

An ethical corporate pirate?

Editorial and presentation of the ISC issue on Information Ethics

by Mikael Böök

book@kaapeli.fi

Editorial

"The Internet is not a library. The library metaphor presupposes so many things - a central source for resource information, a paid staff dutifully indexing new material as it comes in, a well-understood and rigorously adhered-to ontology - that trying to think of the Internet as a library can be misleading".

I do not quite agree with the authors of the O'Reilly book *Google Hacks* who make the above statements.¹ Those who deny that the internet is a library or, conversely, that the library is an internet, are likely to find themselves mistaken..

But how to decide on the matter? The relatively old and widely spread "library metaphor" indicates likeness. Let us as open-mindedly as possible try to detect whether or not the one not only looks like, but actually *is*, a variant of the other.

The use which the O'Reilly-writers make of the word "central" is... central. Am I wrong in supposing that they think of the library as an information center which is controlled by bureaucrats? It would follow that, if we began to perceive the internet as a library, then the net would become bureaucratized.

¹ Se Calishain, Tara & Dornfest, Rael: *Google Hacks. 100 Industrial-Strength Tips & Tools*. O'Reilly 2003, s. 1.

The O'Reilly-writers may believe that all librarians rigorously adhere to a particular ontology. But librarians have always held and do still hold many different views on the basic order of the books and other knowledge representations. What has happened is that the ontologies (or, at least, the technologies!) of librarians have been thoroughly shaken up by the internet. Therefore, library science is presently undergoing an epochal transformation. But so too is computer science and artificial intelligence research (from which the O'Reilly writers probably have drawn *their* ontology).

The internet has - thanks in part to Google's search engine, but also for other reasons - no doubt become a central information source in general, and a phenomenal "*central source for resource information*", in particular. However, when applied to the internet in this way, "central" contains a positive value judgment. It does not connote a bureaucratic or top-down institution, but something which is "essential", "useful" and "important".

True, it is necessary to discuss the differences between "a library", like Helsinki City Library, The Michigan University Library, etc., and "the library", which (like the internet) is a peculiar thing. The individual library is a bit like the company Google, for instance, in that it has a management, paid staff, separate account etc.

The internet, as is well-known, is not a single organization or corporation, but a network. This is probably why the O'Reilly-writers are not ready to admit that the internet is "a library". But the writing, the books and the libraries also form networks. The libraries and the librarians together form a worldwide library network.

What, then, is peculiar to networks? Networks are *rhizomatic*:

"Wood anemone is a plant with rhizomes, that is, roots which go in different directions under the surface and connect the entire system of what from above looks like individual anemones. Solomon's Seal is another example, as are many ferns."²

A characteristic feature of the internet, in addition to its rhizomatic nature, is that the network can govern itself without any specific person having to be appointed or elected to be its President, or similar head. That is why the internet has often been called a cyberspace, but only rarely a centre of power.³ However, the library, too, exhibits cybernetic features. What is it that makes libraries grow constantly? Is the growth of the libraries steered top-down, or is it a process which governs itself through feedback loops? One of the most famous librarians and library scientists, S R Ranganathan, presented already in the 1930s an evolutionary definition of the library: "*A Library Is a Growing Organism*". Incidentally, Ranganathan also noted that the printed matter might not forever remain the main vehicle for spreading knowledge and information, which he regarded to be the main task of libraries. In the future, libraries may use "other means", he predicted, referring to H.G. Wells vision of a world brain.⁴ Add to this a dose of universal Darwinism.⁵ The conclusion to draw is, that the only guiding center of the library is the human species, which it serves.

It remains to be asked which roles different professionals (e.g., librarians) and paraprofessionals are playing, and ought to play, in the information processes. The same question applies to governments,

² Quoted and translated (by MB) from Liedman, Sven-Eric: *Stenarna i själen. Form och materia från antiken till idag*. Albert Bonniers förlag 2006, s 481. The botanical term rhizome was ported to philosophy decades ago by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

³ However, consider the concept of the Second Superpower.

⁴ See Ranganathan, S. R. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. Madras Library Association 1931, p 382. Btw, I searched in vain for a copy of this work in Google Books. Found it eventually in the Internet Archive: <http://web.archive.org/web/20070703180012/dlist.sir.arizona.edu/1220/> .

⁵ The expression 'universal Darwinism' occurs in Susan Blackmore's lecture on "Genes, Memes and Temes" (overheard via Youtube, July 2010).

legislators and private corporations such as Google. How do we want the library, *aka* the internet, to be?

I believe in taking note of the likeness in species, as well as of the rhizomatic and cybernetic potentialities of both library and internet. However, in the 2010s, it might sometimes look as if the individual company Google is becoming too dominant in both library and internet terrain. In order to find out more about how the matter stands, I decided, one day in April 2010, to try to book an interview with one of Google's founders and directors.

> Date: Tue, 20 Apr 2010 11:32:49 +0300 (EEST)
> From: Mikael Book <book@kaapeli.fi>
> To: sergey.brin@google.com
> Cc: press@google.com, Luca Ferrieri <lucaferrieri@gmail.com>, TONI SAMEK <Toni.Samek@ualberta.ca>
> Subject: Request for interview / Information for Social Change
>
> Dear Sergey Brin,
>
> in your New York Times-article on October 8, 2009⁶ you wrote that Google
> wants to contribute to building "A Library to last forever".
>
> It would be interesting to hear more about your thoughts on this subject.
> Would you be willing to grant an interview to Information for Social
> Change (ISC)?
>
> ISC (<http://libr.org/isc>) is an international journal of what might be
> called "the library Left" . The theme of its Summer 2010 issue is
> "Information ethics". I am a library activist from Finland, a member of
> the editorial board of ISC, and the editor of the summer 2010 issue
> together with Luca Ferrieri, who is head of the city library at Cologno
> Monzese, Italy, and library scientist Toni Samek, Canada.
>
> Proposed themes of the interview:
>
> 1. "The library is a growing organism"
> (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_laws_of_library_science).
>

⁶ Brin, S: "A Library to Last Forever", New York Times 8 Oct 2009.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/09/opinion/09brin.html>.

- > Is Ranganathan's fifth law of library science still valid? Or, is the
- > library being superseded by the internet?
- > Alternatively, is the growth and spread of the internet just new
- > evidence to prove the validity of Ranganathan's law?
- > What is a library, except, perhaps, being a growing organism? Will
- > Google Books become a library?
- >
- > 2. The rise of "the Second Superpower"
- > (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Superpower).
- >
- > The growth and spread of the Net inspire hope for a greater intellectual
- > freedom in the world and the formation of an informed global public
- > opinion, which is independent from the interests of the nation-states.
- > Hence a fundamental question of information ethics: what can we do to
- > make "the Second Superpower" prevail? ("We", here, refers to you, to
- > me, to Google, and to the library profession.)
- >
- > In order to be included in the Summer issue of ISC, the interview should
- > be made no later than June 2010 (the deadline for articles has been set
- > to 31 May). It would be OK with me to do the interview by email, or in
- > some other way. However, I would prefer a dialogue face-to-face, if only
- > the Icelandic volcanos do not spoil the possibilities of air-travelling.
- >
- > Well, these were the subjects I thought the interview would touch upon.
- > For your entertainment, I enclose some verses from "Alice in
- > Wonderland":
- >
- > "The time has come," the Walrus said,
- > "To talk of many things:
- > Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--
- > Of cabbages--and kings--
- > And why the sea is boiling hot--
- > And whether pigs have wings."
- >
- > The spring advances, greetings from Finland.
- >
- > - Mikael Böö

The company's press department was given a copy of my request.
The next day I received a reply from the "Google Press", as follows:

- > Hi Mika[e]l;
- >

- > Thanks very much for your inquiry. Unfortunately, we will be declining
- > this offer. Good luck and take care.
- >
- > Best,
- > Google Press

I appreciate that Google immediately gave a clear, albeit negative answer. It is possible, even likely, that Sergey Brin, or the person who dispatched the answer also felt that my questions were too vague and therefore risky to address. If you go in depth with these issues you must be prepared to tread in minefields.

Many probably think that Google is a pirate because the company has scanned more than 10 million books and thereby challenged the place of the world's libraries, publishers and authors. I would still believe that the fear that Google will somehow be able to get hold of "everything we know" is exaggerated. The problem with the company Google is whether it actually will turn out to be a pirate. Then I think, in line with the idea of the Pirate Party, that a pirate, in certain cases, is an ethical figure.

It seems to me that we now live in an exceptional situation where in some respects we ought to act like pirates. Certainly not to steal, rob and kill, but because an ethical behavior only seems possible outside the domains of the state and state-governments.

If Google intends to pursue its fine principle, "Don't be evil"⁷, the company ought to terminate cooperation with the military-industrial-academic complex and refuse the U.S. Government intelligence service exclusive access to its rear rooms, where they are keen to enter under the pretext of monitoring and jailing terrorists and pirates.

⁷ " "Don't be evil." Googlers generally apply those words to how we serve our users. But "Don't be evil" is much more than that. Yes, it's about providing our users unbiased access to information, focusing on their needs and giving them the best products and services that we can. But it's also about doing the right thing more generally -- following the law, acting honorably and treating each other with respect." (from Google's "code of conduct", <http://investor.google.com/corporate/code-of-conduct.html> - copied July 2010).

It may be observed that Google only occupies a minor place among the contractors of the Complex. In 2006, the value of the company's contracts with the military amounted to some \$137,000. That's peanuts compared to, say, Verizon's \$2,500,000,000 contract.⁸

However, the really important issues in this context are perhaps not so much about money as about *the ethics of information*. And, of course, about the separation of powers and the democracy.

Therefore, it was disheartening to hear that "*Google Teams Up with CIA to Fund "Recorded Future" Startup Monitoring Websites, Blogs & Twitter Accounts*".⁹

Who wants to be part of the recorded future of Google and the American military-industrial-academic-intelligence complex? Not me, please. I am not even American.

The proposal that Google should be an ethical corporate pirate may seem as utopian as asking the company to lift itself by the hair. But do we, American or not, really have a choice but to try hard to help and support the ubiquitous Google company in its dedication to ethical behavior? An ethical pirate easily acquires many enemies. It therefore needs support. The librarians might do right to form ethical alliances with Google.

Sergey Brin wrote, in his aforementioned NYT article: "*If Google Books is successful, others will follow.*" This indicates that he is aware of what every true librarian must perceive as self-evidence. Namely, that Google, the private business corporation, is after all only one of the wood anemones on the earth's face.

⁸ The figure for Google is quoted from Turse, N.: *The Complex. How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives*. Faber & Faber 2008, p 59. As for Verizon, a major U.S. telecom corporation, see http://www.militaryindustrialcomplex.com/contract_detail.asp?contract_id=8065. According to recent news, Google and Verizon have made a deal about designing a new brand of *network neutrality*.

⁹ Radio broadcast by *Democracy Now!* 30 July, 2010, where journalists Juan Gonzales and Amy Goodman interviewed Noah Shachtman from *Wired* magazine and John Simpson, director of Consumer Watchdog's Inside Google project. A transcript of the show is available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/7/30/google_teams_up_with_cia_to

Presentation of the special issue of the ISC on Information Ethics

What is information ethics? The articles in this issue of ISC should give an inkling. However, doubts remain. Can the ethics of information be anything more, or less, than the ethics?

Robert Hauptman, in his foreword to a recent book on the ethics of information in the context of library and information science¹⁰, writes: "*nothing is more important than the way we treat each other*". If we agree with this, the ethics of information consists in treating the information in accordance with Hauptman's maxim.

Treating the information is something we do as we read. Hence the quest for an ethical base for the practice of reading. This is also what Luca Ferrieri is searching for in his fascinating introduction to *the ethics and ecology of reading* in this special issue of ISC. To connect the dots between the ethics of information and the ethics of reading may be as difficult as to know what Spinoza meant by ethics in his *Ethics*. You have to read it in order to understand it.

The city library of Cologno Monzese near Milano, where Luca Ferrieri works, is an active promoter of public readings. For instance, the library regularly organizes *reading marathons* with readers, story-tellers and writers.

Furthermore, the Cologno Monzese library is an important node in a network on the *politics* of reading. In Italy, this network of librarians, authors and readers is known as *Non pago di leggere* ("I won't pay to read")¹¹. It strives to keep up the resistance against the controversial

¹⁰ The book by Elizabeth A. Buchanan and Kathrine A. Henderson. See the book-review later in this issue of ISC.

¹¹ See <http://it.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjm0H2v9QQM&feature=related>.

directive on the Public Lending Right of the EU (European Directive 92/100/EC). The directive treats libraries like whatever “establishments open to the public”, and does not even mention the practice of reading. The PLR-directive is analyzed in this journal by Marianna Malfatti.

"Information ethics is a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural field concerned with ethical questions examining relationships in society among people, information, recorded knowledge, and the cultural record. The field exposes local, national, and international issues related to the "production, collection, interpretation, organization, preservation, storage, retrieval, dissemination, transformation and use of information" and ideas",

Quotes library scientist Toni Samek in an account of her work as a teacher of information ethics at the university of Alberta. Samek is a member of the editorial board of ISC.

Ethics and politics go together, or enter into conflict. The ethical tends to become political, and the political, unfortunately, often turns out to be an *unethical* way to treat each other. The abuse of political power, in particular, raises thorny information ethical issues, such as those confronted by Elizabeth Woodworth in her reflections on the 9/11 controversy. It is to be hoped that Woodworth's article will inspire library scientists and librarians to educate the people on *State Crimes Against Democracy* (SCADs)¹² and to participate in common actions in order to put an end to them.

Amelia Andersdotter, one of the two members of the European Parliament who represent the Pirate Party (both from Sweden) takes up another problematic that relates to power abuse, namely the potential

¹² This concept, i.e. SCAD, is introduced by the authors in *American Behavioral Scientist* Vol 53 Nr 6 (February 2010). The issue is devoted to “sense making under “holographic” conditions: framing SCAD research”. 9/11 2001 is the key case.

abuse of economic and political power through exclusive control over ITC-systems and databases. "In the ubiquitous information technology environment the librarians are Google, Apple, E.ON or Albert Heijn (a Dutch supermarket chain)", she writes. Individuals ought to have better possibilities to manage the data about themselves, she demands. The librarians of the public libraries should ask how they might help the citizens to control their "data emissions" and "adsorptions".

The year 2010 has been labelled "the year of the e-book." Topically, Marke Hongisto, a scientist employed by the Finnish Meteorological Institute, analyses the case of the institute's disappeared book collection. *"Libraries host a spirit of intelligence and civilization which can never be replaced with a computer-connected environment, whatever its efficiency. It is easy to retrieve data fast from the internet, but to understand it one needs a quiet environment, a library"*, Hongisto writes.

We have split the articles in this ISC-issue in two parts. The reason for this should become clear from the introductory note to the second part. The second part consists of Kenneth Willement's article on the outreaching activities of Canadian public librarians in the Working Together Project, and Francine Mestrum's reflections on U.S. Social Forum 2010 and the European Social Forum 2010. Willement is Community Development Manager of the Halifax Public Libraries. Mestrum is a Belgian social scientist and specialist on development issues. In an earlier ISC-article she wrote about the scandalous gains by banks and other financial institutions profiting from the revenues and money transfers of emigrants.¹³

¹³ See ISC No. 24, Winter 2006 - 2007. Special Issue on 'Libraries & Information in World Social Forum context'.

An article which did not make it to this issue was Hervé le Crosnier's piece on a synthetic bacterium called "Synthia"¹⁴ (because we did not find a competent translator in time). That is a pity, because "Synthia" actualizes important ethical issues, which are information-related from the beginning to the end.

¹⁴ Le Crosnier, H: "La boîte de Pandore de la biologie synthétique"
<http://blog.mondediplo.net/2010-05-21-La-boite-de-Pandore-de-la-biologie-synthetique>