

The Changing Role of the Manuscript Librarian

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2000 about 40 manuscript librarians from Europe met in Stockholm answering the initiative of Anders Burius, manuscript librarian of the Royal Library of Sweden. The participating colleagues agreed in forming an Expert Group of Manuscript Librarians under the auspices of LIBER. In July 2001 LIBER's General Conference in London formally approved the Expert Group. In February 2002 the Provisional Board elected in Stockholm, constituted itself. André Bouwman (The Netherlands) became chairman, Anders Burius (Sweden) secretary, Eef Overgaww (Germany), Bernard Meehan (Ireland) and Felix Heinzer (Germany) became members of the Board, all for the period 2002-2004. At the end of the Stockholm Conference Els van Eijck, deputy general director of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, the national library of the Netherlands, invited the European manuscript librarians to hold the second conference in The Hague. This article deals with the results of that second conference, actually held from 5 - 8 March in The Hague.

In close co-operation with the Board of the LIBER Expert Group of Manuscript Librarians the Dutch organising committee, consisting of manuscript librarians from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and the Leiden and Amsterdam University Libraries, and chaired by Els van Eijck, discussed several times about theme and main goal of the conference. The committee prepared a questionnaire to gather information from the future members of the LIBER Expert Group of Manuscript Librarians. The questions dealt with:

- the institution one is working;
- the nature and indexing of the collections;
- the use of the collections;
- the function of the manuscript librarian.

In the eyes of the organising committee the answers to the questionnaire could perfectly provide a firm base for the conference, but during the time of preparation the questionnaire has been postponed to a later date. Nevertheless the content of the conference has been formulated in accordance with the four parts of the questionnaire. The main theme, and at the same time the title of the conference, has been finally decided to in meetings with the Board of the LIBER Expert Group of Manuscript librarians.

Aims of the LIBER Expert Group on Manuscripts

The LIBER Expert Group on Manuscripts recognises the unique significance of manuscript and archive collections, not only for the world of research and learning, but also for a wider audience of people interested in history and cultural heritage. The primary aims of the Group are to act as a forum for curatorial concerns, and to enhance understanding and practical cooperation among curators across Europe, taking account of the differences in approach which have occurred historically.

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Of course, manuscript librarians should have a profound knowledge of their collections and they should provide access by making bibliographical descriptions according to high standards. From of old these tasks are at the core of the work of a manuscript librarian. However, the information and communication technologies initiate methodological changes in manuscript studies. A narrow material conception of manuscript librarianship, as hitherto had been worked out by the tradition, has proven insufficient in this new environment. The rapid changes in the field of information management do not leave the departments of the special collections unaffected. It has become an inseparable part of the work of a manuscript librarian to fill the originating electronic and digital environment with historical and manuscript material. They are expected to have knowledge of digitisation, project management and marketing in order to increase the use of their collections. This inevitably leads to re-formulating the tasks of the manuscript librarianship as a profession.

Despite the differences, all manuscript departments in Europe have one thing in common: their position at the core of the library is not self-evident anymore. The paradigm shift 'from collection to connection' has its consequences for the manuscript departments as well. Traditionally there was a strong focus on the collections. The manuscript collection, often being the most rare and precious of all, attracted a lot of permanent attention both from the management and from the public. Consequently, the curator of the manuscript department had an important position in the library management, being the head of the department that possesses all these treasures. The manuscripts formed the heart of the collection and therefore of the library itself. Efforts were focussed on the handling of the items themselves: cataloguing and preservation. In many cases, the collections were not freely accessible: users needed to show a hand-written permit.

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At the present the focus has shifted from collection to connection. The accessibility of the collections is now the centre of attention and in most libraries the items in manuscript departments are not particularly well attainable. Whereas manuscript librarians have tried to protect their treasures from wastage by heavy use for centuries, now they should open the vaults and allow everybody to see these rare and vulnerable documents?! Evidently, preserving the treasures and making high quality catalogues is not enough anymore: manuscript librarians should think of new services, start up digitisation projects and make expositions on the World Wide Web. Users consider access to the collections as their right and libraries are beginning to realise that: now is a watershed: they have to adapt otherwise they will lose their customers. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out at the conference, libraries are not particularly good at changing. They tend to be too inward looking. The LIBER conference therefore focussed on this changing role of the manuscript librarian.

The main goal of the conference was provoking discussions about several aspects of the activities of manuscript librarians in Europe and by doing so attaining a vivid, constructive, real LIBER expert group of manuscript librarians. Nearly eighty manuscript librarians participated, coming from all over Europe and working in libraries, museums, archives or elsewhere. In this paper we share the results of these three days full of provocative papers and intensive discussions.[1]

THE CONFERENCE

The conference was opened with an enthusiastic keynote sketching the above-mentioned changes that took place in an environment comparable with the world of the manuscript librarian. The programme concentrated on three themes: organisation, collaboration and tasks.

Organisation

Speakers introduced the first theme from different types of institutions, ranging from a literary museum, a national institute for cultural heritage, a leading national library to the largest university library in the United States of America. From those different points of view the organisation of the manuscript department itself did not become the main issue in the presentations and the discussions. Most colleagues directly focussed on building and describing a collection and the customer oriented approach of exhibiting and digitisation. 'Labelling and sorting out brings peace of mind to well-organised people' as Anton Korteweg, the director general of the Dutch Literary Museum in The Hague proclaimed. Like Korteweg's institute many manuscript departments a long time had a strong focus on classic cataloguing virtues. The collections were at the core. However,

enlarging the collections by purchase has become quite difficult because of the steep increase of prices and a continuously declining acquisition budget. In these circumstances institutions are forced to adapt towards a customer oriented approach rather than staying focussed on the collections. Manuscript departments may reach out to the public in several ways. By providing loans for exhibitions the original manuscripts can be shown to a larger audience and by undertaking digitisation projects images of the manuscripts can be provided so that everyone can look at it, wherever and whenever they want. But if the organisation is not fit for it such attempts are bound to fail.

In 5 years time the British Library has given more than 2,000 items on loan to 243 exhibitions world wide, as Beth McKillop of the Asia Pacific and Africa department set forth. Digitisation of the collections increases interest and demand, but the rising costs of transport and especially insurance may be a problem. Hot topics in the department of oriental manuscripts are religion (Islam) and colonisation, because of the growing political interest in 'outreach' and cultural diversity. Still, scholarly needs are at the core. The task of the curator is to check the aim of the requests for loans and to see to the observation of the regulations concerning the handling of manuscripts. In some cases, requests have to be declined. This is most unfortunate for both the customer *and* the library.

At the conference Stephen Hartog of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage gave an insight in the solution he chose to deal with this problem. His main aim is to give his collections on loan, to museums, Ministers and embassies. His institute deals with 500 requests a year, dispersed over 2,500 locations. Hartog has delegated many responsibilities to his staff. They have direct contact with the customers so that the needs of the customers can effectively be matched with the conditions the material requires. The workflow is supported by a collection information system, which makes loans traceable during the entire process from request to invoice.

Another way to promote the use of the collections is by starting up digitisation projects. Nevertheless, many library staff members feel anxious about the digitisation of the collections. The need of an electronic manuscript catalogue is generally accepted, in order to allow researchers to search for manuscripts without having to visit the library first. During the conference the seemingly need to provide digital copies of these manuscripts caused a lot of discussions. Although users would love it, from the librarian's point of view there are disadvantages as well. Some argued that if one possesses superb paper-based collections there is no need to rely on digital surrogates and the librarians can hardly control the use of these digital copies. Others replied that if only photograph copies are supplied users would digitise them themselves. The dissemination of digital copies may attract new customers who otherwise would not have been tempted to visit the library. Still, there was a general concern that libraries will become so caught up in the perceived necessity and glamour of creating digital

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surrogates, that they will lose sight of the fact that it will continue to be necessary to acquire and catalogue original materials today to preserve for future scholarship. Nevertheless, manuscript librarians have to adapt. The customers and consequently the library management both demand this. So they have to reorganise their work in order to cope with these developments. Possibly less time should be spent on cataloguing and some more on project management ...?

Collaboration

Working together can save time. Since it has become an inseparable part of the work of a manuscript librarian to fill the originating electronic and digital environment with historical and manuscript material, many international and supranational projects have been set up. At the conference for instance, the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL) proposed plans to develop a Manuscript File, in the same way as they have developed the Hand Press Book (HPB) Database. Furthermore, this spring the Malvine project opens new and enhanced access to disparate holdings of modern manuscripts and letters, kept and catalogued in European libraries, archives, documentation centres and museums. External funding especially stimulates such new concepts of access to manuscript collections. In Germany for instance, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft annually spends approximately € 25,000,000 on library projects, mainly on information systems.

However, collaboration may not only be time saving but can also be quite time consuming. Overhead costs, a lack of a clear management structure, bad financial preconditions and conflicting interests are but a few possible disadvantages. In her paper, Jutta Weber, project manager of various library projects in Germany and Europe dealt with the question when co-operation has added value. Firstly, there has to be something in it for the user, for if it is of no value to the customer the collaboration project will add hardly any value at all to the participating libraries. When choices have to be made, one should rather add more content than more technology. By setting clear priorities the risk of never finishing the project will be reduced. Finally, when the project has successfully come to an end it should be maintained. Therefore, the continuity of the project has to be secured beforehand. Recent examples, like Malvine have shown that by combining forces a lot of progress can be made.

Naturally, participating in external projects has its consequences, involving both intended and unintended changes at the own manuscript department. Intended aspects of collaboration in larger projects are that the library staff becomes more experienced in project management and external funding may support the regular tasks as well. However, more projects means less flexibility of the staff, more overhead and temporary projects may cause discontinuity. To what extent this leads in a rather small manuscript

department André Bouwman shows in his presentation. Projects might keep you from dealing with top priorities and therefore they have to fit in a long-term programme.

Tasks

The third theme of the conference was simply devoted to the tasks. Firstly the task seen by the manuscript librarian her- or himself. What is the profile of manuscript librarian of the future? How does one become a manuscript librarian? What skills, attitudes and knowledge are necessary? Secondly speakers answered those questions from the user's point of view and from that of the manager.

Eef Overgaw, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin), provided an overview of the German system for educating librarians. Most librarians receive a general, non-academic training. There is a post-graduate training for superior librarians in Munich, which takes two years: the first year in Munich and the second year training on the job. The libraries themselves select candidates. Though the system seems rigid it has its benefits: graduates are competent and motivated and since all librarians have received the same training regardless their department there is a common understanding of each other in the organisation.

As Manuscript Studies Development Librarian Murah Ghosh showed aspects of the new profile which is needed for tomorrow's librarian. The mission of the University of London Library is to support scholarship and innovation to advance research and learning in the University of London, regionally and world-wide. Much has changed: the information environment, the expectations of our users and our professional philosophy. The role of the manuscript librarian has changed irrevocably. Our challenge is how to combine the traditional and new role in a professional profile.

Paul Hoftijzer, Scaliger Institute of Leiden University, spoke about the changing role of the librarian from the user's perspective. Formerly, users needed to show a hand-written permit to gain access; nowadays they consider access to the collections as their right. Now is a watershed: libraries have to adapt otherwise they will lose their customers, but libraries are not particularly good at changing. They tend to be too inward looking.

If they want to survive, they should take this advice:

- break down walls,
- get out and listen to your users,
- share your knowledge,
- promote the 'historical experience' of handling the manuscripts.

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The Head of the Reference Services & Collections Division of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Martin Bossenbroek, compared manuscript librarians to foresters. They both face the conflict between preservation and access; they have precious and irreplaceable trust and the necessity to foster public awareness. It is both a benefit and a pitfall to know your collection well. A good guide knows his way, but also knows that others do not. So make electronic catalogues, link them to other systems and promote the use of your collections.

CONCLUSIONS

The conference was a great success. Not only the hospitality and the smoothly organisation by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek have been praised by the attendees in most warm words in e-mails and cards, but also the opportunity to talk with colleagues, who are dealing with the same problems has been highly appreciated. It became quite clear that there are many differences between our European libraries. For instance some libraries do already have an experience of years in digitising manuscripts, while other just start with that. Some institutions are doing great efforts to reach other kinds of users, while others strictly stay by their traditional users as there are students and scholars. Most colleagues are working with the manuscript collection of their institutes on their own or with a very small number of staff members. Nevertheless we think that this conference on the changing role of the manuscript librarian has formed a solid base for the Expert Group of European Manuscript Librarians.

In the Closing Meeting Els van Eijck formulated some conclusions. There is so much to do: our daily work, building up knowledge of the collections and answering new challenges. However, a modern manuscript librarian is a manager that has a feeling for vision, policy and marketing. Evidently we all have the same problems but we still lack coherent solutions. That is where the LIBER Expert Group of Manuscript Librarians comes in. We should focus on three themes:

1. User orientation: who are they and what are their needs?
2. Knowledge management: how to bridge the gap between traditional and new tasks?
3. Crossing borders: how to connect the European heritage in a modern multidisciplinary approach?

Working groups should investigate these three topics and present their results on the next LIBER manuscript meeting. To improve the communication between manuscript librarians, members of the LIBER Expert Group, a discussion list is open. [2] Please do use it and contact your colleagues.

NOTES

1. All papers of the conference can be consulted on the conference website:
<http://www.kb.nl/coop/liber/mss/>
2. LIBER Expert Group of Manuscript Librarians discussion list. The address is:
LIBER-MS-EXPERT@NIC.SURFNET.NL

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

The British Library. <http://www.bl.uk/index.shtml>

The changing role of the manuscript librarian. <http://www.kb.nl/coop/liber/mss/>

The Consortium of European Research Libraries. <http://www.cerl.org/>

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. <http://www.dfg.de/>

Hand Press Book (HPB) Database. <http://www.cerl.org/HPB/hpb.htm>

Koninklijke Bibliotheek. <http://www.kb.nl/>

Literary Museum in The Hague. <http://www.letterkundigmuseum.nl/>

Malvine project. <http://www.malvine.org/>

Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. <http://www.icn.nl/>

Scaliger Institute of Leiden University.
<http://ub.leidenuniv.nl/bc/scaligerinstitute/index.html>

Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz. <http://www.sbb.spk-berlin.de/>

The University of London Library. <http://www.ull.ac.uk/>