The library of the future: Services, agility and a functional identity continuum

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Abstract

Academic libraries are currently undergoing fundamental change. Digitisation, open access, research data management, artificial intelligence, changing learning and research practices, and the transformation of the publishing system are broadening their remit whilst simultaneously raising users' expectations of them. In international professional discourse, this development is often described as a transition from a collection-centred library to one that is more service- and workflow-oriented. (Dempsey and Malpas 2018; Pinfield, Cox and Rutter 2017; Lavoie and Bryant 2026) This brings with it new opportunities. Libraries can develop new services, align themselves more closely with research and learning processes, and expand their role as an

infrastructure for academic communication. At the same time, an institutional tension is emerging. Library services are increasingly breaking down into individual services, some of which could also be provided by other organisational units. This makes the question of what enables the library to remain recognisable as a library all the more pressing. This article proposes framing this question using the concept of the 'functional identity continuum'. This does not imply a static adherence to traditional forms, but rather an interconnection between collection, selection, cataloguing, contextualisation, access, space, preservation, outreach and institutional responsibility. From this perspective, the library of the future remains a plausible institutional form only if it sustainably integrates new services and anchors them to a core library function.

Keywords: library of the future; academic library; Open Access; research data; scholarly communication; library as an institution; functional identity continuum; digital transformation; service orientation.

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1. Introduction

The future of the library has been the subject of debate for several decades, under varying circumstances. In the 1980s and 1990s, the focus was on the concept of the digital library, extending as far as the 'library without walls'. As early as 1986, John R. Sack described the 'library without walls' as a new prototype for academic library development; a few years later, Roger Chartier explored the cultural and media-historical implications of 'Libraries without Walls' (Sack 1986; Chartier 1993) Later, the focus shifted to open access, research data, learning spaces, makerspaces, the digital humanities, bibliometrics, research support and, most recently, artificial intelligence. Almost every one of these developments was linked to the expectation that the

library would reinvent itself, leave its traditional routines behind and align itself more closely with the actual working practices of its users.

These expectations were by no means unfounded. Scholarly work is changing significantly. Research is increasingly digital, data-intensive, collaborative, international and infrastructure-mediated. Study and teaching take place in hybrid spaces, on digital platforms and within a ‘ ’ knowledge environment, in which information overload, uncertainty about source quality and algorithmically structured visibility have become the norm. In their SCONUL study, Pinfield, Cox and Rutter describe the future of academic libraries accordingly as an interplay of several interrelated trends: ‘datafied scholarship’, ‘connected learning’, ‘service-oriented libraries’, ‘blurred identities’ and ‘intensified contextual pressures’. (Pinfield, Cox and Rutter 2017) Under these conditions, it seems plausible that libraries can no longer be described solely in terms of their collections, buildings, catalogues and lending services.

New services alone do not answer this question. It is not only a matter of which new services libraries can offer. At least as important is the question of whether these services are still intrinsically linked. Research data management, APC administration, open access advice, publication services, learning space design, AI training, bibliometrics, metadata management and long-term digital archiving may be useful in their own right. However, they do not automatically justify the library as an institution. Some of these tasks could also be assigned to data centres, research services, academic support units, finance departments, communications offices or external service providers. It is precisely for this reason that the institutional question takes on a new sense of urgency.

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In this article, I proceed from a two-part thesis. Firstly, the transformation of academia opens up new and thoroughly sustainable areas of responsibility for libraries. Secondly, this expansion simultaneously gives rise to the risk of institutional decoupling if the new tasks are no longer tied to a recognisable fundamental library concept. I refer to this fundamental concept as the 'functional identity continuum'. The term builds on reflections I have set out elsewhere at regarding the library as an institution. Historically, the collection, collection management and reading rooms were 'to a large extent identity-forming' because they did not exist in isolation alongside one another, but functioned as a functionally interconnected structure. (Ball 2023) Collection, selection, cataloguing, organisation, contextualisation, access, space, preservation, outreach and institutional responsibility formed an institutional arrangement. The question of the library of the future is therefore not primarily a question of whether libraries will be traditional or innovative. Rather, what needs to be clarified is whether it will be possible to integrate new services into such a functional identity continuum.

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2. From the collection-centred library to the service- and workflow-oriented library

In the international debate, the transformation of academic libraries is often described as a shift from a 'collections-based library' to a 'services-based' or 'workflows-based library'. Dempsey and Malpas demonstrate that, within an increasingly differentiated higher education system, libraries can no longer be understood solely in terms of internal metrics such as the size of their collections, circulation figures or reference services. Their relevance stems increasingly from how they contribute to institutional goals, support research,

promote academic success, enable academic visibility, facilitate digital workflows or foster interdisciplinary collaboration. They conclude that the benchmark for library excellence must in future be based on ‘strategic fit to the needs of the institution’ rather than on collection size or circulation figures. (Dempsey and Malpas 2018)

This shift alters the context of the collection, not its significance. The collection remains relevant without being the sole focus of library identity in every respect. With regard to the development of academic collections, Dempsey, Malpas and Lavoie have pointed out that libraries are increasingly operating within networked, collaborative and, in some cases, shared structures. Holdings are no longer built up exclusively at a local level, but are collectively secured, made available digitally, integrated into platforms and utilised in new forms of scholarly work. (Dempsey, Malpas and Lavoie 2014) As early as 2010, Hazen argued that, in the face of economic and technical changes, research libraries would need to redefine their collection policies without compromising the strategic importance of collections. (Hazen 2010)

The SCONUL study by Pinfield, Cox and Rutter also describes this development as a reorganisation of academic libraries across several areas of tension. The concept of ‘blurred identities’ is particularly illuminating in this context. It highlights that, whilst libraries are entering new fields, they may at the same time be losing their former institutional clarity. The authors state: “The dividing lines between the library and other parts of the university are already becoming blurred.” (Pinfield, Cox and Rutter 2017) The library’s newly acquired ability to connect goes hand in hand with a loss of distinctiveness.

The OCLC concept of the ‘Library Beyond the Library’ places strategic emphasis on this point. Lavoie and Bryant describe how academic libraries extend their

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impact beyond the traditional library setting when they align themselves with institutional priorities, cooperate with other units and actively demonstrate their value for research and teaching . (Lavoie and Bryant 2026) At the same time, they emphasise that this development requires agility. ‘Agility is the watchword of the future’, states the OCLC report. (Lavoie and Bryant 2026) Libraries therefore operate in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments; their services must be reviewed, scaled back, expanded or reconfigured as institutional priorities, technologies and user needs change.

This perspective is productive for the library of the future because it does not tie the library down to its past. However, strategic orientation, cooperation and visibility require the library to have its own distinct profile, for cooperation only makes the library visible if it remains clear what unique contribution it makes within the collaboration. If this recognisable contribution is lacking, the library may be involved in many areas, but will no longer be perceived as an independent institution in any of them. The ‘Library beyond the library’ would then run the risk of becoming a library without a library.

3. User-orientation and agility as necessary but not sufficient criteria

User-centredness is one of the key guiding principles of contemporary library development. It is well-founded in practical terms. Today, researchers expect support not only with access to literature, but throughout the entire research process: with research, data management, publication, visibility, persistent identifiers, licensing and rights issues, bibliometric analyses, open access requirements and, increasingly, the informed use of AI tools. In their ARL study on new liaison roles, Jaguszewski and Williams describe how library work is having a greater impact on research, teaching and academic communities, thereby renegotiating traditional boundaries between the library and academic

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practice. (Jaguszewski and Williams 2013) Students, for their part, expect learning environments, digital resources, advice, media literacy, accessibility and flexible workspaces.

These changing requirements suggest the need for an agile library. In this context, agility refers to the ability to monitor changing needs, apply existing expertise to new contexts, form partnerships and adapt services in line with institutional goals. This may involve expanding certain tasks, scaling back others or developing new forms of collaboration. In this context, Lavoie and Bryant emphasise that libraries must continuously review and recalibrate their services as institutional priorities, technologies and user needs change. (Lavoie and Bryant 2026, 16 ff.)

However, user-centredness is not a sufficient condition for institutional identity. According to their own self-understanding, libraries have, in the past too, anticipated needs that users have not always articulated directly: the long-term preservation of knowledge, the maintenance of authority data, the cataloguing of hard-to-find materials, the preservation of cultural heritage, the quality of metadata, or the ability to draw on today's research in the future. It is within this long-term perspective that a distinction lies between mere service provision and institutional responsibility.

This distinction becomes particularly significant in digital environments. Users often perceive digital availability as immediate access. The underlying conditions – such as licensing rights, platform dependencies, metadata quality, long-term archiving, format migration, persistence and provenance – often remain invisible. A related form of invisibility concerns the algorithmic visibility of knowledge. Schlotheuber puts this particularly succinctly with regard to search engines: 'With search engines such as Google, we often find things more

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quickly and precisely, but we only know what we find and not what we do not find'. (Schlotheuber 2023, 16) The library of the future should therefore not only be a user-oriented service provider, but also an institution that makes the conditions for use visible, stable and verifiable.

4. Open Access and Scholarly Communication: An Expanded Role and New Interdependencies

The transformation of academic publishing towards Open Access has changed the role of the library in a significant way. Under the subscription system, libraries were primarily purchasers, licence holders, intermediaries and archivists of academic literature. In the Open Access system, they are becoming more deeply involved in issues of funding, consultancy, contracts and governance. Publication funds, transformation agreements, institutional repositories, advice on Diamond Open Access models, monitoring of publication costs and advice on licences are becoming part of their remit. Peter Suber fundamentally describes Open Access as free, digital, online access to academic literature, which simultaneously requires new legal and economic arrangements. (Suber 2012)

This development broadens the scope of the library's activities. Libraries can act as mediators between academia, publishers, research funding bodies, university management and political objectives. They possess expertise in accessibility, licensing, metadata, long-term archiving and institutional information provision. In this sense, the library can function as a mediating infrastructure within the field of scholarly communication. In my article on the crisis in scholarly communication (Ball, 2025), I described this role as a way of understanding the library as a 'reconciler of the conflicting parties in science

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communication'. In the age of open access, libraries are partners in the publication process, not merely as acquisitions and access institutions.

However, Open Access also brings with it certain ambivalences. The reversal of payment flows from reading to publishing creates new dependencies. Where publication charges, transformative licences or centralised funding mechanisms dominate, the ability to publish may depend more heavily on institutional budgets than before. This shift in the cost logic can be described as follows: submitting a manuscript under APC conditions is no longer merely a question of academic quality, but also of available funding. At the same time, the market may become further concentrated around large international providers if large-scale contract models tie up local budgets and weaken smaller publishers or alternative initiatives. Larivière, Haustein and Mongeon have described an existing trend towards concentration in the academic publishing market as an 'oligopoly of academic publishers'; they demonstrate empirically that a small number of large providers control a significant proportion of academic publications. (Larivière, Haustein and Mongeon 2015)

This results in a complex role for libraries: they promote Open Access whilst remaining aware of the economic and institutional side-effects ; they support publication infrastructures without seeing themselves as publishers; and they facilitate Diamond Open Access models without underestimating the requirements these place on professional publishing (quality assurance, editing, production processes, visibility, distribution channels, metadata, sustainability).The Diamond Open Access study by Bosman et al. shows that, whilst Diamond Open Access represents an important non-commercial publication model, it is often fragmented, resource-dependent and vulnerable in terms of infrastructure. (Bosman et al. 2021) It is precisely this vulnerability that demonstrates why Diamond Open Access journals rely on professional

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support that goes beyond mere funding, for example in areas such as quality assurance, metadata or long-term availability. Librarian involvement in such models is therefore only plausible if it not only provides resources but also links these tasks to the library's own core functions, such as cataloguing, preservation and dissemination. Publication-related services gain credibility within the library context when they are understood as contributing to access, visibility, quality, long-term availability, institutional responsibility for knowledge and links to the library's collections.

5. Holdings, Collections and the Problem of the 'Library without Collections'

One of the key issues facing the library of the future concerns the library's holdings as an organised collection. Digitisation and open access have significantly altered the relationship between libraries and local holdings. Electronic resources are often no longer held locally but are made accessible via platforms. Open-access content is freely available and, at first glance, no longer appears to require libraries to acquire it . Research data, software, preprints, digital editions and new publication formats are also broadening the concept of what has hitherto been termed a scholarly object. In her study on 'Big Data, Little Data, No Data', Borgman has shown that digital scholarship not only generates larger volumes of data, but also requires new forms of infrastructure, documentation and reusability. (Borgman 2015)

This raises the question of whether libraries can continue to be libraries in future even without their own collections. The idea of a 'library without walls' is not new. Sack and Chartier discussed it early on, albeit from different perspectives. (Sack 1986; Chartier 1993) Since then, digital libraries have established themselves as indispensable infrastructures, but they have not

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completely replaced the traditional library. Rather, a hybrid structure has emerged in which physical, digital, licensed, open-access and institutional collections coexist.

Building on this concept, the question can be posed as to whether the discussion might shift in future from the ‘library without walls’ to the ‘library without collections’. This concept is analytically useful because it highlights the crux of the problem. If content is available everywhere, the question arises as to what, then, constitutes the library’s responsibility for its holdings. One possible answer might be to understand the collection no longer primarily as ownership, but as a responsible, curated and contextualised knowledge base. The collection would then no longer be primarily what a library physically owns or has legally licensed, but rather what it selects, catalogues, enriches, preserves, contextualises and makes accessible to its users. Thomas Stäcker has highlighted this connection in relation to the digital collection mandate and, using the ‘ ’ formula ‘Data is King’, has drawn attention to the strategic importance of library data and collection work. (Stäcker 2024)

This expanded concept of a collection can include research data, open-access publications, digital collections, software, audiovisual materials, institutional publications, teaching materials and curated corpora. However, a distinction must be made: the mere storage of data or the mere linking of freely available content does not in itself constitute added value from a library perspective. It is only through selection, quality assurance, metadata, contextualisation, linking, rights clarification and a long-term perspective that a library collection in the broader sense comes into being. Tenopir et al. state with regard to research data: ‘Research data is an essential part of the scholarly record.’ (Tenopir et al. 2017, 24) Research data is thus part of the body of scientific knowledge, but

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does not automatically constitute library holdings. It only becomes so through institutional processing, description, curation and preservation.

Herein lies a possible future for a transformed understanding of collections. The collection does not disappear as a result, but rather changes its form. It would lose its exclusive ties to physical media and locations, yet retain its significance as an epistemic point of reference. Without such a point of reference, library services become mere supplementary offerings, their connection to the library's functional identity continuum is lost.

6. The functional identity continuum as an analytical category

The concept of the functional identity continuum seeks to capture this tension. It refers to the interconnection of those functions through which libraries remain and become recognisable as libraries. These include collection, selection, cataloguing, organisation, contextualisation, access, space, preservation, mediation and institutional responsibility. Historically, these functions were closely linked to the physical collection, the catalogue, the reading room and the library's institutional embedding within academia and education. In today's digital age, they are becoming partially decoupled from one another.

This dislocation opens up new possibilities, but also harbours risks. It enables new specialisations, collaborations and services. Research support can be linked to data centres, legal services or research administration. Publication consultancy can collaborate with university presses, open-access offices or communications departments. Research support, publication consultancy, learning spaces and research data management can each be linked to existing

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structures outside the library: to data centres and legal services, to university presses and open-access offices, to teaching concepts and student support services, and to institutional and national infrastructures. From a sociological perspective, this shifts not only the remit but also the question of who within the university is authorised to carry out these tasks. Scott understands institutions as relatively enduring social structures stabilised by regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements. (Scott 2014) According to Scott's model, if these elements shift, this has significant consequences for the organisation, even though Scott himself does not specifically address the library.

This development becomes problematic when library functions lose their internal coherence. Individual activities may remain useful, but their connection to one another is no longer apparent. In this case, whilst the library remains formally active, its institutional recognisability diminishes. I have already described this danger with regard to the library in the year 2040: if individual services no longer require a link to the library and their affiliation is merely asserted, there is little to prevent these services from being reorganised under a new organisational framework. (Ball 2023, 90)

The functional identity continuum is therefore not a call for a return to the old library. Rather, it serves as an assessment criterion and raises the question of whether new tasks can be combined with traditional library functions in such a way that a recognisable connection is established and a link back to the library's institutional backbone is maintained. Research data management is then not merely data storage, but forms part of collection and cataloguing, because research data, like publications, must be catalogued and made discoverable, and to reproducibility and academic integrity, because without secure, traceable data, scientific results cannot be verified. Open Access advice is then not merely funding management, but forms part of access and visibility,

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because it determines who can access research results, and of publication policy, because it helps shape the conditions under which academic work is published in the first place. AI literacy is therefore not merely about tool training, but is also linked to source criticism and an understanding of metadata, because algorithmically generated content requires the same scrutiny as other sources, and to provenance analysis and epistemic responsibility, because it remains unclear on which data an AI system is based if no one verifies this provenance. Learning spaces are then not merely about space management, but form part of a knowledge environment, because concentration, exchange, access to media, advice and guidance only enable the work for which these spaces are intended when they interact.

From this perspective, the library of the future consists of more than just a collection with additional services. Its identity arises from the institutional configuration of its knowledge functions. Its identity rests less on individual activities than on their interconnection and interrelation.

7. Libraries as epistemic and social infrastructures

The English-language debate on research libraries increasingly emphasises that libraries are not merely providers of information, but rather integral parts of wider knowledge infrastructures. Tenopir et al. demonstrate, using the example of research data services, that libraries in Europe are taking on new roles in advisory services, data management, policy and infrastructure development. (Tenopir et al. 2017, 24) Cox and Pinfield also describe research data management as a field in which libraries are redefining their current activities and future priorities. (Cox and Pinfield 2014) Jaguszewski and

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Williams describe new liaison roles in which librarians are more closely integrated into research, teaching and subject communities. (Jaguszewski and Williams 2013) Lewis, for his part, interprets the academic library as an institution that must rethink its roles in the context of digital disruption, without relinquishing its fundamental responsibility for scholarly communication. (Lewis 2016)

These positions represent shifts in operational responsibilities. Schlotheuber's concept of 'thinking space', however, argues on a different level: that of the symbolic and societal significance of libraries. Both levels are interlinked, because the operational remit can only be legitimised as a library function if the institution behind it remains recognisable as an independent societal hub of knowledge. Without this connection, RDM and liaison roles would be interchangeable services lacking an institutional core.

Eva Schlotheuber describes libraries as 'spaces of thought' and as the 'memory of society'. Libraries, she argues, are 'far more than mere repositories of knowledge'; they are 'spaces of thought' that facilitate intergenerational understanding. (Schlotheuber 2023) Elsewhere, she refers to libraries as the 'memory of society' and as a 'collective space of thought'. (Schlotheuber 2023) This function does not become obsolete even in digital environments, but it is more difficult to make visible. When digital knowledge systems are structured invisibly by search engines, platforms and algorithms, this structuring itself eludes the kind of reflection that defines a library's space for thought. This is precisely where the change lies: not in the loss of the function, but in the increasing difficulty of exercising it in an environment whose organising principles are themselves no longer transparent.

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Here, too, lies a future area of focus for the library. It can help to make the conditions of visibility, order and availability of scholarly knowledge transparent. In the age of algorithmic search and generative AI, it is not merely important that information is available. Equally significant is how it is found, selected, weighted, summarised and interpreted. In their seminal study on ‘ ’ – classification and infrastructure – Bowker and Star demonstrated that classification systems are by no means neutral tools, but rather have social, technical and epistemic consequences. (Bowker and Star 1999) In this context, Edwards et al. refer to ‘knowledge infrastructures’, that is, complex socio-technical arrangements that enable, stabilise and facilitate the circulation of knowledge. (Edwards et al. 2013) Historically, libraries have possessed expertise in dealing with classification systems, metadata, classification, authority data, provenance and source criticism. Whether and how these competencies can be transferred to AI-driven environments is an open question that neither Bowker and Star nor Edwards et al. have investigated, as their work focuses on classical classification systems and general knowledge infrastructures respectively. Nevertheless, such a transfer seems obvious, because the principles themselves – such as verifying provenance and assessing biases – apply regardless of whether they are applied to a library catalogue or an AI system.

At the same time, the library remains a social infrastructure whose learning and working spaces are more than just a physical resource; they are part of an academic culture. Neutral terms such as ‘workplace’ obscure the specific quality of library spaces, which offer more than just a workspace.

They differ from ordinary workspaces in that they are embedded within a knowledge environment. Such spaces combine concentration, access to media and guidance with social presence and institutional reliability – characteristics

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that arise from their embedding within a knowledge environment but which cannot be empirically substantiated within the present framework and must therefore be understood as the author's assessment.

It is precisely in this combination of epistemic and social infrastructure that a lasting distinction lies between libraries and mere workspaces.

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8. Artificial Intelligence, Platforms and New Requirements for Building Trust

Artificial intelligence is intensifying many of the developments described. AI systems are transforming research, writing, translation, summarisation, review processes, metadata enrichment, literature review and academic communication. This creates new opportunities for efficiency, multilingualism and accessibility, but at the same time raises new questions regarding traceability, bias and academic judgement, arising from the very automation that makes these efficiency gains possible in the first place. The ACRL Trend Report 2024 notes that generative AI has sparked discussions in academic libraries about search, recommendation, the cataloguing of digital materials, transcription and translation, as well as debates on bias, data protection, training data, disinformation, copyright and plagiarism. (Quigley et al. 2024)

The more recent trend discussion emphasises that academic libraries are becoming increasingly active in AI-related fields such as AI literacy, but also in areas such as open science and reproducibility – because generative AI makes it more difficult to verify research results – and in equitable publishing, because

AI-supported processes in peer review and publication can create new inequalities in access, and in student wellbeing, because dealing with AI in everyday student life creates a need for guidance. (Quigley et al. 2024) Long and Magerko define AI literacy as a set of competencies that enables individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies, communicate with AI, and use AI systems appropriately. (Long and Magerko 2020) Lo demonstrates, through his CLEAR framework, that prompt engineering goes beyond technical operational competence and can be linked to information literacy, critical thinking and the evaluation of AI-generated content. (Lo 2023)

Here, too, a similar ambivalence is evident as in the preceding sections. The library can gain new relevance if it transfers skills in information evaluation, metadata, source criticism and research support into AI-driven contexts. If, on the other hand, AI services are presented as a mere add-on, they lose their library-specific profile, as they then differ in no way from the use of tools that other higher education institutions can also offer. A library-based perspective on AI must therefore focus less on the use of tools per se and more on what distinguishes this from a mere service provision. It examines how algorithmic systems structure access to knowledge, what data and texts are processed within them, how provenance remains visible, what role metadata plays, and how academic communities can develop trust in digital knowledge infrastructures.

This does not mean that the library becomes a technical supervisory body for all AI systems – a role that nobody expects it to fulfil in the first place. However, it can remain a forum for institutional reflection on the conditions governing scholarly information. AI systems automate access to knowledge without disclosing the data on which their results are based or the criteria by which they are weighted. It is precisely this gap that remains, whether or not the

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library fills it, and that is why the question of its contribution to traceability, source criticism, contextualisation and trust is becoming increasingly pressing, rather than being rendered superfluous by automation.

9. The library of the future as an integrating institution

The developments outlined above paint a picture of the library of the future that is neither purely optimistic nor does it descend into cultural pessimism. Libraries are expected to develop further services, cooperate more closely with other organisational units and adapt to dynamic user requirements. In light of changing academic and learning practices, this development is plausible and, in many respects, productive. It also aligns with international strategic debates in which libraries are increasingly described as partners in open science, research support, data management, scholarly communication and digital infrastructure. (Bertelmann 2024; LIBER 2022)

What remains to be clarified is what will ensure that the library remains recognisable as an institution. The answer does not lie in individual characteristics. Buildings, printed collections, open access, research data, learning spaces and AI expertise are not, taken in isolation, sufficient to make the library recognisable as an institution. A relational understanding appears more viable: the library remains institutionally recognisable where it integrates diverse knowledge functions, links them to a diversified collection and ensures their long-term preservation.

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The library of the future would thus be an epistemic and social infrastructure. It combines collection, selection, cataloguing, organisation, contextualisation, access, space, preservation, mediation and institutional responsibility. It operates between the realms of a local institution and a global platform ecosystem, and in doing so must reconcile openness with security, user-orientation with long-term responsibility, and service with epistemic order. Its contribution lies in establishing connections between individual services, not merely in providing them.

The relational understanding outlined in the previous paragraph is already an application of the functional identity continuum, even though the term was not yet mentioned there. It allows innovation and tradition to be considered together rather than pitted against one another. New services are assessed in terms of how they fit into the library context, rather than being rejected outright. In this process, traditional functions migrate into changing media, data and platform environments, rather than being preserved. The library of the future would thus be neither a merely modernised collection-based library nor an arbitrarily expandable service agency, but an institution that establishes a recognisable relationship between old and new knowledge functions.

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10. Summary

The library of the future can hardly be conceived as a continuation of the 20th-century library. Science, research, publishing, learning, media and digital infrastructures have changed too much for that. However, the notion that the library could permanently assert itself as an open collection of individual

services is equally unconvincing. Such a model would remain flexible, but would lose institutional stability.

The concept of the functional identity continuum offers a way of conceptualising this tension. It highlights the fact that, historically, libraries have gained significance through the interplay of collection, selection, cataloguing, organisation, contextualisation, access, space, preservation, mediation and institutional responsibility. In today's digital age, these functions are shifting, yet their significance remains unaffected by this. The crucial question is whether they are being reconfigured in new ways.

The library of the future is therefore more than a place, more than a collection and more than a service provider. Rather, it emerges as an epistemic and social infrastructure that not only makes knowledge accessible, but also organises it, contextualises it, preserves it, ensures it remains verifiable and integrates it into scholarly work processes. Its future viability will depend on whether it can integrate new services into this framework. Where this is achieved, the library will remain more than the sum of its offerings, as manifested in the functional identity continuum. Where this is not achieved over a prolonged period, its institutional form will lose credibility despite growing activity, and other organisational units will take over individual functions until scarcely anything remains of the library as an independent institution.

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