Is There a Place for the Librarian in the Library of the 21st Century?

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 Abstract

The increasing role of electronic tools in the contemporary world and the immense amount of available information makes all modern libraries face new challenges. In order to survive and meet the needs of potential customers, traditional libraries should be transformed into so–called *hybrid libraries* focused on providing information collected not only in books but also in all available electronic sources. The electronic sources contain e–books, digital documents and various databases. Is there a place for librarians in such libraries? If yes, what is the role of a librarian in the current situation of increasing expansion of electronic sources and common access to the Internet? The authors of this paper define the role of a librarian in the hybrid library. Since modern libraries play a vital role in creating the society of knowledge, a modern librarian is a guide who helps to search for relevant information in numerous sources of information. The librarian is constantly open to any changes in their field and eager to improve their skills and knowledge. The authors particularly emphasize the importance of personality traits of a modern librarian.



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| *“A library is a trinity made up of books, readers, and staff — particularly the reference staff. We have a library only at the moments of all the three factors standing integrated. The reference staff are the power mediating between reader and book and stimulating integration.”— S.R. Ranganathan* |

 Knowledge–based Society and Information Society

An all–embracing need for gaining and exploring knowledge, which is associated with the models of the knowledge–based and learning societies, creates new challenges for twenty–first century libraries. The information age has arrived and modern society is commonly referred to as the “information society.” Still, this term does not have a commonly accepted interpretation. The first definition of information society (*johoka shakai*) was established as early as in 1963 in Japan by Tadao Umesamo, concerning the “information processing society.” Afterwards, the term was popularized by the futurologist Kenichi Koyama in his *Introduction to Information Theory* and published in Japanese in 1968. The Japanese were aware of the fact that it was about more than popular computing technology. In 1972, Yoneji Masuda outlined a complex project for transforming all areas of social and economic life based upon the development of the information and telecommunication sectors. According to Masuda, “the civilization to be built as we approach the 21st century will not be a material civilization symbolized by huge constructions, but will be virtually an invisible civilization. Precisely, it should be called an ‘information civilization.’” [[1](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#1)] According to modern researchers, society is described as: “the society in which the information is intensely used in economic, social, cultural and political life; it is a society with abundant means of communication and of information processing, the society being the basis for serving as a major part of the national income and ensuring the source of income for majority of the population” [[2](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#2)]. The information society is defined as “the whole of activity serving to produce, use, protect/secure, accumulate and pass on information. The information society is constituted by all those employed in producing, using and transmitting information as well as those creating information infrastructure.” [[3](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#3)]

The turn of the twentieth century gave rise to and subsequently changed mass media. The growing popularity of the Internet and other electronic mass media is still visible. This change created a new type of society, which abandoned analog technology in favour of digital technology within a couple of years. Tomasz Goban–Klas called this modern society “the media society,” believing such a name accurate for the society satiated or even oversaturated with media [[4](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#4)]. The new society is also referred to as the digital, Web, Internet or computer society [[5](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#5)]. Information is the most sought–after and valuable merchandise in this society. The speed of changes taking place in the modern world requires humans to keep up with information constantly, gaining and using it in practice, and this has become indispensable for one’s social and professional development. The access to information itself does not guarantee development, since the amount of information in the world is enormous. The crucial factor is being well acquainted with and skillfully existing in the “ocean” of information, which means searching for adequate sources, selecting and evaluating the information as well as having the ability to transform it into knowledge. Failure to use the information–winning tools skillfully can become the reason for the phenomenon referred to as “social exclusion.” Manuel Castells, an information society theoretician, formed the theory of a divided city “in which apart from the global economy, satiety with information, there exist and spread groups of handicapped, the class of pariahs not only in terms of information.” [[6](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#6)]

 Role of Libraries and Librarians in a Knowledge–based Society

A major method for fighting against social exclusion is education and professional activity. In this context we mean literary and media education at the primary school level, and technological information at higher levels of education. These abilities will enable one to skillfully move through the tangle of information which one encounters during each stage of life.

Undoubtedly, in the field of education libraries find an extremely wide scope for activity. They are suited for this, because “if a well–preserved human thought (output) constitutes a piece of information, disseminating this output will mean disseminating information. The fact that the library cooperates with the development of science, economy, culture and education indicates that via library the information is provided to the society in need of information. Therefore, the libraries were co–creating the information society long before it started to be associated with particular conceptions of society.” [[7](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#7)]

One might think that with new libraries awash in electronic sources of information, as well as a world dominated by common Internet access, a librarian is no longer necessary, because the process of gathering information may be performed automatically. However, this is not true. The amount of information in the world and the speed of information growth in the Internet, with the number of web pages currently estimated at 19 billion, consequently leads to the situation in which searching for information would require a great amount of time. It appears that in order to efficiently find, select, check and make information available, and understand the users’ needs, it is not only a matter of a computer program or database being able to provide some sort of condensed data, but also requires an information expert such as a librarian. Throughout the centuries, the librarian’s role has remained unchanged, although the tools and resources used to supply required information and transform it into knowledge constantly change. Especially now, the librarian is indispensable. Therefore, it seems necessary to reflect upon the characteristics of a modern librarian that would best serve all users in the era of the information society.

Twenty–first century libraries do not have a lot in common with the traditional model. Their dominant element is no longer books, but electronic sources of information, including electronic documents, databases, Web resources, e–books and virtual libraries. Most library–related processes are now computerized. Technological development has contributed to facilitating access to the information gathered throughout the world. It has changed methods of communication, and consequently it has altered the tasks to be undertaken by modern libraries.

Contemporary libraries should offer a widely–perceived educational activity to provide users with competencies that enable them to interact with humanity’s cultural heritage as a means of preventing cultural homogenization in the age of globalization. New technologies have also made cooperation between libraries possible, with the information resources in today’s libraries constituting a significant contribution to the informational potential of a society. Information constitutes one of several aspects in the context of fundamental human rights in the information society, so the right to information in the case of groups threatened by exclusion can be a basic one [[8](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#8)].

Modern libraries could be compared to information malls. Moving around them can cause certain difficulties. A very common phenomenon is that of “library anxiety,” mainly observed in higher education institutions where users feel uncomfortable about their level of knowledge. The main barrier is the fear of embarrassing oneself when asking elementary questions, or getting a negative feedback from a librarian. Another obstacle is a lack of computer proficiency, which renders searching superficial and incomplete. This leads to the perception of the library as an unfriendly place. Therefore, one can obviously conclude that the librarian is an irreplaceable link. In Singapore, a full self–service library was opened with a remote information section and a cyber–librarian, from which one could obtain necessary information at any time. This, however, has not eliminated the service rendered by the librarian. Although invisible to the reader, a librarian actually participates in the process of searching for information; this brings to mind current hybrid libraries, which combine features of traditional libraries with those using modern technologies. Indeed, we enter the world of “hyper–reality,” with hypertexts, in which an image, a vision, or the play of signs displace real sensations and experiences. In the era of information processing, communication, and the knowledge industry, the librarian participates in building a new society [[9](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#9)].

 What Should the Twenty–first Century Librarian be Like?

Twenty–first century libraries heap new tasks upon a librarian. The model for a hybrid librarian does not have much in common with a stereotypical librarian, except in lending books. Modernized working conditions (*i.e.*, new library buildings, new technologies) undoubtedly influence the changing image and prestige of a librarian. A modern individual wins against the stereotypical image of a librarian. A contemporary librarian becomes a guide in the world of knowledge, which demands they know how to use the new sources of information skillfully. Modern librarians are crucial now for not only their high level of expertise, but also for being able to associate with the modern individuals’ personality. A twenty–first century librarian must be modern, with modernity being a consequence of acquiring psychological, praxeological, social and professional capabilities [[10](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#10)].

Psychological abilities involve self–awareness, self–evaluation and self–control, which in the case of a librarian concerns a personal conviction of a mission accomplished. To keep up with the continual flow of information, new resources and new technological developments, a librarian should always be a step ahead, actively reacting to all changes and modernizations, noticing the need for their own development, not only when encouraged by their superiors, but also resulting from their own motivation to learn. Such skills will not be provided by the most thorough education, because the need for development must stem from the natural predispositions within the librarian. An ideal librarian is a person aware of his or her role and aware of the need to constantly develop and improve.

The profession of a librarian is associated with a range of praxeological competences such as diligence, adaptation and motivation. A librarian’s diligence is beyond question, as meticulousness is a required characteristic and associated by society with the librarian’s profession. Technological developments in the twenty–first century gradually necessitated a change in traditional work methods. The automation of all possible library activities and the presence of and constant changes in the field of electronic resources compel librarians to adapt to these new circumstances. Continuous professional development becomes necessary in the form of courses, training, conferences and meetings, and the use of new educational methods such as e–learning or internet discussion forums. The twenty–first century society is a learning society; therefore by virtue of their mission, librarians should serve as an example for other professional groups. Librarians should be aware that “learning processes are not only in favor of other co–employees, they also have an impact on effectiveness and quality of the library information services.” [[11](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#11)] A modern librarian is open to innovations and changes, because the fast–paced, constantly evolving nature of changes in libraries makes it necessary to adopt an eager and interested attitude towards new solutions. One does not need to be young to be modern, as a modern individual, particularly a modern librarian, can develop modern characteristics throughout one’s professional career even after many years of work.

Society does not consider librarianship a prestigious profession. A low social recognition and no particular prospects for a spectacular career may, to some extent, decrease the motivation in the professional environment. However, librarianship is a profession with a future. There is a demand for new specialists: discipline librarians, systems librarians and electronic information specialists. Each specialization requires other competencies and skills, and each of those presents new challenges. A sense of professional fulfillment and satisfaction tend to be significant factors influencing the librarian’s motivation.

Librarians are not motivated by lucrative career prospects. This needs to be clear to anyone considering a career as a professional librarian. However, “born librarians” are guaranteed satisfying careers. Social assessment reflects that the mission and character of our profession remains unclear, thereby requiring constant promotion and a change in the stereotypical perception of a librarian.

A librarian should serve society best by utilizing social competences such as empathy, persuasion, leadership and cooperation. For users, the librarian’s personality instantly creates a link between the media and information. As suggested by the *Code of Ethics for Information Professionals*, “the task of librarians consists in recognizing, satisfying and developing information, educational, scientific, cultural, esthetic needs and the needs for entertainment.” A librarian should keep up with technological developments and be proficient in new technologies. However, for all the users who can use new technologies skillfully there are just as many who cannot. Not coincidentally are librarians often referred to as psychologists [[12](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#12)], since they are challenged to distinguish the users’ needs appropriately, or, in some cases, to help the user specify them. Following the *Code of Ethics* … “while respecting differences between the users, a librarian and information services always are always governed by the principle of equal opportunities and respect for the human rights, and particularly the right to intellectual freedom and unconstrained access to knowledge, information and culture (...), understand and respect the fact that not all the users are able to receive information and use the library to the same extent. They try to equalize their chances by acting with a special concern in favor of the users with special needs and those in a socially disadvantageous situation (…)”

Libraries, as non–profit organizations, are also regarded as service providers, while the information becomes merchandise and a user the customer. Therefore, typical commercial customer service principles can also apply here. To many people, the library is often thought of as a place only visited out of necessity, in order to find a necessary item or get particular information. The need for constant knowledge acquisition will result in more frequent users’ visits, so it appears crucial to make this place a pleasant experience for the user–customer. With the modern library changing its image, modern librarians ought to change as well. Working with pleasure, and not with a sense of obligation, enables one to derive satisfaction from it, and only an employee genuinely involved in performing his or her own duties is able to approach each specific customer–user professionally. Readers’ behaviors are varied, and as previously mentioned, readers may be aware of their information needs, but may be also totally lost. Consequently, the role of a librarian consists in comforting the users and supporting them so they can overcome their own fears and anxieties about being in the library. Individual approaches to different types of customers, often including special–needs or elderly users who possibly may be unable to utilize the new technologies, are essential in building a user–friendly image of libraries and librarians. Not only is this a matter of factual preparation, but also the knowledge of psychology pertaining to customer service is extremely important in the process of the librarians’ in–service training.

The change in society’s perception of the librarian as an individual and of the profession requires us to inculcate into society that we are important as a professional group, we are useful, and that our role is not limited to passing books. The shift in the image should be first reflected in ourselves, following the proverb “fine feathers make fine birds,” and it involves persuasion, or the ability to evoke intended emotions in others. The librarians’ ethic of collaborating on improving their image as well as sharing experiences and mutual support helps society to perceive librarians as a strong, determined group of professionals, aware of their socially useful role. As suggested by Teresa Gruszecka “library as a learning organization puts a strong emphasis on collective effort and collaboration of the staff both in in–service training and in other fields: problem solving, flow of information, creating new knowledge.” [[13](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#13)] An increasing amount of information makes it impossible to embrace the totality of it, which is why the popularity of specialization in a particular area increases. Dealing with information in a particular area of knowledge enables one to realize and fully satisfy the readers’ needs. As a librarian, collaboration does not only refer to collaborating within the same professional group, but mostly to interacting with the user — the major drive in all libraries’ activities. Understanding and responding to the user’s needs for information ought to be the main aim in of the librarian’s work. Modern library staff should also work toward winning new readers, similar to commercial organizations winning customers. A modern human should have a craving for acquiring knowledge from childhood, and sees in it the role of libraries and librarians. Therefore, the libraries’ advertising promotion activities are tied to creating a social conviction that libraries are a necessary link allowing the user to realize even the most advanced information needs. This can take place by evoking in the reader the idea that he is important, approached individually and professionally. In a consumption–oriented world, the role of information should be equally important as that of any other need in a contemporary individual.

Discussing professional qualifications last might not seem to make sense; however the essential issue appears to be the personality of a contemporary librarian, his way of approaching his duties and new challenges, while education, as acquired knowledge, becomes only a help in professional life. The increasing popularity of area specialists shows the abundance of knowledge in today’s world requires more narrowly–focused specializations, because mastering both the present and fast–growing new information resources is simply impossible. Apart from area knowledge, a modern librarian should also be qualified in terms of sources of information and using them, not to mention keeping up with constantly changing information resources. Proficiency in searching information and knowledge, allowing its selection and minimizing information noise should be the basic requirement towards being a successful librarian. A librarian should also be equipped with general knowledge, to enable him to be conversant in a multitude of subjects. The current model of the librarians’ university training is directed towards improvement in the scope of scientific information, and later library science or bibliology. Self–improvement and training is also an extremely important issue. By their professional attitude, librarians should serve as an example to the user living in the learning society, and it is the conception of lifelong learning that should be perfectly reflected in the person of the librarian. A contemporary librarian should combine the two professions of computer scientist and economist, because proficiency in the use of electronic tools and a marketing approach to library and the marketing of its services is the only alternative in the case of hybrid libraries. The motto of this year’s Library Week was “Don’t you know? Ask in the library.” This model of a librarian should be the ideal for all library staff representatives — to be a guide to the user, not only a person lending books (which are gradually displaced by electronic and multimedia resources), and also a help in finding the most precious thing nowadays — information.

The development of the modern world and requirements cast upon the society imply that librarians working among the richest sources of information are very important individuals providing access to information to be transformed into knowledge. And the crucial issue is not the debate whether the librarian is necessary, but the question of developing the model and standards of librarians’ activity to become an integral part of modern society and its consequences, and to be perceived in this way by a more and more demanding user. 

 Notes

[1.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%221a) Zacher, L. (ed.), 1992. *Społeczeństwo informacyjne. Aspekty techniczne, społeczne i polityczne*. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza “Warszgraf”, pp. 159–161.

[2.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%222a) Krzysztofek, K. and M.S. Szczepański, 2002. *Zrozumieć rozwój. Od społeczeństw tradycyjnych do informacyjnych*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, p. 170.

[3.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%223a) “Społeczeństwo informacyjne,” at <http://republika.pl/iosi/Strony/2.html> (accessed 29 June 2006).

[4.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%224a) Goban–Klas, T. *Cywilizacja medialna*, Warszawa 2005, p. 42.

[5.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%225a) Haber, L.H., 2006. “Społeczeństwo informacyjne jako kategoria socjologiczna,” In: E. Jurczyńskiej–McCluskey, M.S. Szczepańskiego, and Z. Zagały (eds.). *Równi i równiejsi, zwycięzcy i przegrani: Dynamika zróżnicowań społecznych w Polsce na przełomie XX i XXI wieku: praca zbiorowa*. Tychy; Bielsko–Biała: Śląskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania i Nauk Społecznych w Tychach, Akademia Techniczno–Humanistyczna w Bielsku–Białej, p. 381.

[6.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%226a) Goban–Klas, T., and P. Sienkiewicz. *Społeczeństwo informacyjne: szanse, zagrożenia, wyzwania*, Kraków 1999, p. 48.

[7.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%227a) Długosz, J. “Społeczeństwo informacyjne a wykluczenia,” *Biuletyn EBIB*, nr.7/2003 (47), at <http://ebib.oss.wroc.pl/2003/47/dlugosz.php> (accessed 30 June 2006).

[8.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%228a) Długosz, *op.cit.*

[9.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%229a) Gruszecka, H., 2005. “Tradycja i nowoczesność bibliotek.” *Bibliotekarz* no. 11, p. 10.

[10.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%2210a) Krokowski, M. and P. Rydzewski, 2002. *Zarządzanie emocjami: Inteligencja emocjonalna: vademecum użytkownika*.

[11.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%2211a) Gruszecka, H. *op.cit.*, p. 8.

[12.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%2212a) Szydlik, L. “Bibliotekarz — psychologiem,” *Bibliotekarz* 2005 no. 12, p. 18.

[13.](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml%22%20%5Cl%20%2213a) Gruszecka, H. *op.cit.*, p. 89.

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[Top of Page](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/kanczak_v16n1-2.shtml#articletop) | [Table of Contents](http://www.worlib.org/vol16no1-2/index.shtml)