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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses research areas and methods related to library history. The first section outlines research areas, including activities such as services to children in public libraries, mobile libraries, cataloging rules and practice, classification rules and practices, development of bibliographies, organization models, literature offered to users, library users, availability of the library, and the impact of the development of new medias. The importance of relating library history to the development of society is stressed. Research methods are addressed in the second section, including deciphering historical materials, difficulty finding sources, and language problems. (MES)

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Library History revisited: Reasearch areas and methodology

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Paper

Library history revisited: research areas and methodology

The title I have given my paper, "Library history revisited", was not chosen by chance. I am rather confident that library history is the area where research in the LIS sector actually started in most countries. Bibliometric studies carried out by Vakkari and others certainly seem to indicate this. Today, however, other areas of the LIS sector would be more popular among researchers. So a "revisit" to the library history seems to be appropriate.

Let me start off with two quotations: The first is from a professor in modern history at the University of Oslo, Norway, Knut Kjeldstadli :

"History thrives on being a hybrid or a "bastard" subject. It is a crossbreed between the humanities and the social sciences, proving it's capacity just in crossing borders and combining freely different approaches and working methods. " (Kjeldstadli 1992:6)¹

The second quotation is from the English library historian Alistar Black, who gives his short and to the point definition of library history:

"Rather than being founded on abstract knowledge, (library history) is by definition a subject that deals with the activities of an institution" (Black 1994:7).

Research areas

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Black's definition could be a good starting point in trying to outline the possible research areas for a library historian. Let us first take a closer look at what kind of **institution** Black is referring to. I guess we can agree that the institution we are talking about is a library, whether it be a public library, a university library, a school library or the library of an oil company. If we go back in time we would have to include libraries in monasteries, private libraries and we also would find it natural to include the many reading societies and circulation libraries, where you had to pay a fee for each book you wanted to borrow. In short, we would like to have a rather broad approach to the term "library", though at the same time not broader than it makes us feel comfortable about the institution being a library, or at least what we could regard as a "forefather" of the library as we know it today.

Black also focuses on **the activities** in his definition. Again we would need a broad approach in order to catch all the different areas that might be of interest for our research as library historians. Let me list some of them:

- Services to children in public libraries, when did it start, what kind of activities did the library offer, what kind of books?
- Mobile libraries, in rural areas, in metropolitan areas
- Cataloguing rules and practices at different times
- Classification ditto
- The development of bibliographies
- The organisation models used in libraries
- The use of different practical routines, such as how long could you keep a book, how much would you have to pay if you were late in returning the book?
- What kind of literature were offered to the users?
- Who were the users of the library, by social classes, gender, and different age-groups?
- How available was the library? Where was it located? Did you have to pay anything to use it?
- When was it open? What impact has the development of different new medias had on libraries?

Obviously this list would need to be extended. What I would like to stress is the following: The research areas for a historian is almost unlimited if he or she want to study the activities of a library.

A look at the papers presented by the Round Table of Library History at the IFLA conferences will confirm this. Let me quote just a few of the titles from the last years:

- "The public library and reading by the masses: historical perspectives on the USA and Britain 1850-1900" by Paul Sturges.
- "Homosexuality and United States libraries: land of the free, but not home to the gay" by James V. Carmichael.
- "La primera Biblioteca publica Portuguesa (1775-1795)" by Manuela Domingas.
- "Expectations and a worthy, respectable position in society: means and aims of library work within the early labour movement in Sweden" by Magnus Torstensson.
- "The destruction of Chinese books in the Peking Siege of 1900" by Donald Davis and Huanwen Cheng.

These are just a few random examples, to show you the variety of topics presented. The titles on the list, however, also emphasize two more aspects of library history that I would like to focus on.

Library history tends to have a national approach, as some of the titles of the papers will confirm, or it might be limited to one region or maybe even to just one library. This is not unique for library history, it is a characteristic of much historical research, and underlines that history tends to deal with the specific, more than with the general. We find, however, also examples of comparative studies in library history, as the list will show. More comparative

studies would be welcome! But the geographical limitations in research approaches to library history are not the only ones. Often researchers will tend to concentrate their work to a certain period in time, like I do myself.

Having just finished a project on reading societies for Norwegian peasants in the late 18th century, a colleague urged me to go on to the 19th century to see what happened to the reading societies then. "Did they develop further towards the public libraries of today?" The question is interesting enough, but I decided to stick to my period. The reasons for this are many, one important one being that in your research you are always left with so many new questions relating to your sources. I had in my last study discovered that some of the peasants had interesting book collections at home. So I was curious to learn how they got information about the books. Through newspapers? Booklists from publishers or bookshops? I have decided to focus my study on the book lists, to see what kind of books they present and how. Who were the book lists meant for: the scholar, the growing middleclass who wanted books for entertainment, or the peasants who wanted religious books, as well as books on how to develop the small farm or on how to raise your children. I guess you will find that this "sticking to your period" is what most, though not all, historians tend to do.

The other aspect I would like to focus on is that relating the library history to the development of the society as such makes it far more interesting, in fact, I would say that it is essential. The social and economic structure of the society at a given time and place, the level of learning, the level of literacy, the technical development of medias, the status of gender, of age etc., are all aspects relevant to the history of libraries. The library and the library's services may be seen as a result of these factors, but might we not also consider the impact of the library on society? A library history only dealing with the library as such, not relating it to outside factors, might possibly be of interest for internal use, within the library community. This kind of history might, however, easily just confirm our traditional views on the development of libraries. If on the other hand, we choose to relate to other research fields, and maybe use their theories on our own empirical data, the result could be a library history that challenges us, and it might at the same time enable us to establish a fruitful dialogue with the larger research community.

Research methods

Professor Kjeldstadli, as quoted earlier, point to history as a subject that crosses borders and combine different approaches and working methods. Many historians would agree on that, though not everyone. In this short paper I will not go further into that discussion, and I will concentrate on presenting the research method most specific for the field of history, as the methods used in library history will be the same as those used in historical research in other areas, and the problems you will face will mostly be of the same nature.

This April I attended The British - Nordic Conference on Library and Information Studies in Borås, Sweden. The conference focused on research. For a couple of days I was listening to interesting and stimulating papers, where research results and research methods were presented. The conference confirmed my impression that surveys might be the most frequently used research method used in LIS today, and it is often supplemented with later in depth interviews or focusgroup discussions. Library history's research methods are normally rather different - for obvious reasons. As a library historian you will deal with the past, most likely the persons involved will be unavailable to answer any questions you might have.

Historians mainly rely on written material, handwritten or printed, more or less intact. Studying these sources will be a major part of your research work. Possibly you will have to start by transcribing the material. I can from my own experience, in trying to decipher reports from late 18th century, handwritten in the Gothic alphabeth, or German hand as you say in English, assure you that this is very fascinating, though also time-consuming. Handwriting is often impossible to read today. This was no different in earlier days and a different alphabeth doesn't make it any easier. The fact that you can read what is written, will however only be one of the first steps in your research. Surely you will have to analyse your sources, trying to be

fair to the people who wrote the information down in earlier times, being very much aware that you do not know what their pattern of thought were. You will also have to be careful about the possible changes in the meaning of the words, the changes may not be total, but often the nuances will have changed.

One problem that you will stumble on to, sooner or later, is that the sources you want to look at, the sources you need to confirm other findings, they simply do not exist. Sometimes they never did, you will have to accept that. When you know that once it did exist, but that it now is missing, you will probably find it just as irritating as I do.

What kind of sources you would be working with, will of course depend on the theme and on the period you want to study. The libraries themselves often have good archives with interesting material. In addition you will find material that might be useful to you in the different public archives, in the local newspapers, in governmental studies and proposals from the period that are of interest to you. In many countries more and more of the interesting resources are being made available through databases. I have myself had the possibility to work with different local demographical registers in digitized form, and thus been able to trace members of the reading societies in late 18th century, by the use of my own home computer.

Common for all research areas is that you need to start with a search for literature on what has already been said on the subject you are interested in, nationally and internationally. As library history tends to be very national oriented and also published in the national language only, this means that much of the research in library history, going on around the world, will not be available for us, due to language problems. This is a great disadvantage to our field of research, because it hampers the possibility of making use of the works of many colleagues .

Conclusion

The challenge as an historian, lies in trying to create or maybe recreate the past. Your aim is to give a picture of what happened. You will have to interpret the written sources, being very much aware of how much these interpretations will be influenced by who you are, your opinions, your level of knowledge, and the time in which you live. You can only do your best, and you will have to live with the fact that you will never fully capture the truth. That is why it is so important that library history should be rewritten again and again. New historians might go through some of the same sources that you have used, they will also study your work, they might confirm your findings or reject them. The result will anyhow add still more nuances and facettes to our common knowledge of the history of our libraries.

Library history might very well be where research in the LIS sector really started. The first research in the area were often carried out by retiring librarians, writing down the story of their former workplace, the library. A lot of what we know about our libraries in the older times is the result of this kind of work. There is of course the problem that this form of library history might be a bit too "nearsighted". If you are writing down the story of your own library, you might be tempted to focus on the positive sides of the institution and the people who work or used to work there. You might also easily take a lot of things for granted, and there is always the possibility that you might be less critical, less inquisitive than an "outsider", writing the story of the same institution would be. Even with these possible limitations in some of the earlier studies in library history, I would like to stress that these works still are important contributions to our common knowledge of libraries. If the sources are listed, unfortunately this is not always done, then these studies are important sources themselves for researchers of today and also for future researchers.

Historians says that history needs to be rewritten again and again. This certainly also applies to library history. So even though library history is a well established research area, so established in fact that we might think that everything already has been done, and though the need for what seems to be more useful and practical applicable research might be more

obvious in today's struggle for money and more effective use of limited resources, let me finish by insisting that library history is a field well worth revisiting, or visiting for the first time.

Note:

1. My translation. LB

Suggested reading:

Black, Alistar (1994). "In Search of an Analytical Model". - Page 7-26. - In: A New History of the English Public Library . - London

Carr, E.H. (1961). What is History?. - London.

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History and Theory : Contemporary Readings (1998). Edited by Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, Richard T. Vann. - Oxford.

Iggers, Georg G. (1997). Historiography in the Twentieth Century : From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge. - Hannover and London.

Kjeldstadli, Knut (1992). Fortida er ikke hva den en gang var : en innføring i historiefaget. - Oslo.

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