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Around the 1990s: A “Wende” for Research Libraries

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is three-fold. First, it describes the situation of libraries in the years around 1990 from the perspective of international organisations, namely the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Second, it intends to show that this healthy situation already held the seeds of the future frailty of academic libraries. Third, it compares key debates in the Nineties with today's challenges for research libraries and shows how key decisions taken in the Nineties had a long-term impact on future library trends.

Keywords: Council of Europe; European Commission; Eastern European libraries; LIBER: academic libraries 1985–2000

Die 1990er-Jahre: Eine „Wende“ für Forschungsbibliotheken

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag hat drei Ziele. Erstens beschreibt er die Situation der Bibliotheken in den Jahren um 1990 aus der Perspektive internationaler Organisationen, insbesondere des Europarats und der Europäischen Kommission. Zweitens versucht er darzustellen, dass der gute Zustand vor allem bei den wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken schon den Keim der späteren Schwäche enthielt und es werden drittens die Diskussionen der Neunzigerjahre mit den heutigen Herausforderungen diskutiert und gezeigt, wie die Kernentscheidungen der Neunziger Auswirkungen auf die zukünftigen Entwicklungen der wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken hatten.

Schlüsselwörter: Europarat; Europäische Kommission; Osteuropäische Bibliotheken; LIBER; Wissenschaftliche Bibliotheken

1 Introduction

Few times in the history of research libraries can be remembered for such outright optimism as the last decade of the 20th century. As a result of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the col-

lapse of the Soviet Union, a whole part of Europe was freed from the Soviet grip and opened to the values of democracy. Central and Eastern European countries started to realise that everything they had respected until that moment was instead utterly ridiculous and sometimes odious. A time of reconciliation among Europeans had started, although its full achievement was to be seen only two decades later, when eleven Central and Eastern states joined the European Union.

The Council of Europe¹ doubled its membership from 1990 to 2003. Being the depository of the European Cultural Convention since 1954, the Council of Europe had a monopoly on educational and cultural activities at a European level at least until the Treaty of Maastricht, signed in 1992, was enacted. In the wake of the European Cultural Convention, a seamless and impactful action of educational standard and equivalence of diplomas and credits took place. These farsighted achievements were to culminate in the Bologna Process some forty years later.

Around the 1990s, the Third and the Fourth Framework Programmes (the predecessors of the current Horizon Europe) included a scheme designed to serve the specific needs of libraries. This scheme ran, respectively, in 1990–1994 and 1994–1998. Both programmes ushered in a memorable period for the development and co-operation of library services in Europe, with 25 million euros allocated to library projects during the Third FP and 29 million euros during the Fourth FP (93 million euros at 2023 values). During the last decade of the Second Millennium, libraries, and in particular academic libraries, were sending applications to the European Commission for the enhancement and the standardization of network-oriented library systems, services, and information resources.²

¹ Based in Strasbourg, the Council of Europe is an international organization focused on promoting democracy, rule of law, human rights, economic development, and integration of certain regulatory functions in Europe. Founded in 1949, it has 47 member states. The work of the Council of Europe in higher education policy focuses on issues related to qualifications (qualifications frameworks, recognition), public responsibility for higher education and research, higher education governance, and other fields relevant for the European Higher Education Area. The Council of Europe has contributed to the Bologna Process from its inception and is a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG).

² Aslan (2012), Vitiello (2014).

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This time can be defined the Golden Age for research libraries. Their hegemony in the information field was the result of two kinds of primacy. Before the emergence of search engines and social media, libraries were the only institutions able to offer unhindered and free of charge delivery of content to the public at large. As public institutions, they had the monopoly of free access to information. The second level of primacy lay in the technology they used. Among the actors in the book and information chain – publishers, booksellers, journal subscription agencies – research libraries could proudly show off an advanced and more capillary use of technological applications. Libraries were pioneers in digital information as well as in the circulation of bibliographic records and the use of metadata for shared services linked to the universal exchange of publications.

Between 1985 and 1995, academic libraries had reached their tipping point in terms of technological advance and automated distribution of records. A few years later, their hegemony was going to be eroded and finally cast aside by the emergence of new actors – namely, information and content providers such as Google and Amazon – and new trends – for instance, the vertical integration of publishers and distributors – with scenarios and developments that would make their position much more uncertain.

The aim of this paper is three-fold. First, it describes the situation of libraries in the years around 1990 from the perspective of international organisations, namely the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Second, it intends to show that this healthy situation already harboured the germs of the future frailty of academic libraries. Third, it compares key debates in the Nineties with today's challenges for research libraries and shows how key decisions taken in the Nineties had a long-term impact on future library trends.

2 LIBER and the Council of Europe

The history of LIBER, the Association of European Research Libraries, has been reconstructed by Esko Häkli in a learned and informative book.³ The former Director of the National and University Library of Finland explores the period from 1971 – the year when LIBER was born – to 2009 when LIBER became a Foundation (Stichting) under the Dutch legal system. LIBER now includes 420+ research libraries from 40 countries. At its outset, LIBER started with no more than 15 Directors joining the Strasbourg meeting and a first Executive Committee including only nine members.⁴

For at least twenty-five years LIBER developed under the protective wing of the Council of Europe in a connection that was both professional and political. When LIBER set off, IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, represented the only international arena for exchanges of views and mutual support among librarians. (FID, the International Federation of Documentation, had already embarked upon a pattern of decline and was eventually dissolved in 2002).

The newly-born organization dealt with library issues and problems that were not strictly “European”: collection development, preservation, access and library management and administration.⁵ LIBER's geographic scope, however, was different from that of IFLA. At that time, IFLA looked like a “gentlemen's club” unable to satisfy the growing demands for library co-operation.⁶ Moreover, being an organisation that stretched over the two sides of the Iron Curtain, IFLA was under the strain of professional debates that often were the mirror of political divisions.

With its initiative-taking attitude and professionalism, LIBER allowed European librarians to think “big”. LIBER extended its influence on all Council of Europe countries, facilitating co-operation in terms of standardised services to be provided by and to its members. The “patronage” of the Council of Europe was advantageous in many respects: it offered LIBER a political authoritativeness which worked decisively in incentivising libraries of the “free” Europe to join the organisation.

Among LIBER's founding fathers there may have been secret hopes of also receiving financial support from the Council of Europe. These expectations, however, were never met partly because of the limited resources the Council of Europe could make available, and partly because it is not in the logic of a political organisation to provide continuous support for professional activities. Nevertheless, the Council of Europe repeatedly funded LIBER annual meetings.

A consultative status with the Council of Europe was clearly beneficial to LIBER. Less straightforward is the reason why the Council of Europe needed LIBER to pursue its political objectives.

In 1971, when LIBER appeared, the Council of Europe had embarked on a path of significant achievements in the cultural and educational fields. The very first, and potentially the most brilliant, was without any doubt the European Cultural Convention of 1954. Not only was the ECC the first instrument of a cultural nature at a European level; in the crucial years from 1985 to 1995, the ECC became an important political catalyst to spur the membership of former

³ Häkli (2011).

⁴ Ibid. 26 f.

⁵ Ibid. 339.

⁶ Ibid. 16.

Communist countries to international organisations following democratic standards. In the logic of European unification, the ECC is considered the “antechamber” for political accession to the Council of Europe, and membership with the Council of Europe is a pre-requirement for future accession to the European Union.⁷ Hungary was the first to ratify the ECC in 1989; it became a Member State of the Council of Europe one year later and of the European Union in 2004.

At a first glance, the ECC does not display a strikingly impressive narrative. It is a short text of eleven articles of which only the first five deal with content, the others being more formal in nature. The emphasis is on cultural heritage, which is mentioned in three out of the five articles. Only two articles focus on activities other than cultural heritage. Article 2 encourages each Contracting Party to study “the languages, history and civilisation of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to those Parties to promote such studies in its territory”. Article 3 commits the Contracting Parties to consult with one another “with a view to concerted action in promoting cultural activities of European interest.”⁸

Despite, or perhaps because of, the vagueness of the text, the ECC has proved to be an instrument of great flexibility, lending itself to a variety of applications. It triggered a series of treaties which are considered milestones in the history of the integration of European higher education: the European Convention on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1956), the European Convention on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications (1959), the European Agreement on Continued Payment of Scholarships to Students studying abroad (1969), European Convention on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study (1990) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992).⁹

These Council of Europe Conventions implicitly set a watershed between a cohesive and harmonised block of countries being inspired by the European values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law and, beyond the Iron Curtain, the block of Communist countries. In the Council of Europe vision, libraries were instrumental to this political vision and LIBER was one among many organisations of civil society that would disseminate European ideals at a professional level.

It is not by chance that library association belonging to the Communist block opposed the establishment of LIBER, in which they saw “a political body [...] creating a

rift between East and West”.¹⁰ Their perception was, in a certain sense, accurate and their negative reaction, therefore, justified.

3 LIBER and the European Union

During the last decade of the second Millennium, the European Commission started to play a crucial role in library developments through the “Telematics for Libraries” programme. The political trigger for this programme was the Schwenke Resolution of 1984, in which the European Parliament drew political attention to the importance of libraries for European culture. The Schwenke Resolution did not support the idea of an unsustainable bricks-and-mortar library concept, but promoted a virtual European Library made from the connection of physical libraries scattered all over Europe. The resulting programme was included in the Third and, five years later, in the Fourth Framework Programmes. Responsibility for the “Telematics for Libraries” programme laid with the DG XIII “Information Society” of the European Commission, in charge of harnessing research on innovation and the use of information/communication technologies.¹¹

The “Telematics for Libraries” programme was broken down into three “thematic” action lines:¹²

- Action Line A: Network-oriented Internal Library Systems
- Action Line B: Telematics Applications for Interconnected Library Services
- Action Line C: Library Services for Access to Networked Information Resources

Several projects dealt with interoperability between systems and the concept of a “single point of contact” for distributed libraries. Standards were developed for metadata, computerised bibliographies and projects dealing with book-related information jointly formatted by publishers, libraries, and booksellers. Conversion tools from one format to another, including transliteracy problems related to distinctive alphabets (Latin, Greek, Cyrillic), and special services provided to disabled people were also funded by “Telematics for Libraries”. Emphasis was placed on resource access and sharing, user needs and the use of communications networks.

⁷ Huber (1999) 9.

⁸ Council of Europe (1954).

⁹ Council of Europe. Complete list of the Council of Europe's treaties: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list>.

¹⁰ Häkli (2011) 31.

¹¹ Vitiello (2014).

¹² European Commission (2001).

Thanks to EC funding, decision support, management information and performance measurement tools were developed in libraries. Attention was also paid to modern library services and citizens' access to information, addressing several specific issues including lifelong learning, copyright, literacy, regional information services and public library collaboration on access to knowledge. For the first time, reliable figures on library resourcing and usage in Europe were provided through the LIBECON initiative. Fourteen years after the Schwenke Resolution, the European Parliament adopted Ms Mirja Ryyynänen's report on “The Role of Libraries in Modern Societies”.

Not all libraries were the happy beneficiaries of EU funding. Research libraries were certainly most favoured since they were already making use of information and communication technologies in providing online services. Many academic libraries were project coordinators and partners, either because they had the equipment and resources to play this role, or because research-oriented activities necessarily resorted to libraries for further progress. Several projects funded by the European Commission concerned the automated distribution of information in areas such as the marine environment, economics, mathematics, and legal resources.

“Telematics for Libraries” succeeded in attracting participation from many libraries, but the quality of the participation strongly indicates a biased approach towards national and academic libraries. Research libraries represent less than 10 % of the total number of libraries. Nevertheless, the impact of “Telematics for Libraries” concentrated on the most prosperous libraries and library systems; as certified by a consulting company, “almost two-thirds of participants [were] national and academic libraries, with public libraries only accounting for 25 %”.¹³

An indirect effect of the “Telematics for Libraries” programme was also the formation of various ad hoc organisations acting at European level. LIBER was founded in 1971; other co-operative agencies came to existence in the years before and after the end of the second Millennium: CENL, the Conference of European National Libraries (founded in 1987), EBLIDA, the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (1992), CERL, the Consortium of European Research Libraries (1994), NAPLE Forum, the National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe (2002), and SPARC Europe devoted to open access, open science, open scholarship, and open education (2004).

Häkli's motto is ever true: there is no innovation without co-operation.

¹³ Ibid. 32.

4 From Big Library Networks to Big Deals

At the time LIBER entered full maturity, the scholarly communication market was living through dramatic changes that would radically impact on the economic environment of academic libraries and their ways of functioning. Right after the Second World War, scholarly communication was a fragmented universe with the property of scholarly journals often handed over to associations of scientists. Since the 1980s, scholarly publishers began policies of mergers and acquisitions, which would eventually result in an oligopoly of a few publishers dominating the scholarly trade.

These developments enjoy huge popularity in professional literature.¹⁴ The “big bang” that accelerated the movement of concentration was the merger in 1993 of Reed and Elsevier, two leading STM publishers. This new conglomerate would pioneer all the major changes in scholarly communication. Concentration was not the only feature of the market of scholarly communication; another trend was the vertical integration of the production and distribution of research journals. Until the 1990s, with scholarly publishers offering printed journals to libraries, the two segments had been distinct: subscription agencies functioned as intermediaries, collecting orders from libraries, ensuring payments, and channelling the distribution of journals.

In the last decade of the Second Millennium, scholarly publishers created digital archives of their publications. These platforms not only aggregate content but offer all sorts of sophisticated services in addition to search functions; they analyse and process thousands and thousands of publications and list them in many ways for many functions. The advantages for the research community are obvious. The reverse side of the coin, however, has been a huge increase in journal prices, far beyond any economic consideration. The median serial expenditure in member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), for instance, went up by 421 % between 1986–2006, (in the same period, the cost of living rose by only 83.9 %).¹⁵

Libraries reacted in two ways. On the one hand, they created consortia to gain better leverage in their negotiations with publishers. This two-sided monopoly (of vendors and purchasers) eventually gave more leeway to libraries and better subscription fees, although it did not decrease prices significantly nor lower entry barriers for newcomers in the field.¹⁶

¹⁴ For an introduction see Guédon (2001), Harnad (2015), Suber (2021), Mittler (2018).

¹⁵ Elaboration upon data provided by Kyrillidou (2008).

¹⁶ McFadden et al. (1998), Giordano (2002).

The second step was the launch of the open access movement. At the end of the second millennium, an open access campaign was started to create awareness among librarians and to lobby with university leaderships. In 2001, this campaign culminated in the Budapest Open Access Initiative. Open repositories of publications became known: without any doubt, the most important and exemplary in many respects was the pre-print archive in physics created by Paul Ginsparg, the US physicist, in 1991. And finally, the first journals in open access were published. This novelty was going to change the business model for producing digital publications, with fees that were requested from researchers, and no longer from library customers.

Guédon (2001) has dubbed 1991 the most emblematic year in the new era of digital publishing. That year Elsevier launched the TULIP project and Paul Ginsparg began his physics preprint server at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Very much has been written about the Los Alamos preprint server and the launch of the Open Access movement. The TULIP story, instead, remains unknown. It was the TULIP experience, however, that toolled up scholarly publishers for the digital era and legitimized their dominant role in the sector of scholarly communication.¹⁷

In 1991, nine major universities in the United States joined forces with Elsevier, then already the largest STM publisher worldwide. At that time Elsevier, as an all-print provider, was uncertain about its future strategy. Should its investment be made in search software, document delivery systems, massive conversion from print to digital form, network developments, or all of them?

TULIP was approached by Elsevier and by the nine academic libraries with different perspectives. Elsevier evaluated all possible options that would fit its developments in digital business. The nine US partners, instead, showed little interest in TULIP. The project ended up with librarians' recriminations that copyright policies, and in particular fair use practices, were being circumvented, and that the core mission of libraries was to distribute information to their users free of charge. At the end of the day, the licensing schemes proposed by TULIP were rejected by libraries – they would accept them a few years later under worse conditions.

The TULIP project provided many answers to scholarly communication problems – for Elsevier only. Networked distribution (information sent across the Internet over campus networks to the desktops of students and faculty) was dropped as a solution. Elsevier opted for a centralised platform – what would be called Scopus several years later. Costing, pricing, subscription, and market models were

going to be decided by Elsevier only, and not shared in a distributed manner with libraries.

The mistake made by research libraries was to reject the principle of shared stake holding in the scholarly communication process. With the advent of centrally managed platforms academic libraries stopped monitoring readers' usage patterns – this information bonanza was handed to publishers. By means of tools like the impact factor, scholarly publishers started to make separate deals with libraries depending on the number of times a publication was used.¹⁸

5 Conclusions: How the “Wende” in the Nineties Still Impacts on Research Libraries

LIBER's popularity among research libraries grew in the Seventies and the Eighties of the last century. In the Nineties, however, the objectives of the Council of Europe and LIBER started to diverge. For years, the aims of the international organisation had been European harmonisation based on human rights and democracy. The fall of the Berlin Wall radically reshaped the priorities of the Council of Europe and its working methods. Implementing the rule of law means dealing with rules at all; therefore, the reform of the legislation of the members of the Council of Europe in Central and Eastern Europe became the main goal of the international organisation.

In the “decade that made history”, the Council of Europe overhauled the regulatory apparatus of what were at that time dubbed the “new democracies”, to make them conform to democratic requirements. Lawmaking was revised and the grain of civic society rejuvenated to open to free markets. As a result, the book world was turned upside down. Publishers experienced the thrill of freedom of expression with catalogues enriched with several authors who were condemned during Soviet times, from Freud to Kafka, Proust, Beckett, and Joyce. The associations for publishers, booksellers and librarians had to revise their statutes and transform themselves into non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – a process that was completed in a few years. The book world also experienced the strains of the free market with painful restructuring of publishing houses and libraries and thousands of professionals losing their jobs or taking early retirement.

With the reshuffle in the Council of Europe's priorities, the destinies of LIBER and the Council of Europe severed, and relations were discontinued after 1993.¹⁹ The work on auto-

17 Hunter (1994).

18 Ibid. 148 f.

19 Häkli (2011) 154–65.

mation and technologies undertaken by research libraries was out of the scope for the activities approved by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers. Separation, however, was not only far from being stormy, but rather was highly beneficial for both parties. The Council of Europe addressed public libraries and library associations that were joining a new association: EBLIDA, the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations. Seven years later, the Council of Europe released the Council of Europe – EBLIDA Guidelines on Library Legislation and Policy in Europe.²⁰

In turn, LIBER started to shift its interests towards the research activities of the European Commission. The EC “Telematics for Libraries” programme turned out to be highly advantageous for research libraries involved, as we have already seen, in 75 % of the approved projects. After the Framework Programme for Research and Development, LIBER has been involved in more than 20 projects funded by the European Commission (Connect and Horizon programmes).²¹

The real “Wende” for research libraries – with no happy end, unfortunately – was not generated by international organisations, but by globalised publishing. Trends in sight some forty years ago generalised, consolidated and produced the current dependence of research libraries on scholarly publishing and its platforms.

History is not made with “ifs” on the grounds of counterfactual evidence. It is, however, legitimate to wonder what the present state of scholarly communication would be if the TULIP project had been approached not from the copyright perspective but looking at the economic implications of the scholarly communication process. With hindsight, one might wonder whether the prejudicial attitude taken by libraries then has not been instrumental in inhibiting an economic development where the issue at stake, and the dominant factor, is control over the distribution segment of the scholarly communication chain.²²

It may seem like talking about Cleopatra’s nose, but the spectre of economic dependence is still haunting today’s universe of research libraries.²³

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²⁰ Council for Cultural Co-operation. Culture Committee (2000).

²¹ LIBER Projects: <https://libereurope.eu/projects/>.

²² I have expanded on this topic in Vitiello (2021).

²³ Ibid.

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