

ON THE CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH STATUS OF BOOK, LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT: The facts and processes concerning the world of books, libraries and librarianship, as well as written information and communication, have gradually become the subject matter of academic discussion, gaining autonomy in distinct disciplines with the passing of time. The multitude and variability of these disciplines, their constant evolution as well as their character and problems, varying in different countries, make it difficult to present one consistent image of the research status quo. Ever progressing in different forms and intensity, the processes of integration, autonomization and specialization in the field of research on books, libraries and information have transformed and created new constructions, in terms of both theory and methodology as well as research practice. The situation is not helped by the confusion in the nomenclature of disciplines, specialities and research trends, magnified by semantic differences in multilingual literature and carelessness in the usage of concepts and terms. Contemporary research in book, library and information sciences is determined and characterized above all by the following phenomena: (1) The multitude and diversity of research problems prevent their location in one “all-embracing” discipline – be it bibliology, library science or information science. These sciences, then, have undergone autonomization, which at the same time does not rule out connections or cooperation; (2) Each of the disciplines, clearly shaped in this field in the last few decades, has a specifically independent status in the world of science owing to its own specific research subject matter, its characteristic concept apparatus and suitable research methods, unique character of relations with other sciences, as well as owing to cognitive and practical aims; (3) Bibliology, library and information problems are of interest to other sciences, especially humanities and social sciences. They constitute an important element of their research efforts and are of great importance to the theory and practice of book, library and information sciences. A special role is to be performed by (heterogeneous and “polymorphous”) sciences on culture, (social) communication and means of communication (“media science”); (4) In sciences dealing with books, libraries and information, there is a clear division between historical and contemporary problems. Strongly developed, historical bibliology studies the book as a creation and tool of human civilization, a product of material and spiritual culture and an instrument of social communication in the history of humankind; (5) The increase in the knowledge of facts in book, library and information sciences is not yet accompanied by appropriately developed theoretical and methodological afterthoughts, which could allow intensifying research and elevating the importance of the aforementioned sciences.

Taking up the problem of the present-day condition of book, library and information sciences, we have to begin with a brief flashback. The facts and processes concerning the world of books, libraries and library science as well as written information and communication have gradually become the subject matter of academic consideration, gaining autonomy in distinct disciplines, specialities and research trends as time went by.

In the following stages of science development, they appeared under different names, were singled out according to various criteria and pursued with variable intensity. Many of them remained merely at the level of theoretical or terminological proposals. It is assumed that bibliography was the first, yet not entirely shaped, form of the (future) book, library and information sciences and that they entered the age of maturity in the 19th century as library science. Such a shortcut does not reflect the whole variety of historical events and theoretical concepts, which created these disciplines, their particular specialities and research trends.

The multitude and variability of these disciplines, their constant evolution, as well as their character and problems, varying in different countries, make it difficult to present one consistent image of the research status quo. Constantly progressing in different forms and intensity, the processes of integration, autonomization and specialization in the field of research on books, libraries and information have changed the hitherto state of affairs and created new constructions, on the grounds of both theory and methodology as well as research practice.

The description of the situation is not facilitated by the confusion in the nomenclature of disciplines, specialities and research trends, magnified by semantic differences in multilingual literature and carelessness in using concepts and terms. Although it might seem that it was a long time ago when everything that related to the book was encompassed by the term “bibliography”, it can still denote the total knowledge of the world of books. It is characteristic of literature in the English language where bibliography, especially along with the adjective “historical” or “theoretical”, denotes exactly the general knowledge of books, whereas “bibliographic(al) studies” should be understood as bibliographic(al) research (Pol. badania księgoznawcze). Also in the case of other authors writing in different languages, the meaning of the word “bibliography” is close to the term “bibliology”. There is also a tradition of placing bibliological issues under the name of library science; it was consolidated by the institutionalization of library science as a faculty at universities. As a result, in literature (as well as in catalogues and databases, which generates already serious trouble in searching practice!) purely bibliological problems that have nothing in common with libraries can be found in the entries “library science” and “librarianship” (Fr. bibliothéconomie, Rus. библиотековедение, etc). The names, which are given to issues belonging to bibliology as well as library and information

sciences within the limits of other scientific disciplines, in turn, usually have an occasional character, and their inaccuracy and variety make it impossible to find any clearer tendencies here. The term “book market” may sometimes come in handy to a sociologist who is writing about the book, even when his description encompasses also publishing, library and readership issues; a cultural historian uses the term “circulation of the book” to name all bibliological problems of the epoch he is interested in; a literary historian will mention at times “the reception of literature” when he touches upon other bibliological issues (works of art as books – published, censored, purchased, collected and, finally, read).

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Contemporary research in book, library and information sciences is determined and characterized above all, as it seems, by the following phenomena:

1. The multitude and diversity of research problems prevent their location in one “all-embracing” discipline – be it bibliology, library science or (scientific) information science. For the past few years in particular, these sciences have undergone autonomization, which at the same time does not rule out connections or cooperation. The formation process of separate disciplines resulted from the need to clearly specify their characteristic research problems and it most often meant looking for the most important, central research paradigm.
2. Each of these disciplines, clearly shaped in the field of book, library and information sciences, has had a specifically independent status in the world of science over the past few decades, owing to their own specific research subject matter, characteristic concept apparatus and suitable research methods, unique character of connections with other sciences as well as owing to cognitive and practical aims. It also has its own experts and institutions.
3. Bibliology, library and information problems are of interest to other sciences as well, especially humanities and social sciences. They also constitute an important element of their research efforts and are of great importance to the theory and practice of book, library and information sciences. A special role is to be performed by (heterogeneous and “polymorphous”) historical sciences,

sciences on culture, (social) communication and means of communication (“media science”).

4. In sciences concerned with books, libraries and information, there is a clear methodological and institutional division into historical and contemporary problems. At the same time, we can notice global tendencies to integrate historical and contemporary problems. This is taking place owing to university curricula, team research programmes, the activity of academic associations and the integrative role of periodicals. The significance of the history of libraries and librarianship as an inseparable element of current librarianship aspects, or the importance of the history of the book in educating printing and “book industry” workers are only some of the examples.
5. The increase in the knowledge of facts in book, library and information sciences is not yet accompanied by appropriately developed theoretical and methodological afterthoughts, which could allow for the intensifying of research and the elevating of the aforementioned sciences. The abundance of multilingual publications does not go hand in hand with their academic value. Suffice to compare them with the character and standard of writing in other humanities and social sciences (e.g. the theory of the book in view of the theory of literature, or a study in readership processes from the viewpoint of bibliology and library science in comparison with the psychological or sociological perspective). Over the past few years or decades, however, some significant positive changes have taken place in several countries.
6. Book, library and information sciences, as disciplines which deal with important cultural products and tools, are faced with a number of tasks. They prove necessary to other sciences and social practice since they enrich the knowledge of the world of man’s creations and participate in the organization of communication processes in society. Once unimaginable, the new possibilities are available to these sciences by means of the computerization of the world of books, libraries and information.

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The perceived tendencies mentioned above visibly take place in the field of bibliological research. Contemporary book science (or “bibliology proper”, as older authors would say) was formed owing to the takeover of the discipline’s hitherto theoretical and

methodological output, which led to the creation of new research paradigms. Since the book is a historical phenomenon and bibliology was born as a historical science, its most developed part today, which is also equipped with suitable methods and cognitively attractive, is historical bibliology (the history of the book) with all its specialized detailed disciplines whose subject matter is the phenomenon of the book in the history of humankind. In contemporary bibliology, the historical trend is closely connected with the philological trend, where the world of books is important as it consolidates and transfers language and literature. It is in the research on the text and on the circulation of literature that the great potential of bibliological studies is particularly revealed.

At the same time, the book is a social fact so cognitive categories such as “the book in society”, “the book and society” or “the social function of the book” turned out useful in bibliology. One of the most influential concepts in the past few decades, the so called functional bibliology concept, derives from the sociological trend. It tends to treat the book (and “the universe of books” in general) not only as a historical and social fact but also as the actual and potential realization of its roles. The functional perspective constitutes a useful key to the explication of the genesis and evolution of the book (“the universe of books” in general) and to the description of roles that books perform. It also explains, assesses and generalizes the mechanisms of individual and collective life appearing in bibliological phenomena.

The development of information and communication sciences taking place in the last few decades told bibliologists to pay attention to the potential and properties of the book as a tool for consolidating information and means of communication and it resulted in the appearance of information and communication bibliology models. Again, it extended the scope of the research subject matter beyond the traditional book (e.g. Paul Otlet considered as such any document, Robert Estivals – *écrit*, i.e. the written, whereas numerous English, American and German writers – printed media, printed records, *Printmedien*) and concentrated research efforts principally on the issues of transfer and reception. Although the informative and communicative perspective led to an enhancing of the arsenal of bibliological terms it also resulted in excellent outcomes in not only historical but also theoretical and contemporary works. In turn, it could not be absolutized as a central or (especially) unique research attitude.

As time went by, it turned out that this viewpoint, recognized as the “final target” in search of the central research category subject of bibliological research by certain academic circles, could not explain all curiosities and properties of the book – this special product and tool of human culture which has various connections with man and the world of man’s creations. Again, then, they paid attention to the value of the cultural perspective for bibliological research. We say this again because for at least one hundred years books, printing, libraries and readership have been connected with the word “culture” in the literature of humanities in many countries. The compound “book and culture” has gradually become the central concept in book studies and, although it expresses diverse concepts and realizations, at a certain level of generalization it is based on fairly homogeneous theoretical considerations.

The usefulness of the term “the culture of the book” for specifying the subject and character of bibliology arises from the fact that it can encompass and concentrate all material and spiritual aspects of the book and the world of books. It defines a single book and collections of books (the whole edition, publishing repertoire, bookshop assortment, “the universe of books” in general) as creations of material, technical and spiritual culture since, as Karol Głombiowski observed, “only when related to the whole material and spiritual culture will the role of book be revealed entirely as a tool facilitating the maintenance, integration and historical continuity of society with the aid of its characteristic means” (Głombiowski, 1970, p. 24). The matter is also perceived in this way by the German literature historian and bibliologist Paul Raabe, for whom *Buchkultur* is “historically shaped, encompassing a substantial part of cultural life, related to the intensely interacting totality and presence of the world of books, [...] whereas the production, dissemination and functioning of books constitute the centre of book culture” (Raabe, 2001, p. 27).

“The culture of the book”, becoming the central research subject matter in bibliology, affords us a full and in-depth description of the phenomenon of the book as a creation and tool of culture, and of including the whole world book heritage in its various manifestations and functions. Placed among other cultural phenomena, it corroborates its significance in the development of civilization, which is not perceived in all its scope today. The search for religious, political, economic and other cultural determinants is accompanied by a discovery of the significance of books in many spheres of individual

and communal life: for the purpose of the development and codification of languages, the standardization of law and liturgy, the dissemination of philosophical, political and religious ideas, the popularization of education. The specificity of different forms of the culture of the book is revealed along with their tradition, continuity or episodic character, their attractiveness for other cultures, expansion or disappearance.

“The culture of the book” may be a central concept for different interpretations:

- theoretical (the theory of the book as a subject, tool and function in culture),
- historical (the history of the book culture in different epochs),
- spatial (the culture of the book as in cities, regions, countries, nations, etc.),
- individual (man’s culture of the book, from his childhood till the “third age”),
- collective and social (the culture of the book of social classes, occupational and religious groups etc.),
- prognostic.

The usefulness of the term “the culture of the book” as a subject and main research category is confirmed by numerous derivatives emerging in the international literature on humanities. Consequently, we come across such terms as “the culture of handwriting” and “writing culture” (Ger. *Schriftkultur*), most frequently in medieval studies and sociolinguistics, “print culture” and “typographical culture” (Ger. *typographische Kultur*), “editorial culture”, “bibliographical culture” (e.g. in the historiography of literature), “library culture” and “readership culture” (the two last terms can be most frequently encountered in the history of culture, but also in bibliology, sociology or literature science).

The contemporary bibliology is often situated in a broader scope of problems concerning the “written word” (Fr. *écrit*) as well as its creation and reception, which consequently results in the emergence of such research categories as “written communication” (Fr. *communication écrite*), “script and society”, “the power of the written word”. It also entailed the intensification of multidirectional research on the history of readership.

Subsequently, the issues of the “revolution” in the world of books draw our attention especially when it comes to the transition from the handwritten book to the printed one

(typographical revolution) as well as from the printed book to its electronic version (electronic revolution). New research categories have appeared in the history of printing and printed books: “printing press as an agent of change”, “printing as a catalyst of cultural transformations” (Ger. *Buchdruck als Katalysator kulturellen Wandels*), “typographical culture as a diversified information system” (Ger. *typographische Kultur als differenziertes Informationssystem*). A new concept of “material culture of the text” derives from the long established Anglo-American tradition of historical bibliography; in Italian literature, “the philology of printed texts” (*filologia dei testi a stampa*) appeared alongside the former “bibliography of the text” (*bibliografia testuale*), etc. Responding to the needs of humanities and the interests of the public (which by the way have not been explicitly expressed), for the last few years bibliology has elaborated many other, once unknown, research categories, e.g. “the book as a visual space”, “the word and image in the book”, “the book as an (information) system”, “the book as the national (and world) heritage”, “the book as the memory of/for the future”, “the typology of books”. There is also a tendency to specify and improve such research categories as “political bibliology”, “bibliolinguistics”, “multilingualism in the world of books”, “the ethnic book”, “the ecology of the book”, “the role of the book in international relations”, “the book as a globalization factor”, “the extermination of the book” (*bibliocide, libricide*). The realization of research programmes falling into these entries requires the incorporation of completely new tools into the bibliologist’s workshop which come from the field of many sciences, and not only humanities or social sciences. Further expansion and improvement of the historiography of the book, and bibliology as a certain whole, are possible owing to the newly revealed and interpreted sources and, especially, new questions that address them. For problems and research areas, such as typology of the book, book policy, the ethnic book, the book in communication processes, the book as an element of the national and world heritage or the book and other media, are of importance not only for learning the history of the book (culture) but also for the organization of the contemporary book system.

The dynamic development of new research trends in bibliology and also of the elaboration of studies in traditional fields of its interests has resulted in an enormous increase in literature. A special role in the discipline, also as its “flagship” outside, is performed by great collections such as historical syntheses like *Histoire de l’édition française* (Paris 1982-1986, vol. 1-4) or *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (Cambridge 1999-

2002, vol. 3-4), encyclopaedias – let us just mention *Lexikon des gesamten Buchwesens* (the 2nd edition, Stuttgart 1987; so far 7 volumes up to “U”) and *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du livre* (Paris 2002; so far 2 volumes up to “M”), bibliographies, terminological dictionaries and book series.

Self-awareness of the discipline is increasing, which is visible not only in the studies in its theory and methodology but also in discovering and rereading old writers. The new editions of fundamental bibliological works by Mikołaj Rubakin, Paul Otlet, Mikołaj Kufajew and others allow the new incorporation of important texts, constituting the building materials of contemporary bibliology, into academic circulation.

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