Scientific and research libraries in the late 20th Century

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Abstract:

*This report is a summary of my book **Scientific libraries. Past development and future changes** which was published in 2008. The aim today is to comment some of the statements I made in this and summarise the development within the library sector from approximately 1965 up to today. My ambition is to look at the period from a more holistic perspective.*

I will point out and comment some more important topics and trends during this period such as computerisation of the work-flow, the dramatic increase in the demand for higher education, the information explosion, the growth of a new type of librarian, new structure of information, the rationalisation movement, the will to co-ordinate library systems. My focus will be on academic, research, national and scientific libraries.

1. To understand the change the libraries have undergone the last four or five decades we have to know and understand the tremendous growth of higher education during this time and its impact on the libraries. If we look at some figures from countries in Europe from 1962 to 1969, we see that the amount of students doubled within these seven years, compared with past 20 years when the figures were almost untouched from The Second World War up to 1962. In other words the universities grew from exclusive institutions for a few, to be of importance for many, in lesser than 10 years. The book-production also increased with 25% in the same time.

This new situation meant dramatic consequences for the research libraries. The students demanded new and enlarged and student-friendly reading-rooms, the information-boom demanded new information systems which caused need for

rationalization and a more cost-effective way of working. The libraries started a painful re-organisation work which is still, today, not finished.

2. A distinguished librarian described his entrance in the library profession in the beginning of 1969ies as follows:

"After a number of years in the international book trade I entered the world of librarianship. It felt as one was confronted with patricide and ill-fitting suits. Levels of tolerance was low and one wished for a window to be flung open on the world. Changes incurred consequences no one even wanted to contemplate".

Very little had happened for more than a century. The organisation of an academic library in 1969 almost looked the same as it did in 1900.

A question which was raised during the 1960ies was to which extent the libraries should be independent. A common situation previously, was that libraries were very autonomous and independent from their mother-institution, some of them were also separate agencies. But the universities argued that there should much closer contacts in the future. It was a question of power. The universities were interested to take control over their libraries and hoped for better co-operation and adaption to the agenda for education. The idea of the global universal library was criticised and tended for many to be obsolete. The result of this debate was that the universities won and gradually took over the command. Today very few Academic libraries can consider themselves as independent. A reorganisation started which, one can say, is still going on. From having been silent and quite isolated institutions they were put on high pressure from the new "owners". The old organisational scheme following the process of the book from acquisition to shelving, going back to the end of the 19th Century, was split up and replaced by a user-oriented and service-oriented organisation. Closed stacks were abandoned. Access to the library 24 hours per day was a demand. The last three decades have, as I just said, seen an ever going on reconstruction of the libraries emanating from different rationalisation-schools popular for the moment. They all have in common that the services should be based on the users´ need, be as cost-effective as possible and also possible to evaluate for the funders.

3. Evaluation became extremely popular during the 90ies. It all started in USA when ALA presented the report **Measuring Academic Library Performance** in 1990, but the ideas spread very fast to the rest of the world and IFLA presented their version of the report in 1996. Measuring is still very relevant but it tends nowadays to be made more on bench-marking grounds, which means that you compare the services and procedures between different libraries of the same category and then you draw conclusions of the results. Often these studies are made by independent evaluators.

4. The ever increasing flow of information caused panic among some university and research administrators. The famous Weinberg report from 1963 stated that something had to been done if not the whole scientific system should fall to pieces. One were afraid of that the researchers should be isolated and not be able took take part in the latest scientific innovations. But what to do? Some argued that the establishment of a national information provision plan was the answer. Western Germany very early established a plan for organising the information in different academic sectors, sondersammelgebiete, and this solution tended to be a model for some countries. Great Britain choosed another way and centralised the information provision and built up a huge depot of journals, reports from all over the world in Boston Spa.

5. But many professionals put their hope in the new information technology. The libraries, with their millions of books and thousands of journals and also thousands of loans per day, were thought of as ideal institutions for rationalisation and for testing the relevance of the new IT. But the generation of IT-systems of the 70ies did not manage to solve all the problems. So it was the Union Catalogues which were computerised first. The idea of just cataloguing a book once, and let all the other libraries just copy the record, was a success and was introduced first on a national basis but very soon also internationally. You simply bought the records from the Library of Congress or British Library and transformed the information to the local catalogue. But the libraries still waited for an integrated catalogue which should include services for circulation, journals, acquisition and also good search functions. Not until the middle of the 80ies were these facilities gradually implemented in the library systems and by the end of the decade most libraries had computerised their internal work-flow.

6. A rather odd debate, from our standpoint of today, was the discussion during the 70ies and 80ies what a librarian really was like. A new proud profession saw the day light in the shadow of the growing IT-revolution. You could very short summarise the situation as follows. The argument was that the new IT-library environment demanded new skills. The old type of librarian should just be occupied by traditional analogue services while the "documentalist", as they were called, belonged to the future. They were seen as the only category able to do sophisticated searching in the complicated databases of that time and also understand the need of the coming generations.

We know today what happened. The introduction of the Internet and new ways of communication changed the situation dramatically almost over a night. The systems became easier to understand and handle and user-friendly. The librarians adopted the new technique fast and saw the possibilities alongside with the documentalists and the latter were assimilated and soon considered as a part of a librarians´ skill, and the discussion died.

7. The expansion of higher education had its impact on libraries also in another way. Traditionally the libraries have played a passive role in the curriculum. Their task was to provide the student or the teacher with sufficient information when it was asked for and not play an active role in the education. But this situation changed in the 60ies and 70ies. New categories of students were not so experienced and advanced as they were in the past. They needed to be taught how to look for information and how to use the libraries´ facilities properly. A new subject was invented: **Information literacy**. The ambition was that the student after he had left the university should be capable of using information professionally, he should have information competence. The way of teaching this competence differed from one university to another and from time to time. In the very beginning it was rudimentary. The student walked around in the library and filled in a form where some questions were put forward. Next step could be a laboratory where all the students had a computer in front of her and a teacher/librarian showed how to search and find information in the databases. A third step was to involve the librarians directly in the education and also let them teach the students how to evaluate the information – not just look for it but rather be sceptical, and here is where we are today.

8. A few words must also be said about the globalisation of the profession which happened after the Second World War. Countries became more and more dependent of each other, commercially they were closely linked and what happened in one country often influenced its neighbours. The Libraries were of no exception. A few minutes ago I mentioned the co-operation around library records - the exchange of records - but the co-operation was extended and intensified especially during the last three decades of the Century, and included development of library systems, harvesting the net, long time preservation and not the least: administration. IFLA played a major role in this development especially in the beginning, but very important for countries in Europe, was the Unions´ new-woken interest in library matters which ended up in a library-programme resulting in several R&D-projects in the 1990ies and beginning of this Century. These priorities brought the libraries closer together. CENL (Conference of European National Librarians) founded in 1987 has taken over most of the initiatives and has made major contribution to the European co-operation, most well-known is perhaps Europeana. But also other professional European organisations such as LIBER and IATUL has partly replaced IFLA as important library-actors in Europe. Still, of course, IFLA is a main actor in the global scene, as we can see and feel this week.

9. The **Electronic Library** was a conception established in the beginning of the 1990ies. What it really meant, was from the beginning not very clear. For most librarians it was equal with the on-line catalogue. But during the decade and the absolutely unforeseen development of Internet, it was replaced by the **Digital Library** which better described the vision. More and more information became accessible by the net. Papers, scientific journals, dictionaries and encyclopaedias were digitally available through licensing and papers copies were cancelled.

Libraries, and their users, which never before had any chance to access advanced scientific information, suddenly realised that their stacks grow immensely, not through traditionally access of paper-copies, but through access by the Internet. This development put an effective end to the information provision plans of the 70ies and 80ies. I am sure that some librarians think that this was the ultimate shift of paradigms, but history shows us that it is hard to predict the future of our profession and IT-progress and we will for sure keep meeting new challenges.

10. One could expect that the technical progress should have moderated the interest of building new libraries. This was not the case. It was really the opposite around. As a consequence of the rapid expansion of students in 60ies and 70ies building plans fell behind. The start was slow. It was not until the 90ies that something happened but the change was really visible. The situation in US was described as follows:

 "The 1990s were good years for higher education and for academic libraries. This was evident not least in the huge investments made by in the renovation and expansion of existing libraries and the construction of new libraries. Between 1992 and 2001 the higher education community spent on average some 449 million dollars annually on library constructions".

The reason for this sudden interest in building new libraries, apart from the need to host the students, was that they still were looked upon as a kind of monuments of mankind and its progress. They were planned and shaped by famous architects and should manifest the grandeur of the institution. Libraries were built not just in the US but all over the world, both at universities and on a national level. Just think of the new national libraries in Great Britain, France, Denmark, Russia, Norway, Estonia, Bibliotheca Alexandrina and new academic libraries in Oslo, Stockholm, Germany, Great Britain and in the USA.

11. Many of the above-mentioned tendencies and developments will be more obvious and stronger in the future. The challenges will be even more complicated to face. I will not discuss these developments in this paper. Here my ambition has been to point out some of the main developments through the last 40 years or so and analyse how the libraries have handled the situation.