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The Demise of Quality?

Quality Newspapers and the Information Function of Libraries on the Brink of Collapse or Resurrection?

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Abstract

In *The Guardian*, Alan Rushbridger compared the future of newspapers to climate change. Five years ago, many climatologists were sceptical whether climate change was a real and serious issue. Today, most scientists agree that global warming is a fact of life. In the world of newspapers, at present, almost everyone agrees that the traditional, particularly quality, newspapers are facing huge problems. The blog '*Print is dead*' chose a fitting title for Rushbridger's article: *Print is dead: an inconvenient truth*.

Another traditional icon of the information society, the public library, is facing similar problems as the newspaper industry. The information function, the core business of the library, is under threat. People tend to use search engines at home instead of visiting and accessing the (virtual) library and ask for professional advice. It is important to note that these search engines are more and more driven by commercial interests than by a genuine concern of quality information. Ranking algorithms are more beauty contests and quality stamps. (Local) governments tend to demand more and more new social services included in the library. Commercial publishers' concerns are understandable. In the United States and Europe the world of the press faces a real crisis, and the battle to survive is a race against the clock. Newspapers, especially the quality press, will only survive if they can persuade the audience of generation Z to read them on the Web. Failure to do this will signal their demise.

We will discuss the tensions in this field by addressing the mutual relationships between the stock market driven economic business model and the traditional characteristics of quality journalism as well as the cultural changes in consuming news stories and analyses in print and on the web. The key question is: how these societal tendencies will affect the quality of information consumed by the public and hence the public quality of discourse?

This paper aims to address both issues by asking whether quality is really under siege and to what extent can the new, convergent media improve the quality of the information society by fostering the interaction of the roles of journalists and librarians. In the new world of journalism and librarianship both will prove their roles and functions by engagement, enrichment, empowerment and entertainment for both readers and library users.

1 Libraries

Public libraries' existence was based on the traditional functions of storing, indexing and having available all kinds of information sources and literature that could serve a local or more general public in their search for pertinent knowledge, leisure and entertainment. Today

libraries fulfil roles in the local community far beyond the traditional functions. Many libraries are nowadays vibrant centres of entertainment, cultural performances, lectures, etc. This is the start of cultural entrepreneurship and the *experience library*.

Entertainment, educational – escapist – and aesthetic experiences are becoming an essential part of the modern library (Nijboer 2006). The spectacular new central library of Amsterdam is a showcase for this trend. Its spectacular building, with a large restaurant, facing the central IJ waterway of Amsterdam has already achieved much acclaim. It resulted in a sharp increase in library users, but not everyone is particularly satisfied about the quality of information services offered to the public since the opening of the new premises in July 2007. Numerous letters to the editor of a major regional newspaper indicate that the quality of the information function is one of the main topics of concern.

Problems

Public libraries in many countries face a series of problems. One of the conclusions of a British parliamentary document about the public libraries of ‘the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’ of the House of Commons (2005) stipulates:

“We regard the overall picture to be one of decline – both in provision and usage – especially in the provision of books which many see as a library’s key function. It is difficult to argue that the library service is simply responding to reduced demand from the community when: overall expenditure is rising in real terms”. “We believe that a situation in which core performance indicators, and gross throughput, are falling—but overall costs are rising—signals a service in distress” (p.14).

The change in policy and focus of many libraries has much to do with their *raison d’être*, because crucial tenets are under threat, in particular the information function. This information function is traditionally the foundation of the other core functions. These other four core functions: education, culture, reading and literature, and a place for meeting and discussion, are served better in the ‘new social and cultural agenda’ of many local governments. Currently, libraries undertake activities, which were in the past considered by many as a non-playing field. A better analysis resulting in a grounded consensus between the local government and the library about the necessary tasks and boundaries of the library as institution is needed. Evidently libraries are no longer just about books and information; they are not even mainly about books and information. A whole new set of performance indicators is necessary to judge their contribution to society.

Information use

The information function of the library is under attack by the googlization of society. The threat of marginalizing the library role in providing information is conceivable. In 2006 research in the Netherlands showed that only a small percentage of high school students still use library (e-)resources. Guess what: the rest used exclusively the Internet for their assignments. Fast and easy were the most important criteria, whilst the reliability of the information seems to be of a lesser concern (Internet 2006). In all age categories Internet use is still on the increase, in particular the older generation is catching up (Internetconsumptie 2007). Internet is winning the long-term battle with the library as provider of information in all age categories. Statistics show that in the Netherlands the number of library members, the circulation of books as well as the fiction collection decreased significantly. Young people acknowledge that the library offers a vast amount of reliable information for school assignments, about health, history and literature. However, the majority of the young people don’t mention the library as their first resource for seeking information. Almost 70 % is of the

opinion that Internet provides more [quality?] information than the library. Only 4 % has a different view (Stalpers 2007). These findings are not typically for the Low Countries. In 2005, Harris Interactive conducted a large survey on behalf of OCLC in six English speaking countries, about people's information-seeking behaviours, how familiar people are with the variety of e-resources libraries provide for their users, and how libraries fit into the lives of the respondents (Perceptions 2005). Some of the main conclusions on information consumer's perceptions and habits were:

- Respondents use search engines to begin an information search (84 percent). Only 1 % starts an information search on a library website.
- Quality and quantity of information are top determinants of a satisfactory information search.
- The two most important criteria to evaluate electronic resources are: information is valuable and information is available for free. Speed is number three on the list, but has less impact.
- Respondents do not trust purchased information more than free information. They have a high expectation of free information.
- Search engines are rated higher than librarians.
- Library users like to self-serve. Most respondents do not seek assistance when using library resources.

Huysmans (2006) remarks about the invisibility of the library on the Internet that in the long run the notion that the ranking of the library will decrease when people are looking for information is clearly an understatement. One of the main conclusions of the OCLC report was that libraries and librarians appeared to be increasingly less visible to today's information consumers (Perceptions 2005). The younger generation replaced the library and the encyclopaedia for internet resources ("The library is located at best on the edge of their cognitive information map" (Wubs & Huysmans 2006)).

It will be difficult to persuade young people to become loyal library users. The image of the library in the Internet era is a serious problem. Young people consider the library as traditional, old-fashioned with a dull atmosphere and even young people who love books find the library dull (30 %) or old-fashioned (40 %) (Stalpers 2007).

Last year, a mystery guest visited the four largest libraries in the Netherlands and she wasn't exactly impressed by the service provided to this important and difficult target group. Her conclusion was that young people really have to love reading and be prepared to face all kinds of hurdles in order to find the right books, music and e-resources. Resources are available, but logistically a lot has to be improved in these libraries to make it attractive for young people (Graaff 2007). The role of the library for the 50+ segment seemed to be relatively satisfactory until recently. However, their needs have and will change in the coming years.

There are more questions than answers about the information function of libraries at the moment. More research is necessary about the information needs and information seeking behaviour among high school and university students. Another pressing research topic is the (non) use of library portals and what kind of improvements are necessary in order to ensure that people will use them for serious information tasks? Which information tasks are actually left for libraries in the digital world? BOBCATSSS 2008 is an excellent environment to discuss these issues with students and professionals and hopefully we get new insights and creative ideas to improve the information role of the library for quality information in our knowledge society.

Strategies

Finally we will discuss briefly two strategies for information quality and the library. We will discuss these strategies in this session.

- A) The first strategy is to accept defeat and marginalization of the information function. Consequently, we have to put more resources in the other core functions, which, at present, are valued higher by the stakeholders.
- B) The second strategy is a long-term strategy towards media education and media literacy in which the library will play a key role. In the long run this strategy will be hopefully successful in combating the demise of information quality and maintain the position of the library as a resource for quality information. New opportunities and coalitions are possible with the (local) press (see further below).

Re A

Accept the marginal role for one of the core functions of the library as a consequence of the googlization of society. It's an illusion of many librarians and their representatives in national or global organizations that we can beat Google and other search engines in their own field. It is ultimately our firm opinion that it has to be the library and library website that has to become the certified place to find quality information. Many librarians want people to *start* searching at library websites, because that is where the "good" information is. In the meantime we are spending lots of money to create new information services, which cost effectiveness, is questionable, if users are not turning to (e-)resources of the library, which seems to be the case. A library can also be more than a centre for quality information. The library's new social and cultural agenda offers a lot of new opportunities for entrepreneurial librarians and let's pursue this as well!

Re B

A long-term strategy in media education and media literacy in which the library plays a central role. It will not be easy to achieve such a goal. It is not only generation Z, who thinks they are information savvy, impressed by volume it are often also the educators themselves. Wrongly a considerable number of educators are of the opinion that they are media literate themselves, often not aware at all of the many gaps in their media literacy competences. Often the educators have no clue themselves what criteria to use to evaluate search results, the selection and use of information by students (Dirkx, Theuns & Timmers 2006). As long as educators don't have the essential skills, who is to blame for the media illiteracy and the information quality of assignments of students?

In all types of schools in many countries, information specialists put a lot of effort in courses media literacy and media education. Not only media literacy, but also more and more emphasis is put on competences to select and evaluate information (sources). How effective these courses are is not always clear yet (Dirkx, Theuns & Timmers 2006). In some countries, e.g., the U.K. the USA and Australia, it is an integral part of the curriculum. Qualified specialists also teach it. In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, unfortunately it is not an integrated part of the curriculum (Oprea & Huysmans 2007). However, for the last couple of years, media literacy and media education is increasingly a priority for the Dutch government (Raad van Cultuur 2005). Developing media literacy programmes and coaching students (and educators!) and cooperate pro-active with (in) schools, universities, community centres etc. is necessary. Successful programs will have a positive effect on the information function of the (digital) library. But it will take time to see the positive effects.

2 The Press

Generally, the world of newspapers is facing the same huge problems as the public library. As Russel Baker (2007) observed: 'Its advertising and circulation are being drained away by the Internet, and its owners seem stricken by a failure of the entrepreneurial imagination needed to prosper in the electronic age'. Surveys show that more and more young people get their news from television and computers breed a melancholic sense that the press is yesteryear's thing, a horse-drawn buggy on an eight lane interstate. Baker mentions a lecture by John S. Carroll (2006), ex-editor in chief of the *LA Times*: 'In this "post-corporate phase of ownership" we have seen a narrowing of the purpose of the newspaper in the eyes of its owner. Under the old local owners, a newspaper's capacity for making money was only part of its value. Today it is everything. Gone is the notion that a newspaper should lead, that it has an obligation to the community, that it is beholden to the public....'

So, is 'blogging' the journalism of the future? The number of blogs worldwide is growing by leaps and bounds. But, as popular as blogging is today, most blogs don't have anyone reading them, said Derek Gordon, vice president for marketing for the San Francisco-based Technorati, in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* (2007). Gordon reports that of the 109.2 million blogs his Huren search engine tracks: 'just over 99 percent' get no hits in the course of a year. On top of that, there is a quality problem with most of the blogs that will get hit, even the popular ones. In The Netherlands for instance, some newsblogs don't consider themselves to follow the traditional standards and codes of journalism.

So in this ongoing debate Philip Meyer (2004) presented two future scenarios for the press:

- A) The present owners squeeze the goose to maintain profitability today without worrying about the long term.
- B) The present owners – or their successors – will accept the realities of the new competition and invest in product improvements that fully exploit the power of print and make newspaper companies major players in an information marketplace that includes electronic delivery.

Enter civil journalism as a (certainly not the) way to help perform scenario B is an option in bringing back the press to the community. A community where the public is not primarily a consumer, but a civilian (Lewis 2005). Though in our view, this community is a 'light' one (Duyvendak & Hurenkamp 2004), not communities like the socio-political blocks, called pillars in Dutch, (protestant, catholic, liberal, social-democratic) which structured Dutch society until some forty years ago. Just as the civilian, the professional journalist is participating in the community. Bowman and Willis, (2003): 'The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, paying an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.'

We consider democracy as a culture, not just a system of free elections. A democracy needs democrats, i.e. democratic, participating civilians. From the end of the eighties, newspapers in the United States had a growing number of experiments with civil journalism (Rosen 1995 and 1999; Glasser 1999; Heider 2005; Poindexter 2006), on local, regional as well as national scale. Papers in the Netherlands and other European countries made more or less the same experiments. Unfortunately, the results are sometimes rather alarming. There exists no best practice. The only – relative – successes depends on exclusive local, regional and national circumstances.

But there is another alarming pattern. Rather promising initiatives were prematurely aborted by the financial management because they did not bring in the cash fast enough. Also, by cuttings on investments in the newsrooms, some initiatives simply failed by lack of personnel. The quality of the participation was a huge problem (the same as the blogs). Badly written, uninteresting babble and – most important – no real news!

Civil journalism, as it seems, can be of some success on local or regional scale, when papers learn from the mistakes of their predecessors. Last summer, the Minneapolis/St Paul based *StarTribune*, had a big campaign to improve the water quality in Minnesota, *The Land of 10,000 Lakes*. The paper informed the public systematically how they could measure the quality, and how they could start legal procedures against companies or (local) governments. *StarTribune* empathically joined the traditions of fishing and hunting in the lakes. The paper did not use the methods or discourse of the so-called bunny huggers (though it used their experience). Of course they used the Internet as an interactive communication tool with the readers. The sales of *StarTribune* raised (slightly) and some legal procedures were started.

But – as above – you have to invest in journalists. In research, in interviews with local committees and with experts. You have to maintain the continuity of a campaign, to maintain the quality.

Conclusion

Above we sketched the heavy blows two of our most cherished institutions for quality information for the people encounter. Both face the attack not from competition between peers, but from the total mix-up of unfiltered information, news, opinions, gossip, and simply everything that once has been written and remains as possible results in a query. On the web, aging of information does not exist as on paper. Every stupidity or misinformation simply remains for ever. People cannot see the difference between quality, value and defunct information anymore. We cannot blame the public; they have no tradition of finding out by themselves what is correct and what is incorrect in news or other information. Both institutions face the same problem; why not fight the same enemy together?

Enter the public library. The library might become the perfect institution to enhance the quality of civil journalism. Because of the local (or sometimes regional) information infrastructure, in which the public library participates, it is a natural source for local civil journalism. The library has information professionals who can assist a journalist in every step of his research. Not only to find facts, laws, but also academic experts in the field of his investigation. A lot of local media depend on freelancers or even volunteers (Monikers 2001) who are not even backed by a newsroom. For them the services and facilities of a library seem even more useful.

A shift in thinking has to be made, in which we position the public library, including its new societal roles, right in the middle of civil journalism. The public library might become an extension of the newsroom in which serious people join forces in helping the press in its metamorphosis from a bastion of unchallenged prestige towards a mixture of professional and civic information based on grounded and certified information and news.

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