

2015.

The Public Library as a Political Category

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Today is a special date. We write 11 September 2015. The crime at the beginning of this century must not be forgotten!

It must be over 20 years since my first (and only?) intervention in *web4lib*, an electronic discussion forum for *library-based online managers*. *web4lib* has been neatly archived on the Internet, but the archive only reaches back to April 1995. I therefore had to dig into my old mail folders at the 'Cable's Knot' in Helsinki, Finland, to retrieve my letter. Here it is below, headers and all (Donald J. Napoli, director of St Joseph County Public Library in South Bend, Indiana, was an American colleague with whom we competed for the 'first' server-based public library):

Date: Sun, 19 Mar 1995 10:21:38 +0200 (EET)

From: Mikael Book <book@katto.kaapeli.fi>

To: Web4Lib Moderator <listchek@library.berkeley.edu>

Cc: web4lib@library.berkeley.edu,

'Donald J. Napoli' <donald.napoli.8@nd.edu>

Subject: Re: Responsibility for Library Home Page

>This is a fairly brief reply to the responsibility question. The Library is
>an integral major participant in the development of the University's
CWIS,
>including the development of a University home page. Anything posted
>thereto must be approved by the larger body.

The above statement clarifies the difference (in questions of responsibility) between the university library and the general, public library. The former is a part of that semi-autonomous (in relation to the state) public institution, the university. Being only a part of the university, the university library is only, or at least primarily, responsible to the university. The university itself is then responsible to the rest of us (the society at large). Above all, the university is responsible for the quality and development of science, learning and higher education.

To whom, then, is the general, public library responsible? Certainly not to the university. The responsibility of the general library is to the general public. The public library is the backbone of the public sphere, thus of the public itself. The public became one only when it started to read and write, i.e. the genesis of the public coincides with the coming of the book, the bookshop, the journal, the Lesegesellschaft, the coffee house, the newspaper – and then, finally, the public library. The public library system was born at the point in history when the masses began to read books and papers, i.e. when the people started to constitute itself as a public. This happened only during, say, the last two hundred years. (In my country, Finland, we actually celebrated the bi-centennial of the public

library only last autumn.) The process I refer to is, obviously, parallel to the rise of political democracy.

Now, coming back to the question of responsibility of what is said on the hypertext-pages and how these pages are edited, lay-outed etc, *in the public library*, I am of the opinion that the individual librarian is the basic operational and responsible unit. Please consider this person (the librarian) as a public figure, a publisher and editor who is responsible to the public for what she or he says and writes.

This figure (the individual librarian) should have maximum freedom of expression. There should be no committee or board who can intervene *before* she or he says or writes, or says, or shows, what she or he likes to write, say or show.

I don't mean that it is a bad idea to set up a supervisory board for the WWW-pages of the library, maybe with the chief-librarian as its head. What the policy of such a board should be is not so terribly difficult to see. It is summed up in 'the ideal of making all information available without delay to all people' (I thank Michael S Hart of the Gutenberg Etext project for this formulation; he has in turn quoted it from *The Software Toolworks Encyclopedia* by Grolier Electronic Publishing 1990). The crucial word, here, is, of course, 'information'. (I suggest that, in the library, at least, we apply the semantic approach; information is 'meaning'. Thus, we skip, for the moment, the mathematical or 'bandwidth' concept of information.) The point is, however, that the traditional 'ethos' of the public library, is providing both the necessary and sufficient platform for the organizing of the 'electronic library'. The problem, here, is not one of responsibility, but of the fast tempo of change, the very small scale of economic investments (public or private) in the library sector (compared with the investments in the so called information super-highway), the need for new skills, and even for the acquirement of new kinds of 'literacy'.

A note on our practical experience: The library in Helsinki, Finland, where I spend my working-day, (The Cable Book) in an effort to link the electronic publishing activities of various civil associations and cultural movements to the World Wide Web *via the public library*, was the first public library on a WWW-server (in the world). Our experience may not be the most relevant one (for the other libraries), but it just so happens that we have *the longest* experience of publishing international, public hypertext (WWW) in the public library. Of course, we started only a year ago (28 Feb, 1994) so maybe experiment is the right word, rather than experience! Anyway, our experiment/experience can be summed up like this: so far we have managed OK *without committee and without chief editor!* The librarians, actually all staff members including the book-binder and even the young guy who does his service as conscientious objector in the library, have proven fully capable of taking their new personal responsibility as organizers of the library without walls.

Let the librarian be what she or he is: a responsible person. Let her or him assume the new responsibilities which come with the Internet – to be a guide to information for the library's patrons, i.e. the public. Right now (spring 1995) the alternative direction of the electronic library seems to

be towards becoming just one huge commercial advertisement.
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In 1995, even some philosophers were speaking about libraries without walls. They thought that all solid things would melt into air. But the walls of the library proved to be robust. It appears that the library has become a universal trait of humanity. That insight is not new, of course.

No, the real innovation, when I compare the situation now with then, is the new constitutional status of the library. And constitutional in more senses than one. The library is now formally recognised (by Articles 3 and 4 in the Constitution of 2014) as a power of the state. In other words, the Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches of the state are today checked and balanced by a fourth power, the Informational power as termed by our legislators. This fourth state power is, of course, nothing else than the library.

Manuel Castells and others had already used the word 'informational' in discussion of the 'information society' in the 1990s (Castells, 1996). At that time, and indeed a decade later, the future of libraries and librarianship still appeared to be uncertain, even grim. Here I summarise some of the developments that have led us to regard the power of the library almost as a natural phenomenon. I will focus on the years 2005–2009.

The changes have been very fast and dramatic. Yet they did not all happen at once. It is necessary to understand the present as a result of longer historical processes, by which I include the transition from orality to literacy, and the history of libraries from their genesis in ancient civilisations such as Sumeria, Old China and Ancient Greece, and further via the Arabs of the Near East and Africa, to the birth of the modern public library in the enlightenment and democracy movements of 18th- and 19th-century Europe and America.

The relatively short history of the modern public library has always seemed to run in parallel with the history of that fragile political system called democracy. Indeed, the story of democracy is that of the library.

Independent minds

To go back to my library of the 1990s: who should be responsible for the content and the quality of its homepage? Behind that question loomed another, much bigger issue: who was to be responsible for the content and the quality of the library itself?

With time it dawned on Internet users, at least to the new generations who had grown up with it, that the net was not a 'library metaphor', as many early writers on the digital revolution had thought, but a library in itself. The Internet was no longer seen as a virtual library, but rather to be as real as the traditional 'physical' library.

Yet the real break-through, which was to come only a couple of years later, was the result of a long process of maturation. First and foremost came intellectual freedom, both as an idea and as fact. Intellectual freedom is not

abstract. The modern public library, which strives to deliver all information to everybody without delay, is the concrete embodiment of intellectual freedom.

The pioneers of the public library movements in America and Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries had anticipated this feature of the library. However, it could only become a reality when the library's walls, and thus the library as such, seemed to vanish into thin air, or became subsumed under global financial capital, selling out to information-broking corporations as a result of the free-market fanaticism that reigned sovereign during the first decade of the 21st century.

A common mistake among those who with fascination and awe observed the new social phenomena that followed upon the rapid spread of the Internet during the second half of the 1990s was to assume the existence of a separate, 'virtual' reality. Even the author of the famous *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (Barlow, 1996) seems to have postulated the existence of a new 'home of Mind' somewhere beyond and above the old world 'of flesh and steel'. The birth of library power could come about only on the condition that this dualistic temptation was resisted and, gradually, overcome, so that people could finally see that the Internet, far from being a separate realm, is an organic part of the library.

'Organic' is not used here in a romantic or mystical sense. The library is 'a growing organism', said Ranganathan, and the Internet is just a new branch on the big tree. So Barlow warned governments: 'Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions', he certainly hit a stroke in the right direction. Except that he mistook the declaration of independence of the libraries for a declaration of independence of 'cyberspace'!

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as cyberspace. True, after its detours in the science of 'cybernetics' and in 'cyberspace', 'cyber' has today returned in the shape of what we sometimes call the cybernation of information by the libraries.

At the time of their publication, both the *Internet Manifesto* and, in particular, *The Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom* passed relatively unnoticed by the press and the general public. Both documents were put forward by International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and IFLA/Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) in 2002 (a year after 9/11). In retrospect, these documents stand out as true landmarks on humanity's road towards democratisation, whereas the whole pile of official declarations on trade liberalisation, financial globalisation and free movement of capital, although stemming from the same time only a decade ago, now seems completely outdated. Take, for instance, the concept of 'liberalisation' in the now defunct the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) treaties on free trade in services and intellectual property. 'Liber', it might be recalled, means free, but that particular 'liberalisation' only meant that capital would be flowing freely over national borders. Intellectual freedom proved to be a wholly different story. Intellectual freedom has since also prevailed over 'intellectual property'.

Today, the beginnings of a cybernetic government by way of information and communication, and through the libraries, are easier for everybody to see. How

our 'cybernation' will develop in the years ahead is still too early to predict because, as everybody knows, it is not without its deficiencies and problems.

A structural transformation

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the Internet (for the larger public) was just taking its first steps, I was appointed member to one of those innumerable State Committees that were to investigate the effects of the digital revolution (they did not call it by that term, but that was what it was) on society and, in particular – in the case of this committee – on the libraries. Being a political radical, I soon became isolated; indeed, the whole committee was soon left to die a quiet death and replaced was by another committee, which had no radicals on board.

Another member of that committee was Dr Häkli, who was then still the Chief-Librarian of the prestigious Helsinki University Library, which plays the role as national treasurer of the country's literary heritage, but also acts as a national guide to the future for the whole sector of libraries, museums and archives.

As the discussion of the committee touched upon the need to develop the technical library systems for cataloguing and searching for information, the elderly and somewhat aloof Mr Häkli, who only rarely opened his mouth, commented: 'Oh, I thought that information technology had already taken care of all that!'

Dr Häkli's remark, which was only meant ironically, turned out to be a rather accurate prediction. IT – and, it should always be stressed, the Internet – certainly 'took care' of the technical library systems. No doubt the librarians, proud and jealous of their professional skills, tried for many years to avoid this conclusion, seeing it as frightening for the future of their profession.

But the librarians rapidly overcame their fears. Already in the 1990s, many libraries became 'hybrids' that combined their collections of printed books and journals with computerised workstations and Internet access for their patrons. Librarians all over the world quickly got the message that they had to make the maximum use of computers and the Internet. Unfortunately, two serious obstacles stood in their way.

The first, of course, was their relatively scarce resources. For instance, how would the library afford, at the same time, to maintain its collection of books (considering that book publishing did not decrease, but increase, with the advent of e-publishing) and to increase its supply of computer-mediated information services?

Secondly, how could they compete with the new computer-mediated information services? The obstacle here was in part the ruling ideology of 'privatisation' of everything, including all the formerly public information services such as public broadcasting companies, schools and universities (which also serve the public in the vast field of 'information') and, last but not least, the libraries. The dominance of capitalist media corporations, and thus the weak position of the libraries in the informational relations of force, was felt as overwhelming. So when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated a million dollars to a library in Europe, Asia, Africa or Latin America, the librarians just gratefully accepted it, although many of them probably felt such a self-

interested gesture of charity from the richest couple of the world to be humiliating. What is a private software firm in the hands of a few capitalists compared with a public library, one of the most important institutions of mankind?

The library cannot live out of charity. The library must be strong and take the lead, especially in IT and on the Internet. The asymmetry of forces between the two was so crushing, however, that it paralysed the will and hopes of the librarians, a group which, after all, still represented the real expertise in the information field. This is why Google (and other search engines) and Wikipedia (and other similar encyclopaedias) have only recently become organic parts of the library. Let us look a bit closer at these two important, although rather different, examples.

Google started out very nicely from the work of two whizz-kids, who managed to set up a superior information search engine on the Internet. Soon all Internet users, including librarians, became heavily dependent on it. If you looked up 'World Social Forum' (WSF) on Google, you got tens of thousand of hits. In the catalogue of the library, by contrast, you scarcely found a single book on that important new institution of the global civil society. So Google just won 1000 : 1, and you didn't even need to walk away from your desk at home to the information desk at the nearest library (if there happened to be one in your neighbourhood).

Dr Häkli could still say 'keep those thousands of hits on Google, but I'll read the book!', and would have an important point because the written information only lives with a human subject who appropriates it, i.e. with somebody who 'reads the book'. But the arguments of the old humanists, or those who believed that they, and only they, were the true humanists (not to be confused with Dr Häkli, who *is* a true humanist), started to fall, one by one. Not even the often heard objection, 'When I go to bed, I prefer a book to a computer', lasted for very long. This insight came to me at last when, back in 2004 or 2005, waking up from some more or less pleasant dream during the small ours, I found my wife reading essays about cryptozoology in the bleak light of her Treo, one of the first mobile phones that also served as the physical infrastructure of e-books.

The further development of Google, however, was one more tragedy of the commons. Google, as you remember, was privatised and listed on the Nasdaq stock exchange. What a shame. They sold it all; they simply were not capable of imagining an alternative to a money-driven world. TINA, 'there-is-no-alternative', was written in capital letters on their foreheads.

Why did the librarians of the world not create their own Googles? Why did they not take up serious competition against those ... yes, those capitalists? What else could those entrepreneurial, but not very civilised spirits be called? Right behind all those hackers turned greedy, some of whom were really gifted, for example Linus Torvalds or the guys who developed Google, or who were mediocre at best, like Bill Gates with his all-pervading Windows system, lurked the people for whom money was the alpha and the omega: the capital managers, the investment bankers, the patrons of the oil-industry, the warlords...

The profession and the traditional ethos of librarianship tended to make the librarian '... blithe as a milkmaid, or sumptuously dressed according to the wishes of its masters' (Briet, 2004). A librarian used to be the loyal nurse of

everybody's information needs, performing only subordinated functions and tasks in the social production of knowledge, world-views, ideologies and entertainment. How would the helpful and sympathetic, but humble and politically unambitious professionals, library and information specialists (LIS) become leaders, governors and strategists of the information society? And, considering that most LIS were women, how would they take the lead in IT which, like most technology, was traditionally dominated by men?

On a general level one can state that quality, content, meaning and communication successively came to prevail over quantity, technological form, bandwidth and information. The old joke from the beginning of the digital era, 'technology is the answer, but what was the question?' surfaced again in the period of maturation of the technology, and as the public space became saturated with a seemingly never-ending stream of new technical devices and 'revolutionary' software applications. First and foremost, people finally learned to make use of all these new gadgets and to use them for what they were meant to be used, namely to make your voice heard and your face visible. The forces of consumption, and among them not least the library and information professionals, started to develop into forces of production.

One of the important phenomena of the more mature Internet of the first years of the 21st century was the fast, almost sudden appearance of Wikipedia. If Google and the other Internet search engines provided hundreds and thousands of 'hits' for almost any keyword or search-phrase, Wikipedia gave structured and fresh knowledge, not on everything of course, but on almost all such things that fit into an encyclopaedia.

It is probable that the idea of an encyclopedia may undergo very considerable extension and elaboration in the near future. Its full possibilities have still to be realized.

Thus wrote H. G. Wells in the 1930s in his essay *World brain: the idea of a permanent world encyclopaedia*. Those certainly had been prophetic words.

Wikipedia's entries outnumbered those of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Brockhaus* even by 2004/05, and it outdated these traditional encyclopaedias by far by means of its salient feature of becoming continuously updated by its own users. Undoubtedly, Wikipedia's plasticity and capability of uninterrupted growth was absolutely necessary in an era of explosive scientific and technological development, for better or worse. What could the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tell you about, say, nanotechnology, global dimming, 9/11, the ATTAC movement (Association for a Tax on financial Transactions to Aid the Citizen), and other important phenomena of that time? Almost nothing; only a digital online encyclopaedia could make it.

Yet had Wikipedia only been superior in terms of quantity and freshness, and equal to its printed predecessors in terms of quality, it would still have only been one more of the same kind, i.e. a new-fangled and superior encyclopaedia, but an encyclopaedia nevertheless. And encyclopaedias, useful and entertaining (T. S. Eliot never went on a journey without a volume or two of the *Britannica* in his luggage) as they may be, are bound to remain temporary substitutes for real knowledge. Knowledge, after all, cannot live in articles or books, and not even in websites and e-books that are updated as often as to become almost 'real-time'; the insights of knowledge, the knowing in itself, can be nothing else than

processes of the living mind, or the 'society of minds', as knowledge is by nature a social thing.

This description of knowledge as a social process is not so far from what the Wikipedia was really about. Wikipedia developed further and made visible one of the most interesting features of the Internet, its co-operative nature and, at the same time, the inclination of human beings to collaborate and construct their knowledge base together and just for the fun of it (which explains why latter-day T. S. Eliot's could not imagine going anywhere without their laptops and iPods).

Viewed from a sociological angle, the Internet is the community of its users, who make it work by means of 'networking', which is concerned with the same thing as co-operation, and which is very much about communication, i.e. the sharing of meaningful messages and content. These simple truths had been at odds with the commercial and consumerist ideology that still dominated the scene during the first decade of the public Internet; yet the ideas of co-operation and peer-to-peer exchange of information lived on and flowered just beneath the commodified surface of society. And of course it was precisely in the libraries that these ideas of free communication and sharing of knowledge, so contrary to the corporativistic ideology of intellectual property, had one of their safest havens.

The phenomenon of blogging was another symptom of the shift from quantity to quality, and from using information to producing it, i.e. from information to communication. Blogging simply meant an exponential growth of the number of people who not only read but also wrote the public hypertext. Undoubtedly, 'blog' was a dim concept. The World Wide Web had actually seen innumerable 'blogs' right from the beginning in 1991/92. Those who complained that the actual content of the blogging was usually of as little relevance as any chat over a cup of coffee, were not totally wrong, either. Still, blogging meant a great step forward in the 'structural transformation of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1962). Blogging helped the public itself to rise from the degraded status to which the undirected mass media had reduced it during the 20th century. Thus, blogging contributed strongly to the return of the 'reasoning public' that Habermas had valued so highly in his somewhat pessimistic and nostalgic treatise from the time when TV made its global breakthrough as a mass medium at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s.

Among the LIS, blogging was very much à la mode in the years following 2004. It was at this point that the LIS began to take their place as a vanguard within a reading, writing and reasoning public that was becoming ever more aware of itself and its own potential. Many of the bloggers, who used the Internet as intensively as the scientists and researchers (the World Wide Web had, after all, been invented at CERN, the European centre for nuclear research), were librarians and women. One of them wrote in her blog that librarians should function as 'strategy guides to information and knowledge' and that she, Jenny 'The Shifted Librarian' Levine, was going to use that title on her visit cards instead of the more traditional title of 'librarian'. Intuitively, she had grasped the whole meaning of the change that lay ahead.

9/11 and open conspiracy

The era of neoliberalism and conservatism was marked by many great financial and politico-economical scandals and crimes: BCCI, Enron, Worldcom, Clearstream, Yukos-Menatep, Parmalat, etc., are still remembered as symbols of capitalistic fraud and deception.

But the greatest and most compromising of all those crimes was 9/11. This is not the place to tell the whole story, some parts of which have, unfortunately, remained unexplained and obscure until this very day, the 11th of September 2015. Suffice it to recall the so called 9/11-truth movement that gathered the most diverse kind of people in its rows, from American family members of the innocent victims of those terrible and tragic events to some of the world's most experienced politicians and observers of public affairs (such as former German technology minister Andreas von Bülow, or veteran Egyptian political commentator Mohammed Heykal), from serious academic intellectuals to sinister conspiracy theorists and – as was unavoidable – 'misinformers', who deliberately created the FUD (fear, uncertainty and doubt) that was so typical of those years. Those were the years of the so-called 'war against terrorism'!

David Ray Griffin, with his devastating critique of the report of the official 9/11 Commission – set up by the President and Congress of the USA and published in the summer of 2004 – was foremost among the critics of the semi-official account of 9/11 that had been fed to the public all over the world by the mass media and governments. Griffin, an emeritus professor of philosophy from the Claremont School of Theology, California, was very well aware that he did not possess 'the whole truth'. The general thesis of Griffin was, therefore, that a new and totally independent investigation of the 9/11 attacks had to be opened, and that the journalists of the mainstream press finally had to scrutinise the many unanswered and disturbing 9/11-related questions with courageous and open minds (Griffin, 2005).

Other participants in the 9/11-truth movement, who were inclined to look at things from a more cynical perspective than Griffin, accused him of political naivety, or of a having-it-both-ways attitude. Why would a press that has spread all the lies, and a government that was itself involved in the conspiracy, help the 9/11-truth movement to find out the truth? Yet the position of Griffin was the more fruitful, because the raising of consciousness and courage among the general public was a prerequisite for any further action, and how could that consciousness be achieved if not through a public investigation and a reasoning in public that permitted an advancement together towards the truth?

In a footnote about the tendency of the American Left to avoid taking a hard look at the evidence, which proved the official 9/11-account to be full of 'omissions and distortions', and to consider the possibility of official complicity, Griffin wrote:

To some extent, this fact [the attitude of the Left] reflects a matter of principle – a concern that devoting attention to possible conspiracies is diversionary. Some of the reasons for this wariness are valid. One concern is that a focus on exposing conspiratorial crimes of present office-holders may reflect the naive assumption that if only we can replace those individuals with better ones, things will be fine. Underlying that worry is the concern that a focus on conspirators can divert attention from the more important issue of the structural problems in the national and global

order that need to be overcome. But although those dangers must be guarded against, we should also avoid a too strong dichotomy between structural and conspiratorial analysis. For one thing, although structural analysis is essential for any deep understanding of social processes, structures as such, being abstractions, do not enact themselves. They are influential only insofar as they are embodied in agents – both individual and institutional – who act in terms of them. These agents, furthermore, are not fully determined by the dominant values of their societies. They have degrees of freedom, which they can use to act in ways that are more or less just, and more or less legal. When political leaders enact policies that are egregiously unjust, dangerous, and even illegal, it is important to replace them with leaders who are at least somewhat better. Finally, and most important, the exposure of a conspiracy may, rather than diverting attention from a society's problematic structures, turn attention to them. For example, if it became evident that our national political leaders caused or at least allowed the attacks of 9/11 and that they did so partly because they had deeply embodied certain values pervasive of our society, *we might finally decide that a society-wide reorientation is in order* (Griffin, 2004: 204. My italics.)

Opinion polls taken in the years following 9/11 in fact showed that a majority of the inhabitants of New York, the scene of the main events in 2001, did not believe in the official story. The problem was that the official story had almost taken the place of a religion. Thus, expressing the doubts and posing the disturbing questions in the open was like committing sacrilege. For years, only citizens with exceptionally strong nerves, those who were personally touched, for instance the widows of men who had died when the World Trade Center collapsed, or those who did not care because they saw conspiracies everywhere, and thus had no reputations to lose, dared to stand up and speak their minds in this climate of semi-ritualistic conformism. Many opted for the view that Griffin advocates in the above-quoted passage, that it is better to focus on the structural ills, and try to find cures for them, than to cry 'catch the thief!'

9/11 and the subsequent 'war against terrorism' was also exploited by the US Government, and by other governments, as pretexts to tighten control over free speech and communication. The American Patriot Act, for instance, gave the police extended rights to spy on the reading habits of individual users of the public libraries.

So the prospects of the 9/11-truth movement still looked bleak when three, four or five years had passed since the massacre. Had the US army been successful in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had the Bush administration cared a little more about its own people and the peoples of the rest of the world, it might have made it, gone unpunished. Unnecessary speculation! The Bush Government did everything in its power to increase the doubts and suspicions about itself, and its aggressive foreign policy indeed led it straight into the kind of war that equals disaster.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the librarians, like the members of other intellectual professions, found themselves at a crossroads. The uneasiness of the political situation that followed upon 9/11 was felt in most parts of the world. To this came the reminders of the hubris that is underpinning western civilisation. Leena Krohn commemorating *The House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe, observed:

Every civilization has its end, and ours has already grown extremely fragile from its internal hostilities, its overpopulation and its thoughtless ways of using natural resources. We have built on sand. 'That once barely-discernible fissure' extends now 'from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction to the base' (Cheney, 2005).

In this spiritual climate the idea of an Open Conspiracy again took root in the minds of intelligent and active citizens. The movement got its name from a nearly forgotten blueprint for world-revolution that H. G. Wells had written in the 1920s. While H. G. Wells had remained popular as a writer of science fiction, most of his political ideas had for a long time only collected dust, until they were rediscovered by the critics of the dominant forms of globalisation at the beginning of the new millennium.

The founders of Open Conspiracy stand out as the authentic intellectuals of that recent epoch. They were the ones who dared to rise up, as the French writer Emile Zola once did, to accuse the mighty and powerful of conspiracy against the meek and powerless. The standard counter-accusation against these courageous people was, of course, that they were 'conspiracy theorists'. However, like the Black Panthers of the 1960, who decided that 'Black is beautiful', they affirmed: 'Let's make the conspiracy open!'

Open Conspiracy to some extent participated in the efforts to reveal and publicise the secret official conspiracy of 9/11. However, it was first and foremost determined to build an international revolutionary movement in the open.

On what grounds could that movement claim to be revolutionary? Open Conspiracy did not pretend or propose to transform the whole of society into *etwas ganz anderes* in accordance with the prescriptions of an utopian theory. From H. G. Wells and the numerous people who had shared his beliefs, one of whom was Bertrand Russell, the new open conspirators had this common feeling:

Let us get together with other people of our sort and make over the world into a great world-civilization that will enable us to realize the promises and avoid the dangers of this new time.

Civilisation, however, is young and inexperienced while the library is old and wise. Civilisation is particular; the library universal. Civilisation is euro-centric, but the library originated in the Middle East. Libraries were a reality in Mesopotamia before the ancient Greeks invented the myth of Europe.

The innovation of Open Conspiracy consisted in setting library power squarely on the agenda of mankind. Library power was something different from the vague ideas that people had until then made themselves about a 'world government'. It was certainly not any kind of 'United States of the World', with a President, Government, Parliament and universal national anthem. By consequence, it also strongly differed from the dreams of those desperate rulers of the world's only 'superpower', as the USA was, or pretended to be. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Rice had clearly expressed their hopes for continued dominance during a 'New American Century'. The traditional, imperialistic 'superpower' was the only model of global governance that those

old-fashioned politicians, bankers and industrial magnates were capable of envisaging.

The idea of library power grew out of two rather simple insights: (i) that the library as an institution is universal enough to serve as a foundation of a world civilisation; and (ii) that the Internet is a library.

The dispute over Internet governance

Originally, the question about the responsibility for the Internet was largely seen as a non-issue. The Net was believed somehow to take care of itself in its own cybernetic way. Signs of a change in this regard started to be felt during the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the two sessions of which took place in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), respectively. A number of countries (including, notably, countries with governments that wished to restrain the freedom of information and expression of their citizens) started to press for the creation of a government-run body under the United Nations to supplant the now defunct ICANN (The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). However, the Government of the USA, where the root servers of the Internet were located, did not want to lose the monopoly of control that it had – or believed that it had.

Active citizens round the world were watching the growing conflict over Internet governance, as it was called, with fear and suspicion. Only conservative bureaucrats and politicians of the older generation, who actually had very scant and superficial knowledge about the Internet (in the mid-1990s, when it emerged, they were already in their 40s or 50s), favoured Internet governance by traditional state governments.

The alternatives to some kind of multilateral arrangement under the United Nations did not look much better. Governments (except, of course, that of the US) did not want to let the US retain its exclusive influence. And why should they? But the US Government had already, using 9/11 as a pretext, taken steps towards a tightening of its control over vital technical functions of the Net.

If the US monopoly looked untenable, the possibility that the Internet would ultimately become 'privatised' and run by the giant corporations (Nokia, Samsung, Microsoft, Sony) that the Internet itself had helped to become powerful global players seemed equally disgusting, at least to the millions of people who had by then learned to use and appreciate the new source and means of information and communication.

Almost nobody imagined that the librarians, and their institutions, the libraries, would soon play the key role in the field of Internet governance. True, IFLA was trying to make the voice of the librarians heard at the first WSIS. In a number of statements, the leaders of IFLA reminded the political leaders and the international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) at the WSIS of the existence of the world's network of libraries:

The most important message which we must take home from this city of international dialogue is that libraries are essential if we are to 'humanise l'homme', if we are truly to develop a people centred information society. We must emphasise to our colleagues, to our communities, and especially to our governments that it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. The global network of libraries, with more than 2.5 billion registered users is already at the heart of the information society. A modest investment will

return great benefits for communities and nations
That is what Alex Byrne, president-elect of IFLA, said at the preparatory WSIS session in November 2003. These words, however, were scarcely noticed by the media (the WSIS was given scant attention), or even by the representatives of the other INGOs who had somehow managed to participate in the WSIS on the spot.

On Internet governance, IFLA at first took the following position:

In regard to the proposed approaches to the governance of the Internet, IFLA supports a multistakeholder approach which involves governments, civil society and business and which offers a path for increasing participation by those interests in all countries as the capacity to participate develops. (September 2005)

What modesty from the side of a community which knows that it 'is ... at the heart of the information society', especially considering that neither IFLA nor the libraries had even been mentioned by the report from the international Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG)!

The Internet is capable of running itself. It does not need to be 'governed' at all. Therefore, the dispute over Internet governance that emerged at the WSIS could be seen as largely unnecessary. Yet there was the domain name system (DNS) that had to be taken care of centrally. The policy on domain names had, since 1998, been set by ICANN, a 'private-sector, non-profit corporation', as it was called, although it had never cut its umbilical cord to the US Department of Commerce. Development of the Internet also required the continuous elaboration and setting of universally applicable technical standards, guidelines, specifications and tools. Various international industrial-academic consortia, such as the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), worked on these tasks.

After the first WSIS, which officially was proclaimed a great success, but unofficially was seen by many as 'the weirdest global summit on the globe' (Bruce Sterling), the American Library Association began to raise its profile on the Internet governance issue. EBLIDA, the European Bureau of Library and Documentation Association, soon followed suite. As the dispute over Internet governance seemed to continue without end, IFLA finally went on to propose that the governance of the Internet be trusted to the world's library community.

Although this proposal was met with some skepticism at first, it soon started to gain wide support. The beauty and simplicity of this solution to a difficult political problem was not appreciated by everybody. In particular, the governments and bureaucrats of dictatorial regimes, such as China and Iran, feared that such 'library power' would prove to be yet one more step towards eroding their ability to control and monitor their citizens. These governments had originally demanded a reform of ICANN for precisely this reason, i.e. in order to increase their own power over the Net.

Another opponent to the interesting *démarche* from the side of the library community was, not surprisingly, the US Government. It is rare that the powerful are ready to give up their power without a fight. In this case, however, the position of the US Government was very weak, for historical reasons. No government had done more to develop and spread the Internet than the US Government. Yet nobody could claim ownership or exclusive intellectual property

rights over this new library-like institution, the Internet. The World Wide Web had not been invented in America, but in Europe. A great deal of the software on which the nodes of the network run were based on GNU/Linux, an operating system for computers that had, against all odds, been developed by a young man from Punavuorenkatu-Rödbergsgatan in my hometown Helsinki (I happened to know the young man and his parents, who were of my own generation.)

But the issues concerning authorship or ownership or (state) governance were absurd in the case of the Internet. You could own books, both those you had written and those you had bought, but you could not own 'the book' as a form and cultural archetype. (Which is one of the fundamental reasons that public libraries managed to survive despite the aggressive 'liberalisation' of every public service that was going on under the GATS and the TRIPS.) Neither could the Internet as a form and a cultural archetype be owned, bought and sold – or governed, in the traditional sense of that word. So the US Government had to retreat and admit that the Internet belonged to everybody, just like the books in the public libraries, and, more generally, like the whole public sphere with its intellectual freedom on which all the modern forms of democracy are resting.

Open Conspiracy whole-heartedly embraced the idea of library governance of the Internet. Throughout history, the libraries had been entrusted the tasks of organising, cataloguing, presenting and preserving the world's written heritage. The profession of the librarian had developed to meet that challenge, and it had proven capable. Would it not be capable of running the domain system of the Internet? If some technical assistance was needed, it certainly could and would be provided. The gifted computer programmers, the real hackers, had always proudly defied the mighty and rich. The Free Software Foundation and other associations of the best computer programmers were there to help the libraries. The minds who constituted the world's 'electronic frontier' were certainly not natural allies of the governments of the USA, China or France, or the Commission of the European Union.

Social information and the World Social Forum

In theory, the modern political library stayed politically neutral and autonomous. Anything else would have contradicted the intellectual freedom that the library was set to guard and cultivate. Traditionally, however, the concept of the autonomy of the library had been related, above all, to the nation where the library functioned and to the nation-state that, usually, covered the main part of its expenses.

The globalisation of the public sphere which arrived with the Internet changed the conditions of the library's relative autonomy. It became urgent to re-define the status of the libraries within the political system, and this time in the global political system. As we have seen, the declarations on intellectual freedom by IFLA/FAIFE, and on the Internet by IFLA, paved the way for that important progress in the thinking of librarians. Even more so, the increasing 'hybridisation' of the libraries, by which I mean all the combinations of traditional and digital libraries that were planned, or actually practised, during the first decade of the public Internet and World Wide Web, pointed in the same direction.

In this new situation, the need for something like a 'Declaration of Independence of the Libraries', whereby the international library community would swear loyalty to the peoples of the world, instead of to the national governments, became a necessity. Within the library community, discussion started on the old theme of Montesquieu and the founding fathers of the USA: the question of the division of powers. They found that time had ripened for the libraries to constitute themselves as a 'fourth' state power (the three others being, traditionally, governments, parliaments and judicial courts). That idea had a precursor in the somewhat vague conception of a 'Fourth Estate', meaning the printed press. The new conception of library power was far more precise.

The worsening international political climate in a world that again risked being split into hostile blocs, or even experiencing 'clashes of civilisations' (one of which still upheld the myth of Osama bin Laden and his 20 terrorists) also reasserted Albert Einstein's saying, 'Remember your humanity and forget the rest'. A new universalism and/or cosmopolitanism had to emerge, but it had to be stripped of the hubris of the earlier generations, who believed that humans were called to dominate and control the earth and the forces of nature. Here, the other and more fundamental climate change played its decisive role. How ironic that it had been possible to study and verify the phenomenon of global dimming only when air traffic was halted during the first days and hours that followed upon the 9/11 attacks. Henceforward, remembering one's humanity meant, above all, remembering one's own limitations as a human being.

People of all kinds worldwide became better informed because of their access to the Internet. And their loyal servants, the librarians, became ready for the challenging of empires.

The participation of the library community in the World Social Forum had started already in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where the first three WSFs were organised (2001–2003). The successful workshop on 'Libraries and the Democratization of Information' that took place during WSF IV in Mumbai, India, January 2004, marked the beginning of a new phase in the convergence between the WSF and the libraries. The main speaker at that workshop, IFLA chair Kay Raseroka from Botswana, proposed that LIS participate in the WSF and – this was the really significant part of her speech – use their professional skills to document it.

A great project! The editorial staff of a newspaper or a TV channel can cover the life of a whole city, or even a whole country or region. However, if the 'life' consists of literally thousands of information-centred events – conferences, seminars, workshops, groups – per day, then a few reporters, or even a whole group of them, have to be happy if they manage to select just a few of the more important ones to cover and report to their audiences. That was very much the case with the WSF.

Kay Raseroka's proposal was, therefore, the beginning of a revolution in the way the WSF was documented and presented to the WSF participants themselves and to the larger public as well. Librarians from various continents and countries decided to integrate the information from and about the WSF in their concept of social information.

The prevailing concept of social information is rooted in various regional and national traditions and ways of responding to the challenges of the digital revolution. The American GILS (Government Information Locator Service), for

instance, was seen by many Europeans as a positive model to follow. While European authorities tended to regard governmental information as a possible source of revenue, in America it was generally thought, and rightly so, that the citizens (taxpayers) had already paid for the knowledge and information that had been produced with money from the state budget. So government information was offered free of charge via the GILS. Soon, however, Google, Wikipedia and other effective ways of finding information on the Net rendered earlier systems such as the GILS obsolete. If only governmental offices at all levels published information about their plans and doings, sufficient transparency and accessibility could be achieved without separate technical systems such as GILS. At the end of 2005, GILS was actually put to an end by the national Institute of Science and Technology, NIST. (Incidentally, NIST was also the organisation from which the US Government commissioned studies on the collapse of buildings WTC1, WTC2 and WTC7, which were said to have been caused by the airplane crashes and the subsequent fires on 9/11; those collapses, and especially that of WTC7, which was not hit by a passenger jet, have never been fully explained.)

The libraries were, as a matter of principle, supposed to include as much as possible of the government information in their collections. The principle of intellectual freedom, by contrast, demanded that the libraries treat the governmental information like any other information, namely as something that is most probably incomplete, and possibly also one-sided or biased, if not plain wrong.

Social information, the concept used in library work, was applied to integrate various categories of political, economic and cultural information, including government information or 'public information', under a single broad concept. In the English language, social information is distinguished from scientific information, the latter being information based on the natural sciences and technology.

The librarian's critical attitude to social information, however, resembles that of the social scientist. The 'neutral point of view', which is recommended by the authors of Wikipedia, also comes to mind as a possible description of the institutional spirit of the libraries.

Social information, as a concept, has one root in the Swedish notion of 'samhällsinformation' (literal translation: 'society information'). Thus, Anders Ericson, writing in 2002, noted that

The Swedes [...] make greater use of the wider concept *samhällsinformation* (community and society information) and increasingly classify their Web links under headings such as Health, Environment, Education, etc. which offer access not only to local and government authorities but also to various organisations and private persons. A quick browse through British websites indicates that similar solutions are common also there (Ericson, 2003).

The information of (from, about) the WSF, and the related documentation project of the librarians, was a peculiar case of social information that was international or 'global', but non-governmental. Through their 'WSF Information' project, the libraries engaged directly in the construction of global civil society

and a global public space. A major event in the development, whereby the libraries enhanced their role as a global political actor, was the WSF in Nairobi (2007). This WSF hosted a large conference on library policy and a number of special workshops on important issues. One of the workshops was dedicated to finding answers to the question: 'How to create a "WSF information" in the world's public libraries, to be placed on a par with "government information" and – in Europe – with "Europe Information"?'.

Open Conspiracy entered into a new phase when library workers from around the world united with the social activists of the world's peace and justice movements at the WSF in Nairobi. After the WSFs in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, Caracas, Bamako, Karachi and Nairobi the INGOs had found a common home that was at the same time very old and brand new: the global library.

Further developments

I shall only add a short note on further development from 2007 until today.

The global campaign in favour of a new financial architecture culminated in the years 2006–08, and the long-awaited international conference on a Global Currency Transactions Tax (CTT) was finally held in February 2009. In June that same year the international CTT Treaty, which had been sketched by Lieven Denys and Heikki Patomäki and presented at WSF II in Porto Alegre, was ratified by 57 states, whereafter it entered into force. In February 2010, the Assembly of the CTTO (the organisation that had been created by the conference and the treaty on CTT) decided to allocate 20% of the tax revenue to an international library fund that was to be managed by IFLA. In one stroke, the library community had substantially increased its ability to support modern public library systems in countries of the Global South and to strengthen its role in the policy-making on telecommunications and Internet governance.

The catastrophic and catalytic event that occurred in August 2009 dealt, as everybody knows, a serious blow.

The Fourth WSIS, held in Kiev, Ukraine, in 2012 marked the final breakthrough of the international library power. The first WSIS had been organised by the International Union of telecommunications; the WSIS in Kiev took place under the aegis of IFLA, which had now attained the central position in the information society that it deserved. However, as always when a new power establishes itself, cleavages soon appeared between different currents of thought and opinion. In this way, a number of new political formations – a kind of 'global political parties' – has emerged. Which, after all, is alright. But beware of a uniform political culture!

It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.
(Walter Benjamin)

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