

TO BE A LIBRARIAN? PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IN THE PROFESSION

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Paraphrasing Mallarmé, if the reason for the world leads to a book, then the library as preserver of books should be the place where the ways of searching for the meaning of the world, begin or end.

The 20th century, which has unveiled many secrets, has succeeded after more than two millenia to destroy the myth of the library as well, a myth which has been fed in the course of time by a necessary dose of mystery which invisibly span round the book. With the invention of printing, the book, an object with multiple virtues which became more and more accessible for an ever-growing number of readers, gained a value in itself related first of all to its content and the message it aimed to convey. The myth of the book and library began thus to lose its vigour and the modern epoch completed this permanent process of de-mythicization.

Up to a certain moment, the history of the library is confounded with that of the book. The role of the book in people's culture is not limited to that of memory of humanity. The book also determines to a great extent the way people relate to the world.

Beginning with the idea that the ideal state of man's being in the world would be when all his senses assert themselves in real harmony, Marshall McLuhan defines three ages of culture¹: an oral age when hearing took priority over the other senses; a second, visual age followed it, asserting the supremacy of sight, and the last age was the contemporary one, which tended towards the complete assertion of all the senses. The visual stage of culture, founded first of all on the development of the phonetic alphabet, completes, mainly through the invention of printing, the process of man's separation from his other senses. The present state of culture, determined by the technical means of the electronic age tends, in McLuhan's view, towards recuperating on a cultural level the other senses of man, requesting them without distinction and this leads to mutations in the contemporary society which are not without consequences in human consciousness. The role attributed by McLuhan to books, printing mainly, in the evolution of culture, and the impact of the printed letter on the consciousness of man led, within the stage of visual culture, to the unconscious isolation of man

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Galaxia Gutenberg*, Edit. Politică, București, 1975

from his fellows. There is a tendency in contemporary society, subject to electronic means of information, to reunite individuals by the network of communication, determining new mutations in man's vision of the world and his relation with others.

The place of the library in the new information society can be configured only if the new library precisely defines its relation to those who ask for its services and the basic principles which he will use in administering and supplying information. The library is not only an important centre of culture today, indispensable in the process of knowledge in contemporary society, but it is also one of the most competent purveyors of the information market. The library, which covers a significant part of the field of human knowledge, is related to all forms of knowledge, as Maurice B. Line says, owning a power in the present epoch which it should not be afraid to exercise.²

Libraries at the end of the 20th century, including Western libraries which have strengthened their position in the information system to which they belong as well as libraries from the "other Europe", Eastern Europe, which are on the verge of redimensioning their new exigencies, reflect on their role in the process of the complete assertion of the new means of communication. This also leads to the re-evaluation of the qualities of the future librarian.

This study aims first of all to present in a cultural perspective the mutations produced in the librarian profession and, on the other hand, to place in a global perspective the present tendencies of the assertion of the library in a society which is based on the unconditioned appeal for information.

The genesis of the library was initiated with the intention of preserving books (this means everything that was a written record) not only for a certain time, but because of the natural wish to gather all human knowledge. The profession of the librarian is often confused with the library itself. We do not intend to summarise the history of the library, but a retrospective view on librarianship is necessary, especially as this profession is in a stage where stress is laid on defining the role of the library in a world dominated by electronic means of communication and the capacity of the library to assume its new means of information.

In Europe the library, in the classical means of the word, began to function at the time of organising monasteries and also schools for copying manuscripts. They functioned as the most important cultural centres until the appearance of universities. In order to evaluate the *moral profile* of the medieval librarian, we shall define him as the bibliophile who fears God, or the librarian of the first power. In this period there was almost no need for books outside the monastery, the number of readers being extremely limited. The book was first of all an object of cult destined to the liturgical service. However, the books were

² Maurice B. Line, *Savoir c'est pouvoir, or le pouvoir est dangereux*, in: *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, 36, nr.4, 1991, p.268-279.

copied not only for the monastery; laics often asked for manuscript copies, works from the Greck-Latin antiquity, especially.

The founding of universities opened the way towards another type of learning, which was not strictly religious, and this led to the diversification of the need for books.³

In the course of time, especially from the Renaissance on, information about librarians increased, as laics, princes and statesmen began to have small private libraries which subsequently became the nucleus of the great modern libraries. Thus we learn the names of some librarians who managed to gather collections of rare books.⁴ Gabriel Naudé, Richelieu's and then Mazarin's librarian travelled for ten years through Europe in search of books and manuscripts, assembling a precious collection which had subsequently formed the Mazarina Library. Etienne Baluze, Colbert's librarian succeeded in collecting the most precious books from the Cathedral of Metz for his Protector, the Psalter and Bible of Charles the Bold. The reformed Benedictine congregation from Saint-Maur founded a library at Saint-Germain des Prés which became an important centre of editing the works of the Church Fathers. Jean Mabillon and Bernard de Montfaucon, erudite librarians of this order travelled throughout Europe in search of medieval texts for publication. These are only a few examples of librarians which justify their inclusion in a distinct category, that of the *erudite*, *bibliophile* or librarian on the second level. Characteristic to this period of passing from the epoch of manuscripts to that of the consolidation of printing, is the prototype of the "book maniac", represented by the librarian Antonio Magliabecchi who was in service to the Medici family, famous especially for his excellent memory whereby he knew by heart the catalogues of the libraries in Florence, as well as those of some other European libraries.

The presence of the modern, specialist librarian, with respect for books and submission to the profession is more and more perceptible with the opening of the libraries for the public. The development of modern libraries brought about a change in the mentality regarding the profession of librarian. The modern librarian defines his profession with great accuracy, in terms which specifies the principles of his condition. The present-day vision on the profession of librarian differs greatly from that of former times. One of the essential aspects of the profession is pointed out by an article published in *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, namely, "la gestion d'une collection, en tant que fond et ensemble d'accès documentaires rendus vivants par le service à des publics identifiés."⁵ The more

³ Geo Haven Putnam, *Books and Their Makers During the Middle Ages*, New York, Hillary House Publishers Ltd, 1962, p.178-225.

⁴ Albert Flocon, *Universul cărților*, Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1976, p.322-332.

⁵ Bertrand Calerge, *A quoi former les bibliothécaires et comment*, in: *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, nr.6, 1995, p.41.

the libraries are organised in hyper-specialised services, the more precisely will librarians define their tasks and place within the new configuration which results from the natural process of diversification of the services offered by the library. At the first census of the stratification of distinct professions in a library, completed in France in 1994, it was established that these can be grouped in at least four categories, namely, "métiers liés aux collections, métiers liés aux publics, métiers liés à la formation, à l'étude et à la recherche et métiers liés à la conduite de projet et de service".⁶ Every category has a specific number of librarians. The total number of specific professions in the library enumerated in this census was 32, which is totally relevant for the profession of librarianship produced lately. A modern definition of the librarian says that "Le bibliothécaire commande les ouvrages, les classe, les conserve et les communique. Il sait faire naître le goût de la lecture informer ou conseiller les lecteurs (...) le bibliothécaire doit posséder le goût des responsabilités, de l'efficacité, de l'organisation, de la précision, le sens de la communication (...) le bibliothécaire doit être polyvalent. Il n'est plus forcément la personne qui manipule seulement des livres mais peut gérer cassettes, disques compacts, vidéos, jouets."⁷

Undoubtedly the profession of librarian is in a process of transformation and adaptation to the new social and cultural context created by the information explosion as well as the unprecedented offensive of the means of information.

The image of the librarian of the near future is prefigured at the end of this century. The expression "virtual library" is almost a reality. Even if it is premature to speak about "virtual libraries", the first steps towards a "library without walls"⁸ have been taken. A project of the "library of the year 2000" took effect in the Library of Congress, aiming first of all at the development and modernisation of the technical means of disseminating information. The automation of libraries also implies the creation of an electronic catalogue which can be consulted by a network of users who are thousands of miles away. Nevertheless, we cannot imagine a library without a librarian, therefore even a "virtual library" will create its own "virtual librarian". What will be his role in a society which produces and "digests" information? This "virtual librarian" could manage a good part of raw information, structuring it in an electronic way which is

⁶ *Premier recensement des métiers des bibliothèques*, in: *Liaison Bibliothèques*, nr.6, juillet 1995, p.2.

"Professions linked to collections, professions linked to the public, professions linked to formation, study and research, professions linked to the management of projects and services."

⁷ *Métiers des bibliothèques et des archives*, in: *Actuel*, bulletin edited by the Centre d'informatique et de documentation Jeunesse, June 1995, p.1.

"The librarian purchases, classifies, preserves and communicates publications. He can develop the taste of reading, inform or counsel readers (...) The librarian must have a sense of responsibility, efficacy, organisation, precision, the sense of communication (...) The librarian must be polyvalent. He handles not only books but also cassettes, CDs, videos and games."

⁸ Jacky Ebréart, *Vers la bibliothèque sans murs: les actions de la Bibliothèque du Congrès*, in: *Bulletin des Bibliothèques du France*, 36, nr.1, 1991, p.43-49.

accessible to the user and could thus maintain complex connections between the different types of information within a given hypertext system through the computer. The hypertext is defined as a structure which carries out “navigation”⁹ within the information space, constructed according to certain criteria. It proves to be the most operative mode of harmonising multimedia channels, based on relations and links established through nodes of information. As technology develops and the demand for information diversifies by the unprecedented widening of the horizons of knowledge, the need for configuring a space in which information is selected, stratified and stocked in databanks is supported without reserve. This privileged space also tends to become a “virtual library”, harmoniously integrated, for the time being, into the friendly space of the library.

From a different perspective, that of communication, the library functions within a triadic relation which presupposes the existence of three terms of reference: librarian, book and public. We observe that the stress is shifting according to the importance of the librarian, book and public over the centuries. In the Middle Ages the focus shifted towards the book; the directions of communication within the relationship mentioned before are reorganised in the function of the book, from the book to the librarian and less to the public.



There were no readers in the Middle Ages outside monasteries and universities. In the Renaissance and mainly at the beginning of the Modern Age we witnessed a new shift of stress within this triadic relation, towards the librarian. The erudite librarian knew books; he initiated compilations of catalogues accessible to an initiated public. The basis of the first libraries in the very sense of the word were laid. Due to the rudimentary means of information it was difficult enough for the passionate reader to find the book he wished without the help of a good librarian. Remarkable books often remained unknown, their value ignored by their owners. Librarians put all their knowledge into the search for these books. Schematically, these relations can be represented this way:



In modern times we witness a new shift of focus in this triadic relation, towards the public. The assertion of this new element within the relations of communication of the library proves to be more visible in the present. It is one of the necessary requirements of every modern library to know its public well: “Ce

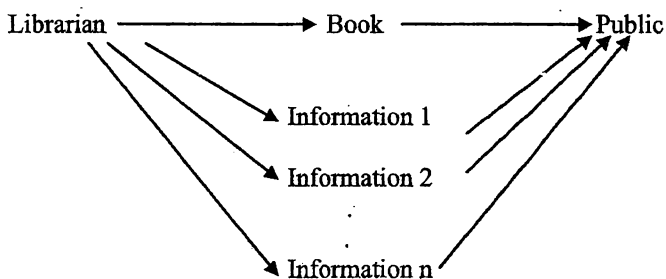
⁹ Hervé Le Crosnier, *Une introduction à l'hypertexte*, in: *Bulletin des Bibliothèques du France*, nr.4, 1991, p.280-292.

n'est pas au lecteur de s'adapter à la bibliothèque (...) mais à la bibliothèque de s'adapter à ses besoins."¹⁰

Librarian ← Book ← Public

This triadic relation of communication which has already become classical in the definition of libraries, tends to change now, shifting slightly in function of a new element which has a natural place in the functioning structure of the library. This is the information.

Communication is thus more dynamic and flexible, ensuring that every element of the new relation is equally stressed. These new relations can be represented this way:



The increasingly developed electronic communications has led to a stratification of the relation between the librarian and the book. The information which the library can provide by the network of computers which also permits the connection to other networks of information configures a kind of super-library on a global level, a library which is present only in electronic files. But a library does not mean only information. The collections of documents will remain for a long time the basic nucleus of the function of a library. Similarly, the library is also an important centre of culture, a space where freedom of thought, freedom of reading and information is ensured and protected. Librarianship in this perspective implies not only the adaptation to the new technologies of information but also the recovery of the competence of an old tradition based on the love of books.

¹⁰ H. Lorblanchet, *Dis... c'est encore loin L'Amerique?*, in: *La lettre de la Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Montpellier*, nr.4, 1996, p.40.

"It is not the reader who must adapt himself to the library (...) but the library must adapt itself to the readers' requirements."