

The Atlas of New Librarianship by R. David Lankes. MIT Press. 2011. 408 pages. Illustrated.

Remember the story about the red-haired man who did not have any eyes or ears? Neither did he have any hair so redhead, he was just figuratively speaking. He could not speak, because he had no mouth. He had no nose, for that matter. He did not even have arms or legs. “Therefore there's no knowing whom we are even talking about”, the storyteller says¹.

The story ends with the suggestion that we stop speaking about that red-haired man.

Now imagine a big library. However, this library would not have any catalog or classification system. Neither would it have any books, so it would only be called a library theoretically. It would not even have any walls or floors. Would we know which library we were speaking about?

Well, it depends. The American professor R. David Lankes has produced a great book about a library which, as distinguished from the red-haired man, actually would have *something*.

The method which Mr. Lankes must have used in order to be able to write the *Atlas of New Librarianship* is not wholly unlike that of the aforementioned story-teller: firstly, strip your subject of everything. In the case of the library this means getting rid of all the *artefacts* — the books, the documents, the collection, the library building, etc. Secondly, look very hard for something that might be left. Finally, start building your subject anew from what you found (if you were able to find something).

The library of Mr Lankes does not lack “innards” (I forgot to tell that the red-haired man had no innards), because it would still have a professional staff. Indeed, it would have *librarians*. Therefore, we might actually wish to continue to speak about this library of Mr. Lankes' imagination.

So, to start with, imagine a library where everything else is gone but the librarians with their librarianship, and where the librarianship boils down to this magic formula: “THE MISSION OF LIBRARIANS IS TO IMPROVE SOCIETY THROUGH FACILITATING KNOWLEDGE CREATION IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.”

A formula? Nay, a message!

In my mind, I compare it to the poster about ships and boats of many shapes and sizes which hung on the wall whereby I slept as a child and which was to describe all the stuff of mariners and sailors. Over it all throned these words in big capital letters: NAVIGARE NECESSE EST. VIVERE NON EST NECESSE, which means that the sailor must continue to sail even when the sailing will take his life.

¹ Cf “The Red-Haired Man” by Daniel Charms. —Daniil Kharms (Russian: Даниил Ива́нович Хармс; 1905 – 1942) was an early Soviet-era surrealist and absurdist poet, writer and dramatist. (Wikipedia)

2.

The Atlas of New Librarianship is big and thick and I have not read it all (yet). It is not an easy read, although its language, or prose, is often close to the spoken word (like transcriptions). It gives the reader a lot to think and argue about.

As a book it has a structure which is clear and comprehensive enough. It even comes with a map. When you unfold the map, be sure to have enough space around you. (It is as big as that poster from my childhood which I mentioned above.)

The whole Atlas is divided into six chapters in strict accordance with its basic principle (plus Preface, Acknowledgements and Introduction, of course, and notes for its readers, and followed by a postscript and a large chunk of Supplements, to which I shall return). Thus we have one chapter on the MISSION, another on KNOWLEDGE CREATION, a third on FACILITATING, two on COMMUNITIES and the IMPROVE(ment of) SOCIETY respectively, and finally the expected chapter about the LIBRARIANS.

Lankes calls his chapters “threads”, which makes me think of a Spider's web and a network, but also (at the same time) of *treading* (like when you are treading softly in unknown territory), and, furthermore, of a hierarchical system of computer files. Well, the whole map looks like an Octopus!

Somebody remarked that *The Atlas of New Librarianship* might as well have been called *The New Atlas of Librarianship*, but I don't know. What would the difference have been, and which was the Old Atlas, if I may ask, if Lankes' atlas is supposed to be the New? S.R. Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* perhaps? Actually why not, because Ranganathan, too, had a complete idea of the library and the mission of the librarians. He thought (and taught), correct me if I am wrong, that librarians ought to liberate the knowledge and help to disseminate it as widely as possible. R. D. Lankes, on the other hand, thinks (and teaches) that the mission of librarians is to facilitate the creation of knowledge. Because, his library is a gaping hole, there is absolutely nothing to spread or disseminate. The knowledge has to be created.

I think Plato had this idea that knowledge is created through conversation. If asked for a reference, I would refer to the dialogue called “The Symposium”, and to the very idea, and practice, of dialoguing in order to find out what the truth of a matter is. But if we delve into the conversation theory, or dialectics, we will probably soon need whole libraries of books, and librarians who keep them in order so that we can find them, or so that they can find them for us.

Lankes, being one of the Moderns, refers to Gordon Pask, who has developed a cybernetic conversation theory.²

The idea that knowledge is created together, in conversation, and therefore through meetings, has always had a big appeal. On the other hand, I remember an old professor of philosophy at the university of Helsinki (my alma mater) who maintained that knowledge should not be expected to come out of meetings. But maybe he just complained that his students held so many political meetings instead of following his lectures? Be that as it may, on this issue I am inclined to side with Mr. Lankes and his team of participatory librarians!

² Andrew Gordon Speedie Pask (1928 – 1996) was an English cybernetician and psychologist who made significant contributions to cybernetics, instructional psychology, experimental epistemology and educational technology. (Wikipedia)

To complete the description of the contents of the Atlas, let me add that almost half of it (pp. 193-406) consists of some one hundred and fifty “agreements”, that is, supplemental articles and illustrations, alphabetically ordered. While reading here and there among the “agreements” I reflected much on why this word was chosen. In the notes for the readers at the beginning of the book, it is suggested to mean “An understanding about the field of librarianship that may include a skill area, a relevant theory, a practice, or an example”. An “understanding”, yes, I thought, but then I realised that I certainly did not agree with everything that was said in these agreements (I can say as much with confidence although I have not even read half of them). However, this problem of not being in agreement can be solved if only the reader agrees that what we have here is just a dynamic collection of *temporary* agreements. Something like the Wikimedia³, perhaps. Or, to take another example, consider all the diplomatic agreements between governments and states. As everybody knows, international agreements, too, can be quite dynamic and transient in nature.⁴

3.

I should now come back from pure description to reviewing what is actually being said in the book. One thing I personally value especially high is its saying that librarians ought to be activists and even radicals. “Some in academia feel that knowledge is a cold thing, a dispassionate examination of facts and limitations. Yet knowledge is anything but cold and dispassionate”, Mr. Lankes writes. With this credo the new librarianship stands or falls. And in this respect, the new librarianship hardly differs from the old.

To be radical is to replant the tree (with its roots); in this case it means to reaffirm the social and political dimension of librarianship in the age of the internet.

For non-American readers like the present writer it may also be noted that the *Atlas of New Librarianship* is rewarding as a source to specifically American ways of thinking about community organizing and social improvement. Here, positive lessons are still to be learned from the Americans, in contrast to their unwise and frightening world politics. I doubt that librarians and library scientists from a European country would have been able to produce anything as bold and, yes, radical, as David Lankes and his colleagues and students have done with this Atlas. As the financial, political and ecological crisis deepens, it will however become necessary to do it. “Man muss so radikal sein wie die Wirklichkeit — you have to be as radical as reality” (Bertolt Brecht).

4.

The reductionism of the Atlas of New Librarianship can be turned against it. Is it possible to distil the mission of the librarians into one single sentence (“to improve society trough facilitating knowledge creation on their communities”) ? Yet it might be necessary to do so in a certain situation. The

3 Wikimedia: my spelling is intentional. There is the Wikipedia, of course, but there is also the Wikisource, the Wikiversity, the Wikinews and many other wikis.

4 The Atlas explains the choice of the word “agreement” with a reference to its place in Gordon Pask's conversation theory: “Why do conversants bother to exchange language of any sort back and forth? Pask's answer is to reach an agreement. These conversants might seek an agreement on the time of the day, the solution to a nuclear crisis, the solution to a reference question, or even within an individual that a sound came from an object he or she saw fell to the floor.” (p. 39)

librarians (as everybody else) have to focus on what is most important right now. Furthermore, who can convincingly deny that the library (as most of our institutions) are in deep crisis? All that is solid melts into air, wrote Marx and Engels. Well, what now when even the books of the library, for instance, seem to dissolve into e-books with open access and open data? In this precarious situation one has to find some “thread” to keep on to. A life-line.

As I already indicated above, I would recommend that we gratefully seize hold of this lifebuoy from David Lankes and his crew at New York's Syracuse University. However, once the buoy has helped us to reach the shore, what are we actually going to do?

Here we stand on *terra firma* again. We now have, as it were, a second chance to go somewhere. We even have an excellent map! But where, and in which direction, shall we start walking?

Looking hard for some answer to this question, I found... Norman Cousins. As I am not from America, I had not even heard about this guy before. However, the Atlas quotes Norman Cousins, writing that:

“The library is not a shrine for the worship of books. It is not a temple where literacy incense must be burned or where one's devotion to the bound book is expressed in ritual. A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates, should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas.”

Although this might just be another and perhaps slightly more poetical way of pointing out that the library ought to facilitate the creation of knowledge etc., it was enough to arouse my curiosity. So I found out some facts about Norman Cousins and ordered one of his books, called *Modern Man is Obsolete*⁵, which I have now read.

Now *here* we have something! Norman Cousins wrote that essay already in August 1945, right after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His reflections on the new situation were not unlike those of Albert Camus, Mohandas Gandhi, or Albert Einstein. They *were*, however, significantly different from what Harry Truman, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle said at the time. In particular, they differed from what the latter-mentioned guys *did* at the time. (Note: The difference between what Obama said and what Obama did.)

To continue and finish this book-review: should librarians limit themselves to facilitate the creation of knowledge *in their communities*? Could not the library also become the midwifery of, in particular, the active peace-making *in the world* which Norman Cousins was asking for, and therefore, of the abolition of the weapons of mass destruction?

In the Atlas of New Librarianship, I find nothing that would explicitly forbid such an interpretation. No, this new Atlas certainly can be a very useful tool in our struggle to create libraries for the people. But only on the condition that we also have a progressive international perspective.

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⁵ Cousins, Norman: *Modern Man Is Obsolete*. The Viking Press. New York 1945. — Norman Cousins (June 24, 1915 – November 30, 1990) was an American political journalist, author, professor, and world peace advocate. (Wikipedia)