

## Library Communication in the Era of Digimodernism

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**Abstract:** The movement from a modern to a postmodern/digimodern information society can be seen in many facets of the library. The library arena, where knowledge and ideas are documented, shared and preserved, is being transformed with unusual scale and impact. This transformation is characterised, in part, by the deconstruction of classifications and meta-narratives, diminishing hierarchy and control, and non-linear communication development. The aim of this paper is to analyse the transformation of the library communication with users based on the digimodern approach. The paper reveals the impact of digimodernism on the library theory and practice through the binary oppositions: taxonomy-folksonomy, information expertise-user participation etc. These characteristics challenge and redefine how library specialists manage collections and services today and in the future.

**Keywords:** library communication, library transformation, power relations, information society, postmodernism, digimodernism, user participation

### 1. Introduction

The library as a social institution has always responded to the changes and challenges that have emerged in society at different times. Miksa (1996) pointed out that the library has always been “a product of cultural and societal contexts”, “an era-specific phenomenon”. During last decades libraries and their services have transformed together with society. This transformation embodies numerous socio-cultural and technological issues, including transformation of the library institution and library-user communication.

Library that in its nature is an amazingly modernist institution today lives in a society bearing different names: post-industrial, information, service, and certainly also postmodern/digimodern society. It can be assumed that the library as an information processing institution is supposed to have a rather favourable, vital and stable position in their academies and in the information society. However, the new ways and means of obtaining information have considerably shaken the position of the library institution (see Savage 2008, Davis 2008, LeMoine 2012). The role of information in the information society grows con-

siderably; furthermore, today, seeking for information by using search engines is so simple, fast, and comfortable, and can be done without leaving home. In such conditions, the library can hardly claim to be in the role of the main portal of knowledge. In these new social conditions a necessity arises to analyse what is happening in libraries today, to analyse new phenomena in the philosophy and practice of library work and communication.

Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2015) differentiates between three turns in the social (r)evolution of the recent decades: the informational turn, caused by the exuberance of information; the digital turn, proceeding from the development of technology; the communicative turn, brought along by mediated communication. Based on this, the transformation of the library may be viewed as a turn in all the above-mentioned dimensions: digital, informational, and communicative.

## **2. Digital Turn**

For libraries, the digital turn means the application of digital technology in all aspects of library work. Bruun (2011) stresses that most libraries today have a much more relaxed and natural way of interacting with the digital possibilities – the use of digital media and digital services is now viewed more as a useful tool than as a threat to the libraries. According to Owen (1997), the dominant factor in the development of libraries is the on-going move towards digital distribution of information through the global network infrastructure. This implies a shift from the traditional role of the library towards a role as a supplier of networked services for digital information resources. So the mainstream strategy and activities of academic libraries are related to the word “digital”, which comprises both digital collections and digital services.

From the aspect of library services, Alan Kirby’s (2009) concept of *digimodernism* seems to be especially interesting. In his opinion, a new cultural climate has been created by digitisation. Kirby relates digimodernism above all with the distribution of Web 2.0 at the beginning of the 21st century, bearing in mind Wikipedia, blogging and social networks.

Digimodernism can also mean the democratisation of culture, including the active interaction between authors, readers and web-users. Lankshear and Knobel (2008) highlight that “digital usages inherently enable new types of innovation and creativity in a particular domain, rather than simply enhance and support the traditional methods”. The digital turn in libraries has given rise to the emergence of newly empowered active library users, who may control and shape the content, evaluate the books they have read and share their searching experiences with other users on the library website.

## **3. Informational Turn**

Library information and digital turns are related to the movement into the information society based on the profound influence of modern information and

communication technologies, digitisation of information and prevalence of the Internet. The development of information society offers libraries totally new opportunities and sets new tasks for them (see Friend 1998, Ray 2001, Wolff 2012, Einasto 2017). Information society has drastically changed the library institution, offering both new developments and new challenges which are associated with changing the learning environment and research strategies, scholarly communication and the structure of higher education. As Dillon (2008) observed, “beyond mere access, faculties view the intelligent management of information as part of their own working practices, bringing with them concerns with repositories, privacy, copyright, and migration across time and distance”, so we must recognise the attitudinal and cultural shifts that have occurred throughout the society in how information is viewed.

If we turn to the academic and research libraries, we also cannot neglect the fact that the universities of today face a unique and interesting situation – at present, practically all students have been born around the beginning of the 1990s or, in the information society. As the users of e-services, this generation is characterised by that 1) they have great expectations, 2) they expect customisation, 3) they are technology veterans, 4) they utilise a new communication mode (Gardner and Eng 2005). The world-view and information behaviour of this generation may have a significant impact on the academic library services: access, customisation and service quality have become the main key words for libraries.

As “opportunities and freedom of the young generation as consumers of the media and information increase” and “young people in Europe are highly confident about their proficiency in the Internet” (Kalmus 2007), the libraries tend to have certain expectations to the “digital generation” (Siibak 2009) and presume that modern students cope well with independent information retrieval. However, the everyday library practice does not confirm it. Relevant research show that students who excel in information retrieval, have often problems using library search engines (Martin 2009, Harley et al 2001). The problems areas are database and e-catalogue options, such as Boolean operators, truncation, opportunities to expand or limit of searching, also with selection of appropriate keyword.

Social practices of Estonian memory institutions also confirm this, for example, Kalmus’s research revealed that both European and Estonian adolescents over-estimate their competence: a great proportion of pupils are unable to evaluate information on the Internet (Kalmus 2007). So students may feel that using library services requires more knowledge and skills than using internet search. A self-contradictory situation arises when technologically experienced students try to be independent users of the academic library, but fail to use library information system.

As Lauristin (2012) highlighted, "information society is not only technology, information society is relationship between people and the transformation of these relationships". Libraries have to learn about the new needs, the current information environment, cultural context and information-seeking experience of the people whom they serve today. So it is important to analyse how the library communication with users is changing in the information society.

#### 4. Communicative Turn

The library-user relations may be viewed as power relations, where *access* and *expertise* are the main keywords. It may seem unusual to speak of a library as an institution of power, but within the frames of communication analysis, such a discussion is quite relevant (Einasto 2015). Furthermore, in the information society "information becomes ubiquitous, but information also becomes for those who control it, a source of power" (Martin 2009). Thus, in the library context, communicative turn means mainly the changing of power relations in the library and user communication. The power relations in the library context may be viewed relying on the ideas of Louis Althusser (2006) and Michel Foucault (2011) that power relations do not mean only the army and the police, but also education, culture, and communication, and that power exerts itself also invisibly, through knowledge and technology.

According to Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, presented in his early work *Discipline and Punish*, power does express itself through norms, control, and discipline, using two simple means: hierarchic surveillance and fixing norms (Foucault 1991). This can be observed in all library models: the strict following of inherently adopted values, norms, behaviour patterns, power hierarchies, and discipline. Everybody who has visited a library knows that a library is really a specific disciplinary space with its own etiquette and norms of behaviour and communication. All these norms are related to the value priorities of the library: the book, knowledge, education, order, and silence. In the communicative space of the library the activity of both the librarian and the users has for centuries been dictated through a binary opposition *allowed-prohibited*.

Library may be considered as a system of knowledge, organised according to logical principles and strict order, which tries to standardise the user's behaviour (Einasto 2015), for example the idea of a *panopticon* by Jeremy Bentham has been used for centuries in the library interior architecture as the embodiment of disciplinary power. In comparison, today, in the library virtual space, the design which restricts behaviour is missing. However, it is wrong to presume that the user is not affected by the disciplinary power of the library when he/she uses it electronically. The reason for this lies in the existential idea of the library – to create a system of knowledge about the reality, organising, classifying and presenting that knowledge in the catalogues.

While searching for information, the users have to conform to this knowledge classification, regardless of their own and maybe totally different world view.

Classifying knowledge, a library offers its users what Foucault (1977) calls a coded view of things. Note also that when all information is systematised and catalogued, to get the information needed, the user has to acquire searching strategy, library terminology and classification system. In other words, the user needs a key or a code for library communication and this may become a source of power.

Therefore, when observing practical changes in the library-user communication, we cannot describe their relations only as the submitting of the user to the requirements of the library system. It is important to learn whether the digital and information turns in the library of today are also accompanied by the communication turn, and whether and how the role of the user is changing, in other words, how much space does the structure (library system) allow for the agency of the user.

According to Runnel study (Runnel 2009), the ICT using can be theoretically contextualised within the notions of structure and agency. Runnel approaches agency as “a self-reflexive action based on intentions, such as motivation or choice, and capabilities, such as skills, initiative or creativity”, and user participation as a form of user engagement in the production process, but also as “a certain technique to share power and responsibility” (Ibid). In his later book *The Subject and Power*, Foucault writes that power is exercised only “over free subjects”, who have the “field of possibilities: different ways of leading, reacting and behaving”. Foucault (1982) believes that these ways are shaped through social practices, which he conceives as “schemes that are offered and imposed over an individual by culture, society and their social group”.

Today the library-users power relations are uniquely characterised by their implicitness. Power is not operating directly and visibly, but unnoticeably, finding expression in the practices which have been developed during the using of the library. These practices include, for example, information search, requesting of materials, access to texts, etc. The user already comes into contact with the power of the library system when using the most wide-spread e-service – the e-catalogue search by the author: as soon as the user tries to search “Michel Foucault”, the authority control of the information system enforces the form “Foucault, Michel”. Here, we can conceive power as the idea of “producing” the user’s information behaviour.

Thus, due to the fact that the strategy of power lies in its being unnoticeable, it may be an illusion that today there are no power relations in the communication between the user and the library. However, power relations have not been eliminated from the library communication, rather, they are transforming. The basic attribute of power in both the Gutenberg era and in the time of the digital turn is the access to knowledge. The user participation in the e-service delivery is also related to access. Such an approach allows us to discover a new power

strategy in new modes of library work, which is much more subtle, compared to the disciplinary forms.

In the Era of digimodernism active democratization of culture is important, and library is not an exception here. According to Duderstadt (2009), librarians have developed knowledge in many forms, and “so much of this wisdom, many of these fundamental concepts and principles, continue to be valued as they are applied to the digital world”. Lankes (2010) is an opinion that the librarians of today could „focus on connection management instead of collection management“. User involvement in the self-service processes as a ‘co-producer’ of new services is the example of the new communication strategy of the libraries.

For a true communicative turn, librarians try to adopt new ways of information work and make rigid cataloguing and classification systems more flexible. Today libraries started to experiment by adding tagging capabilities, see for example Australian and Canada experiences (Porter 2011, Spiteri 2006). Uncontrolled vocabulary as the result of collaborative tagging is known as *folksonomy*. Kroski (2007) defines folksonomy as “a non-hierarchical ontology that is created as a natural result of user-added metadata or tagging” in comparison with the taxonomy (controlled vocabulary) with strict rules and norms.

Coyle (2007) proposes that “librarians might as well adapt to it and take the advantages of both folksonomy and traditional information organisation systems and use them simultaneously to increase access to library collections”. Folksonomy has become a new trend where the users can add any keyword/term themselves, develop their personal information space within the catalogue, control and shape the content, evaluate on the library website the books they have read and create communities of common interests.

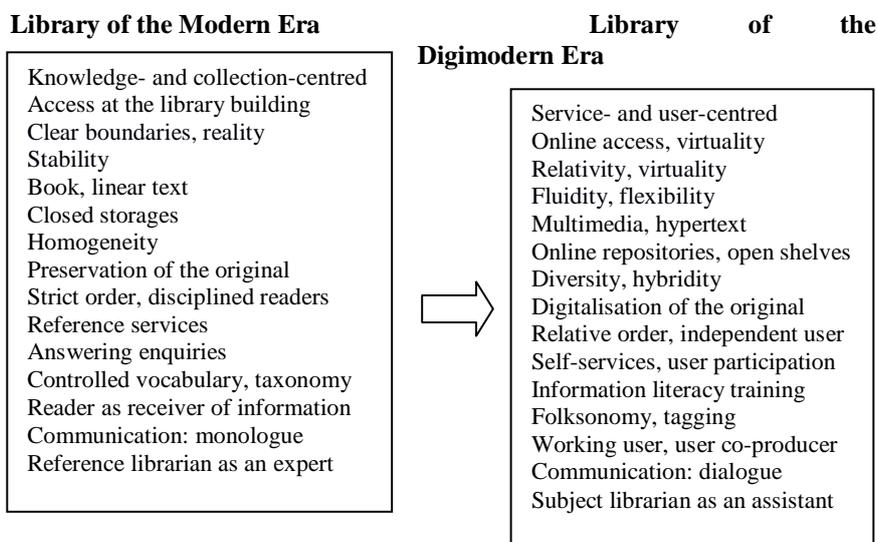
The ideas of participatory cataloguing, collaborative tagging, and folksonomy are interesting and perspective, because they are democratic, collaborative, empowering and oriented to users’ needs. These ideas may have their future in the development of the library communication strategy and new services. Furthermore, these ideas could be successfully applied just in the academic library with a larger user competence and potential.

## **5. Conclusions**

The digimodern library is a new hybrid organisation using above all new technologies and means of communication to get, systematize and make accessible information on different bearers. The libraries of digimodern era above all characterized by love of technology. Computer technologies have drastically affected library philosophy and practices, thus the concept of librarianship and its practices have considerable changed (Einasto 2017). The library has today become a rather flexible information and cultural institution

with vague virtual barriers and access-centred mission. A digimodern library is client-driven library; it researches and understands the users' needs and expectations. Moreover, users may play a key role as co-creators of new library services.

In our contemporary libraries both, Modern era values (such as valuing and preserving the printed word, order in organising catalogues and collections) and post-/digimodern categories (pluralism, variety, virtuality, disappearance of barriers, and participation of the users) have merged. A digimodern library is a creative mix of old and new, of tools and resources, blending digital and print books, and staff expertise in new and ever-changing arrays. A digimodern library is not an antithesis of a traditional modern library but a paradigmatic difference. Such transformation of library institution can be illustrated by the following (see Figure 1):



**Fig. 1.** Transformation of the library institution

The “communicative turn” in libraries is centring on the changing power relations in the library-user communication and on the role of user. If we consider the three turns described in this work (digital, information and communicative) which have occurred in the libraries, the question arises, which one is the most important among the three. Based on the theoretical analysis, the so-called digital and information turns are not revolutionary turns but, rather, they are new and effective ways the library can use to store and disseminate information and automate its work processes, including user services. This is mainly a technological evolution, whose importance and impact are compared to the inventing of the printing press by Gutenberg. Despite the huge effect these

turns have on library work, the functions, mission and principles of the work with information have remained the same.

Compared to that, the “communicative turn” can be called a true revolution, because the virtualisation of information and services; new technologies for obtaining information are already questioning the irreplaceability of the library as a social institution which offers information services, and require that libraries revised their ways of communication with their users. As Lotina’s study revealed, “technologies have not only speeded up the process of information dissemination and enabled a convergence between different types of media, but also changed the roles of users – ordinary people become producers and actors, professionals and experts” (Lotina 2016).

Harley et al (2001) stressed that library value is not so much in how many resources are offered, but in the nature of those services, activities, and programs provided. Rather than seeking dominance and control, digimodern librarians need to focus on integration. The libraries have realised that even though the users aren’t library experts, they are experts in being users. This in turn means that the libraries can gain much knowledge and valuable information from their users. The users can help shape the library space and services more directly by using tools and methods, which are common in digital culture. This in turn can create new places of dialogue between the library and the user.

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