

The role of tradition and modernity in libraries – the birth of a new era

When I give you a warm welcome to the tenth anniversary of the IGeLU conference, let me take you back in time – with a specific purpose.

Others' experience make history, and the shared understanding can raise many new and useful questions in our everyday work. The members of the library network in Hungary – as well as libraries all around the world – are before the birth of a new era. „Moving to cloud” can mean the access to heaven – at best. But let me ask you a question: „what if we are going to be in hell if moving goes wrong?” Or more precisely: what can we do wrong with the moving to go to hell instead of heaven? The choice is helped by a technical improvement. In many cases in the past, innovations were born in line with the interests of entrepreneurs and investors, giving a boost to the cultural and societal transition. Let me give you an example: many believe that the native language programme of the protestant reformation is the reason why vernacular literatures exist. But sixty-four percent of publications published between fourteen-ninety and fifteen-seventeen were already vernacular. It means that product innovation was in the interest of publishers, who realised that the native language books have a much bigger market value than the scientific, Latin and Ancient Greek works. Similarly, many other novelties are linked to publishers: book illustrations, the table of contents, index lists at the end of books, and so on.

Shortly after the Industrial Revolution, the innovations driven by the society's needs were running out. By that time, overproduction was at such large scale that selling, and the success of business was depending on the technological innovation of the supply. And the fight for taking the customer began. At the beginning, the weapons were fair supply, real added values and respectable advertisements, later

they started to use manipulation and lies. These phenomena can be found everywhere, but nowadays – in my personal opinion – manipulation is a bit more pronounced.

However, introducing innovations involves risks. Danger lies in introducing something new against the traditions, only considering the financial or political profit. In societies that are not prepared for changes, these phenomena can cause crashes instead of tension, which demands a great amount of undue energy to repair. In this way, the loss is a lot bigger than the profit. Let me give you an example here, too: without analysing the hidden notions, the American „democracy export” experiment in the Middle East and in North Africa causes one of the biggest challenges today: migration, which may end in losing the leading position of the European continent.

The world’s libraries are in the doorstep of introducing such integrated systems and cloud services, that are great achievements of technology innovation experts. I truly wish that those financing these innovations may find it worth the investment, they absolutely deserve it, as the added value of keeping the public access to the cultural and scientific heritage, is a real asset. The role of libraries and librarians, however, is changing in the „new era”. The changes since the nineteen-seventies have been more frequent, and the time elapsed between changes has been shorter and shorter. Are librarians prepared to adapt to these changes without damaging their role and value in the society, and without losing their self-esteem? When forming this question, I would like to indicate the importance of traditions again. It does matter how and where we wish to introduce novelties: we have to consider the traditions of a given culture, region and the library heritage of the area.

This conference is in Hungary, so let me share with you some thoughts about the Hungarian library history. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Hungarian Kingdom created a cultural institutional system that was similar in structure to those in Western Europe. This means that we had similar library types to those founded on Western Christian territories. We had shared libraries – formed by twenty-four parishes –, and we have examples of humanists opening their own libraries to friends, as „bibliotheca publica”. Our entire culture – including the diverse culture of nations living on our territory – was essentially under the influence of German and Italian cultural and scientific centres; it was and still is an receptive culture. In the Central European Region, in the early modern times, the institutional systems – schools, church institutions, printing houses and libraries – were physically destroyed several times. The Hungarian Kingdom lost its independence in fifteen-forty-one, and never got it back again. The country was rebuilt after the Turkish regime as part of the Habsburg Empire, under German cultural influence and with Austrian administration. For Hungarians, the concept of the „library used by the public” had more resemblance to the „öffentliche Bibliothek” than to the „public library”. As an example for the latter, we often use the case of the early twentieth-century foundation of the Budapest Metropolitan Library, although it is different from the then and now meaning of the classic „public library” concept of England. The relationship between libraries and current political powers has always been an interesting story. Political powers often verified their existence through influencing the libraries’ acquisition policy and narrowing down the institutions’ operating conditions.

After the second world war, the communist regime observed libraries with an ambivalent attitude. On one hand, they established a number of new libraries – with the intention of educating the members of the society, and defining for the peoples what to read. On the other hand, they exiled those scholars to libraries, who were „persona-non-grata” in their active researcher or university lecturer roles.

This resulted in one of the golden ages of librarianship: scholars proved their excellent abilities of operational work, using their science and cultural organisational skills. Their set of knowledge also became the standard: in Hungary, it is unconventional to have a true library leader without a scientific career.

However, academic is conservative. They resist new methodologies, and often suggest a „slow-down” attitude towards fundamental changes caused by information technology inventions. They watch the content, and not just the naked information – as Umberto Eco suggests – he wants the rose, not the name of the rose.

At the end of my welcome speech, without tying up all the loose ends, let me express my wish that the prospect of the new cloud services will not widen the gap between social classes, or increase the tension between professional groups, but will connect tradition and modernity. The hope is that it will give the attention to the content, will provide full public access with its state-of-the-art toolkit. I personally believe that Ex Libris offers such inventions to libraries all around the world. We carefully study its potential, along with our potentials – not only the financial ones. We must take into consideration the types of future system users: the scientist with a modern mind-set, or the less experienced young professional with excellent technical knowledge. We wish to offer the new product to both user groups, which will touch and transfer the entirety of traditions.