

Wondering about the future of libraries

Abstract: This chapter explains the reasons behind the writing of this book, starting from the debate about the future of libraries, which has characterised the literature in library and information science over the last years. The main assumption is that this issue has gone beyond the boundaries of the librarians' playground, as a consequence of phenomena like the economic crisis that started in 2007–08 and the digital revolution. The chapter illustrates the aim of this book, which investigates how much of the process of investing in libraries is perceived by national communities, what the gap between scientific analysis and general perception is, and whether the connection between political, social and economic phenomena and the future of libraries is obvious or not in the eyes of the general public. This book poses the following main questions: are libraries still valued by society? And if yes, under what perspectives are they still valued?

Key words: future of libraries, economic crisis, digital revolution, public perception, library impact, library value.

The debate among scientists and professionals

Over the last years there has been much research and discussion about the future of libraries, particularly public libraries. A look into the databases that specialise in library and information science¹ and into the scientific and professional literature confirms that the need to redefine the role of libraries in the today's scenario is widely and strongly felt by librarians and information scientists. The content of these numerous books and articles ranges from the analysis of new models and new perspectives of library services in the digital era to the investigation of the cultural, political and sociological premises upon which libraries are based, which are being questioned in today's society.

The literature about the future of libraries has rapidly become so vast and complex that in 2009 the American Library Association (ALA) felt the need to compile an annotated bibliography on this issue (its coverage starts from 1998).² At that time, the entries of the bibliography were about 200, which can be considered a relevant number, given that the selection is mainly referred to the American context and only encompasses articles written in English.

An updated version of this bibliography is not available, nor a wider bibliography – as for the geographical and linguistic coverage – on the same topic. Therefore we can only hypothesise that the overall number of sources concerning this issue is much higher than 200.

The introduction to the ALA bibliography highlights some important aspects characterising this literature. First of all, ‘for every prediction, opinion, or concern expressed with significant and credible evidence, there is an opposite position. For example, [...] arguments are made for and against library as physical space’.³ Many different viewpoints are also expressed on future library identities and roles.

Secondly, under the framework of the debate about the future of libraries, many other smaller and larger issues are encompassed:

the changing notion of what it means to ‘read’, and the perceived (by some) reading crisis; the future of the online public access catalog; the changing needs of primary, secondary and college students as well as professional academics; library finances; copyright and other intellectual property issues; scholarly publishing; current and future technologies; the very nature of what it means to ‘access information’.⁴

Clearly, the perception of being at a turning point in the library history is widespread in the library environment and, when going through the specialised literature on this topic, ‘it is easy to develop a feel and an appreciation for the complexity, thoughtfulness and passion with which these debates are argued’.⁵

The current situation

Scientists and professionals seem to have a clear notion of the many surrounding trends and situations that are strongly affecting libraries and librarians. Many of these phenomena have their roots in the late

1990s and early 2000s, but have displayed their full consequences over the last years.

Among these phenomena the following ones at least should be highlighted, as they are widely perceived beyond any specific geographical or social context:

- the digital revolution and its wide consequences on the composition and functioning of society;
- the economic and financial crisis that developed from 2007–08, with its tough consequences for political and social life;
- the crisis of traditional welfare and the search for new and more sustainable models;
- the decline of the middle class, and economic and social polarisation;
- the consequences of the knowledge economy on lifestyles and cultural consumptions.

All these events and trends are strongly intertwined; therefore a realistic view of the current situation could only come from an overall analysis of them.

The above-mentioned trends seem to have no direct connection with the future of libraries. However, a more attentive consideration shows that, under the new social and economic framework, the traditional roles of libraries and the premises upon which they are based are strongly questioned.

By retracing the origins and the traditional functions of libraries, the reasoning easily raises – in librarians' minds – concerns and worries regarding the future.

As is well known, libraries developed in an era of information scarcity to preserve human knowledge and make it accessible in the widest possible way. Libraries are the place where the products conveying this knowledge (whose formats have changed because of the changes in technology, from manuscripts to printed books, from periodicals and newspapers to audio and video recordings) are collected and preserved. Furthermore, the aim of libraries is to allow the widest possible audience to access this recorded knowledge (depending on levels of education and reading in an area that a library serves).

After the acknowledgement of this role, libraries were soon considered a public utility and – little by little – became one of the prerogatives of the national or local authorities' policies and part of public expenditure.

In particular, after the second Industrial Revolution and in parallel with the foundation of the welfare states, in many Western countries a specific type of library, the so-called ‘public library’, was born as a means for the lower classes to approach written culture and an opportunity (conceived as alternative to traditional schooling and informal in method) to improve themselves.

Over time, libraries, both public libraries and generally, have become a stable component of the cultural and social services funded by taxation at national or local level. They have contributed to reinforcing the pact between the state and the lower classes, which little by little turned partially into middle classes.

In more recent times, information and knowledge have gained a central role in the international economy, since innovation, creativity and ideas have become the main engine of growth and progress for individuals and societies. Consequently, access to them has become crucial for prosperity at local and global levels. In the meantime, technology has come on in leaps and bounds, and the Internet has boosted the information society, transferring content onto the web and making access to it easier and wider.

The capitalistic economy has gone global and has turned into the so-called ‘turbo-capitalism’;⁶ consequently, its returning expansive and recessive cycles have become more and more severe in global markets and national economic situations. The social welfare has been questioned insofar as the market has been accounted as the main ruler for providing services. The tough recession that started in 2007–08 has pushed towards a deep revision of the welfare system in Western countries and towards a wider role of the free market.

Librarians are perfectly well aware that libraries are pressed in the middle between the expansive role of the Internet and the shrinking role of national and local authorities in providing public services on a taxation basis.

The situation set out above is generally synthesised in two main arguments against the survival of libraries:

1. libraries are becoming useless insofar as access to information and quality content is provided by the Internet, and the role of experts in creating content and accessing it is deemed to become more and more unnecessary;
2. the cost of libraries is infeasible in an era when public spending is under review as a consequence of the economic crisis and the growth of the national deficits in the Western countries, particularly the European ones.

Why this book? Why now?

For all the above-mentioned reasons, the issue of the future of libraries has gone beyond the boundaries of the librarians' playground, flooding the ground of the public opinion by means of the mass media.

At the time of writing, six years after the emergence of the economic crisis and after the shift towards the participatory and social web is basically accomplished, it could be interesting to check whether the fierce debate among librarians about the future of libraries has any echoes in general society, which aspects of this debate receive more consideration and what public perception is conveyed by mass media.

Pessimistically, and a bit cynically, the compiler of the ALA bibliography states that 'no one, it seems, is as interested in the future of libraries as librarians'.⁷

Therefore, the aim of this book is to consider how much of the process investing libraries is perceived by national communities, what the gap is between scientific analysis and general perception, and whether the connection between political, social and economic phenomena and the future of libraries is obvious or not in the eyes of the general public.

Currently libraries are facing increasing budget cuts and forced closures in many Western countries. In Europe, where the economic crisis is particularly hard and public expenditure is under strong pressure, the effects on libraries could be particularly fierce.

In these difficult times, it is essential for libraries to prove their economic and social impact, in order to gain some space on the political agenda.

For the same reasons, it is time to look at libraries from the outside and to wonder about their future from the point of view of society as a whole, rather than that of their patrons and librarians.

In the end, the main question this book presents is: are libraries still valued by society? And if yes, under which perspectives are they still valued?

Notes

1. To have an idea of the topic's relevance, the Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), which is the most important database for this disciplinary field, can be consulted: www.csa.com/factsheets/lisa-set-c.php.

2. ALA, 2009. The bibliography was compiled under the framework of the Program on America's Libraries for the 21st Century promoted by the Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP).
3. ALA, 2009: 1.
4. ALA, 2009: 2.
5. Ibid.
6. The term was first used by Luttwak, 1998. On the same issue, see also Sennett, 2006.
7. ALA, 2009: 2.

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