

The participatory digital library: the challenges for the librarians

The twentieth edition of the Stelline Conference “Digital library/The participatory library” took place lately. It was organized by Editrice Bibliografica and AIB (the Italian Library Association) in Milan on 12-13 March 2015, within the context of Milan Book City.

The aim of the conference was to point out – within the digital ecosystem – the library transformation, defined by the juxtaposition in the title of two terms which are often set in opposition, that is ‘digital’ and ‘participatory’ library, and not ‘the digital library vs. the participatory library’ or even the dichotomy ‘digital or participatory library’. The first question all of the approximately 2000 participants asked themselves was: what is a participatory library? What do we mean with user involvement into the life of a physical/digital library? Each presentation has tried to give an answer to this question, opening up to the stimulating debate at the end of all sessions.

Participating does not merely mean having a conversation; there are problems to solve and also ‘false’ problems whereon we often linger to shield us from change. The conversation continued after the conference, for example on the blogs of younger librarians such as Valeria Baudo, Enrico Francese, Andrea Zanni, Eusebia Parrotto and many others I cannot name, as the list would be too long. Valeria Baudo and Eusebia Parrotto rightly underlined that we need to start from the needs of the users, encouraging them and stimulating them to express their desires.

The first clear message from the speakers was: in a time of social change, libraries must ‘connect’ to their users both in the physical and the virtual environment. New partnerships with our users mean exactly this: giving them the possibility to use libraries in new ways. Users have changed and they must be involved at various levels; they participate in the creation of contents and in the management of digital libraries that empower them to becoming innovative and creative.

The first problem is to build a community of users, to urge users to become participatory. Not all users wish to participate, or, better to say, not all of them wish to have conversations; Valeria Baudo in her paper *Designing and managing on-line communities* talked about the 90/9/1 rule, according to which 90 are the ‘silent’ readers who seem to be passive, but who in any case are there. There are no participatory libraries, but active librarian agents, involved in their communities, who can facilitate, together with the users, the participatory aspects of libraries. Every time a new user enters a participatory digital library, a would-be content creator enters as well. For example, librarians could give them the possibility of creating collections, of customizing the catalogue and constructing the website. According to Maria Stella Rasetti in the paper *Digital and participatory: makerspaces in the library among plural collections, multiple connections and changing communities*, the librarians’ role stretches to the promotion of innovation, by creating spaces such as library-makers, workshops and so on. The participatory digital library focuses, paraphrasing Lankes, on the action of ‘facilitating the creation of knowledge’: this approach characterizes the vision of the digital library. Librarians are not ‘collectors’, they are the ones who lead to new ideas, through innovative services on one hand and through labs and technological-content platforms on the other.

From digital libraries as ‘resource centres’ to libraries as ‘community centres’! The second message delivered to the participants is that the digital library is not what it is generally meant, that is a repository of digital contents with some connected research services. The central idea of the concept of the digital library is that facilitation of knowledge and social action must advance simultaneously: there are many possible social models of the world, and each one leads up to a different action for different communities. Such a social action implies a critical approach to long-standing rocky certainties: it is necessary to review the priorities of libraries in relation to their social context and to the needs of the users.

The digital library definitely represents the knowledge process and therefore focuses on the contents more than on the container (artifact) and on its physical context (building). Yet, even if the tendency is to dematerialization and virtual communication, the digital library has a perceptive and emotional aspect – as cognitive psychology succeeded in demonstrating – which is fulfilled into the active participation of the users, their involvement in the construction of the digital library and the collaboration among the users that the digital library facilitates.

Almost anything happening in the digital world is significant to knowledge building, anyway it is not visible to the naked eye! Mental operations flow effortlessly, very fast, because we care about the result and not about the operations themselves. The problem – mentioned also at the Stelline Conference – is the possibility of a contrast between physical and virtual space. The answer cannot be dichotomous, whereas the digital library system is open, dynamic and flexible. In the city of bits – according to William Mitchell¹ – real places are integrated by virtual places, and their presence is simultaneous. The space-time perception in an age of constant connection and presence on the Web varies dramatically compared to the past, and this entrusts the architects of the present and of the future with a new task: planning places suited for this new collocation. The digital library will not replace the traditional library in the short run, but some differentiation will take place, so that both means of accessing information will coexist in different – though possibly integrated – spaces.

All speakers came to the conclusion that the participative aspect has been undervalued and that physical and digital libraries nowadays are not participatory. Nevertheless, there is a vivacious community of librarians which is aware of the importance of the participatory library and is debating on how to bring it to life.

What could be done differently? We need to open the library to the world, by digitizing and giving visibility to the heritage held in libraries, as Klaus Kempf suggests in *Digital library, that is the sentence to penal collaboration. The case of the Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek*. We need an adequate structure or institution to curate the digital collection. One of the parallel initiatives of the conference was the seminar “Digital curation and cultural heritage”, organized by Ornella Foglieni on behalf of the IFLA Preservation and Conservation Section, in the spirit of integration among different cultural institutions and which discussed various aspects of digital memories².

Understanding what is happening is very important in order to be ready, to define the future we want, rather than being passive onlookers if not downright victims of the transformation.

The Cluetrain manifesto: the end of business as usual had been the cue for the AIB Group on Digital libraries to write *The digital libraries manifesto*, which was followed by a

1 William J. Mitchell, *City of bits: space, place, and the infobahn*. Cambridge: The Mit Press, 1996.

2 The program of the seminar “Digital curation e cultural heritage” is accessible at: <http://www.cultura.regione.lombardia.it/cs/Satellite?c=News&childpagename=DG_Cultura%2FDetail&cid=1213715103551&packedargs=menu-to-render%3D1213349371101&pagename=DG_CAIWrapper>.

lively ‘conversation’, afterwards abandoned. We had the feeling in this conference that we wasted ten years, maybe because we were afraid of novelty or because we lacked appropriate training. Therefore, after ten years, probably the moment has come to discuss on the AIB manifesto for digital libraries again.

An authoritative voice came from Donna Scheeder, IFIA President-elect, who opened the conference and participated to the satellite event on “Digital curation and cultural heritage”. Besides, she privately met AIB members from Lombardy chapter and the AIB IFLA delegates, and encouraged them to get out of the libraries and communicate clearly to administrators and politicians our mission (as described in IFLA *Lyon Declaration*). If we manage to clarify to the society at large the unique role libraries play in development, we will be able to obtain the necessary resources to carry out this fundamental institutional role. The funding principles of the participatory library are all clearly expressed in the *Lyon Declaration*: the community, the connection, the open collection.

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