TEMPORARY AND DISTRIBUTED LIBRARIES: BREAKING BOUNDARIES, CREATING NEW RESOURCES

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Abstract:

What is the role of traditional libraries in terms of the digitalization of 'everything'? Their new strategic functions and physical forms are investigated, starting with the radical change induced by infinitely duplicable digital libraries and the shift of paradigm they induced: from a professionally curated collection to a distributed process with new potential actions and protagonists. The reliable archiving and retrieving of high-quality information should be acknowledged as a fundamental need in the vast ephemerality and overwhelming qualities of digital data. Tactics, practices, and possible trajectories are articulated, describing a new tactical and social librarianship.

Keywords: Libraries, Librarianship, Publishing, Post-Digital, Archives, Distributed Libraries, Temporary Libraries, Digitalisation, New Media Art

Introduction

Common sense may evaluate libraries as superfluous and outdated entities, especially because 'everything', or any content that can be stored in digital form, seems accessible from computer networks, particularly through the small computers in our pockets that we still call (smart)phones. Despite that, libraries are still efficient systems for the preservation and sharing of knowledge produced under high standards (Kurzweil, 2013), often impossible to retrieve online or not yet digitised. Beyond any fetishism for books as objects, physical libraries provide space to facilitate the meeting of people and fellow experts, creating concrete opportunities to learn and improve shared knowledge.

Physical libraries are the outposts of a social kind of sharing, while digital libraries enable enormous accessibility but do not necessarily build communities—often the opposite. Establishing temporary and distributed libraries can create and support libraries' reclamation of their historical roles, enabling them to deal more efficiently with rapidly evolving contemporaneity.
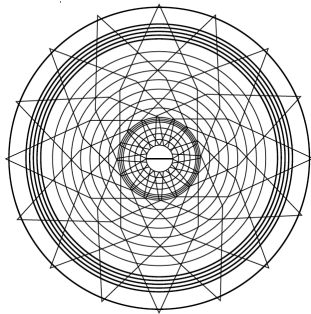
Digital libraries and custodians

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 types of assets. One of the proven examples is Google Books, admittedly created not to be the most comprehensive digital library but to serve as the most sophisticated corpus of text-based Google 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 and academic-oriented. There are also specialised, smaller collections that can be 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 unknowingly) one of Aaron Swartz's leading thoughts: '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 principles 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 Online, 2016).

Custodians made a mirror backup site of the Ubuweb.org's very valuable collection in 2016, and they collaborated with the huge archive.org platform based in the US to begin building 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 based on both methods: 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. On one occasion, he printed 250,000 pages of pirated JSTOR documents (as a tribute to Aaron Swartz) in an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, proving how a very valuable quantity of scientific culture protected behind the wall of copyright was technically infinitely reproducible. The concept of preserving to avoid censorship has been also embodied by French artist David Guez in his project, Humanpédia. Here, he is conceptually quoting the basic strategy used in Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 (Bradbury, 1953), asking people to learn by heart a single Wikipedia article to become living, functioning backups of almost endless digital content.

Most of the above projects are meant to build shared, liberated digital libraries on global and personal levels with no self-imposed boundaries. This principle was brilliantly synthesised by Marcell Mars when he affirmed, 'When everyone is librarian, library is everywhere' (Mars, 2012). However, the principle of this statement doesn't necessarily imply that these DIY libraries should be exclusively digital.
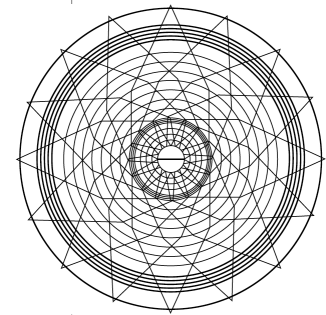
Liminal librarianship

A few experiments in building DIY libraries through unprecedented approaches have been attempted over the years with remarkable results. One of the most recent examples belongs to the mail art field, stemming from the practice of 'decentralised congresses' that started in 1986. These consist of spontaneous, self-organised events of at least two mail artists, publicly announced and happening in any public or private space. This practice led to the 2016 initiative, Move Your Archives, which used the same procedure but incited mail art collections' owners to meet and show them to each other or display them at publicly accessible events. In the most consistent mail art spirit, the materials, including underground publications, have been in transit and have been exhibited with a do-it-yourself attitude. Artists created a temporary 'archival space' and a dialogue among the participants. The library space is created by its owners, who have gathered their own materials over the years through a continuous post exchange.

The ephemeral nature of publications assembled in a library from rather accidental events has been established by garbage collectors. A symbolic case is the library assembled in Ankara, where garbage collectors saved discarded books in good condition for months (Feingold and Atay, 2018). Six thousand titles ranging from fiction to scientific research have been carefully put on shelves in the sanitation department headquarters, and they're available for one-week lending. It is a collective effort to give back to the community what should have just been sent to the landfill. A more personal effort has been accomplished in Bogota by Jose Alberto Gutierrez, a garbage truck driver, who has collected more than 25.000 books over seventeen years (Smriti, 2017). With assistance from colleagues, he has formed La Fuerza de las Palabras, a community library in the basement of his house. He has donated materials to around 235 schools, institutions, and community libraries across Colombia, re-enabling discarded knowledge in its appropriate context.

These are examples of what I define as 'liminal librarianship'. It is a practice in which materials are retrieved from various parts of society using 'sleeping knowledge' to solve the tension between surplus and needs. The material surplus is related to and shared with the potential need, revitalizing the knowledge destined to sleep indeterminately or be destroyed. Conceptually, it is a liminal territory that has to first be found and explored then put to use and dignified by librarianship, embraced by amateur librarians and sparking a new collective custody and sharing. In our materially overabundant society, these practices act as an adventurous guerrilla against the endless flow of consumerism.

Temporary libraries

Between huge classic libraries and digitised ones, there are various types of smaller efforts, bringing the library concept and often its working system away from institutional standards. As a starting point, let's consider Alberto Manguel's statement
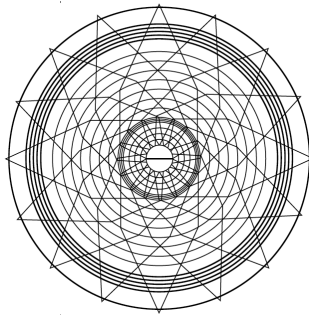
that 'every library is migratory' as he considers historical examples of small libraries travelling with famous warlords; e.g., Alexander the Great carrying a copy of the Iliad with him in his military campaigns or Napoleon carrying a wood box on similar trips with history books about almost every country (Cronin, 1994). A more recent example of migratory libraries can be found in the end of 19th century in projects intended to deliver selections of books in areas far from libraries. The means of transportation for these books have evolved over time from carts to cars and vans, and since the mid-20th century, they have started to be called 'bookmobiles'. The structure is a simple one: a modified vehicle filled with publications that are lent in the place where it is parked, in the usual public library scheme. In some underdeveloped areas, they are still used. However, the concept of independent libraries has been further elaborated through various approaches to define the contemporary concept of DIY libraries, which are nevertheless focused on serving small communities. For example, the Prelinger Library, founded in San Francisco in 2004, has a remarkable collection of 50,000 image-rich 19th and 20th century historical ephemera, periodicals, maps, and books, mainly donated to be available to the local community of artists, writers, and activists and remaining independent from the institutional library system. It is the young ancestor of the so-called DIY libraries that have recently started to spread in North America. The goal of these libraries is to share among a restricted community a small and usually quite focused collection, built 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 a limited number of people and small environment but also opening the space to lectures and other types of social 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 spaces to facilitate free book exchanges (BookCrossing, Little Free Libraries, Ourshelves, etc.) in that it pushes a community to better organise, develop, or gather and manage a collection, and from there to give space and time to shared interests in specific cultural fields with opportunities to learn and discuss further.

My formulation of a 'temporary library' relies on a similar concept based on breaking the classic library's boundaries, sharing, and attempting to elevate liminal librarianship to a methodology in conjunction with the institutional library system. Classic libraries are open but physically centralised, so breaking these boundaries (metaphorically represented by library walls) means bringing publications to new
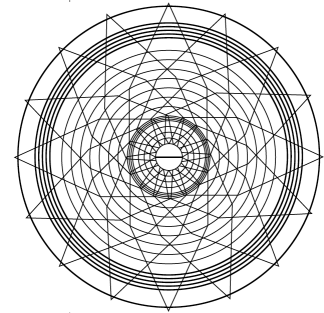
places and expanding and redefining their public roles in a more contemporary sense. The temporary library concept consists of a curated selection of publications reflecting a relevant topic, possibly with a local/national character or inclination. When selections are agreed upon among the curators, a minimal physical library is built, publishers are asked to donate these publications (or they are otherwise acquired), and a specific space is dedicated for consultation, typically during a compatible event (a festival or a conference on similar topics), eventually allowing attendees to get in touch with publishers through a list of contacts to compensate the donation. Finally, when the event ends, the temporary library is donated as a 'special collection' to an established institutional library under the condition that it would be lent to other events upon request and shipped back when those events were finished.

Under this approach, the curated selection is able to attract new types of readers, who can then connect to the publishers' communities and contribute to creating a public resource to release even more of their potential of knowledge. Additionally, other temporary libraries (with compatible or similar topics) can be gathered at some point in a single place for a while, exemplifying 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, these libraries are metaphorically breaking the monumental character of the library and its physical centrality, giving space to external qualified intervention yet still integrated into the systems.

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 art-related and media-related ones, 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 distributed libraries with content mostly absent from library catalogues. This distributed library approach is about supporting online publication of the respective catalogues and making them searchable. In particular, Neural magazine has developed a free web platform (the Neural Archive) that facilitates this process through free software and the most basic IT standards. The platform allows any collection to be indexed by 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 'distributed libraries' (or better yet, their respective catalogues), creating an important tool for researchers in that specific area, which in this case is the new media art field. In fact, this process should result in a collaboratively compiled bibliography that is extremely specialised and, very importantly, based on the physical books preserved in the respective physical spaces of the participants. Even if none of the small entities were able to
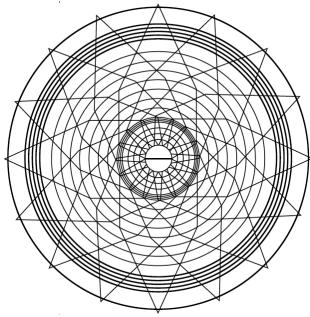
grant real public access to the respective physical collections, this method should guarantee proper indexing and preservation of specialised cultures. Beyond intrinsically taking public responsibility for these collections, once the catalogue is published, one of the most crucial challenges would be to structure the data in a way that is compatible with current libraries' standards, forming an independent conceptual 'other side' of the library system that is perfectly searchable and compatible. Distributed libraries can grow even larger and more quickly than classic libraries because they are not constrained in a single place. They would more deeply reflect Manguel's contemporary library definition: 'an ever-growing 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 rising 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 (Kittler, 1996) and their respective values, in a distributed library system, the 'transmission' obtained through the networked infrastructure becomes fully functional for the storage needed to preserve the physical copies in a mutually necessary way rather than a competitive one.

Conclusions

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

Temporary libraries are meant to accomplish both these goals, being temporary as social installations then transforming into stable cultural resources.

The distributed libraries are, on the other hand, intended to let focused collections emerge and be publicly acknowledged, intrinsically compiling extensive bibliographies and becoming valuable and strategic repositories.

Finally, the role of the citizen librarian in dealing with these types of structures should embrace both tasks: being a custodian who preserves, shares, and duplicates when needed as well as a 'shaman' who knows these collections well enough to be able to guide other citizens to discover new connections and establish new social and cultural relationships.
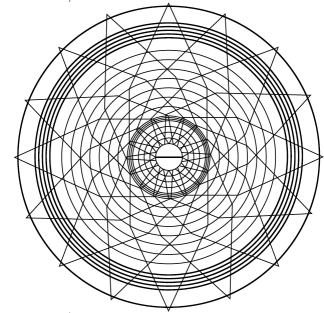
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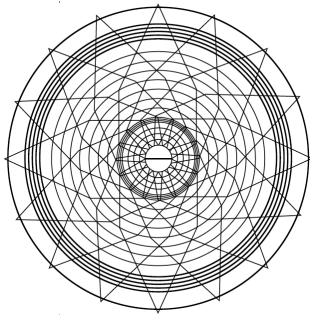Pearl, M. The Rise of DIY Libraries, (2015, May 7) URL:http://www.vice.com/read/the-rise-of-diy-libraries-430

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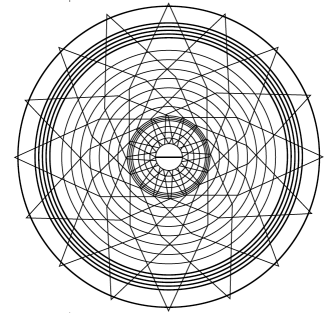
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ВРЕМЕННЫЕ И РАСПРЕДЕЛЕННЫЕ БИБЛИОТЕКИ: РАЗРУШЕНИЕ ГРАНИЦ И СОЗДАНИЕ НОВЫХ РЕСУРСОВ

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Аннотация:

Какое участие традиционные библиотеки принимают в процессе оцифровывания "всего на свете"? В данной статье исследуются их новые стратегические функции и физические формы, начиная с радикального изменения, вызванного бесконечно дублируемыми библиотеками цифровых данных , и смены парадигмы, которую они вызвали: от профессионально курируемой коллекции к распределенному процессу с новыми возможными действиями и игроками. Надежное архивирование и извлечение высококачественной информации следует признать одной из основных нужд в виду того, что цифровые данные в высшей стпени эфемерны и их несметное число. Автор формулирует тактику, практику и возможные траектории, описывающие новое библиотечное дело в тактическом и социальном смысле.

Ключевые слова: библиотеки, библиотечное дело, издательское дело, постдиджитал, архивы, распределенные библиотеки, оцифровка, медиаискусство