

On Libraries and Political Power As If Montesquieu Still Mattered

Abstract of the contribution to “Fair Use of Information - Seminar on Information Ethics, Helsinki, November 25th 2009” , arranged by the 80th Anniversary Committee of the Finnish Research Library Association in cooperation with the Association’s International Relations Group. By library and social forum activist Mikael Böök, MA. Email: book@kaapeli.fi

This speech/paper is about the library as a political category and a potential state power. Once we speak about state powers in the plural, or the division of powers within the state, Montesquieu is a natural reference. The additional “as if M. still mattered” is, firstly, an intended sarcasm. (A cynicism of the *citoyen sans pouvoir*.) Secondly, the human society and the human condition changed definitely ca 1945, with the advent of the WMD and the computer. From then on, human life continues only “as if” the problems of disarmament and of the necessary political transformation of the political system into some kind of (democratic, hopefully) global government, or global governance, had already been solved. Montesquieu's sharp Republican sense for the need to divide the power (to take power from some, and to give it to others) is supposed to be a necessary premise for the solutions.

What possibility is there for the Library to become a relatively independent fourth, Informational, State Power, which checks and balances the Powers of the Executive, the Legislative and the Judicial branches of the State? The idea of the Fourth Power is not found in Montesquieu; it appears only during the first part of the Nineteenth Century in writers like T.B. Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle. They coined the expression *Fourth Estate* to describe an informational power, which they thought was of a beneficial kind. They included, firstly, the political reporters of the Press, but also, in a larger sense, all writers, the entire institution of literature and, indeed, the library. The expression has lived on ever since. Nowadays it also refers to radio and television, and sometimes even to blogs and wikis. Yet the “fourth estate”, or the “fourth power” has remained a loose idea; it is parable, and a metaphor, but not really a concept of philosophy and/or political science. The theme of this speech/paper is that the library is now rapidly *becoming* a fourth state power because of the global spread of the internet. Therefore, the political concept has also to be developed. This idea is in part based on Ranganathan's 5th law of library science, which states that the library is a growing organism. Supposedly, the internet is the youngest branch on that old tree, i.e. an extension of the age-old social institution, the library.

The fundamental problem of the library, when considered as an emerging state power, is how it can transform itself from a politically passive public service into a political agency. The speaker/writer seeks a solution to this problem in two interconnected phenomena: a) the almost cybernetic, or self-governing, nature of the internet, as we know it today; this feature of the Net must be defended, continued, strengthened, and inscribed in the basic laws (Constitution) of society; and b) the perspective, which has been opened by process of the World Social Forum (WSF), towards a global civil society.

The WSF has been defined as an “open space” by Chico Whitaker, one of its founders, and by many of its participants. This means, notably, that the WSF as such does not make common political resolutions or programs. At a conference during the WSF event in Mumbai 2006, Ms Kay Raseroka, who was at the time chair of the IFLA, stated that the library and the WSF are both “open spaces”. The speech/paper discusses how to create permanent links between the “open space” of the social forum, and that of the library.

A key question is this: how can the peoples of the social forum and the librarians together define and “classify” the global political issues in a way that guarantees the continuity of the cybernetic “library power”, and reinforces it? A distinction is introduced between classifications of knowledge, which have been created by more or less professional LIS (library and information specialists), and classifications of social activities, which are made, and indeed often enforced, by rulers of the state (the list of 'Ministries' of a modern national state being the archetypal example), but also by the peoples of the social forum. An example of the latter: the 21 “actionable themes”, which were adopted by the International Council of the WSF during the preparations of the WSF event in Nairobi (January 2007), and the experience of the WSF Library Project of the NIGD (www.nigd.org ; for the example of the 21 actionable themes, see, in particular, www.wsflibrary.org). Other important questions concern the role of the librarians in what has been called 'internet governance' in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) . In the immediate situation, it is also necessary to discuss the role and future of Google Inc.