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Library Science - quo vadis?

(Re)Discovering „Bibliothekswissenschaft“

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Abstract

*This paper presents a seminar project held in the summer of 2004 at the Institute of Library Science at Humboldt University, Berlin. The result of the seminar was a book, compiled and edited by students, which contained a series of essays from professional librarians. Titled **Library Science – quo vadis?**, the book discusses the history, current position and the future of library science, not only in Germany, but also in other European countries and the USA. It shows that the discipline of library science is not limited to the physical aspects of managing books stacked on shelves, but that in the age of the information society, libraries play a key role in the distribution, protection, management and theories of information and knowledge.*

Introduction

In the spring of 2004, our Institute's seminar plan offered for the third time a class under the title: *The Making of a Book*. This is a hands-on seminar introducing students to real-world book publication from the submission an idea to the final hardcover product. In the process, students learn how to edit and prepare submitted articles for publication, how to secure financing and how to find a publisher. This class was particularly timely as the Institute was facing closure at the time due to financial restructuring at the Humboldt University. So it was only natural that students – forced to defend the Institute's very *raison d'être* - decided to stimulate and support discussion about what exactly library science is.

In line with the title *Library Science – quo vadis?*, the purpose of the seminar was to publish a comprehensive analysis defining the role of library science, as well as its ability to adapt to the demands of today's fast-paced information society. Students started by contacting authors and experts in the field for written contributions. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Within weeks, the project received twice the number of contribution confirmations that had ben anticipated, including essays from such well-known IFLA Members and Chairs as Thomas Hapke, Hans-Christoph Hobohm, Rainer Kuhlen and Claudia Lux.

The feedback demonstrated that the questions surrounding the role of library science in society today had struck a vital nerve, especially in Germany. The debate is by no means limited to the quest for survival of a small academic institute in Berlin, but resonates from Germany to the United States, from Holland to Switzerland. As a result the book now also contains contributions from such internationally renowned experts as Michael Buckland, Carol Tenopir, Josef Herget and Hans Roosendaal. International readers can further refer to English abstracts that summarize the German essays. The preface is authored by Guy St. Clair.

Discoveries

In the last few years we discovered some things about our subject *Bibliothekswissenschaft* which on the one hand means "library science," but on the other clearly does not!

The hardest discovery we came across in the autumn of 2003 was the fact that our university -- the Humboldt University in Berlin -- did not know what *Bibliothekswissenschaft* meant and therefore summarily decided to close the Institut für Bibliothekswissenschaft, the last of its kind in Germany!

The most astonishing discovery we encountered was the fact that there was no common opinion what *Bibliothekswissenschaft* meant within the Institute itself. So what can you do if you can't find inner peace? Rush out into the outer world to try to generate reflection might possibly may be one way to build unity of opinion. So, that is exactly what we did. We decided to write a book clarifying just what library science is, inviting some central library science protagonists to write articles for us.

If you have ever tried to find a solution by asking many experts -- or if you just know a little how the scientific community works -- you may rightfully assume that this is not the way to bring forth a consensus.

At this point we discovered that a consensus was no longer important because something much more invaluable surfaced. We found *Bibliothekswissenschaft* or library science to be a multi-faceted and extremely vital discipline at which all approaches converge at one special point – namely, the crossroads of information and its distribution.

Starting at any perspective – be it information ethics or theory, cataloging or library politics, library history or education – and you will end up at that very point as you will discover in our book.

This caused another question to arise. Why do we always have to justify our discipline? We wondered if the same discussion could have taken place in other countries as it did in Germany in the past 30 years? To get close to a possible answer we will focus first on the following question:

Is German ‘*Bibliothekswissenschaft*’ different from ‘Library Science’?

Library science emerged in Germany in the early 19th century under the name *Bibliothekswissenschaft* and has enjoyed a long tradition there. Key German figures in the discipline, like Martin Schrettinger, Julius Petzoldt, Fritz Milkau and Karl Dziatzko, focussed on library administration and its collections. This set the stage for the complementary scientific character for the real experts. The somewhat scientific isolation of Germany after the First World War and more so during the Third Reich might well have caused a disconnect between German library science developments and those in the rest of the world.

However there was another line of development in library science (and in documentation) on an international level. Melvil Dewey, Paul Otlet, Suzanne Briet or the probably most famous protagonist in this field, S. R. Ranganathan, consolidated a theory of knowledge organization and a philosophy of science.

The historical influences leading the split in the development of *Bibliothekswissenschaft* and library science were compounded by the fact that in Germany, *Bibliothekswissenschaft* has always been questioned and has had to justify itself. Even most librarians believe that there is no need for library science – because there is no library science but only library practice. The discussion focuses on that following crucial point.

Is it a craft or is it a science?

The perceptions between people close to the subject and people from „outside” the scientific world show a large gap. The German Brockhaus Encyclopaedia of 1892, for example, gives the following definition:

“Bibliothekswissenschaft (Library Engineering) is defined as the embodiment of all scientific and technically basic principles and experiences concerning the administration of a library since the beginning of the 19th century. It is resolved into two equal components: on the one hand the ancient “Bibliothekskunde” dealing with the description of new and old libraries, and on the other hand the systematic “Bibliothekslehre” dealing with basic principles of library administration.

*A practical distinction in "Bibliothekslehre" is drawn between two components. One concerns the outer elements of the library, constituting building, administrative personnel and funding while another can be called 'the lesson of book treasure'...*¹

More than 100 years later Brockhaus encyclopaedia of 2001 offers the following definition:

*"Bibliothekswissenschaft, the practice-oriented scientific discipline, dealing with the function, types of organization and impact of libraries, and in principle with questions of information transfer as well as reader research."*²

But this definition is still insufficient and too limited for our understanding of a modern library science. We argue that it is time to overcome this dichotomy and to open the term to international – or global – approaches. For us library science is quite different and more extensive than the definitions quoted above imply, as the definition provided by the School of Library and Information Science at Keio University in Tokyo suggests:

*"The concept of library and information science has broad connotations and its meaning is not always clearly understood. Library science is defined as the total body of knowledge needed for the systematic collecting, organizing, and preservation of recorded materials. These are the products of man's intellectual and emotional experiences and activities, and the practice of making them available for use. It studies the technical aspects of applying basic knowledge and theory to real situation."*³

What is the role of library science in today's knowledge society?

Today's world is fundamentally driven by communication based on electronic technology and global communication networks. The developments in the recent years suggest that this development will not attenuate but will intensify. Information -- beside the communication channel and the communicators -- is a basic element in the communication process. Libraries deal with information.

On this basic level you will surely agree, that the FID's definition of *documentation* can be applied to today's libraries as well: "... the collection and storage, classification and selection, dissemination and utilisation of all types of information (FID 1960) with the small but important stipulation that libraries do not

¹ „Bibliothekswissenschaft (Bibliothekstechnik), nennt man seit dem Anfang des 19. Jahrhundert den Inbegriff aller auf die Verwaltung einer Bibliothek bezüglichen wissenschaftlichen und technischen Erfahrungsgrundsätze.

Sie zerfällt in zwei gleichstehende Teile, einen geschichtlichen, die Bibliothekskunde, die sich mit der Beschreibung der ältern und neuern Bibliotheken beschäftigt und einen systematischen, die Bibliothekslehre, die die Grundsätze der Verwaltung behandelt.

Man unterscheidet in der Bibliothekslehre am zweckmäßigsten zwei Teile, einen auf die äußerlichen Bestandteile der Bibliothek bezüglichen, der das Gebäude, das Verwaltungspersonal und die Geldmittel betrachtet, und einen zweiten, den man die Lehre vom Bücherschatz nennen kann.“

² „Bibliothekswissenschaft, praxisorientierte wiss. Disziplin, die sich mit Funktion, Organisationsformen und Wirkungsweise von Bibliotheken befasst und auch grundsätzl. Fragen der Informationsvermittlung sowie der Leserforschung behandelt.“

³ <http://www.slis.keio.ac.jp/index.html>

deal with "all types of information," e.g. as do archives but with primarily 'published information'".

As there has been a shift in how information is published and distributed, there must also be a shift in how libraries deal with information. And as there is a shift in how libraries deal with information, of course there consequently has to be a shift in library science. It's that simple. But is it really?

This point of view is rather fatalistic, assuming that the world is outside and library science has to maintain an observer's position from which it analyzes what it perceives, and subsequently sculpts a clear, descriptive theory about what actually happens in the world of libraries.

But as we do not see library science to be a solely descriptive science, we maintain that it should take, so to speak, the prescriptive aspect more seriously. There are, in fact, some concrete phenomena in which, in our opinion, contemporary librarianship must act and perform research. These include, for instance:

- lifelong learning and teaching information literacy,
- bridging the *digital divide*,
- information ethics,
- filtering: quality control – "sorting things out" – i.e. reducing the amount of data and information people have to deal with,
- dealing with and designing new ways of publication and preserving man's intellectual heritage,
- special services for the disabled – meaning lending a helping hand to those who need it in keeping pace with the globalized communication universe,
- playing a fundamental role in a democratic, pluralistic society.

First and foremost, of course, libraries have to perform "information logistics," meaning: "to have the right information, in the right form at the right place at the right time with necessary redundancy and acceptable costs". (Umstätter, 1997, 12)

The abstract implication for the discipline of library science would be what Søren Brier describes: "Library (and) Information Science (LIS) devotes itself primarily to the study of systems and methods for classification, indexing, storage, retrieval, and mediation of documents that can cause the creation of information in the user's mind."

But we would argue that libraries and library science should broaden their focus well beyond this point. Libraries in the 21st century are much more than centers of scientific communication, much more than places to collect publications and certainly much more than a luxury entertainment add-on.

Libraries – and the history of the public library system of the USA and its underlying ideas prove this – are places where society gets its intellectual shape. That implies that libraries have to be places of education – an education that does not lead to man's functioning for a system, but to responsible, thoughtful human beings with an intellectually-founded background sophisticated enough to give mankind a future worth living in.

This task, much larger than just the technical challenges, is what library science and library scientists should bear in mind.

Library Science – quo vadis? Challenges and Opportunities

When we decided to edit a book about these issues, there were many people not only from Germany but from the United States, England and Scandinavia who sent us best wishes and warm greetings, full of encouragement and professional stimulation – even in the absence of actual participation among some, due to prior pressing commitments. In the end there were 31 contributions from 36 authors.

We organized the articles in the following structure:

- **Library Science between Traditions, Self Understanding and Public Perception**

The main article in this field was written by Michael Buckland from the School of Information Management and Systems, University of California, Berkeley and entitled: “Information Schools: A Monk, Library Science, and the Information Age”.

- **Library Science in the Age of Digital Media**

One of the main articles in this chapter is written by Carol Tenopir, professor at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, entitled: “Electronic Publishing and Its Relationship to Library and Information Science”.

- **Library Science in the Service of Society**

This chapter reflects on information ethics, library science and politics as well as international dialogue.

- **Library Science in the Service of Scientific Information and Communication**

Various articles discuss the open access debate as well as issues about special library services in the field of scientific information and communication.

- **Library Science in the Service of Library Practice**

This chapter gives a wide range of perspectives on why and how library science is needed both for scientific libraries and public libraries, such as the method of cost-performance analysis, e-learning methods, or integrated customer orientation.

- **Library Science in Teaching, Higher Education and Profession**

Articles in this part discuss the German system of higher education in library science and the controversy between the acceptance, necessity of and benefit to library scientists.

The book was published in May, 2005:

**Bibliothekswissenschaft – quo vadis? = Library Science – quo vadis? : Eine Disziplin zwischen Traditionen und Visionen ; Programme – Modelle – Forschungsaufgaben / hrsg. von Petra Hauke. Mit einem Geleitwort von Guy St. Clair und einem Vorwort von Georg Ruppelt. – München : Saur, 2005. – 488 S. : Ill., graph. Darst.
ISBN 3-598-11734-5**

Some main articles are written in English, the others in German. There are also abstracts for all articles and author biographies in English.

Conclusion

Library science in the early 21st century has to confront enormous challenges. It has to position itself within the knowledge society's continuous changes. There are two priorities. Firstly we have to take up the challenges, go out and do the research, develop the strategies and find solutions.

Secondly, we need to communicate this new role and explain its significance for a future society as clearly as possible to the public, and to society's decision-makers.

Numerous closures of library science institutes world-wide are ominous indicators of this necessity.

Fortunately, in Germany we were given a new chance. In February this year, after a struggle of a year and a half by the Institute's students, lecturers and friends, the Humboldt University in Berlin decided to not to cut the Institute of Library Science after all. We received an incredible amount of support from all over the world for which we are most grateful.

Nevertheless, there is still a crucial problem to solve. In Germany, library science graduates are not well accepted into the usual professional fields and we have – unfortunately – to assume that in general there are no prospects for us students.

We do not expect that someone will come and just "offer" us a great future. We know that we have to create this future for ourselves. Furthermore, we are highly motivated to create new perspectives, to discover new fields of activity – and we will work the land! The first step is to bridge the gap between the more or less isolated German *Bibliothekswissenschaft* and library science on an international level. We need to connect.

There is timely opportunity to do so: the Institute of Library Science is currently looking for an enthusiastic, open-minded and highly skilled personality in the field of library science to fill its vacant head position. It will be neither a relaxing job nor a way

to make big money. But it will be an exciting possibility to participate in the “rebirth” of a discipline and to shape its development. And it is a great possibility to stay young while working with library science’s new generation.

For further information please visit our website:

<http://www.ib.hu-berlin.de/buchidee>