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From Being Libraries to Becoming the “Switchmen¹” of Scholarship in the Digital Age

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« *Beaming Up* » academic libraries in the future is a stimulating intellectual activity, allowing us to take a step back and see the host of evolutions that these lasting institutions have been experiencing. The main lines of a credible future scenario can then emerge. Within the academic world, to which they belong, libraries have witnessed – and often participated in – the changes that have occurred in recent scientific communication events (subscribing to Big Deals, supporting Open Access, developing institutional repositories, helping to manage research data, etc.) and/or been part of pedagogical innovations (developing Learning Centers, creating MOOCs, providing pedagogical support in classrooms, helping students to build their information literacy, etc.). The scope of these libraries has therefore been transformed, going from an established role to a wide range of functions.

These important changes – and the economic implications that go with such changes – have their roots in the digital age and the Web. But the academic communities' practices, usages and behaviors also contribute greatly in structuring the new scholarly world. The ways in which these behaviors are evolving make us question the current role of libraries. At the same time, the dynamics inherent to these scholarly practices have opened up niche markets, themselves operated by new Web and media stakeholders – often Start-ups – which play the role of intermediaries (Google, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Mendeley, ScienceOpen, or also Kudos for instance).

These new intermediaries make up the news of the academic world. They have seeped into the modalities that shape the (collaborative and participatory) creation of scientific publications and pedagogical knowledge as well as its production (complex and multi-modal products), its dissemination (various business models: Gold, Platinum, Freemium) and, finally, its valorization (Altmetrics). Innovation, which has

¹ - Or « Pointsman », as you like it!

always been present in the academic world, has been heightened by these intermediaries who consider it as a priority. Amidst the never-ending race towards innovation, their common goal consists in lasting as long as possible on the academic scene, and to, ideally, create a major place for themselves within this world.

Libraries are used to exchanging with scientific publishers, after having spent several centuries establishing collections of documents for their users. But now, they must also work with Web stakeholders. The latter tend to federate communities of users around platforms and encourage them to interact around content that may have been created by the users themselves or that may simply be shared. The library's traditional role as a mediator is pushed back in favor of Web platforms. The latter act as mediators by promoting the activity of research communities that interact together (through comments, exchanges, sharing...).

For students, teachers and researchers, the pace of these changes renders the academic ecosystem both more complex and borderless. It reflects a nebulous environment in which it is harder to navigate. The constant innovations and normative discourses leave little place for reasoned analysis, critical distance and doubt. And this may precisely be where the future of academic libraries lies.

Academic libraries could see future developments by positioning themselves as strategic players, observing and analyzing the abundance of innovations presented by the other stakeholders who will do anything to last in the system. The future of academic libraries in the digital age consists in looking at how they can capitalize on qualities such as knowledge, know-how and expertise in the midst of a shifting and constantly transitioning environment. Libraries could then help users build a digital culture which leads them to scrutiny, as well as provide them with helpful signs or even with a general "road map". The future of academic libraries lies in adopting a global view of the evolutions that occur in the academic world, whether in research, learning or in teaching.

The future of academic libraries lies in them accompanying users to do a "critical reading" of the new logics and values at work in the academic environment. Libraries could also provide a "survival" set of tools: information, training, expertise, advice, orientation. These are all themes on which academic libraries will need to focus as they modify their roles and services. In order to think of the future of libraries, we must seize this niche area: testing products, appraising services, accompanying

transitions, determining what underlying issues exist beneath the innovations offered in the academic environment, in research, teaching and learning.

This increasingly open environment causes reference points to disappear. The older generations have difficulties navigating in the environment, and the new generations don't always know how to position themselves. The risks are tremendous, especially at the times of "predators" (Beall, 2012). In this context, libraries can build themselves a future by offering "levelling" processes or services that bring actors together and contribute to guarantee trust and authority. This is all the more necessary as the academic world tends to become more and more globalized, and where mobility, exchanges and collaboration are becoming the norm, while levels of knowledge are heterogeneous, as are behaviors and representations. This can constitute barriers for students or researchers. Libraries can federate their audiences by focusing on these pressing concerns.

The future libraries will therefore represent processes more than spaces or places (Dowler, 1997) (Latour, 2012). In this new light, libraries will fully take part in the academic world's evolutions as well as accompany these transitions and, more importantly, will help the public engage with this environment. Libraries can therefore move away from a "victim" status - simply bearing the changes - and, instead, become a fully assumed stakeholder. The future of libraries is actually engrained in the present since, in some cases, libraries already play the role of consultants among the public, helping with the choice of tools, resources, publishing models, etc.

Libraries will play this role with great amounts of credibility. Aren't they the ones that spread the library model, including on the Web (Latour, 2012)? And it's precisely because the library model has become central that it is time for libraries to move forward and suggest new roles. But, in that case, will the future of libraries lead to a renaming process? If this were the case, what new designation could we opt for? "Switchmen" seems to be the best term to describe the role of libraries in the future. They aren't very visible, sometimes forgotten, but they guide users and are essential to overall navigation.

“*Switchmen of the scholarly world in a digital age*”. This expression could correspond to the future of libraries. At a time when Google is reinventing itself², adopting new roles and a different name, libraries have all the credibility to do it too. And in this new turn, which libraries must now negotiate, the biggest difficulty may be that they will be confronted with their own image and their own capacity to make it evolve.

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² - Time Magazine, August 2015 : <http://time.com/3995782/google-is-trying-to-reinvent-itself-and-maybe-silicon-valley/>