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## THE END OF ALL NICHES: THE FUTURE POSITION OF THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN IN A MODERN SERVICE INDUSTRY

[ZNIKAJĄ WSZELKIE NISZE: PRZYSZŁA POZYCJA BIBLIOTEKARZA  
AKADEMICKIEGO W NOWOCZESNEJ ORGANIZACJI USŁUGOWEJ]

**Abstract:** A (University) Library is a modern service industry which has to follow the rules of effectiveness, efficiency and productivity. Even academic librarians have to be integrated into the production process of 'the supply of information' in such a way that they can deliver optimal results on the basis of their qualifications. In the process, the classic occupational image of the subject indexing lone fighter has dramatically changed into that of a productive performance bearer with great skills in management, social competence and performance. This paper gives an overview of the historical development of the classic academic librarian and the current requirements for a modern information manager. The strictly contrastive approach makes clear what a quantum leap there is between the image of a classic academic librarian, and the modern requirements for an efficient academic employee in the production process of supplying information.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP – KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT – PROFESSIONAL IMAGE

**Abstrakt:** Biblioteka (uniwersytecka) jest nowoczesnym zakładem usługowym, który musi stosować się do reguł efektywności, skuteczności i produktywności. Także bibliotekarze akademicy powinni być włączani w produkcyjny proces „zaopatrywania w informację”, tak aby mogli osiągać najlepsze wyniki w oparciu o swoje kwalifikacje. W tym procesie, klasyczny zawodowy wizerunek samotnego wojownika pochłoniętego indeksowaniem gwałtownie przekształcił się w wizerunek wydajnego pracownika, który jest w swojej organizacji motorem wysokich osiągnięć, ma znakomite umiejętności w zarządzaniu, relacjach społecznych i wypełnianiu zadań. Przedstawiono, w formie przeglądu, historyczny rozwój sylwetki zawodowej klasycznego bibliotekarza akademickiego oraz wymagania wobec współczesnych specjalistów w dziedzinie zarządzania informacją. Przyjęte podejście kontrastywne ukazuje, jak wielki rozróż powstał między obrazem klasycznego bibliotekarza akademickiego a współczesnymi wymaganiami, jakie stawia się wydajnemu pracownikowi uczelni w ramach produkcyjnego procesu dostarczania informacji.

BIBLIOTEKARSTWO AKADEMICKIE – WIZERUNEK ZAWODOWY – ZARZĄDZANIE WIEDZĄ

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## INTRODUCTION: THE SUBJECT SPECIALIST OF YESTER-YEAR

“Hemmed in by all this heap of books, their gnawing worms, amid their dust, while to the arches, in all the nooks, are smoke-stained papers midst them thrust, (...) – That is your world! That’s called a world!”\*. While it is Goethe’s famous polymath Faust and not a librarian who is talking here, it would still be difficult to find a more vivid and accurate description of the stereotypical image of the academic librarian. Needless to say, this image has been obsolete in professional circles for quite a while, and the ongoing discussions about the future of the academic librarian are taking place on a very different level. However, it might be useful to bear this clichéd image of our profession in mind, as we go along and reconsider the role of the subject specialist in a modern library.

In the face of a modern, highly competitive academic landscape, more specific customer needs, and strong competitors in the Information Sector, libraries as a whole and specifically academic librarians feel an increasing need for innovation. At the same time, this opens up an opportunity to adapt and develop academic libraries in a way that makes them ready for their future role as modern providers of information services.

In order to discuss possibilities for the future of the academic librarian, it will be useful to first sketch out the perennial debate that has been raging around the role, mission and self-concept of professional academic librarianship. The most central question of this controversy was (and, apparently, sometimes still is) whether the academic librarian is a scientist in a library, or rather fulfils the task of an administration employee. In a second step, this paper describes what may be the lowest common denominator when it comes to the problem of defining the profession of the subject specialist. While this consensus about the core tasks of the academic librarian will probably persist in the future, this paper argues that foreseeably new challenges will both augment and modify the spectre of tasks and competences that define the role of subject specialists.

## A QUICK GLANCE AT THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP IN GERMANY

As far as it is relevant for our present purpose, the historical development of academic librarianship in Germany can be sketched out by focusing on very few selected turning points and debates. To begin with, it might be helpful to cast a glance at the infancy of the modern scientific library.

Until the end of the 19th century, most academic libraries were run by scholars, who, as ‘Gelehrtenbibliothekare’ (scholar librarians), performed this duty alongside their academic responsibilities. Thus, it was not until the end of the 19th century that academic librarianship was institutionalised as a profession, with initiatives coming from both Prussia (1893) and Bavaria (1905). As necessary prerequisites for the training as a subject specialist, graduation and a doctor’s degree were defined. At the same time, the professional training focused on practical rather than academic qualifications. This was a first step away from the old model of the ‘scholar in the library’, and towards a professionalisation of librarianship.

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\* Goethe, *Faust*, transl. by George Madison Priest.

However, the major leap from the scholar who performs administrative transactions in the library during his spare time, to the 'information manager' (we will come back to this term later) had not been taken. This becomes clear if we look at the debates that occupied academic librarians in the early years of West Germany and the time of the *Wirtschaftswunder*: In the young Republic's flourishing science sector, the profession found itself at a professional crossroads. "Mentally trapped in an obsolete idealism" and "lost in discussions about technicalities" [Kuttner 2009, p. 384f.; transl. by the author], libraries found very little public appreciation. Together with fears about an imminent mechanisation and commodification of the academic librarian's work, this lack of recognition sparked a controversy about the role of the librarian in the scientific community. The textures of this controversy can be seen most clearly in the early 1960s, when with Joachim Wieder and Ladislaus Buzás, two eloquent librarians were taking the different sides of the debate.

The most principled positions of this ideologically heated dispute can be summarised as follows: According to Joachim Wieder, an intellectual and social decadence of the librarian profession ["geistige[s] und soziale[s] Absinken des bibliothekarischen Berufes"] was threatening the academic librarian, conceived of as a bearer of culture in a rather emphatic sense, and as a defender of humanitarianism ["Kultur- und Bildungsträger sowie Verteidiger der Humanität"]. Wieder felt that this idealistic conception of the subject specialist was under attack by an excessive amount of administrative duties, and the reduction of the librarian to a cog in the wheel [Kuttner 2009, p. 384f.]. On the other hand, and this was the position of Buzás, it was felt that the academic librarian would be ill advised to withdraw to a professional self-concept as scholar in the library. For Buzás, the only task of the librarian was to provide literature for the library users: Whoever complained about bureaucracy and dull routines failed to understand that the profession of the librarian is defined exactly by daily detail work [Kuttner 2009, p. 387].

Up to now, the last time that the fundamental issue of the academic librarian, trying to clarify the relation between scientific and administrative professional profiles, came to the forefront, was in the year 1998 (cf. Jochum 1998; Oehling 1998; Schiebel 1998; Wefers 1998; Jochum/Oehling 1998; Didszun 1998). A detailed summary of this debate is given by Bosserhoff [2008].

Objectively, however, this controversy that has now been going on for a century, does not hit the mark: The scientific library, understood as a modern service industry, needs academic librarians who are neither administrative officers, nor scholars in the service of the library. Moreover, the solution is not to find the golden mean between the two positions. Instead of taking an ideological point of view to impose a professional concept of the academic librarian, it is necessary to analyse the concrete tasks that the subject specialist will face in the future, and to then delineate the profile of the modern information professional on that basis.

## THE CLASSICAL AREA OF RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

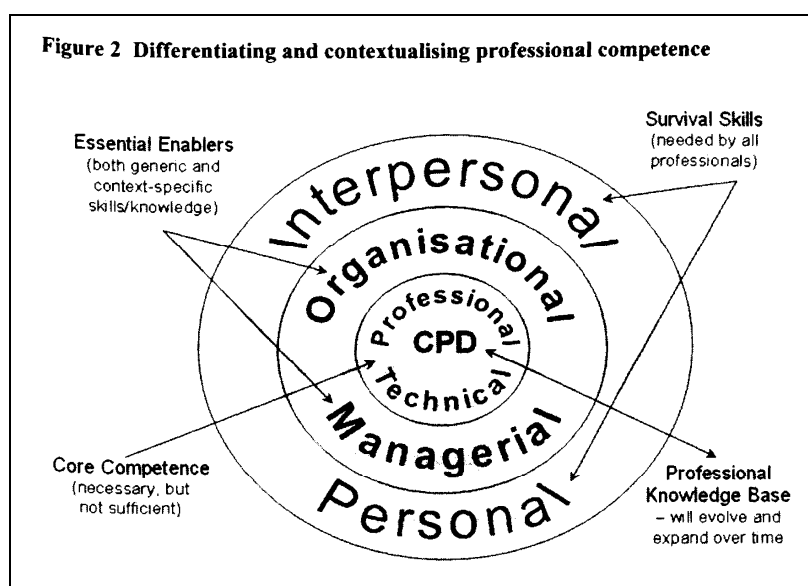
Defining the area of responsibilities of subject specialists by the triad acquisition, subject indexing and providing access is classical, but at the same time not fully adequate. It is classical insofar as this description delineates three broad areas that will continue to be of central importance; it is, however, not fully adequate, because it would be unproductive to pin academic librarianship down to these three areas, and to misunderstand them as the 'real' or 'proper' tasks of the subject specialist.

Evidently, subject specialists will always remain crucially involved in collection management. On the basis of a collection development policy that reflects customer needs, subject specialists make acquisition decisions,

survey and evaluate the current state of their collections, and are responsible for a periodical or continuous de-acquisition. The latter should be based on careful collection analysis in connection with an investigation of usage patterns. The primary objective of collection management will be to optimise the *turnover rate* (the number of materials used by customers relative to the total size of the collection). This of course implicates that university libraries should prioritise the usage of their collection over the sheer size of the collection\*.

Undeniably, developing innovative methods of providing access and creating information services that are well-adapted to the demands and social realities of their customers will not only be central for the present, but also the future of subject librarians. This will be a main concern in the next section of this survey. Highly qualified and deep subject indexing will remain important as well – even if possibilities to configure these processes more efficiently by using synergistic effects should be used to a maximum.

It is probably not helpful to describe the classical area of responsibilities in great detail. It is sufficient to note that this narrow job description might indeed lead the subject specialist into the confinement of Faust's gothic study, and not into the open, service- and customer-oriented scientific library of the future. While acquisition, subject indexing and providing access will remain central for the work of the subject librarian, these areas of work are not at all exhaustive or even sufficient as a definition of an academic librarian's tasks in a modern library. The following model tries to visualise this by placing the classical triad at the centre of a circular structure:



Source: S. Corral (2005). Developing Models of Professional Competence to Enhance Employability in the Network World. [In:] P. Genoni, G. Walton eds. (2005). Continuing Professional Development Preparing for New Roles in Libraries. München: Saur, p. 3.

Only when personal, interpersonal, organisational and the urgently needed managerial skills come together to augment the professional core competences, subject specialists will be able to work in a customer oriented, efficient, and goal-oriented way.

\* It goes without saying that scientific libraries will always have the duty to collect and archive scientific literature in a both synchronically and diachronically representative way. However, for a regular university library, this must not mean that collection segments that will foreseeably never meet any future customer demands should be kept.

If subject specialists are to play on an enlarged field of professional activities successfully, a further increase in professionalism and an optimisation of daily work processes will be necessary. The introduction of indices that optimise and simplify collection management or the streamlining of subject indexing (e.g. by optimising copy cataloguing) easily suggests themselves.

## THE NEW CHALLENGE: THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN OF TOMORROW

With the complexification of the science sector, the further evolution of the information society, and the development of a huge market for information services, university libraries face new challenges and customer demands. The keywords are consistent orientation towards customer needs, expanded service portfolios, output orientation, professionalization, project management, networking with faculties, and involvement in teaching processes. In all of these areas, the professionalism of subject specialists is pivotal for the future-oriented development of academic libraries.

For a consistent orientation towards customer needs, it is necessary that libraries do not conceive of themselves as a bureaucratic apparatus that stores knowledge, but as a modern provider of information services. This is a necessary response to higher expectations from students and scientists, who approach academic libraries with both more specific and diversified demands. Thus, it is not enough to just store information, but rather to create customised services for different groups of customers. One point in case is setting up and running an Open Access repository for the members of the university or even for specific departments or research projects, with possibilities for remote access and depositing and networking primary data.

Generally, modern university libraries need to aim for an active customer service policy. Already in 1992, a study came to the conclusion that “[t]here is too much concern with collection management and not enough with the demands and wishes of the (potential) users. (...). The service can be characterised as passive, and reactive.” [Prins/de Gier 1994, p. 37f.]. The authors proved that the image of librarians and the esteem in which the library is held largely depends on how actively and how professionally the service portfolio of the library is promoted. It goes without saying that a continuous analysis of the different customer groups and their specific information demands is necessary to ensure adequate service orientation.

Optimising the quality of service is only one of several positive effects of the new, competitive situation that libraries face on the global information market. The fact that today libraries are competing for its customers’ attention and interest with multinational, professional information service providers like Google has been reiterated countless times. Under these circumstances, libraries can only stay competitive by marketing their products professionally. In this context, Ulrich Naumann [2010] draws attention to the very basic model of the ‘7 P’ of the services marketing mix: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Processes, Physical Facilities [cf. Mefert/Bruhn 2009, p. 22]. For libraries, the challenge is to take the step from ‘just’ producing innovative and professional information services, to simultaneously creating and implementing efficient marketing strategies for these products. For subject specialists, this means that they are partly becoming marketing strategists [cf. Haglund 2005].

It was already mentioned that libraries need to develop information services that are specific to the needs of different groups of customers. However, the diversification and multiplication of services must of course not be implemented with hustled activity or blind overeagerness. At the same time, it is necessary to review existing services critically, as no service provider can afford to offer the same services for decades, without reflecting

changes in the demands of customers. A systematic approach to library marketing and especially a 'lifecycle-management' of the current products and services is necessary to develop a service portfolio that is balanced, solid, and has a promising future [for service portfolios in libraries cf. Ball 2001]. Creating and reviewing service portfolios not only serves to evaluate existing services, but also to assess the potential of innovative service products.

Thus, in their role as information managers, subject specialists will not only be challenged with the operational implementation of projects, but also with the respective processes of strategic planning, evaluation and adaptation of service products. Managerial competences (see Genoni 2005 above) enable subject specialists to develop target group-specific information products and services, to monitor their implementation, and to promote their visibility. As scientific libraries take up the challenge to create innovative, competitive information services, they need subject specialists who are competent project managers and marketing strategists as well as team and product developers.

Without this expanded understanding of academic librarianship, the development of innovative information services by scientific libraries is unthinkable. New business areas for scientific libraries may comprise the application of highly specialised competences from the information sciences for science rankings and bibliometrical analysis [cf. Ball/Tunger 2006], the planning and execution of digitalisation projects, and counselling in copyright questions as well as the technical and organisational realisation of projects in the area of Open Access.

A further area that requires subject specialists to adopt management skills and to welcome a further professionalization is connected to the question of e-only journal policies. Subject specialists must be able to supply reliable data that justifies decisions to move to e-only subscriptions, or evidence proving that this decision would not be economically efficient. Only a cost-benefit analysis can reveal a possible surplus value of e-only products – and thus the question of customer groups, utilisation patterns and special information demands comes to the forefront again. Ultimately, only after analysing customer demands transparent and consistent decisions can be made.

It is widely agreed that subject specialists must increasingly become specialists for new technical developments of (potential) relevance for information services. Thus, one indispensable role model for the modern library is the 'digital librarian', who bridges the gap between the customer and the multi-faceted digital information services. When facing a multitude of diversified electronic services, only the pedagogical, social and technical competences of the academic librarian allow customers to experience their library as the first and best place to go to satisfy their need for information.

Of course, the academic librarian is not a software engineer. He should however be a specialist for pragmatic contexts of technology: Only when knowledge of the possibilities and limits of technological developments and a thorough understanding of usage patterns and customer demands come together, the strategic planning of IT based information products becomes possible. The professions of the librarian, the digital information expert and the knowledge manager are indeed, as McKee points out, structurally identical:

This coming together of librarianship and information science and knowledge management into a single coherent profession, a single coherent conceptual framework, should not surprise us. Because there is no real difference between the conceptual model of a traditional library service and the conceptual model of a digital knowledge environment. In each case there are the sources of knowledge; the systems by which that knowledge is stored and retrieved and disseminated; and the social dynamics of people, organisations, communities [McKee 2002, p. 121].

It is thus at the intersection of information and knowledge management, the socio-pragmatic usage of technical developments, and 'classical' domains of academic librarianship that knowledge landscapes can be adapted to the social realities and learning habits of students and a new generation of teaching staff. In the future, intuitive library systems, recommender services, the integration of social networks and a personalised access to the library's information services will become a standard.

Simultaneously, academic librarians are increasingly involved in teaching, with one example being courses on information literacy. Here, subject specialists can act either in a planning and organising or in an executive function. Still very relevant are also qualified introductions to specialised information services (e.g. databases) and counselling in subject-specific questions pertaining to information retrieval.

In this vein of development, the Anglo-American 'field librarian', defined by a strong involvement with the academic community, embeddedness into the respective faculty, and a very high degree of accessibility for his customers, may serve as a very sensible point of reference. While it is of course still true that the 'scientist in the library' or 'scholar librarian' is not a model for the future, libraries will need the scientifically educated information specialist, who fosters a continuous exchange between scientists, faculties and the library. Ideally, this exchange does not only consist of specialised information and counselling flowing from the subject specialist to scientists and students, but leads to the construction of social networks between all involved customer groups and the library staff. The 'field librarian' is firmly rooted in her or his respective academic field, consequently knows the demands of the scientists and students of that field very well, and can thus act as a competent partner for the faculties, either in regular work routines or in the planning and implementation of projects.

A further, related model (albeit with a slightly different twist) that awaits adaptation is the 'embedded librarian'. The embedded librarian interacts with the learning, teaching and researching projects of his customers. With digitalisation processes threatening to marginalise the library as a physical place, it becomes necessary to contact customers through innovative IT services, thus making the information services of the library visible for students, teachers and scientists. Not the localized presence of the academic librarian in the library building, but an active service policy, and the idea to approach the customer instead of waiting for him to come, defines the professional role of the information manager.

In summary, a paradigm shift can be diagnosed – from a focus on busy activities, which are predominantly observable and valued among librarians, to library services and products that are clearly visible, professionally promoted, and developed in interaction with different customer groups. Therefore, the work of subject specialists will no longer focus primarily on operational matters, but on the strategic and innovative development of products and services. The academic librarian constructs social networks, partnerships and active cooperations with customers. In the future, academic librarians should not aim to defend a narrow self-conception, or reproduce the long-lasting debate that tries to define the status of the librarian as a scientist, but rather welcome the expansion of their field of activity, and thus establish modern scientific libraries as strong partners of research and teaching.

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