

Faraway, so close: libraries' possible allies in the challenges for the diffusion of knowledge

The printed book is nothing but one of the devices technology offers to transfer knowledge, a device which has become popular in the past 550 years. Whether this type of document will coexist in different ways with current technological devices and services, or it will almost completely disappear, is a question that cannot be answered but in a historical perspective: full stop. Rather, the issue is the contemporary and future role of disciplines and practices relative to the transmission of information, culture, knowledge. Are this role and the function of the organisations connected to it, adequate to understand the changeable problems related to the diffusion of culture in our time? Is it necessary to go through an inner theoretical re-thinking, or rather a pragmatic reconsideration of the world around us? The *Stelline* conference held in the middle of March outlined an answer, at the very least, to this second issue.

This year's conference relaunched during all the sessions the debate on the search for *sharing* strategies, deeper in content and methods than "mere" cooperation. Though these perspectives have been analyzed by scholars and professionals for some time, it is advisable to be careful, so as not to continuously run panting after initiatives already developed in other countries. It might even be already too late for libraries, as this time not only the social acknowledgment of their value or their mere survival are at stake, but the actual possibility for libraries and organizations to be actually of any use in preserving and transmitting knowledge. Their possibility to be indispensable for the production of culture in the whole society, or a specific context, be it a city, a university, a company, is being questioned.

The top political positions at regional, provincial, and town level, and the top professionals in publishing, libraries, museums and archives seem to agree on the need for a concrete and complete *alliance*. Every definition and decision needs to be valued with a unique social aim in mind, without differences between fields and institutions, observing society and knowledge from an unambiguous point of view. Moreover the community, the citizens, need to have the same weight in determining cultural strategies, to be members of the same "majority" desiring to avoid the risk of a social disaster, of a loss of the *productive* and *added* value of knowledge.

The danger that the world economic crisis becomes a "stable" condition is undoubtedly a boost to a collaborative spirit. Similarly, the same motivation descends from the upheaval due to the application of the "*spending review*", which reaches the point of classifying cultural services in local administrations as "non-fundamental", or from the previous reforms of education, University and research, based on "numbers" and not on disciplinary needs. On the other hand, the level of sharing to be attained in the cultural field cannot be limited to such premises: the cultural system must consider itself as the core of production and *critical* motivator of knowledge, as a place for social development and aggregation, as a source for strategic - not just defensive - allegiances. If the crisis becomes "stable" the problem will delete itself as a natural development of civilisation. If, instead, the cultural system does not

align with the new balance, it will become an inessential embellishment -dangerously inessential - of a society where other perspectives of survival and development will prevail.

This way Marco Polillo, president of AIE (The Association of Italian Publishers), proposes a wide view and a high goal for the “stable and necessary” alliance between publishers and libraries. As a long-term goal, beyond partial interests, the development of reading, relaunched by the technologies, brings about very advantageous consequences for both parties, as they share the same interest for the circulation of knowledge. Our president Stefano Parise underlines that strategic allegiances need to be structured as a concrete sharing, the “capacity of seeing together” a unique goal, beyond mere cooperation, in a common horizon of sense and perspective. A first example of this view were the MAB (Museums, archives and Libraries) States Generals last November. An “organic” condivision is after all an IFLA theme, and will have to become the connection between States and cultural institutions: it does not simply represent the resistance to the crisis of the economy, which will always deny its resources to what is perceived as inessential for a society.

Therefore, the principle of the allegiance cannot but be the *value* that knowledge can give to each activity in the social context. Welfare becomes the core of “human consortium”, and knowledge constitutes the strategic resource which makes its centralisation possible. An efficient allegiance needs to be based not only on the collaboration on *procedures* but on a focus on *contents*, wide aims openly shared among all the “good citizens” who participate into the creation of well-being. This equal allegiance, on the other side, must be sustained by the professionals through a constructive and skilled work, whose appreciation will be the theme of the next AIB national Conference next November, and of some papers appearing in this issue.

Library and Information science, Archive and Museum science cannot of course be left behind the changes they should rather elicit. It is necessary to have our minds set on a discipline pursuing a strong social impact and the spreading of culture as *common good*, as we explain further in this issue. Information science needs to be updated and not self-referential, to step forward as partner of a “constructive” social state, where the members do not beg for generic advantages, but learn to build up a general well-being for the community.

Giovanni Solimine and Chiara Faggiolani remark how the “*overall well-being*” can only start from a new promotion of culture as an “essential asset” for the society. If, therefore, it is important to define a *Social library science*, it is also necessary to look for an unambiguous premise to start from so as to conciliate old and new issues and change the “paradigm” without betraying the principles of Library Science. It is necessary to understand the requirements for a positive impact on the community, and welcome in the library *governance* the “bottom-up” requests, as the library must be part of a welfare system constructed by the people for the people. Maurizio Vivarelli, referring to MAB principles, hints as well to a necessary cohabitation of the points of view of the disciplines involved, that is Museum, Archive and Library Science. The condivision is made possible by the unambiguous organization of knowledge in the digital environment, which allows to re-elaborate from a methodological point of view the three distinct views. Beyond the scholarly fences of the disciplinary “fields”, connections are “rediscovered” by focusing on the issues of common interest: description of documents, semantics, order, communication, interoperability, integration.

Talking about the social value of knowledge, it is necessary to underline the problem of the “ecology in the mediasphere”, to use the phrase Luca De Biase quoted on his blog. Libraries, archives and museums are the *loci* of the ecology of information, and are bound to “purify” it from the statistical uniformity of “knowledge” and from the algorithmic automation of “discovery”. After all, even if the shift from the library paradigm of *ownership* to *access* is quite recent, we need immediately a new shift from access to *sharing*. As Anna

Maria Tamaro reminds the audience, 2.0 models of shared information service require the creation of common content, the sharing of research data and the overall care of metadata and preservation. The transmission of knowledge evolves this way into a social process, which all libraries must facilitate and foster.

In this changing scene public libraries must no longer think of the political counterpart as of a wall to breach through by means of an irresistible parade of overall good reasons. The real success is in convincing society -the citizens- to sympathize with the cultural heritage, asking governments to re-address *tax money*. It is necessary to show how much the library sector can contribute to the renewal of a community standard of social and cultural well-being. These are not utopias, but concrete plans, which originate far from mere “lament” and are based upon a sense of reality and times.

Among the strategies to share library value, social budgeting makes it possible to demonstrate the citizens and all stakeholders the actual wealth produced by the cultural service. In a nutshell, the *social budget* shows how much the institution is capable of giving back to the community which invests on it, provided it is built upon effective and shared aims and trust. At the same time *fund raising* must not be conceived as a corrective procedure to face an emergency or another problem, and maybe not pertaining the “dignity” of the institution, but as a strategic practice, based on the *trust* the community shows towards a determined institution.

Finally, decisive is the involvement of all local actors, who become in their turn “supporters” of the common *mission*: from service companies to likely sponsors, from dealers to voluntary sector, the latter being easily involved with great reciprocal advantage, provided right principles and support programs for basic services are followed. Crucial is also collaboration with other local structures and institutions: besides archives and museums, schools and universities, there are bookshops, cinemas, theatres, cultural institutions. The urban setting can be accurately “mapped out”, and read on real or virtual maps, so as to build an effective cultural system for the territory.

As regards university libraries, they can “surround” their political counterparts participating into the governing boards and academic senates and proposing a shared cultural policy, addressing the whole academic community and the region. Similarly, as the excessive power of scholarly publishers is being confronted, it is time to think of collaborative strategies to serve the common interest in the circulation of open data, in the metadata exchange for new services, and thinking of Open Access no longer as a tool for cultural “resistance” but for sharing the goal of spreading knowledge.

Since a long time academic and research libraries have started fruitful collaborations in digitisation and digital publishing projects, together with public partners, foundations, private subjects. New alliances among scholars and students are flourishing, and their aims, besides information evaluation and validation, are also the spread of institutional repositories, the creation of digital, interoperable objects, research evaluation, assistance and help in research and profession. Now it is time to renew the long-established agreements by producing “assets” with a specific social and scientific value, which maintain their public value even whenever they have been produced in collaboration with private subjects. Social budgeting is also present in the new statutes of some universities, and the involvement of territory is pursued by more and more “academies”. Libraries must therefore develop a greater awareness for the relation between science and society and an interactive attitude to the territory, dedicating most of their time and energy to information literacy, continuing education and informal learning programs, not forgetting induction to a critical and qualified research for youngsters inside and outside school.

Open Access itself constitutes an important chance to build up partnerships in order to spread culture democratically in a form which allows university libraries its safeguard and

protection. To pursue the goal of free knowledge circulation it is not necessary for the structures and policies of open repositories to choose *a priori* a *green* or *golden* way: there are various possible combinations in the relation between public administration and business company, which leave space for various management styles as regards quality, costs, rights and profits. A clever opening up of Open Access policy, where the new digital university publishers play a qualitatively determinant role, makes it possible to sustain many social-scientific initiatives and to avoid that our research products end up almost always by being deposited on foreign repositories.

Finally, the spirit of sharing and collaboration will lead to success each and every library or “kindred” institution which will find its mission and its identity merely by looking inside and around itself. It is about taking to the streets, be they real or digital, to approach the people and institutions libraries have often looked at from high up during self-referential flights. Every achievement can be considered under different and autonomous points of view which derive from a mutual exchange of ideas, methods, experiences.

Roberto Raieli