Temporary and Distributed Libraries, Breaking Boundaries, Creating New Resources
Alessandro Ludovico

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton

Winchester, UK

a.ludovico@soton.ac.uk

Abstract

The central role of the library as a central cultural system is transforming into a still undefined new type of cultural body influenced by the spontaneous creation of different types of DIY libraries interconnecting at some point (or not) to the centralised library system.

Libraries should evolve from their historical and "monumental" role, which delivers socially relevant services, into an extended, networked and shared infrastructure of knowledge, rivalling the online type of "instant" knowledge in facilitating social and cultural exchange. Two of the possible approaches to start this kind of process, which would be meant to open and socialise even more the library system, is to create "temporary libraries", in order to fill specific knowledge needs during cultural events becoming then permanent, and "distributed libraries", in order to integrate relevant collections of specialised knowledge accumulated elsewhere in the traditional library system without structurally intervene in it.

Keywords

Libraries, Publishing, New Media Art, Preservation, Online platforms, Digitalisation, Online Libraries

Introduction

Libraries are evaluated as superfluous and outdated entities by common sense, especially because "everything" seems accessible from computer networks, and particularly the ones accessible through the small computers in our pockets that we still call (smart) phones. Despite that, they are still efficient systems for the preservation and the sharing of knowledge produced under high standards (Kurzweil, 2013), often just impossible to retrieve online, or not yet digitised anywhere. Beyond any fetishism for the books as an object, physical libraries are provided with space to facilitate the meeting of people and fellow experts, creating concrete opportunities to learn and improve knowledge.

Physical libraries are the outpost of a social kind of sharing, while digital libraries are enabling enormous accessibility, but not necessarily building communities, often the opposite. Establishing Temporary Libraries and Distributed Libraries can let libraries reclaim their historical role, dealing more efficiently with the rapidly evolving contemporaneity.

Digital Libraries and Custodians

The digital library is a concept belonging to the current digitalisation of every medium and content, often fostered by the so called "online giants", eager to create specific type of assets. One of the proven examples is Google Books, admittedly being created not to be the the most comprehensive digital library, but to serve as the most sophisticated corpus of text-based Google's AI services (Kurzweil, 2013). On the other side there are huge spontaneous and unauthorised collections including millions of publications in the form of files, such as Library Genesis or Sci-Hub, to mention the most inclusive, but also specialised smaller collections defined and technically quantified as "personal portable libraries" (Warwick, 2014) when they are offline, exchanged on a personal basis and small enough to fit into portable storage. They embody (sometimes unawarely) one of Aaron Swartz's leading thought: "We need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world". This is also one of the founding principle of the self-appointed "custodians", a group of intellectuals pushing citizens to act through the scanning and sharing of content. In their words: "We are all custodians of knowledge, custodians of the same infrastructures that we depend on for producing knowledge, custodians of our fertile but fragile commons. To be a custodian is, de facto, to download, to share, to read, to write, to review, to edit, to digitise, to archive, to maintain libraries, to make them accessible. It is to be of use to, not to make property of, our knowledge commons".

Custodians have made a mirror backup site of the Ubuweb.org very valuable collection in 2016, and they

collaborate with the huge archive.org platform, based in US, who has started to plan a whole backup facility in Canada after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, fearing a new wave of digital censorship.

Artist and writer Kenneth Goldsmiths, a Custodian and founder of Ubuweb.org, has used backup strategies in both ways: the digitalisation of content as a liberating paradigm on his own platform, and the re-embodiment of digital content into print in his "Printing The Internet" project, where in one occasion he printed out 250,000 Pages of Pirated JSTOR Documents (as a tribute to Aaron Swartz) in an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. And the concept of preserving to avoid censorship has been also embodied by French artists David Guez in his project Humanpédia. Here he is quoting the basic strategy used in Bradburies' Farenheit 451 novel, asking people to learn by heart a single Wikipedia article, in order to become a living functioning backup of an almost endless digital content.

Most the above projects are meant to build shared and liberating digital libraries on a global and personal level, with no self-imposed whatsoever boundaries, a principle which was brilliantly synthesised by Marcell Mars when he affirmed "When everyone is librarian, library is everywhere". But this statement, in its principle, doesn't necessarily imply that these DIY libraries should be exclusively digital.

Temporary Libraries.

In between the huge classic libraries and the big digitised ones, there are various types of smaller efforts, bringing the library concept and often its working system off the institutional walls. As a starting point let's consider Alberto Manguel's statement that "every library is migratory", as he consider historical examples of small libraries travelling with famous warlords like Alexander the Great carrying a copy of the Iliad with him in his military campaigns, and Napoleon carrying a wood box in similar trips, with history books about almost every country (Cronin, 1994). A more recent example of migratory libraries can be found the end of 19th century, then the first projects to bring selection of books in areas dislocated far from libraries took place.

They were carried with means of transportation which have evolved over time from carts to cars and vans, and since the mid 20th century they have started to be usually called "bookmobiles". The structure was simple, a modified vehicle was filled with publications, which were lent in the place where it was parked, in the usual public library scheme. In some underdeveloped areas they are still used, but the concept of establishing independent libraries has been then further elaborated in different approaches, defining the contemporary concept of DIY libraries, which is nevertheless serving focused small communities. The Prelinger Library, founded in San Francisco in 2004, for example, has a remarkable collection of 50,000 image-rich 19th and 20th century historical ephemera, periodicals, maps, and books, mainly donated in order to be available to the local community of artists, writers and activists, remaining independent from the institutional libraries system. It is the young ancestor of the so-called DIY libraries, which recently has started to spread in North America.

Their goal is to share among a restricted community a small and usually quite focused collection, build up by a few bibliophiles, in a private space collectively rented and wi-fi equipped, through a monthly membership fee. "Wendy's Subway" in Williamsburg, Brooklyn is a classic example, dedicated to the history of revolution and the avant-garde. The books are non-circulating (they can be read only in the library), but one of the main concepts embodied here is to explore "the social life of the book" as Rachel Valinsky, one of the founders, affirms, and how to "activate the book beyond the shelf and have people engage with the idea of the library more broadly as a place of coming together." They are rewriting classic library rules, benefitting from the limited amount of people and the small environment, but also opening it to lecturing and other types of social-based activities. Maru Calva, founder of the similar Biblioteca Aeromoto in Mexico City says "We dream about it being open all the time, and always having someone researching or giving a lecture or learning something."

This social approach goes beyond the so-called "citizen libraries" or spontaneous bookshelves placed in public space in order to facilitate free book exchange (like BookCrossing, Little Free Libraries, Ourselves, etc.), as it pushes a community to better organise, develop, or gather and manage a collection, and starting from there to give space and time to a shared interest in specific cultural fields, with the opportunity to be learnt and discussed further.

Then my formulation of a "Temporary Library" relies on a similar concept based on breaking the classic library's boundaries. Classic libraries are open,

but physically very centralised, so breaking these boundaries (metaphorically represented by the library walls) means to bring publications in new places and finally expanding and redefining their public role in a more contemporary sense. The Temporary Library concept consists in curating a selection of publications, reflecting a relevant topic, possibly also with a local/national character or declination. When the selection is agreed among the curators, a minimal physical library is built asking publishers to donate these publications (or acquiring them), and a specific space is dedicated for consultation, typically during a compatible event (a festival or a conference with similar topics), eventually granting the opportunity for attendees to get in touch with publishers through a list of contacts, in order to compensate the donation. Finally, when the event ends, the temporary library is donated as a "special collection" to an established institutional library, but only under the condition that it'd be lent to other events upon request, and to be shipped back when this event is finished.

Under this approach, the curated selection is able to attract new type of readers, who can then be connected also to the publishers' community, finally contributing to create a public resource which is meant to stay and hopefully travel, to release even more of its potential of knowledge. And if different Temporary Libraries (with compatible or similar topics) are created they can be ideally gathered altogether at some point in a single place for a while, proving minimal redundancy and locally built richness in that specific topic that would probably have been impossible to grasp in a classic library.

In a way, they are metaphorically breaking the monumental character of the library and its physical centrality, giving space to external qualified intervention, still integrated into the systems.

(At the moment there are three Temporary Libraries under development for three international conferences/festivals.)

Distributed Libraries.

If Temporary Libraries are meant to create new mobile library resources, the concept of a Distributed Library is based instead on the observation that a lot of cultural "scenes", particularly some art-related and media-related, are misrepresented in official cultural repositories, especially libraries. On the other end, there are plenty of unofficial repositories of publications about these cultures, usually assembled and hosted by small institutions, critics or journalists. These collections of publications form altogether a "Distributed Library" whose content is mostly absent from library catalogues. This Distributed Library approach is about supporting the online publication of the respective catalogues, being then searchable altogether. In particular, Neural magazine has developed a web platform (the Neural Archive) that facilitates this process, through free software and the most basic IT standards, is free to be downloaded and used through Github. The whole software platform allows any collection to be indexed scanning the publication's covers and entering the bibliographical data.

With a few working partners, the next fundamental step would be to create a small vertical search engine that would search all the different "distributed libraries", or better their respective catalogues, altogether, creating an important tool for researchers in that specific area, which in this case is new media art. In fact, it'd result as a collaboratively-compiled bibliography, extremely specialised and, very importantly, based on the physical books preserved in the respective physical spaces of the participants. Even if probably none of the small entities would be able to grant a real public access to the respective physical collections, it'd guarantee proper indexing and preservation of specialised cultures. Beyond intrinsically taking public responsibility of these collections, once the catalogue is published, one of the most crucial challenges would be at some point to structure the data in a way that it'd be compatible with the current libraries standard, forming an independent conceptual "other side"of the library system, perfectly searchable and compatible. Distributed Libraries can grow even more and faster than classic libraries because they are not constrained in a single place. They would more deeply reflect then Manguel's contemporary library definition as: "an evergrowing entity; it multiples seemingly unaided, it reproduces itself by purchase, theft, borrowings, gifts, by suggesting gaps through association, by demanding completion of sorts" (Manguel 2008).

Preserving knowledge under these conditions assumes new values which rise from social needs and self-organising networked structures, so that the distribution of knowledge itself becomes a strategy rather than a limit. While Kittler underlined the remarkable difference between "transmission" and "storage" in media, and their respective values, in a Distributed Library system the "transmission", obtained through the networked

infrastructure, becomes fully functional to the storage, needed to preserve the physical copies, in a way that they are mutually necessary rather than be in competition.

Conclusions.

"The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creationin their communities" (Lankes , 2016) and the physical libraries are the outpost of the social sharing of knowledge, while digital libraries create shared access but not necessarily communities. Mostly the combination of the two can have a relevant social impact. The selection curated in temporary libraries is meant to let the interested readers to progress and learn about unheard consistent (curated) titles. Furthermore, being placed in a public space during a pubic event, it'll allow the creation of a space of dialogue, where the shared knowledge will affect fellow interested people and experts.

The Temporary Libraries are meant to accomplish both the goals, being temporary as social installations, then transforming themselves into stable cultural resources.

The Distributed Libraries are instead letting focused collections to emerge and being publicly acknowledged, intrinsically compiling extensive bibliographies and becoming valuable and strategic repositories.

Finally, the role of the citizen librarian, dealing with these types of structures, should embrace both the tasks: being a custodian to preserve share and duplicate, when needed. But also a shaman, knowing these collections so well to be able to guide other citizens to discover new connections and to establish new social and cultural relationships.

References

Warwick, H. (2014). *Radical tactics of the offline library*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

de Orellana, R. S. A. M., Marin C., Pope, Q. and Suderman, M. (2012). *Bibliotecas de la Ciudad de los Libros*. México, D.F.: Artes de México.

Cronin, V. (1971). *Napoleon*. London: Collins.!

Kurzweil, R. (2013). *Google and the world brain*. DVD. Directed by Lewis B. Barcelona. Polar Star Films and BLTV.

Schwartz, A. & Aporvearyan (foto) (2013, July). *Guerilla Open Access Manifesto.* Retrieved from http://globalarkivet.se/sites/default/files/docume nts/2013/bis_2013_1_s.18.pdf.

Barok, D., Berry, J., Bodó, B., Dockray, S., Goldsmith, K., Iles, A., ... Snelting, F. (2015, November 30). *In solidarity with Library Genesis and Sci-Hub*. Retrieved from http://custodians.online/

Custodians Online (2016, November 30). *Happy Birthday, Ubu.com!* Retrieved from http:// custodians.online/ ubu/

Tencer, D (2016, November 30) "*Archive.org Moving To Canada Over Trump Censorship Fears*" The Huffington Post Canada, Retrieved from http:// www.huffingtonpost.ca/ 2016/11/30/archive -org-canada-trump_n_13330492.html

Walker, R. (2014, April 4) *One Artist Is Printing 250,000 Pages of Pirated JSTOR Documents, In Tribute to Aaron Swartz*, Yahoo Tech. Retrieved from: https:// www.yahoo.com/tech/one-artist-is-printing-250-000-pages-of-pirated-jstor-81684193816.html last seen 1 December 2016

Lechner, M. (2011, May 9) *Humanpedia, mémoire vive*, Retrieved from: http://www. liberation . fr/ecrans/ 2011/05/09/ humanpedia-memoire-vive_953761, last seen 1 December 2016

Wikiedia, TheF r e e Encyclopedia,s.v . "Bookmobile," (accessed 2016, December 1), Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bookmobile

The Prelinger Library, (accessed 2016, December 1), Retrieved from: http://www.prelingerlibrary.org/

Pearl, M. *The Rise of DIY Libraries*, (2015, May 7) Retrieved from: http://www.vice.com/read/the-rise-of-diy-libraries -430

Manguel, A. (2008). *The library at night*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lankes, R. D. (2016) *The New Librarianship Field Guide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cook, S. (2016) *Information*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press.