

„Time is out of joint“. The impact of digimodernism on the transformation of librarian's role

Olga Einasto

Library Services Department, University of Tartu Library, Tartu, Estonia

E-mail: olga.einasto@t.ee



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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. We, librarians, see, that the arena, where knowledge and ideas are documented, shared and preserved – our arena – is being transformed with unusual scale and impact. This transformation is characterised, in part, by the deconstruction of classifications and metanarratives, diminishing hierarchy and control, and non-linear communication development. The aim of this report is to analyse the transformation of the library and librarian's role using postmodern/digimodern approach. The report reveals the impact of digimodernism on the library theory and practice through the analysis of binary oppositions: chaos vs. order, copy vs. original, skills vs. knowledge, taxonomy vs. folksonomy, information expertise vs. user participation, information providing vs. user engagement and training, system-oriented vs. user-oriented librarians. These characteristics challenge and redefine how library specialists manage collections and services today and in the future. The understanding of the digimodernism can help librarians to rethink their role and redesign some of our classical services, like reference and information services, reframe them to be more attractive for today users.

Keywords: Library transformation, information society, postmodernism, digimodernism, information literacy, librarians, library communication

Introduction

The library is a social institution, embodying both information and communication. This institution has always sensitively reacted to changes and challenges in society and its services have transformed together with society. As our society has changed so radically during the last decades it is difficult to understand a contemporary library within the traditional frames. Those changes are not related only to the development of info technology and the extremely quick distribution of information but to really deep changes in culture, philosophy and world

view. This transformation embodies numerous social, technological, service-related, cultural and information issues, including changes in the institution of library in the digital era, transformation of library communication, librarian's professional expertise and ethics, new partnerships of librarians and users. In these new social conditions a necessity arises to analyse new postmodern/digimodern phenomena in the philosophy and practice of library.

In our analysis we are rather interested in analysing postmodernity/digimodernity as: 1) a historical and cultural situation of the society (Lyotard 1997), 2) a modality of our society in the digital age, or digimodernism (Kirby 2009), 3) a condition or a state of being associated with changes to institutions and creations (Giddens 1990).

According to Kirby (2009: 2), digimodernism appears socially and politically as the logical effect of postmodernism. Digimodernism is the successor to postmodernism: emerging in the mid-late 1990s, it gradually eclipsed it as the dominant cultural, technological, social and political expression of our times. The new cultural climate thrown up by digitization. Kirby (Ibid) 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.

The transformation of the library institution in the age of digimodernism can be viewed through three turns: *the digital turn*, proceeding from the development of technology; *the informational turn*, caused by the exuberance of information; *the communicative turn*, brought along by mediated communication (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2015). The digital turn means the application of digital technology in all aspects of library work. 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 libraries are related to the word "digital", which comprises both digital collections and digital services.

Library information turn is related to the movement into the information society based on the profound influence of modern information and communication technologies and prevalence of the Internet (Einasto 2016). Information society has drastically changed the library institution, I can draw here an analogy with the invention of the printing press in the 16th century. Transformation of the librarian's and user's role and also of the library-user communication is the "communicative turn" (Einasto 2016), centring on the changing power relations in the library-user communication.

Digimodern phenomena in the new library science and profession

There are naturally many aspects that could be discussed under the theme but according to postmodern philosophy this paper presents only a fragmentary survey of how postmodernism/digimodernism changed and changes the library and our profession. In our contemporary libraries both modern (such as valuing and preserving the printed word, order in organising catalogues and collections) and postmodern (pluralism, variety, virtuality, disappearance of barriers, user participation) categories have merged. Today 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 (Einasto 2014).

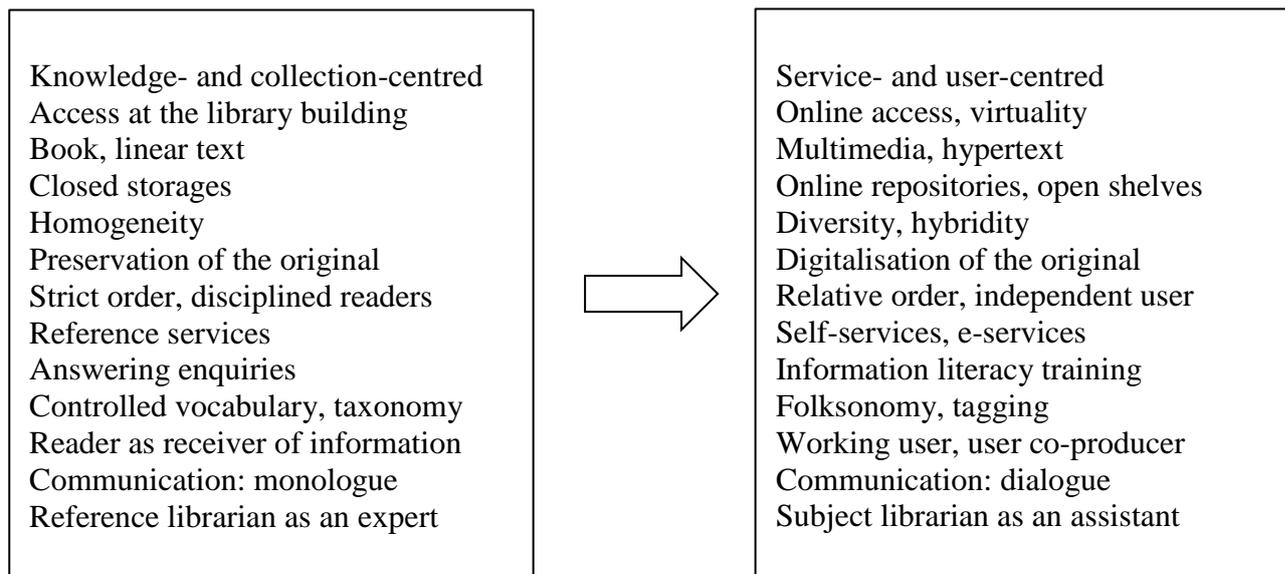


Figure 1. Transformation of the library institution

A postmodern/digimodern library is not an antithesis of a traditional modern library but a paradigmatic difference which can be illustrated through some significant dichotomies.

Variety and pluralism vs. meta-narratives: Changing library sciences

The history of human civilisation is a history of development, each generation learns from the experience of earlier generations, making their own achievements and contributing their work to the knowledge to be inherited by the next generation. In that lifelong learning process librarians always have a very important role. They preserve the meta-narratives – written memory of our civilization, a memory which mankind developed to be more reliable and permanent than the oral tradition (Friend 1998). Librarians also have their own specific meta-narratives: the bibliographical control and universal classifications for systematizing knowledge. The existential idea of the library is creating a system of knowledge about the reality, organising, classifying and presenting that knowledge in the catalogues. In the other words, this is a *taxonomy* – knowledge organisation structure with controlled vocabulary. All these help the librarian to control the reality, describing it in the catalogues, keeping in his/her head about ten numbers from the classificatory and the punctuation marks of the entries, independent of whether it is the a paper or an electronic catalogue.

Meta-narratives are replaced today with pluralism and variety. Lyotard (1997) spoke of variety as an almost obligatory principle, stressing that this is an essential part of our being allowing a right of being and development to everybody. This is an absolutely postmodern idea. Such approach demonstrates itself clearly in the various collections of a today library where all – manuscripts, books, audio-visual items, and electronic issues belong. In the recent years libraries have started to be called hybrid libraries which means joining the functions of the traditional library with the functions of a library based on info technology, not preferring one to the other. It is important to point out here that Kirby (2009), speaking of digimodernism, also points out such phenomena as hybrid texts and hybrid audience. In a similar way the contemporary hybrid library could be called a hybrid organisation as here both the modern and postmodern categories become mixed.

Skills vs. knowledge: Changing library profession

Postmodernity/digimodernity reorganizes the notion and usage of knowledge. In the modernity knowledge meant science: knowledge was useful for one got an education through them and that was a value in itself. Today education becomes more functional: nothing is studied only for knowledge but to apply that knowledge. In this respect library education is no exception. Today more stress is laid on developing skills than on general education. It is partly so because the quantity of knowledge and information in libraries has grown enormous. Thus at present above all such knowledge is appreciated that is liquid.

I shall give an example from life. In tutoring the LIS students at the University of Tartu Library I usually start with a simple theoretical question to my future colleagues: what are the four main functions of the library and which of them is primary today? No student has during the last five years been able to answer my question! What's more, some students did not know well the alphabet and the biographies and data of foreign authors. At the same time I must confess that their skills – especially computer and language skills were really notable.

Expertise vs. amateurism: changing role of librarian

A more drastic change for libraries in the nowadays is that librarians cannot any more present themselves as experts. Expertise is always related to meta-narrative, some universal truth which, however, is an idea of modernism and does not correspond to the postmodern worldview. In the Modern times library was the only place where one could get all answers to practically all questions. The role of the librarian was to guide people path to information from questions to answers, from ignorance to knowledge. Many people saw this path as a complex labyrinth as much professional knowledge and specific professional skill were necessary for that. A librarian resembled Ariadne in this labyrinth whose position was inevitably authoritarian. However, today Google has already won a large portion of search territory from librarians and is not likely to return it. As the user's surveys in the University of Tartu Library explores, students admit that Google is their first information source. At one time, people turned to librarian to get information, but today, there are so many free sources of information that many people can meet their needs outside knowledge institutions.

So today the librarian cannot monopolize the right to information any more. Our professional knowledge does not seem sacral to the society in 21th century with the onset of digimodernism. Internet and Google demonstrates how easy it is today to get information, how quickly one can find an answer to a question. Knowledge that is fluid and even imperfect today carries higher value than knowledge perceived as static and intact. Data that can be copied, pasted, mixed, adapted, recast for evolving purposes and new modes of understanding has very strong appeal in today's information environment, particularly for young people. The problem of managing and preserving knowledge produced in these shifting realms of digital proliferation is enormous, and it is one that librarians need to be integral to solving (ACRL 2006).

All this comes into conflict with the classical service of the library – the reference service, as this has always been based on the knowledge of an info-expert. Library expertise translates into the bibliographical control of knowledge and universal classifications for systematising information. This approach to the world of information has been successful for hundreds of years. I agree with Ray (2001) in that it is no wonder that librarians keep trying to organise the electronic information environment. However, I do not believe, like Ray (2001: 251) that “the elegant, hierarchical, and logical simplicity of the library's traditional system has served us well and is likely to do so for a long time to come”. Rather it can be suggested that the

logical hierarchy systems of the library, being a product of the Modern Era, are not very compatible with the today's users' worldview, because the information overflow and digital transformations have dramatically changed the conceptions of knowledge production, classification and use. Google and Wikipedia are parts of the open information culture, where anyone can be in the role of an expert.

Passive vs. empowered: changing role of library user

Martin (2009) found that it is important for librarians to examine not only this fact, that people do not consider the library as the portal to information, but also the fact, that today users judge themselves being capable information seekers. The library of the Modern Era was centered around its physical building with the book collection. The readers of the digimodernism age increasingly use the library online, as well as Web 2.0 capabilities. The digital turn in the library 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. They have been searching online almost from the kindergarten, but they do not reveal the chaotic nature of online information. While we, librarians, see the power in our databases and catalogue options, such as Boolean operators, the users see them as obstructions.

Relevant research (Einasto 2016, Harley et al. 2001) also show that students who excel in information retrieval, have often problems using library search engines. The problem 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 practice of Estonian memory institutions also confirm this, for example Kalmus 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: online).

So students may feel that using library services requires more knowledge and skills than using internet search, and, as Martin (2009) observes, "when our self-confident patrons fail in their searches for academic information, they are left feeling ashamed, confused, and, above all, frustrated with the library". A self-contradictory situation arises when technologically experienced students try to be independent users of the library, but fail to use library information system.

However, I do not want to state that the reason for this failing is only the user's insufficient knowledge and skills. As it was analysed above, the library sets some barriers for the users, for example, controlled vocabulary schemes (subject headings, taxonomies), which provide a way for organising information at the library. For example, a good language skill (structural skill) is sufficient for a Google search, which is based on natural language vocabularies, but it is insufficient for a library search, governed by a controlled vocabulary with authorised terms. I think that here we can see the power technology of the library system, which attempts in such an implicit way exercise its power in communication with the user.

Discussion

As we have seen, the arena in which knowledge and ideas are created, shared and documented – librarians' arena – is undergoing a transformation of unusual scale and impact, equivalent, or perhaps even more phenomenal, than the invention of the printing press (Kaufman 2005). It is certain that the internet and e-info bring many postmodern values to the library. Librarians now find themselves asking a series of fundamental questions. Does our digimodern society mean that we have to give up all our meta-narratives? How to fit in new phenomena and not

to lose values important for the librarian? What new roles will librarians come to have in the changing information environment? What aspects of the library philosophy and practice will prove the most resistant or impervious to change? Here are some concepts that may be also important to the digimodern librarians:

- *Re-thinking the classical services of library*

If librarians no info experts any more, how to interpret their new role? To be certain, librarians may help users to understand the value of the material library preserve and digitise. It is also important to develop librarians own subject expertise and to use this to foster public engagement with library collections. For example, as ACRL (2006) agenda stresses, the culture of libraries and their staff must proceed beyond a mind-set primarily of ownership and control to one that seeks to provide service and guidance in more useful ways, helping users find and use information that may be available through a range of providers, including libraries themselves, in electronic format.

Davis (2008) argues that the values of neutrality, rationality and objectivity can be deconstructed for librarians continually exercise value judgments in their role of 'evaluating' information sources and determining what are 'good' and 'bad' materials or websites for users; and librarians should to redefine their role to assist in the establishment of a truly equitable society.

I believe that the promotion of information literacy training as the basic library service is very important today. Quite naturally a bibliographer today finds it hard to compete with Google, Wikipedia and the computer memory. If in the Modern era a bibliographer answered the enquiries of the readers, searching for and offering useful and relevant information, then now, instead of bibliographic instruction, librarians engage users in information literacy training. As Martin (2009: 6-7) stressed, "we can encourage information literacy while embracing postmodernism; information literacy is about exploration, not information control". Today librarians must make users aware that our collections is for the express purpose of sharing different opinions, theories, and truths which postmodernism values, almost a playful place where not one idea dominates.

The image of library services must be less didactic guiding users away from postmodern chaos and teach them how to evaluate the information. The task of the academic librarian is in facilitating student critical thinking skills and not the teaching our tedious classification schemes. LeMoine (2012) also found that postmodern library users know how to search and locate information, but have huge gaps in critically thinking about the nature and origin of this information, and this is where librarians are desperately needed.

- *Creating the new mission and value of library and librarians*

It is important for librarians to understand how our society and our users are transforming. It is needed to react flexibly to the changes in the society and to go with them, to create the library mission and role in today information society. And librarians need courage to stand for their values. Library of digimodern will continue to let the many narratives be told. "Our place is that of fellow traveller, not tour guide; fellow student, not scholar; adventurer, not expert; and lay, not clergy. We a no longer experts, but we still know the value of information, with its origins and narratives" (LeMoine 2012). The mission of today librarians has to be providing a barrier-free access to quality information in support of reading, research, learning, teaching, and service to the society. The notion of becoming a cultural centre is also

an expansive role for the future library. It will not only serve as an information resource, but much more, with the exact mission and goals evolving and changing over time.

According to Owen (1997), the dominant factor in the development of libraries is the ongoing 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.

- *The communicative turn does matter*

The main suggestion of Webster about information society is that the information society is not only information which has become so important on all dimensions of society, but “rather that the character of information is such as to have transformed how we live” (Webster 2006: 9). This definition is especially important for librarians, this means the adoption of new methods and formats for working with information, as well as the search for new communication strategies for approaching the users. As Lauristin (2012: 4) highlighted, “information society is not only technology, information society is relationship between people and the transformation of these relationships”. Librarians have to learn about the new needs, the current information environment, cultural context and information-seeking experience of the people whom they serve today. If we approach the library as a social institution, we must analyse how the library communication with users is changing.

Rather than seeking dominance and control, digimodern readers need to focus on integration. According to Bruun (2011), today most libraries 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. The librarians 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. User involvement in digital projects means the creation of a new type of library service and interaction between librarians and users. The users can help shape the library space and services more directly by using tools and methods, which are common in digital culture.

With digimodernism also active democratization of culture is important, and library is not an exception here. Today libraries started to experiment by adding tagging capabilities to their digital catalogues. Uncontrolled vocabulary as the result of collaborative tagging is known as *folksonomy*. Kroski (2007: 94) 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. Folksonomy has become a new trend where the users can add any keyword/term themselves, develop their personal information space within the catalogue, evaluate the books they have read and create communities of common interests.

In commenting on some apparent clinging to an authoritarian meta-narrative of the library, Lankes observed: “This resistance to the democratization of authority among librarians is ironic because there are few professions better suited to the authoritative world of the internet than librarians. They have a culture of open and free expression and access to ideas. They are generalists who move agilely across different topical domains. They are skilled at searching out information, and locating potential biases (and uses) in information. Their enterprises have little invested in the production of information, and much invested in the consumption of information products from a wide variety of sources. Further, librarians already have a reputation as authoritative, not authoritarian” (Lankes 2007: 679). Digimodern user does not

need an information expert or priest, so the reference librarians must allow students to explore, and evaluate resources by themselves, with guidance from librarian as their helper.

However, the transformation of library services from expert references to self-service and online information-seeking depends on how ready and willing the librarians are to share their decision-making power and authority over the library system. It primarily concerns cataloguing, systematisation, and providing access to knowledge – all of which has for centuries been a playground of librarians as information experts, and all of which are the elements of our quality model (quality of content and quality of access). Handing this playground over to non-professionals could become a great challenge to libraries. As a professional librarian, I am interested, for example, in Lankes' (2007) question, how a traditionally strict and rigid system, such as the library (e-)catalogue, might offer possibilities for user participation in, for example, the e-service process, if users could add their own data, keywords or comments to the catalogue to assist other users. Moreover, my practical work shows that the e-service user may send questions not to a reference librarian, but to other users, who then give answers in the role of a consultant. For libraries, this is a truly new and seemingly risky approach.

It's clear that active user participation raises a number of questions, in particular about quality, professional ethics and responsibility, to librarians. The library is a public institution, providing public services and being responsible for their high quality. Hence the next discussion issue is how well librarians are prepared for the related anxiety, disruption and chaos which can be viewed as the risk linked to users. For many centuries, perfect order and discipline formed the main principle of Modern Era library. User participation, which may involve some loss of control, can damage this order.

I do not think, however, that user participation may lead to total disorder. Rather, user participation may bring uncertainty and unpredictability to the library system and to the service delivery. If today's libraries want to get a great deal of valuable information and involvement from their users, whether they should trust their users' skills and knowledge much more? Discussion about this question may be based on the idea by Lynch and Alberti (2010: 15) that "shared authority is more effective at creating and guiding culture than institutional control". Furthermore, Mulvad (2011) proposes that "if we choose to trust the users, we should also be prepared to accept what they bring to the table". However, practice shows that librarians are not so enthusiastic in accepting everything that user participation might bring along. It is difficult to decide what is right and what is wrong, because here may clash the values of the modernity and the digimodernism eras, the challenges of professional ethics and information society, and the users' needs and the responsibility of the librarian.

For a true communicative turn, we, librarians, should adopt new ways of information work and make our rigid cataloguing and classification systems more flexible. I agree with Duderstadt (2009: 220), who thinks that 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". However, based on my own experiences in the work with users' requests, I would suggest that we need to develop our services in a way which could make information search in library as comfortable as in Google, offering, for example, spell checking in the searching process and, maybe, also tagging the user's own keywords and comments.

Our taxonomy-based principles, stemming from the Modern era, could perhaps be reassessed and enriched with folksonomy, delegating some of the power and control to users. Coyle (2007: 290) 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”. Librarians could see their users as, using Siibak words, “knowledgeable” human agents (i.e., people who know what they are doing and how to do it)“ and understand that users engaging in online environments „need to put into practice their necessarily structured knowledge“ (Siibak 2009: 18). I support Lankes (2010: 1) opinion that the librarians of today could „focus on connection management instead of collection management“.

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 librarians of digimodernism are 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 considerably changed. The library has today become a rather flexible information and cultural institution with vague virtual barriers and access-centred mission. A digimodern library is a 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.

According to Weise (2004), the library is subject to change and must be flexible to accommodate change. It does not mean the librarians have to abandon their traditions and values, but rather “to find a way to incorporate the old and the new in a rational manner” (Weise 2004: 11). In this regard, I would like to point out that today’s librarians should not only diligently use new technologies which digimodernism offers to their work, but also have a deeper understanding of the processes of social and cultural transformations. This understanding will also help librarians in assigning their new role.

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