

The cosmos of a third place

Thoughts on the library of today

With the digitalisation of media, the traditional institution "library" has been catapulted to the forefront of innovation. Who would have believed that this hoard of human knowledge goods with its many formats and different forms of manuscripts and printed works would find a place in the front row in the digital age? There are still far too many who do not believe this is possible and who either re-experience their childhood and youth in libraries or associate libraries with anachronistic, unworldly educational romanticism. While libraries had previously made paper-bound books and journals available for permanent use for centuries, the first e-journals and e-books appeared at the turn of the millennium. WEB servers had already found their way into libraries and quickly became a standard innovation. With the WEB server, the new access, the gateway, the platform, the portal of the digital library was created, which initially presented the catalogue, opening hours and "About us".

However, libraries were no longer alone with this mode of access and were the only ones to disseminate literature and information, so that they could no longer claim "access to knowledge" as a "monopoly" – they were better off with their printed holdings. After all, who would want to acquire, index, make available and permanently store these masses of books in order to "only" be able to borrow them again and again and again, and to take care of pages and pages of dusty paper? In the Gutenberg era, it was precisely this heroic back office that was the privilege of these magazine-rich castles of human memory and the treasure troves of Western knowledge. But with the Internet, libraries suddenly found themselves in competition with information providers, who also made information available via the WWW, and if these were companies or private-sector enterprises, information was even sold in this way. To the disappointment of the librarians, commercial competitors usually knew better than them how to market their content effectively and to bring it to their customers. Cheerful to cloudy oracles of influencers or technology experts of that time let it be known that libraries were close to the end of their survival, would be completely replaced by the Internet and would be replaced by it. Much will be needed, but libraries definitely belong to an obsolescent branch of traditional educational institutions, which will not survive the technological change towards the happiness of mankind any more than the "book" as their corpus delicti: both have come to the end of their life, have reached their expiry date and will now disappear in the flood of information, on which only the WWW can swim as Noah's Ark.

In the context of such predictions, it was often ignored the fact, that that libraries continued to enjoy many visits. On the other hand, many new libraries have been built or renovated since the turn of the millennium. In view of the eagerly awaited doomsday predictions, the latter in particular could have caused astonishment: Libraries – not obsolete after all? Currently even more loved than before? A case of "Welcome and Farewell"? What happened there was indeed surprising. For hardly anyone would have thought it possible that even librarians were able to reinvent their libraries in the digital change. Apparently there were still arguments for libraries beyond the desktop and the Internet. The planning concepts for new library buildings provided a visible reason for this. But new visions and objectives for libraries were also developed independently of building projects.

A considerable variety of further development options soon emerged and were intensively discussed: Libraries of the future were digital, electronic, hybrid and hypertextual, knowledge containers, information hosts, peer-to-peer networks, third places and learning spaces, virtual research and learning environments – what could all be "libraries" in the future and what "libraries" were at all was a never-ending source of inspiration, innovation and sometimes more, sometimes less knowledge-based controversy. Common to all efforts to reorient libraries was the view that printed materials, usually referred to as analogue or physical, should no longer be at the centre of the library focus, but should rather give up their place to the digital resources that already occupied them in terms of budget. This shift promoted both the vision and the fear that printed works would be completely replaced by digital media and would probably no longer play a role at all in the near future. In this way, people were either rejecting or advocating it.

The development of the book market has not confirmed the questioning of libraries, nor have the reading and reception preferences of users indicated that books would become meaningless for them. Rather, the impression was conveyed that the digital versions of books and magazines were more strongly oriented towards their printed ancestors than towards the children of the digital revolution. Against this background, the permanent overstretched, supposedly insurmountable contrast between "analog" and "digital" was a permanent topic. This contradiction was claimed, but usually not explained, and as a result has usually led to the finding of simple media diversity. For instead of facing each other irreconcilably, "analogue" and "digital" complement each other – this insight reduced a conflict that was often exaggerated without being able to justify it. It is therefore much more interesting to see what the often addressed "third place" that libraries want to give away really brought and offered in terms of innovation. No, "third places" are not avatars or locations in "Second life", where libraries bought plots of land for virtual presences in exchange for Linden dollars – does anyone remember that?

The "third place" is a term from the social sciences that describes "public locations", which are the third most important place in the development of life next to the "first place" of the apartment and the "second place" of the workplace, and which offer people in moving or designed, publicly accessible spaces the happiness of exchange, encounter and communication as well as information, pleasure and diversion, and often make them "living room-like". "Third places" are public places such as railway stations, bookstores, department stores, shopping centres, hotel lobbies, concert halls, museums, opera houses, restaurants, theatres, shopping malls and even libraries. Libraries are not simply the better Internet hotspots with high quality of stay in terms of furniture and space, but places of education, society, information, creativity, critical faculties and competence development, as the users desire. The library as a "third place" is a living space that does a lot for the further development and well-being of its users, but which sees the provision of literature and information, which a library as a "third place" also provides, rather as one of many offers. The users, as consumers, are at the centre of events, no longer, as often predicted centuries ago, the objects that characterise libraries by their very name, namely the books.

This business logic accompanied libraries as "third places" on the path of their reinvention, just as it related to learning spaces and maker spaces – more of these later. The question arises whether "third places" were an invention of the 21st century or whether such places – also as libraries – did not already exist in earlier times. The "public place" has always existed and its tradition, like that of libraries, goes back a long way. In general, "public" is also "accessible to everyone". But those who lack education, capital or time will not want to stay in places for whose visit this is precisely the prerequisite. Thus libraries have always been the "third places" of those who were able to actually use libraries and who understood how to use libraries in order to exchange, inform, communicate, be creative and disperse. With the "third place" we therefore rather rediscover something that always characterized libraries than that we actually reinvent libraries. Perhaps this is the cunning of the reinvention of traditions that "a good, old wine does not lose its digestibility even in new skins".

No less interesting than the "third place" are the "learning spaces", as which libraries like to re-profile themselves as well. Because we all have to learn, and even learn throughout our lives – naturally in the information society, which we first experienced, and now in the knowledge society, in which we feel so comfortable today because we see ourselves as knowledge carriers, without whom the knowledge society cannot exist. This applies both to librarians and library users. Anyone who wants to have knowledge is in a position to acquire knowledge, i.e. to learn – libraries as hoards and mediators of knowledge goods offer the best conditions for this. The "learning space library" could therefore see itself as a "department store of knowledge" of those, who are willing and – even more – obliged to learn.

Implicitly the knowledge society agrees to know much more than any society before it. Knowledge is increasing exponentially in our times, as is also shown by the equally increasing number of scientific publications. Rather exceptionally, however, the knowledge society raises the question whether, due to its enormous development of knowledge, the individuals of the knowledge society know more than the individuals of all societies before the knowledge society. In other words: Are we all living up to the demands of our knowledge society? The best answer to this question is: "No, I do not meet the demands of the knowledge society and will not be able to do so. But my library gives me access to the resources I need to really exist in the knowledge society." Now somebody else is saying that libraries have no systemic relevance. "Googling" those who deny it or "librarying" that do? Well, Google – Google challenges painfully, sometimes hits libraries in the heart and in any case on the Achilles heel: Here the search slot, which brings the raw material "information" to light – there the discovery system or the catalogue, which is called OPAC, in order to serve search results to the users on a silver platter: Any more questions about who is in charge of "learning spaces" and which institution provides substantial support to all those who search and find in our knowledge society?

But as with the "third place", the cunning of reinventing libraries in the "learning rooms" also throws back libraries. After all, does "learning" in libraries only take place in the knowledge society or did it happen before? Have people always learned in libraries or are they only doing so now? Is "learning" the only destination of libraries and "research" is left out? The ancient Greeks allowed themselves to be carried on the shoulders of knowledge giants and were so bold as to carry across the oceans all over the world what they learned on the shoulders of the giants – so Herodotus knows. I don't know any other way and I know with the ancient Greeks that the conditions for research were and are also given with it. In the tradition of the Humboldt Brothers, the unity of teaching and research is a consensus – this is what libraries make possible and have always made possible. Are "learning spaces" really innovations that have recently opened up for libraries?

The fact that the newly invented libraries continue to exist and are held in high esteem is gratifying. The fact that the newly invented libraries do not have a fundamentally new self-image compared to earlier libraries is not untypical for innovation. After all, innovation is usually organisational or technical and alters the status quo, but as a rule it continues to be based on the definition of the structures that are subject to renewal. In other words, libraries do not change in essence, but they do pick up on organisational and technical innovations to improve their services, as they have done in the past. So far this has always been successful. Whether or not this will succeed in the course of digital change is very likely, but not always entirely evident. The uncertainty that results from this leads to questioning and doubt, which is transferred to the fundamental, without there really being any reason for it. After all, the trademark with which libraries take up and implement technological

change is not technical, but political and is called "Open". As simple and self-evident as this claim is, it implies numerous questions, but is in any case innovative.

The current concept of openness refers to digital open access, not to physical access. Why is this so important? With "Open Access", the digital transformation has been changing the publication model for a good twenty years. Instead of buying publications as monographs or journals (articles) or obtaining them in some other way from bookshops or publishers to build up their stocks or library collections, electronic publications could be produced by the authors themselves (and without the support of publishers) using suitable technology and distributed worldwide via the Internet. The reading and reception of Open Access publications costs nothing for library readers and users. What did this mean for libraries? With this possibility of self-publishing, the build-up of stocks and the mandate of the collection were questioned in perspective – but this did not lead to an immediate questioning. In any case, the consequence of this insight was that libraries should also be able to provide publication services.

Since then, most academic libraries in Germany have founded university publishing houses and continue to operate them to this day. At the same time, publishers made an effort to release secondary publications (Green Road Open Access) and to implement primary "Golden Road Open Access". In addition to "gold" and "green", other colours or precious metals were used to characterise other open access models that flourished alongside "green" or "gold". Thus, as the publication model in libraries changed, new tasks were created. The price competition for the subsidiary publication sector was definitely to be won by the self-publishing sector. The fact that the primary publication area was not unaffected by this is not mentioned here, but of course it should be mentioned. To this day, there is still a lot of cooperation with publishers through Open Access. In addition, the task of open access was legitimised by the fact that publications also had to be prepared and processed using information technology. In the meantime, comprehensive portfolios of infrastructures, services and tools have been established which give direct recognition to the area of innovation thus claimed by libraries and clearly position them as 'Open'. Indeed, Open Access publishing makes a lot of sense – even beyond libraries.

"Open" has become the mantra for the further development of libraries. "Open Library" gave the impression that openness to libraries was only now being rediscovered and that it was also to be seen as a success of digital change. What actually remains open is the understanding of "Open" itself and what "Openness" actually aims at. After all, openness and accessibility have actually always been a feature of libraries. Where else would their meaning lie? The possibility cannot be ruled out that some libraries have had and still have limited access. But this is not the rule – at least not in countries

and regions where freedom of information and speech applies. Against this background, the question arises all the more as to what "Open" actually means.

The key to answering this question may lie in the possibilities that digital forms of work offer those who want to work together interactively and networked via images, data and text. The prerequisite for this are standards that cooperative work requires in technical terms. But standards are also necessary in order to use and understand research results. They therefore apply to publications as well as to research data, methods and software applications. Last but not least, standards also apply to the proof required to permanently retrieve digital publications or objects. In view of these requirements, "openness" is of great importance, but also the price of standardization, which is based solely on the demand for digital processability of images, data and texts.

It would be quite wrong to claim that digital change is teaching us standards for the first time. Of course, we are also familiar with standards regardless of digital work and life forms. But the fact that standards influence our work and life processes as much as digitalisation allows us to experience them, and that they therefore dominate us as it were, is indeed a novelty. In the crisis caused by Corona, we are now experiencing that information technology alone makes exchange, interaction and joint work possible. But the prospect of having to limit ourselves to this is quickly perceived as a loss. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether we prioritise standards or content in the context of open access. What is the most important thing – the quality of the content of publications or standards for their production and distribution? Because data and publications may be "open". If "Open" is the guiding criterion for the evaluation of publications, the quality of content will quickly fall by the wayside and will in future be of secondary importance. Nobody really wants that – not even "Open Libraries".

A contribution that describes libraries as a successful example of "permanence in change" could tempt us to see libraries as the true, the beautiful and above all the good, as a relic of times past that is always regenerating itself anew in the present and the future. There is no doubt that the movement in which libraries find themselves enriches librarians and is at the same time beneficial to library users. However, this movement is lost when the emphasis on libraries becomes a monument. Because libraries are too much in life to be a monument. Moreover, libraries have something contrary to the spirit of the times, something of recalcitrance that may surprise. For they confront the present, which tomorrow has become yesterday, with the past, which we seek, find and receive in libraries in order to explain the future. In other words, the librarian cosmos on the one hand leads us further forwards and on the other hand leads us back again – this is something that resists the hectic upward striving of our progressive decadence, has a thoroughly liberating effect and is

extraordinarily inspiring. That's why we actually prefer to appreciate these "third places" and "librarying" instead of just "googling".

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)