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## Conservation and Communication: Does the Library Concept Rest Upon a Constituent Paradox?

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**T**HE world of libraries kindles debates of an almost theological nature. These debates may lie dormant for a long time, tended only by the sagacious labours of graduates in librarianship, only to spark suddenly into life in the form of controversies whose novelty resides in newfangled styles of vocabulary alone, and which naturally culminate in fearsome excommunications! A project such as ours at the Bibliothèque de France could not fail to wake the sleeping hydra. A recent report on the Bibliothèque de France policy on national heritage collections — which was otherwise brimful of fine thoughts — thus stated that *conservation* and *communication* are the two terms of a paradox underlying the existence of all libraries. I would not venture to champion or to argue against an opinion of this sort, any more than I would on the problematical topics of the nature of mankind or the Holy Trinity. I would prefer to approach this argument in a more pragmatic way, by asking a few simple questions: can we describe what *is* communication, what forms it takes, what expectations it arises in the reader — in other words, what are the actual needs which are met by communication? Can we describe to what extent damage is caused to a document because it has been communicated, or the correlation between damage and the type of document or the manner in which it is consulted? Is it possible to isolate a single cause of ageing and deterioration among all the various contributing factors?

An admittedly down-to-earth analysis of this sort would be a great value in defining library strategy with regard to user expectations. What I would like to

emphasize here is that a more rational and more economic use of library collections can only be achieved where library responses match user needs in the closest possible way. A policy based on considerations such as these requires both methods and means — and it is on this fundamental point that I shall be concluding my address.

Let us put ourselves for a moment in the place of a reader who has come to consult a research or national heritage collection. Here he is coming through the door of the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, or of the public library in Troyes, or Lyon, or Bordeaux. He finds a seat (his favourite seat if he can) and orders a book. What does he want from it exactly? What is he going to do with it? We watch — and we discover that having asked for the 10 volumes of the 1818 Paris edition of *«L'Hermite en province»* to be brought over to him, he can do a great many things:

- he can check up on bibliographical information which is not in the catalogue (our reader is compiling a bibliography).
- he can look up a small section of the document (introductory passages for example, or illustrations, or perhaps just one illustration).
- he can find out whether the document deals with a particular topic or not, in which part it does so, and in what proportion (does the narrator describe such-and-such a charming little village in the Jura in the year 1815?).
- he can find out exactly where the book deals with a particular subject, as a reference has led him to believe.
- he can read the document right through, because most of the information in it is relevant to his research (the state of rural France at the close of the Empire period perhaps).
- he can read and re-read the entire work in detail, because it provides the basis for his own work or research (here our reader is preparing a modern edition of the text, to be illustrated with present-day photographs).
- he can check out the identifying features of this particular copy (notes, owner's name, binding and so on).
- he can compile a material bibliography of the document, including the characters used, its composition and layout (our reader is interested in low-priced publications during the early Restoration period in France).
- he can examine certain physical components of the book (the paper used here contains added plant fibre, straw or nettles for instance).



- he can compare the text of this edition to that of the Lyons edition of the same year (our reader wants to find out about how the text was received and about the cuts that were made).
- he might realize that the title does not after all refer to a literary adaptation of a nineteenth century German work of the Romantic period, as he had thought.
- he might discover that what he actually wanted was the 1818 «*Journal des savants*» and that he had filled in the wrong shelf mark...

We have at least thirteen reasons here — good ones or not — for these 10 volumes to be communicated to the reader. Each of these reasons in fact relates to a different sort of need and in each case there is one response only. Differentiated responses may be discerned however. To summarize, the reader may be needing any of the following things:

- information only, usually with rapid access to a specified or specifiable point
- a copy and/or a copiable form of the same information (to enable him to quote a source for example)
- the document itself for a more or less thorough examination which will usually be detailed and fairly short in duration
- the entire text, to be read attentively throughout, which will usually take a certain amount of time
- the same text together with the next in its original form, to enable him to locate certain features or to compare one with the other.

We are therefore approaching the question on three different levels. At the first level, information is the sole or predominant need. At the third level the reader requires both the object and the information contained in it. There is not always this dual need however: to return to our theological analogy, exhaustive reading here does not always require «receiving communication under both kinds».

Let us now look at the second term of the paradox we began with. The report which I mentioned earlier states that there is a «scientifically proven» correlation between the communication of documents and their deterioration. It is obviously true that a quick glance over a library shelf soon shows which books are frequently consulted and which are rarely or never used. All the same, we need to take a closer look at this and to ask a few innocent questions:

- Do books which are never consulted never deteriorate? This would fail to take into account either the internal causes of deterioration

such as chemically unstable paper, leather, glues or inks, or extended causes such as variations in climatic conditions, pollution, light, insects or fungi.

- A book which is never taken out may *appear* to be in good condition but may well be found to be fragile or damaged when it is communicated for the first or second time. For comparisons to hold, the criterion should be a given condition after a given number of consultations.
- What is known about a book which is not being consulted? It is after all only at this point that a book can be inspected.
- The essential factor to be considered for each document is surely its capacity to withstand multiple use, either under special conditions or without any special precautions. It is obvious that the initial construction of the book largely determines its rate of deterioration.
- Similarly, the type of binding chosen by the library appears in each case to be a determining factor. How can you compare a book in its original binding to another more robustly bound copy?
- Documents are put to many different uses: they may be riffled through, read, photocopied and so on, and it would be useful to distinguish between the various consequences of these uses and to relate them to the document's characteristics. Making a photocopy of a single loose A4 sheet and a photocopy of a large map or a tightly bound book are very different operations.
- Does the «scientifically proven» relationship in question concern only the user, or does it involve the entire chain of communication? It is surely necessary to consider all the operations involved in the chain, which may not even end in communication to a final reader (catalogue preparation for example, or other document movements).
- Finally, where does normal consultation end and vandalism begin — underlining, lacerations, theft? Though vandals do exist, not all readers belong to that category (even «in semine»)!

As I see it, all these questions go to show that if library collections suffer, at whatever level, this is not due to the sole factor of increasing library use. At most, these two analyses appear to indicate that most libraries — if not all — as well as the documents in their keeping, are no longer properly adapted to the needs of their users when numbers increase and request become more frequent.



However, there is nothing fatal about the fact that libraries are having to cope with mass consultation and differentiation in demand. They can respond to this in many different ways, and I would like to mention some of these now. Libraries can for example:

- Improve indirect access to documents by means of full and detailed catalogues. These catalogues can include physical descriptions as well as information on the content and structure of documents (contents, list of subjects dealt with and so on).
- Make the communication process more reliable, by using bar codes to improve the management of stocks, transport and request.
- Improve general conditions of storage, handling and document transportation, by means of better air conditioning, casing, and transport facilities.
- Provide user-friendly copies for those requiring facilities for rapid consultation and document «scanning». Organised means of access should be as numerous as possible, including techniques such as microfilm flagging, searches through internal articulation points or in text mode for digitized documents.
  - Provide for easy production of low-cost working hardcopies if the type of research or the nature of the document requires this.
  - Provide reproduction equipment which will not damage the documents, such as cameras or digital photocopiers.
  - Decide to copy the entire document and to conserve the copy on the basis of predefined criteria (if the same document is requested twice for example, or if the request concerns more than 30 pages or one third of the document), even though such full copies may not be made at the time of the reader's request not entirely at his expense!
  - Gain better control over the physical condition of each document by using an updated «health file», so that objective communicability criteria are always available. A document should therefore no longer be considered to be «non-communicable» just because it has been copied or microfilmed!
  - Improve analyses of specific user needs by drawing up a simple table showing the various modes of consultation — checking up, occasional reading, exhaustive reading and so on.
  - Cross-reference this updated information with data on the condition of documents, so that requests may be direct to the most suitable copy or medium.

- Treat incoming documents according to use criteria, and not only according to custom or to design factors. With bindings for example, strength, openability and ease of upkeep should be the main criteria where the documents concerned are intended for open access under library use conditions.
- For most frequently used documents, «front-shelf» copies for free access, micrographs, paper or digitized copies should be made available to reduce pressure on the main collection.
- Automatic surveillance and control facilities — Such as anti-theft devices or video monitoring for valuable documents — should be set up to supplement direct watch by staff.
- Fragile documents which are frequently requested should be identified and paper copies made. These copies should have wide margins to allow for repeated re-binding, and one additional back-up copy should be made. For technical reasons, the best and most economical results are obtained by making photocopies of each original leaf which is then microfilmed or digitized.
- Reader negligence can be discouraged if primary level maintenance procedures are developed to ensure that copies intended for readers are always in a faultless condition.
- In national or regional libraries a back-up collection may be set up to eliminate any risk of documents disappearing before they are transferred to another medium.

Libraries can use any or all the various means we have briefly surveyed here, according to their mandate, to their predilection and to their budget. This should result in a better balance between documentary or national heritage supplies and user needs. The organisation of document communication and the definition of policy in this field are determining factors for conservation policy. The sole aim of conservation is to ensure permanent document availability, and the reverse is equally true.

The possibilities I have mentioned are as numerous as they are varied — and they may be costly in certain cases. Costs do indeed increase if means are not properly matched to needs, and if they are implemented without reference to an overall strategy. I believe that the actions which should take priority today are:

- First, to obtain accurate information on the condition of documents. This should begin very early on, at the catalogue research stage.



Information should be available immediately to both reader and librarian.

- To develop a systematic binding and conditioning policy which should take into account all new uses for documents, photocopying in particular, as well as a policy for monitoring and maintaining collections.
- The most frequently consulted volumes should be made directly available in the most user-friendly form and in as many copies as required.
- Ample and reliable means for document reproduction should be provided along with clear indications on user policy, including price lists, preference for microform or photocopy etc.
- Centralized or delocated and coordinated back-up collections should be set up. These should maintain close links with the main collection to ensure that each one — and each back-up section — maintains its vigour and reasons for existence.
- Finally — and this should perhaps come in first place — the relationship between users and librarians must allow users to express their needs and librarians to express their possibilities as clearly and as accurately as possible, so that expectations on the one hand and responses on the other never tend towards excess.

Readers and librarians are equally responsible for the constitution, conservation and proper use of public library collections, and should never be working against each other. This dialogue between the two parties is the true «constituent element» on which a library rests. Their dialogue is not only a matter of courtesy or social mores: it is built upon an exchange of information which is essential to the management of the library collections that belong to us all.

**RESUMO** O autor discute o paradoxo resultante da aparente contradição entre as necessidades de comunicação/acesso *versus* necessidade de conservação, nas bibliotecas públicas. Algumas pistas são dadas para a compreensão da correlação entre disponibilização de um documento e a sua deterioração. O acesso directo ao documento primário é questionado na perspectiva duma igual responsabilização do utilizador e do bibliotecário na conservação e uso das colecções.

**ABSTRACT** *The author comments on the existing paradox in public libraries, which derives from the apparent contradiction between the needs of direct access to documents and conservation policies.*

*Some clues are given to a better understanding of the correlation between document availability and deterioration. Direct access to the original document is questioned in the sense of an equal responsibility of both user and librarian as far as maintenance and use of existing collections are concerned.*

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