An instrument of democracy. Libraries in a changing world

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Introduction

On August 25, 1914, the German army deliberately burned the university's library of Leuven along with 300,000 medieval books and manuscripts. In 1933, when the National Socialists have just taken power in Germany, they started the mission to eliminate everything that didn't fit within their ideology, including books of dissenters. In May 1933 more than 20,000 books were burned in Berlin. On January 28, 2013, Islamist rebels set the library of Timbuktu with thousands ancient manuscripts on fire. Many books of this library were about Islam. One of the characteristics of totalitarian ideologies and regimes is the destruction of problematic information and limiting free speech through control of written culture.

What do we loose when we loose a library? A future without libraries, is that possible? In most democratic countries, libraries were founded to support public education and civic participation.[i] Meanwhile the Flemish government recently has decided that municipalities have no longer the obligation to make public libraries available. Local authorities may themselves decide how they will use their financial funding by the Flemish government. Many fear that it will be temptation for a lot of municipalities to close the local library in a difficult budget situation. It is remarkable how much our Western European society emphasizes the utilitarian value. Something only contributes to our society when its use is directly detectable. In addition utility today is often limited to the economic welfare of the people. In tough economic times people like Mr. Average justify that is economized in culture. This means that the entire cultural sector, including the libraries, is currently under strong pressure.

In our changing world, most people are convinced that we have access to all information thanks to the World Wide Web. But they often forget that this information is particularly superficially and at the same time easy to manipulate. Within this context, the meaning of a library, and above all a national heritage library like the Royal Library of Belgium as a repository for intellectual and cultural heritage, remains of exceptional importance.

Libraries as guardians of cultural heritage

The core business of libraries lies essentially in preserving a cultural production, in especial the written and printed culture and heritage, and making it available. Scientific research as well as providing access for a broader public are important ways to share this. In libraries with an important collection, such as Royal Library, this cultural production can be explicitly placed in a historical perspective. The library has a history that goes back to the age of the Dukes of Burgundy and preservers several collections of exceptional historical importance. Not only the precious manuscripts and the rare books we consider as heritage, but every book and every newspaper that enters the library for we are the national repository library of Belgium.

The Royal Library of Belgium preserves a rich collection of Belgian newspapers, originally not meant to be kept. Their importance lies in the richness of information: political, ideological, economic, social, cultural, and so on. Newspapers not only provide information, but also offer a contemporaneous interpretation and comment upon events. And because of this they also outline the history of (or the absence of) freedom of speech. So, our archive of newspaper helps critical citizens to inform themselves about contemporary history, just like literature, philosophical or historical books, and so on.

The reason why cultural and historical heritage, why books, periodicals and newspapers are so important, lies in the fact that it extends beyond our need for food, for health, for shelter and safety. They are carriers of knowledge and cultural identity and also appeal to a whole set of values as there are cultural diversity and pluralism of cultures, the freedom to think and to seek inspiration, the freedom of expression and press. Each one of these values inherent in a democracy. Heritage is the tangible and visible history of a people

and forms together with the written word largely the identity of a people. When a population loses significant cultural heritage, then it loses its identity, its soul itself.

Libraries as information facilitators :

This leads to the conclusion that from the moment on that the materiality of history disappears, the factuality of history itself also ends. The world wide web hardly provides an alternative to free information gathering and the preservation of cultural heritage. The Internet replaces only the visible and tangible reality by a virtual possibility. The world wide web is for most of us also more of a maze than a help because of the abundance of information and disinformation fed by half-truths and lies.

This said, libraries, both the large and the small, are information facilitators with a quality mark which have two important parallel tasks. The first is to make our written and printed cultural production and heritage available in a physical way for reasons of scientific research, gathering information and pleasure. However, it is not enough to open doors for everyone! In the context of today, the second task is to digitize and present these collections on the world wide web in a qualitative manner. Only in this way they offer the people possibilities to have free access to their history, to knowledge and ideas, to socially important information and give thereby the opportunity to participate as critical citizens in all aspects of society.

Libraries as meeting places:

If we agree that libraries are information facilitators, we can go a step further. Libraries, the small and the large, often are organizing together with cultural associations evenings with debates, lectures and readings of authors. But nothing can replace the physical presence of knowledge and literature as a framework for such events, no TV program earlier, no Internet forum now. A dynamic library now is the Stoa of the 5th century Athenian democracy, a meeting place for citizens who come together to discuss, the perfect place for intellectual debate, for the sharing of knowledge, for the strengthening of democratic thought and critical citizenship.

Libraries evolve gradually from knowledge centers to real public spaces where expertise and community come together. The visitors, the readers, the community are central. This community may be defined very broadly, from researchers and young people who come to study over culture consumers into active citizens. National and university libraries are, especially by young people, increasingly used as study and meeting places and less and less as a purely scientific libraries. For this reason it is important that significant scientific libraries as well as a local libraries not only facilitate information and research, but also create debate and encounter and enforce a high level of commitment. Initiatives like the British Library exposition "Magna Carta. Law, Liberty, Legacy"[ii], one of the most famous documents (1215) in the world which was substantial for the development of the human rights, and the range of Magna Carta-related teaching resources for use in primary and secondary school classrooms, show clearly that ancient heritage is still of major importance for the development of citizenship, by bringing together people.

Libraries as safe spaces for dialogue and discussion:

By doing so, libraries offer a safe space for dialogue and discussion about real issues in our society. Libraries are the venues for a deliberative democracy. Not only can they offer many opportunities for students to develop the skills that are essential to participate in a scientific community, but also to participate in a flourishing democracy. [iii] We are living in an era in which citizens strive for a greater participation in civic life. In the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study*, one could read that young people in Flanders are reluctant about the multicultural society, that they believe less than average in democracy and democratic values and that they hardly see the sense of political or social debate.[iv] Libraries have to activate the civic potential of young people by demonstrating their will to assume a more active role in civil discourse.

Since the early days of democracy, citizens have debated about their role in a participatory democracy. In the words of Barber (1984), in a strong democracy "citizens regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society".[v] Democracy requires an engaged and well informed

citizenry. Despite almost universal access to schools, libraries and information the citizens of Europe are not better informed than in the earlier days. Easy access to information through new technologies didn't change this. This is the paradox in which T. Judt points, namely between the abundance of information, that is available to us and the indifference, that we demonstrate with respect to that information and our past. This has realy disturbing implications for our democracy.[vi]

Conclusion: Libraries and democracy

What do we lose when we lose our libraries? We lose an instrument of democracy! The English bishop Richard de Burry (1287-1345) defends his boundless love of books in Philobiblon, written in 1344. In this essay, he also describes books as the custodians of the truth. During World War II when the future of democracy was uncertain, Franklin D. Roosevelt described libraries as "the great symbols of the freedom of the mind". Freedom of the mind implies the freedom of information.[vii] So, there is no doubt that libraries still play an important role in advancing democracy. Since the second half of the 19th century scholars at various times stressed upon the link between the public library and democracy. Libraries were presented as a necessity for any country that wished to be an effective democracy, but also as a doorway to the right of every citizen to cultural and intellectual development. Every citizen needs a broad range of literacy skills. Without, it is not possible to search, receive and create information. Science, cultural development and education are inseparably linked to democracy and freedom. And just because of their educative function, libraries are mostly understood as being instrumentally valuable to democracy.

Also in the future, libraries will play an important role in our democracy despite the possibilities that offer the world wide web. Although the internet offers a huge gateway to information, there is no equity to access. Too many people lack the knowledge, the training, the income and the equipment to make use of it. And there is too much pollution that influences valuable information in a negative way. So, libraries have to renew their historical mission. [viii] Libraries need to reexamine their core beliefs and strengthen their capacity to push boundaries and engage citizens to participate more actively in public life. This

means not only that libraries have to inform citizens, but also that they have to push them to participate fully in our community. Paramount are the fundamental democratic values: openness, respect, participation, the pursuit truth, … The Key Mission of every library should be in the will to be a gateway to knowledge for every citizen so that he can exercise his democratic rights and play an active role in society.

What do we lose when we lose our libraries? We lose an instrument of democracy! A democracy needs cultural and intellectual education. Cultural education is focused on personal and social development, on raising awareness, on acquiring the competence and willingness to participate in social life. From a social point of view the importance of cultural education cannot be underestimated. Cultural education shapes our identity and makes us democratic beings. This being said, we must define libraries, as well as archives, as depositaries of heritage and knowledge, as institutions which form the basis for a healthy democracy.[ix]

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[i] Comp. Ronald B. McCabe, 2001, 68.

[ii] http://www.bl.uk/magna-carta

[iii] Kranich, Nancy C. (2010)

[iv] Saskia De Groof, Eva Franck, Mark Elchardus & Dimokritos Kavadias, , 2009, BURGERSCHAP BIJ 14-JARIGEN. VLAANDEREN IN INTERNATIONAAL PERSPECTIEF. VLAAMS EINDRAPPORT VAN DE INTERNATIONAL CIVIC AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION STUDY, Vlaams eindrapport van ICCS "International Civic and citizenship Education study" voor het Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, p. 215-216. (http://www.iea.nl/national_reports.html#c2900)

[v] B. Barber (1984), Strong Democracy: Participatory Politicss for a New Age, University of California Press, Berkeley, 37.

[vi] T. Judt, De vergeten twintigste eeuw, 15-16

[vii] *Freedom of Information (FOI) can be defined as the right to access information held by public bodies. It is an integral part of the fundamental right of freedom of expression, as recognized by Resolution 59 of the UN General Assembly adopted in 1946, as well as by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which states that the fundamental right of freedom of expression encompasses the freedom to "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".* http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/freedom-of-information/

[viii] Comp. Ronald B. McCabe, 67. Code of Ethics of the American Library Association 3th paragraph: *In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual*

freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.
http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics

[ix] Nancy Kranich (Editor), 2001, Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstones of Liberty American Library Association; Kranich, Nancy C. (2010) "Academic Libraries As Hubs For Deliberative Democracy," Journal of Public Deliberation: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 4: http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol6/iss1/art4; https://adpaascu.wordpress.com/2011/01/04/interview-with-nancy-kranich-on-libraries-and-democracy/