

The Possible Role of Libraries in the Digital Future

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All over the world there is an enormous effort to develop the information society in order to support new economic growth. A new economy is planned which to a large extent will be based on the trading of intellectual property on the global network under the umbrella of the development of electronic commerce. Different library types will meet different challenges brought about by this shift in the global economy. In its optimal form, electronic commerce of intellectual property will mean that from every access point on the global network it will be possible to search, order, download and pay for all kinds of items or commodities which can, in turn, be stored and transported digitally. One of the most

serious challenges to library roles will be for those libraries which have offered services to the general public – like public libraries – or to a large part of the public – like the students in an academic library. These libraries are easily defined as political projects established to fulfil societal aims. New roles in the digital future have to be developed in accordance with the needs of market forces in general and in accordance with the laws of competition. A defensive strategy for libraries is not satisfactory. The European commission has to contribute to the definition of the new “regulatory” framework for libraries also in the digital future.

As we all know it is madness either to predict anything about the digital future – or in other words the emerging information society in general – or to predict anything about the role of libraries in this future in specific. But our future depends upon understanding the forces currently at work, so let us focus first not on libraries but on the digital future.

All over the world but with special emphasis on Europe and USA we see an enormous effort to develop new technical products, to strengthen telecommunications and networks and to develop a new regulatory framework in order to enhance the emerging information society. There is on the European level a lot of initiatives in order to promote the digital future. We have to face the fact that the European Commission (EC) is putting such a great emphasis on this as part of developing the single market (Action plan 1997), because the new information industry is considered an

important element for new growth in Europe. A copyright directive proposal is in this context just one small but important part of a totality. One of the main initiatives last year was the “European initiative on electronic commerce” (see Figure 1). This European initiative stressed the importance of this development saying:

“Stimulating competition in the single market, electronic commerce is already bringing profound structural changes, new skills will be needed to create and maintain new jobs in Europe. Europe’s main competitors have already resolutely seized opportunities offered by electronic commerce – with the US building a substantial lead. However, Internet commerce is catching up in a number of member states. In this respect, Europe can marshal a number of specific strengths in the fields of technologies, content creation and linguistic and cultural diversity. Similarly, the use of a single currency in the world’s largest single market will represent a strong incentive for the take-up of electronic commerce in Europe, whereas conversely, electronic commerce can contribute to the acceptability of the Euro. (European initiative 1997)

What this tells us is that this new development – in which new technologies are combined with the general need for economic development in Europe – will, if it succeeds, represent a major force in the new European and global economy. It will also mean that content which was formally, in our library context, just items in a specific cultural, scientific or educational sphere, will now first and foremost be normal commodities in a new and developing economy. A new economy is planned which to a very large extent will be based on trading intellectual property on the global network. This will mean in its optimal form that from every access point on the network in the world it will be possible to search, order, download and pay for all kinds of items or commodities which then, in any form, can be stored and transported digitally. While there is already some activity based on network searching, ordering and paying for information, the item is normally delivered physically in the traditional way. When digitally stored items or goods are delivered directly to the buyer – maybe in seconds – over the network, we have a new situation.

This new situation, for the moment, is happening to a very limited extent. This situation is actually defined as a problem. Commissioner Martin Bangemann from DG XIII recently made a speech at the ITU (International Telecommunications Union) saying:

“The task is to create mass markets and this requires products to be cheap and easy to use. In many cases this is simply not happening.” (Bangemann 1997)

In fact the enormous possibilities for trading, especially image and sound files, have not yet materialised. But even in connection with text-based products and multimedia products where text is an essential part, this can mean a basis for considerable economic growth. However there are certain obstacles to achieving this growth. In a global environment there is a need to develop global solutions which cover all potential sellers of products, all potential buyers of products (which theoretically and in the long run will mean all citizens in the world) and all (digital) products. In order to get beyond the experimental phase, important new technical solutions must be developed. And we must expect that these new solutions will soon be fully operating. Many elements in a new regime are developing rather

fast and in this context electronic copyright management systems are just one of many elements which will mean that the new technical and regulatory framework is complete.

We can without difficulties see a future where content in all its forms flows without the barriers of time and space to all users and buyers. With this background – from a predicted future of very effective distribution of content on a global scale – as effective as the global telephone infrastructure is functioning already today – we have to look at the role of libraries.

We must differentiate clearly between the role and activities of libraries on the one hand and of librarians on the other hand – now and in the future. We can predict a future information society in which librarians or the skills and competence of librarians will be highly valued. But this does not necessarily mean that there is an important role for libraries to play in general or for special types of libraries. Librarians or the competence of librarians, transformed into something slightly different or nearly similar, in the future will be of interest to all kinds of information or knowledge industries and activities – private or public. However, the institution or department which is called the “library” can look to a much more insecure future.

Libraries can be categorised into different types and here diversification is very important. There are (at least):

- national libraries
- academic and research libraries
- public libraries
- school libraries
- special libraries
- corporate libraries

There are other ways of structuring these libraries. The ECUP (European Copyright User Platform) matrix has been one way to try to establish a systematic approach. Apart from other aspects, all these library types have in the analogue world constituted – nationally, regionally and globally an integrated system of effective distribution. Some years back commercial providers constituted a very minor role in this library infrastructure based on physical objects. This is changing.

It is the long-term effects of digitisation in all its forms and in all fields of the society which really mean a challenge to the very role of libraries. If we just keep our libraries running with a majority of non-digital objects and services we do not need to fear or even face the digital revolution. The role of the national library as being the legal deposit operator could go on more or less unchanged even if analogue is becoming digital and access to the material becomes extremely restricted. The memory of society would be preserved – for research purposes – but not for general use.

The real challenge to library roles in the digital future will be for those libraries which have offered services to the general public – like public libraries – or to a large part of the public – like to the students by an academic library. These libraries are easily defined as political projects established to fulfil societal aims. First and foremost, this library project can be considered an integrated part of a general policy for wealth distribution in society. For example, since studies show that high-income groups use public libraries more than low-income groups, we might say that this service even increases the imbalance of distribution of public goods in society. But this argument can also be used for public educational services in general.

But when we consider free-access-libraries as primary players in the arena of wealth distribution, we take into account that this is our only effective way of giving the possibility for wealth distribution in this field. All other alternatives, as far as I can see, will mean that market mechanisms will distribute wealth in their own ways. Then wealth distribution policy will in all aspects be the most powerful element in this respect. An up-to-date way of saying this is the need to reduce the gap between “the information rich and the information poor” (or the information haves and have-nots).

These types of libraries must also to a large extent be considered part of a total educational policy in a country. These libraries can be supportive for educational activities at nearly all levels of the educational system. With the development of life-long learning and distance learning concepts, these libraries will be even more important as political instruments than previously. These libraries can also be considered important elements in

a national cultural policy. For example, when a national language or a minority language is under pressure from world-languages (due to the global media revolution), libraries can be developed into effective tools for distribution of texts and other artistic material in the native language.

These libraries can also be used by society as one of the mechanisms for influencing regional policies. A national public library law might say that there shall be a public library in all municipalities of the country. In that way it is possible to secure for all citizens as part of a national policy some minimum of library services at the regional level. Last but not least libraries can be used in a systematic way in order to be the basic, or one of the basic, tools for giving all citizens access to important information about the society. This will meet the demand for securing a minimum of access to local, regional, national and community level public information which is a prerequisite for taking part in democratic activities.

To sum up we can at least identify an important societal role for some libraries as being part of a:

- wealth distribution policy
- educational policy
- cultural policy
- regional policy
- and a policy to increase access to information as part of the democratic process in society.

All these elements can be summed up by proclaiming that it is better for society to have an informed and educated population than the opposite.

We do not need to focus much on the corporate library or other special libraries. These libraries are internal instruments for employees and researchers and the employer will (or should) pay what is needed in order to establish good working conditions for internal use. This will also be the case with library services for employees and researchers in universities and colleges. As I mentioned earlier, quite different is the student university library.

The societal need for library activities does not need to disappear in the digital future. That is only if we believe that market forces by themselves will take care of wealth distribution in

general and, in our field, cultural policy, educational policy, regional policy and the need for democratic access to information. I do not think these aims will be fulfilled by market forces alone.

In an environment in which libraries and information dissemination in society was dominated by physical objects and in which libraries themselves were physical places only, main obstacles to fulfilling IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) objectives like UAP – universal availability of publications – were to a large extent physical. In addition to fulfilling clearly political objectives like bringing knowledge to everybody and not only to some of the inhabitants in the society, libraries were important physical places for storage of physical objects containing information in any format. So libraries were collecting the memory of the society in fields where the market had no interest or capability. This also meant that market forces were looking upon libraries as supplementary and in some cases necessary for completing the circle. Market forces had to look for income and some of these activities – which were important for the society – were not possible to fulfil for the market forces. In this respect it has not been very problematic to let libraries and market forces live under one common umbrella – Berne 9.2 (1) – and without very big problems. This is changing – “digital is different”.

The traditional library activity described here – and let me emphasise – there has always been exceptions to this – could go on because there was a combination of a political role for the library and a lack of fulfilment of obligations from the market – which allocated some space – a market niche – for the library activities.

When all or nearly all relevant material is digitised and available through global networks (which is not the situation at the moment) I do not believe that market forces in general will accept without a big fight that publicly financed libraries will be allowed to “undermine” the general market. In this environment we need strong and, to some extent, new arguments in order to go on with publicly financed institutions like libraries.

Many people like Chris Barlas in the EU (European Union) project *Imprimatur* (Intellectual 1996 and see Figure 2) and others have for some time

told those of us who work in libraries that the only place for the library in the future is as an integrated part of the commercial chain, or else we will die. Individuals representing this viewpoint assert that free access for the user is out – we must become commercial outlets or digital book shops.

The latest message from our discussions with partners in the publishing community is revealed in these excerpts from the keynote speech by W. D. von Lucius opening the 4th IPA (International Publishers Association) copyright symposium in Tokyo (22 January 1998). Von Lucius is chairman of the IPA copyright committee and chairman of IPCC (International Publishers Copyright Council). He says of the digital challenge especially in connection with the expansion of the rights of the rights holders:

“The first grave problem in this connection is the definition of private use in a digital environment. Also this problem is seen by the EC in the Green book, which expresses concern about the consequences of inadequate definition. The second possibly much bigger problem is the tendency to an analogous application of lending right and fair use rules for electronic information. What logic can be found in lending rights, when the digital libraries’ shelves are empty and nothing is available to be lent? The principle of exhaustion is generally not transferable to non physical products as electronic dissemination. This was clearly stated by the EC in the Green book on copyright. To quote again Hugenholz: redefining a library privilege for the future in an institutional exemption rule would lead to unacceptable results! It is information in its primary manifestation, which is offered in these cases to the user – the library is lending nothing, but it is inevitably an active member of the trading system for information. The old guiding principle of librarians to offer their service for free has to be replaced by an entrepreneurial attitude as an equally entitled member – one among others – in the information chain. We have to convince librarians, that this is the paradigm in the electronic environment – functions and roles do undergo a deep change. Without acceptance of this fact by librarians a successful system of dissemination of new creations will never arise.” (von Lucius 1998)

As we hear it said – access free of charge is not acceptable in a successful system and can be considered possibly the main obstacle to the development of the digital age. If libraries change their role and enter into the commercial chain and become normal or maybe “abnormal” commercial outlets, there are of course some grave political problems to be faced. The political support for

publicly financed libraries is to a large extent historically – and also currently – connected to the library's ability to provide open access to everybody in society – being part of the project to reduce the gap between information rich and information poor. In this respect the library is the tool for fulfilling this aim. So if free-of-charge libraries vanish on a large scale, we must expect that political support for financing the library will diminish and maybe fade away. This means that the library will have to increase its income by charging up to market price for access and thus will eventually become an integrated part of the marketplace. This approach can also be combined with the demands from competition policy in general to form the following question: will the marketplace and governments (or the EC) accept institutions which no longer have the political basis to support arguments for special treatment. These considerations are especially relevant to public library policies but also to a large extent to academic library policies (the student part of it).

What about the situation in which libraries themselves – for example academic libraries – have in general reduced, or subsidised, prices. Von Lucius comments also on this saying:

“The continuous demands from the academic scene for instance recently articulated by Prof. Reichman from Nashville for ‘adequate’ pricing or special pricing schemes for the academia are not fitting into a free market economy. They are practically a demand for governmental price control. Never before have there been, with the exception of socialist countries, in the Gutenberg world special reductions for books, journals or other forms of information – why should they seem necessary suddenly now in the electronic environment? The idea behind this is obviously to bring across the advantages of exemption rules in favour of the educational system into the new world. It has however been shown above, that this simple analogy is impossible without destroying the information system itself. There may be found solutions through different licensing schemes for special groups, but governments must avoid expropriating rights holders. Again: competition world-wide will work efficiently, to push out of the market information providers with unacceptable prices.” (von Lucius 1998)

This reminds us that we face a challenge in which both governments and rights holders or publishers look upon the content solely as commercial items – not as elements or tools in policy making in society.

As mentioned, there is large activity in the EC in order to develop a new regulatory framework for the emerging information society.

If society needs libraries (as I believe they do) in the context of being political projects, and the European Commission supports libraries in this context in order to fulfil certain political aims also in the digital future (as the EC has already proclaimed), we actually need to ask: what kind of regulatory framework do we need to meet this goal? Up until now we have always been dealing with some kind of defensive activity when we respond to the proposals for new regulatory framework for enhancing a new information economy. And let me stress that EBLIDA (European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations) has done an excellent job here and generally. It must be an obligation for the European Commission to put a completely different and proactive focus on the need for a new regulatory framework for libraries and to define roles for libraries also in the digital future.

Notes

1. BERNE CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF LITERARY AND ARTISTIC WORKS (Paris Text 1971) Article 9, Section 2: (2) It shall be a matter for legislation in the countries of the Union to permit the reproduction of such works in certain special cases, provided that such reproduction does not conflict with a normal exploitation of the work and does not unreasonably prejudice the legitimate interests of the author.

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International copyright symposium, Tokyo, 22 January 1998.

Figures

Figure 1:

European initiative on electronic commerce (<http://www.ispo.cec.be/ecommerce/initiat.html>)

Figure 2:

Intellectual Multimedia Property Rights Model And Terminology for Universal Reference – IMPRIMATUR (<http://www.imprimatur.alcs.co.uk>)