

Libri: The Early Years

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This article outlines the people and motives behind the launching of *Libri. International Library Review* in 1950. The first volumes are analysed and the main themes delineated.

Editors and editorial policy are described. Finally it is briefly discussed if the editorial policy of the journal in its early years had a national bias.

Studies of journals are abundant not only in library and information science, but also in other disciplines and especially in the history of various scientific disciplines. Scope and method of these studies vary, as do the occasion for presenting them. There is ample material to make an elaborate taxonomy of journal studies. Without going into details it seems certain that an important distinction would be the distinction between qualitative and quantitative studies. As in other kinds of investigations quantitative methods are now standard. Quantitative methods are fruitful also in this area of research as demonstrated in Irene Wormell's bibliometric study of *Libri* (see p. 75). However, this article is written on the assumption that the classical humanistic approach, based on qualitative method or interpretation, is still relevant.

The qualitative study will describe what is typical of a journal, recurrent themes etc., based on a search for patterns. But it will also describe specific features (an atypical article or style) as these also characterize the journal in question. In addition the qualitative study will often identify and describe the circle of people around the journal (publisher(s), editor(s), authors).

The purpose of writing a study of a journal differs. Some times it is written as a contribution to the literary history of a country or a period or as a contribution to publishing history (e. g. Clive 1974). In other cases the purpose is to follow the development of a discipline or a topic. Exam-

ples are John Staudenmaier's heavily researched monograph on the journal *Technology and Culture* (Staudenmaier 1989) and a recent article on the treatment of censorship in *Library Journal* (Curry 1997).

In quite a few cases the occasion for writing a study of a journal is a milestone in the history of the journal. Despite the festive occasion such studies need not be uncritical or unreflective. The aim is to present new information and new aspects of interest for others working in the field. In this case I am writing about the journal of which I am an editor. In that sense it could not be unbiased. On the other hand I write about something I care for, and care is one of the identifying characteristics of humanistic studies (Passmore 1975).

The motives behind Libri

It is well known that there are a number of ways in which new journals are launched. Sometimes individual scholars or scientists have been involved, more often than not in collaboration with a publishing house already publishing in the specific field of knowledge. Institutions (university institutes, museums etc.) have also been involved and in other cases a journal has been founded by a learned or professional society (cp. Shaw 1980). *Libri* was launched by a publisher working on a commercial basis, so an obvious question to ask is: why was *Libri* launched? Was there a demand

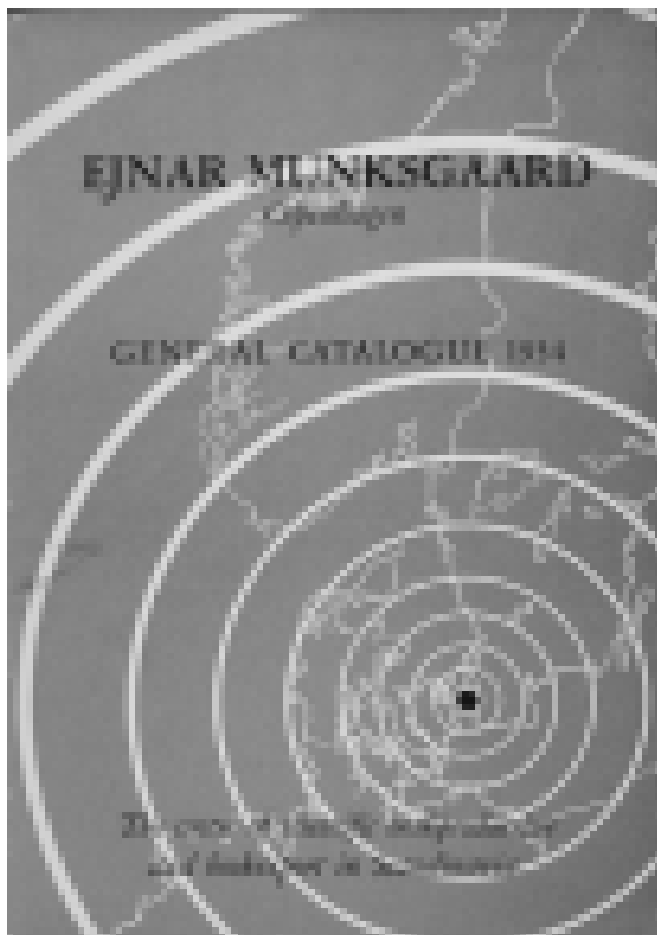


Figure 1: The self-image of a publishing company: regional centre for the dissemination of scientific information

in the market or did a publisher or perhaps a prospective editor wish to create an outlet for specific points of view on libraries? It was a combination of both. The originator of the idea was the prospective editor and the man to realize it was an enterprising publisher, but it was quite a long time on its way.

In 1930 Svend Dahl, a prominent Danish librarian, wrote to the American Library Association suggesting that ALA should launch a new international library journal covering all kinds of libraries. Dahl recommended that the journal was edited in a small (neutral) country to keep it unbiased and open for contributions from as many countries as possible. The ALA did not reject the suggestion, but having decided to launch the *Library Quarterly*, ALA wanted to see how this journal would develop. Dahl therefore approached the Danish publisher Ejnar Munksgaard, who liked the idea but was engaged in

other projects. At the time Svend Dahl was director of Copenhagen University Library and had published a considerable number of articles and books in librarianship, among them the first edition his *History of the Book* (Danish 1927, German 1928, Swedish 1929, French 1933) and the third edition of his handbook of library science which made him an authority in Scandinavian librarianship (Larsen 2000). Ejnar Munksgaard was building a publishing house of international standing concentrating on scholarly monographs, scientific journals and costly reproductions of manuscripts. When Svend Dahl suggested that he start an international library journal Munksgaard had launched the first some ten well-known Scandinavian journals (“Acta”) in medicine and philology and had just started publishing a monumental edition of medieval Icelandic manuscripts with himself as main editor and an edition of ancient Oriental manuscripts. So he did not want to get involved in a new library journal whose profitability was doubtful. But the idea was kept alive and discussed now and then between Munksgaard and Dahl and other Scandinavian librarians, and when it was finally realized in 1950 the Munksgaard company was publisher (Ejnar Munksgaard had died in 1948) and Dahl one of the editors.

The first volumes

The time for launching a new journal was good: after the war there was a focus on international cooperation and the first issue of *Libri* states that the aim of the journal is “to further, within its field, international understanding and co-operation as extensively as possible”. There was also tacit agreement that Western Germany should not be excluded from cultural and scientific cooperation as had been the case after the First World War. German points of view should be represented in the library world, and the new journal was one of the places where you could find them. It is significant that the first volume carries an article by the prominent German librarian Georg Leyh on the disastrous fate of German libraries during the war and reconstruction going on and a parallel article by J. Stummvoll on Austrian libraries [1]. Also published in the first volume were lists of Austrian and German librarians dead during the war years, some of

them as a consequence of military events. Though perhaps not directly intended to balance this, it is characteristic that in the same volume was also published a list of Polish librarians dead between 1939–45. Running through this list with names of concentration camps you get a glimpse of the recent horrors.

There is no editorial archive from the early years. As a consequence it is impossible to give number of copies and subscribers and geographical distribution of the journal. What we know of the early years is primarily based on the letters to and from the editors. Judging from letters in the literary estate of Svend Dahl (in the Royal Library, Copenhagen) there was quite a steady flow of papers submitted for publication, only few articles were solicited and editorial work was performed at a leisurely pace. You can see this as an illustration of the character of information flow on the subject field at the time: there was little focus on turnaround and the articles would only rarely lose news value in being delayed in publishing. On the other hand standards were changing and the editors found it necessary to employ special means to ensure publication of the journal. Volume 3 was published in one issue (against the normal four) containing the proceedings of a conference (*Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Medical Librarianship, London 20–25 July, 1953*). And from volume 4 (1953–54) *Libri* carried the subtitle: *International Library Review and ILFA-Communications-FIAB*. The editors and the publisher had made an arrangement with IFLA that *Libri* should carry 64 pages per volume of notes and news concerning meetings and other activities of IFLA. The arrangement was funded by UNESCO and the 600 USD paid to the publisher was a welcome subsidy to cover costs. For the journal to work as a news medium the editors stated they now had to have "the numbers issued more regularly in future than has been the case hitherto" (vol. 4, 1953, p. 61). The IFLA news were edited by the organization, but the arrangement gave the editors the opportunity to get papers from IFLA-related conferences many of which were published as articles.

Themes

In the introduction to the first issue the editors invited contributions "on topics of importance to

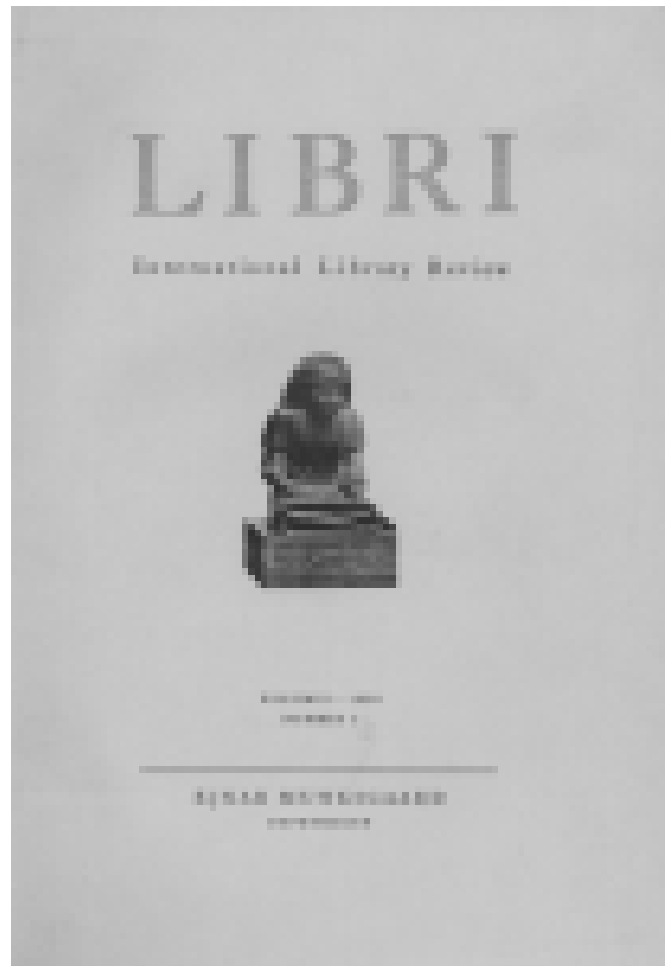


Figure 2: The first issue of *Libri* in "classical" layout and quarto format. The layout was revised in 1960 and changed into the present layout in 1995.

libraries and to those who are interested in the history and collecting of books; more especially the journal will deal with matters of interest to National Libraries, University Libraries and other great and learned libraries". This statement of purpose with its particular emphasis on the historical aspect of librarianship was followed in editorial practice. Of 185 articles published 1950–59 (excluding IFLA communications and vol. 3 containing proceedings of a medical library conference) 56 articles were presentations of individual libraries or reports on the library situation in a specific country, 53 articles dealt with history of books and libraries, and the subject of 40 articles was practical library matters such as cataloguing, classification, union catalogues, exchange and interlending. The remaining 36 articles dealt with other topics such as preservation, binderies, build-

ings, education and the future of the serious book and the scientific journal.

There are very different kinds of articles ranging from the purely historical, and the discursive to the very detailed and technical. In characterizing a journal you may concentrate on the specific, citing peculiar articles (e. g. Prytz Johansen 1953) or articles by authors on topics with which you do not normally connect their name (e.g. Line 1962). On the other hand it is relevant to look for general features and to see if it possible to use the first volumes of *Libri* as a source for library history and reconstruct a view of libraries and the library profession characteristic of at least part of the library world at the time. It is clear that there is much more focus on collections than on use and services. In treating collections focus is on cataloguing and classification. New technology is a marginal topic and it is significant that documentation is presented from a historical point of view (Foskett 1961). By and large the methods applied are methods used in the humanities (history, philology, literature). The social science methods which now abound in library and information research are non-existent in the early volumes. You will find pictures of books, libraries and librarians, but no charts and tables.

Without simplifying too much you could say that the library view exposed in the early volumes of *Libri* is that of the classical, somewhat self-contained academic library cautiously adapting to new conditions. This is nowhere more evident than in one of the few exchange of articles in *Libri*: the mainly German discussion of the future of library profession. The discussion started with an article by Joachim Wieder on the scholar librarian's professional anxieties (Wieder 1959). Wieder sees administrative and routine functions taking more and more resources in the academic library and scholarly work based on original research being reduced. Bureaucratization and mechanization take command and quantity is considered more important than quality. It is not specific of libraries. It is an expression of a widespread cultural and social crisis, but it is a serious threat to the academic and social status of librarians. Another Munich librarian, Ladislaus Buzás, wrote an answer based on the assumption that librarians are not, as librarians, creators of culture; instead their task is to perform a service job (Buzás 1960). According to Buzás the re-

sponse to growth in output of publications and in demand for services is not rearmament of values and insistence on tradition. The adequate response is more money, more staff and more room for libraries.

This exchange provoked a discussion which ran for almost five years. Expressions like 'cultural decline', 'cultural hysteria', 'professional distress', 'mechanistic versus spiritual values' 'idealism versus utilitarianism' abounded. At a time one of the editors noted that "the Germans carry on philosophizing" (P. Birkelund in letter to Svend Dahl, 1962). Indeed, the discussion has some specific German elements. You can see it as yet another example of the classical humanistic tradition facing the challenge of modernity (cp. Ringer 1969). But many librarians irrespective of nationality worried about the issue. They were anxious that massive growth in education (esp. the "mass university") would force university libraries to focus on form rather than content and force librarians to focus on practical skills and technicalities rather than on historical knowledge of books and original scholarly work within an academic subject. And perhaps it is useful to know today that the ongoing work to redefine the role of libraries and librarians in face of new technology is not the first or only radical re-orientation in librarianship.

The editors

It is not accidental that *Libri* published articles on the threats to the traditional scholarly values of academic librarianship. The first two editors were representatives of the scholarly tradition in librarianship. Jean Anker (editor 1950–57) was zoologist and after graduation he went to the Copenhagen University Library, being director of the science and medicine department 1943–57. He wrote several books and articles on the history of zoology and on natural history books (some of them published in English and German). He launched an international journal (*Centaurus. International Magazine of the History of Science and Medicine*; 1950ff) with himself as main editor and founded and edited a new series "Library Research Monographs". The third volume in the research monograph series was Georg Leyh's treatise on the cultural and educational requirements in academic librarianship (*Die Bildung des*

Bibliothekars, 1953), a text which was an important reference in the discussion of the future of the academic librarian outlined above. This fact and the fact that both series were published by Munksgaard is a fine example of the mutually beneficial interplay between publisher, editor and author. Jean Anker also wrote on library topics, but his influence in this area was mainly exercised through practical reforms.

When Svend Dahl (editor 1950–1963) became editor he was national librarian, a post which at the time comprised direction of the Royal Library (national library) and the Copenhagen University Library in addition to coordinating functions in relation to other Danish research libraries. He left this position in 1952 to become an active author, bibliographer and editor till he died in 1963. Among the works he wrote in this period is the second edition of his *History of the Book* (1957, English edition 1958, French 1960). It is symptomatic that the book ends on a sceptical note: Svend Dahl was troubled by the fact that subject expertise and historical knowledge of books were being overshadowed by technical skills. He saw that as a threat to his ideal of a scholar librarian (Larsen 2000).

In the late 1950's a new generation of librarians became editors [2] and a change in the pattern of publication is discernible: relatively fewer historical articles appear. Of the 269 articles (excluding IFLA communications) published 1960–69 111 articles were presentations of individual libraries or reports on the library situation in a specific country, the subject of 59 articles was practical library matters such as cataloguing, classification, union catalogues, exchange and interlending and 45 articles dealt with history of books and libraries. The remaining 54 articles dealt with other topics such as preservation, buildings, education of librarians and a new topic: information overload. Compared with the articles from the previous decade it is not a radical change, but rather an adjustment. There is continuity and at least two of the new editors came from the same environment as the "founder editors". In 1952 Palle Birkelund had succeeded Svend Dahl as national librarian. Profoundly knowledgeable about Danish library history he focussed on making collections accessible. Birkelund has published many works in library history and founded and edited the Royal Library's scholarly yearbook. He was a

central figure in library organizations and was active in founding the European research library association (LIBER). Torkil Olsen graduated in French and was trained as a librarian in Jean Anker's library. In 1957 he was assigned the task of building the library of the new laboratories of the Danish Atomic Energy Commission and in 1965 he again got the challenging task of building up a new research library (Odense University Library). A shrewd library administrator preoccupied with making libraries easy to use Torkil Olsen was appointed national librarian 1982–86. Preben Kirkegaard was trained as a librarian and ended his career as a practitioner as county librarian. He was head of the Royal Danish School of Librarianship 1956–83 when the school developed rapidly professionally and as regards number of students. Kirkegaard has had a leading role in several library organizations and was IFLA President 1974–79.

Palle Birkelund, Preben Kirkegaard and Torkil Olsen were members of the editorial board from 1957–1988 and edited the journal in a remarkable partnership.

National bias?

Libri was launched as an international journal. For almost 40 years the journal was edited exclusively by five Danes – a fact which is quite exceptional in international science publishing – and the question arises if this affected editorial policy?

An examination of the 454 articles published 1950–69 shows that 49 articles have Scandinavian authors (i. e. Danish, Finnish, Norwegian or Swedish; no Icelandic). The subject of 36 articles is a topic related to Scandinavia. In this period Scandinavian authors have published articles on topics not related to Scandinavia, but not surprisingly only Scandinavian authors have written on Scandinavian themes. In the early years the Scandinavian element in the journal is visible, but not at all dominant, and this is in accordance with the purpose of launching the journal. When trying to establish a new international journal in the early 1930's Svend Dahl pointed to a double purpose: to the benefit of librarians all over the world it should publish contributions from authors irrespective of nationality and former enemies, the journal should promote international

understanding and cooperation in the library world. At the same time he was anxious that Denmark had a voice in international librarianship and he wanted to give others the possibility of learning about the Scandinavian library scene. These ideas are not untypical of the ideas behind a small country's approach to international cooperation at the time. Today relations in the international library world and in the world-at-large have changed, and so have the editorial policy.

Conclusion

It has been pointed out that the distinction between amateur and professional is an important one in understanding the development of journal publishing in science even in the twentieth century (Shaw 1980). In understanding why *Libri* was founded and how it survived its first years this distinction does not seem relevant at first. However, it points to the importance of the "developmental stage" of the profession and the subject field covered by a journal. In the early years of *Libri* the library world was professionalised, but not very specialized. The boundary between practitioners in libraries and theorists in library schools were not sharp (mainly perhaps because there were so few theorists in the proper sense). Also, the different approaches to librarianship were on the way of becoming institutionalized in associations, conferences, newsletters and journals. Despite changes in this, so far there has been a need and a market for a general journal like *Libri*. The really interesting question is how long this will be the case. Is the fact that *Libri* has now existed for fifty years an indication that there is a common element in the various activities we subsume under the heading 'librarianship'? Despite rapid changes this seems to be the case and so it is still meaningful to engage in dialogue as authors and readers, and *Libri* can continue to serve as a forum for dialogue within the expanding library and information profession.

Notes

[1] *Libri* articles from the first 25 years are indexed in *Libri. International Library Review. Index vol. 1-15. 1950-1975*. Compiled by Leif Kajberg. Copenhagen: Munksgaard 1976.

[2] *Libri* editors:

Jean Anker, editor 1950-1957. Denmark
Svend Dahl, editor 1950-1963. Denmark
Palle Birkelund, editor 1957-1988. Denmark
Preben Kirkegaard, editor 1957-1988. Denmark
Torkild Olsen, editor 1957-1989. Denmark
Irene Wormell, editor 1989- . Denmark
Russell Bowden, editor 1989-1994. United Kingdom
Joachim-Felix Leonhard, editor 1990-1991. Germany
Hans-Peter Geh, editor 1992-1994. Germany
Nancy R. John, editor 1995- . USA
Svend Larsen, 1995- . Denmark

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