

An unforgettably intriguing and an enriching learning experience: Report of a study visit to the German National Library, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, from 8th-12th April, 2019

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Introduction : The Prelude to the Visit

The unexamined life is not worth living.

-Socrates, Apology 36a

Librarianship is a rather dynamic realm where change is the only byword. In fact, today's libraries, be it academic, public or special are a far cry from what they used to be a decade ago. Concomitantly, it is incumbent upon library professionals to constantly refine upon their library skills not only to keep one's professional credentials relevant but also keep the profession of librarianship relevant. In fact, the advent of Information Technology has accorded an altogether new dimension to librarianship so much so that right now the much-banded concepts of the **information profession** professionally and of **information science** as an academic discipline has now become the consuming passion for policymakers and information/library professionals globally. With the fact of ubiquity of information in the wake of a variety of information tools like blogs, social media, online newspapers, databases and so on particularly in this postmodern and post-truth era, the importance of library/information professionals needs no emphasis. Furthermore, the regular innovations within the digital realm entails similar refinements incorporating the latest digital innovations. So, all in all, the information profession or librarianship-in-a new-avatar as I perceive it, has become all the more challenging but nonetheless intriguing.

So, I was quite intrigued about knowing a thing or two about how cutting-edge library services are been developed and hence the reason to undertake this week-long study visit to attend the information week at the German National Library (DNB), Frankfurt am Main. Obviously, a national library in terms of its agenda, vision, mission and operations is rather different from academic libraries, but then there are certain similar areas like user experience (UX) design, archives and so on. In fact, after the visit I can say in hindsight that notwithstanding the differences, national libraries are indeed a treasure-trove of inspiration on how library professionals and policymakers ought to frame the agenda for the library sector at large. So, at the very outset, I wish to proffer a huge thanks to the Director of DNB , Frankfurt am Main, Ute Schwens as well as to Dr. Lars Svensson, Frank Brinkmann and Regina Weiss for providing me the opportunity to attend the information week at the German National Library, Frankfurt am Main as well as to Sabine Stummeyer, Hella Klauser, Dr. Fabian Franke and Mrs. Kerstin

Broring of Bibliothek and Information International (BII) for providing me with financial assistance that helped me immensely in undertaking this visit. Furthermore, I am also indebted to the Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor of Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Prof. (Dr.) Kuldip Chand Agnihotri, for permitting me to undertake this visit.

The visit in itself was pretty intriguing in that it has shaped my perspective on librarianship in many ways. From aspects like technical services to more specialized topics like web archiving, automated indexing and others, it was a really intellectually stimulating and enjoyable learning experience. The main drift of the information week was to get us acquainted with several aspects of the functioning of the DNB from acquisitions to the user services, to proffer us a comprehensive picture of what an archetypal national library looks like. Just like any other profession, I personally believe that libraries are an uncharted realm that needs to be discovered, re-discovered and refined upon as a knowledge space where patrons can pursue a critical but utilitarian engagement with information and this very visit vindicated that conviction.



[Photo credits : The author himself]

The German National Library in Brief : History and Mission

Even bad books are books and therefore sacred.

- *Gunter Grass, The Tin Drum, 1959*

Past and present are as one.

- *John Greenleaf Whittier, "To William Lloyd Garrison,"*

1879

The German National Library (DNB) is the main archival library as well as the national bibliographic centre for the Federal Republic of Germany. A federal institution with a legal standing courtesy of the public law, the German National Library is commended with the task of acquiring, archiving, technically processing and providing access to the populace all German and German-language publications starting from 1913, foreign publications relating to Germany, translations of German works as well as the works of German emigres published abroad between 1913-45. As a part of its agenda, the German National Library has entered into cooperative relations with other national and international libraries. In fact, it is at the vanguard when it comes to framing regulations/standards for libraries in Germany as well as internationally. Operationally, its funds are been allocated from the budget of the Minister of State for Culture and Media. Currently, based in two cities- Leipzig (the main centre) and Frankfurt am Main- the German National Library employs 634 people. Besides, the German National Library also runs the German Exile Archive 1933-45, the Anne-Frank-Shoah Library and the German Museum of Book and Writing.

The history of the DNB is a rather long one going back into the early part of the 20th century. It all began when the City of Leipzig along with the Kingdom of Saxony and the Borsenverein der Deutschen Buchhändler zu Leipzig forged an agreement that eventuated in the foundation of the Deutsche Bücherei in Leipzig. From 1st January 1913, the Deutsche Bücherei, with Dr. Gustav Wahl as the director, was commended with the task of acquiring, technically processing and providing access, albeit free of charge, German and foreign-language publications published in Germany as well as German-language literature published abroad. During the years of the First World War, the Deutsche Bücherei was erected as per the plans of Oskar Pusch and the architectural acumen of Karl Schmidt and Karl Julius Baer. Till 1923, the Deutsche Bücherei carries on with its expansion in the face of tremendous economic difficulties. However, in 1933 times become bleak for the Deutsche B Bücherei in Leipzig as it becomes a handmaiden of the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda under the Nazis with the newly set-up NSDAP offices breathing down its neck. In fact, the miasma of censorship becomes so deeply entrenched that the draconian laws of the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda enjoined upon the Deutsche Bücherei a separate listing of the so-called officially censored literature that, from 1939-44, was consigned to a separate section titled "List of documents in the Deutsche Bücherei kept under lock and key".

The air raids on Leipzig during 1943 and the concomitant fire damage to the Deutsche Bücherei compelled outright closure of the building from January 1944 and around 1.6 million books were been removed. In 1945 as the Second World War comes to an end, the Deutsche

Bücherei is re-opened in November. As the allied forces carve out Germany into four zones, the Deutsche Bücherei Leipzig is no longer the central archive library. By contraries, in the western part of Germany, initiatives are undertaken to revive the book trade and libraries in Frankfurt am Main. From 1946 onwards the story of the rebuilding of the nation's collective heritage begins anew evidenced in the form of myriad developments, albeit gradually, including notable developments like the ratification of the "Law regarding the Deutsche Bibliothek" and its eventual establishment as a federal corporation under the public law. Hence, the Deutsche Bibliothek becomes the central legal depository library. Post- German unification the Deutsche Bücherei and the Deutsche Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main, are coalesced together into the new institution called Die Deutsche Bibliothek. Henceforth, the Die Deutsche Bibliothek has embarked on an ambitious new journey that evidences not only the development of a national library but contemporaneously the redefining of the German library sector at large. For instance, in 1st June, 2000 the Die Deutsche Bibliothek assumes control of the department of standard cataloguing from the German Library Institute wherein the newly formed Office for Library Standards becomes a sub-unit of the Die Deutsche Bibliothek while in 2006 the "law regarding the German National Library" comes into force from 29th June enabling acquisitions as well as technical processing and storage of online publications as a part of Germany's national heritage.

The Five-Day Visit: An Insight Into a Whole New Realm

Where observation is concerned, chance favours only the prepared mind.

- *Louis Pasteur, inaugural lecture as professor and dean of the faculty of science, University of Lille, Douai, France, December 7, 1854, in R. Valley-Redot, La Vie de Pasteur, 1900*

Practitioners have a privileged discourse with empirical reality.

- *Mary Ann Swain, "Models of Collaboration & Competition: The University Expectation," Association for Library and Information Science Education Annual Conference, 1989*

Day 1: 8th April, 2019

A short but memorable visit, the information week was from 8th-12th of April, 2019. The first day I along with three other participants, the others been from Egypt, Lithuania and Belarus were been proffered a warm welcome by Regina Weiss, the Secretary to the Director General at Frankfurt am Main, Ute Schwens and then ushered into Ute Schwens room where after a brief introduction we were been received by Claudia Löber-Knaak for a session on the acquisition of print resources (both monographs and periodicals). The session on acquisition was a rather new exposure for all of us not only because of the operational aspects relating to the task of acquisitions in the PICA Library Management System (from OCLC) but also the myriad legal aspects that govern the acquisitions process.

Post-lunch we had an intriguing session on the utility of authority data and the concept of the Integrated Authority File/ Gemeinsame Normdatei (GND) (by Stephanie Glagla-Dietz), the maintenance of library standards with reference to data sharing formats and cataloguing in Germany, Austria and the German-speaking regions of Switzerland (by Renate Behrens) and the concept of automated indexing (by Christa Schöning-Walter), basically focussing on the ins-and-outs of subject cataloguing in the DNB. Since 2006, after it was made legally mandatory for DNB to go for digital publications, it became evident that the traditional cataloguing methods were unsuitable and so the decision was taken for re-usage of the metadata provided by the publishers and depositors to create cataloguing records, wherein the depositors have to provide the digital object along with the metadata using specific metadata formats. Furthermore as subject data was not provided so DNB had to start a project in 2010 to develop methods for automated assignment of subject headings taken from the Gemeinsame Normdatei and in 2017 embarked upon a new idea of classification and subject indexing wherein the main focus was to create subject access points for retrieval by using automated procedures for creation of subject metadata. As it transpired from the presentations that, in the light of several issues encountered in the process of automated indexing for a diverse collection, the best thing is the possibility of re-cataloguing of publications in case of further methodological improvements to ease the task of retrieval.

Day 2: 9th April, 2019

The second day started with a session on web archiving by Susanne Puls. Web archiving is now a truism given the plethora of online materials and the DNB is legally enjoined to acquire, catalogue, index and archive the online publications including electronic magazines, ebooks, university dissertations, music files, audio books, relevant software/applications and so on. The law regarding the web archiving of the German National Library was passed on 22nd June, 2006. The task of web archiving by the German National Library is done by availing of the services of a German company called oia GmbH since 2012. The oia makes capital of its own crawlers for harvesting web pages, doing a quality check of those pages and then storing the data on their servers. The metadata gets automatically integrated into the DNB catalogue and access to such web archived data is only available through the reading rooms of the DNB. As with the case of acquisition of print materials, there is a plethora of legal formalities that needs to be taken care of before any sort of archiving is done. Personally speaking, I was intrigued about both the workflow and the legal aspects governing the archiving process in equal measure. Post-lunch we went for a tour of the house accompanied by Dr. Guido Bee that included various aspects like the reading rooms, the stacks, the technical processing departments, the periodicals section and so on. What appealed to all of us, particularly with reference to the reading rooms was that how time and again there is a renewed initiative to redefine the user experience. After this we had about an hour-and-half session on linked data (by Dr. Lars Svensson, Jana Hentschke and Panagiotis Kitmeridis) and its application in libraries, something that is currently dominating the agenda for library professionals globally. Personally, though it might have seemed a bit too esoteric given that there were certain hardcore computer science and logic concepts but nonetheless we quite at ease particularly more so during the application of the linked data concept at the DNB. In Indian libraries, linked data is yet to make its mark and these presentations proffered a wholly new idea as to how libraries become more utilitarian in this era of search engines by using and re-using their data to make information searching more easy and more enjoyable.

Day 3: 10th April, 2019

The day started with an open-house session with director Ute Schwens where she dwelt at large on the role of libraries and scholarly communications, the state of the German library sector in general (including the level of qualification required for German library staffs at different levels in the job hierarchy, the current state of human capital within the library sector and so on) and the German National Library, in terms of its operations. It was pretty enlivening conversation as it opened various dimensions of the German library milieu as well as of the discipline of Library and Information Science in Germany including names of journals like *Journal of Librarianship and Bibliography* (ZfBB; ZfBB-Online is published as a cooperative initiative with the Thuringian University and the State Library of Jena), *O-Bib* (better known as The Open Library Journal, published four times a year by the **VDB/**

Association of German Librarians, covering a wide range of library topics), the involvement of information professionals and scientists in the European chapter of the **Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIST)** and so on .

Post-lunch there was a session on cataloguing and RDA, including a session on ISSN as the ISSN National Centre in Germany is located at the DNB in both Leipzig and Frankfurt. The cataloguing session was conducted by Barbara Pfeifer starting from the type of materials catalogued (both physical as well as online) to using RDA. Some of the intriguing facts that transpired was that whatever is acquired is catalogued and made available within 24 hours including grey literature, that there are 65 full-time cataloguers to ensure speedy technical processing of information resources and the work of cataloguing being evenly distributed between Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main. Since cataloguing like other aspects of librarianship is an evolving aspect so time and again the staff are been trained accordingly to keep up with the latest developments. The session on ISSN was conducted by Christian Schütz, currently the Head of the National ISSN Centre for Germany at DNB and it dealt mainly on the ins-and-outs of managing ISSN records and the practical issues surrounding the integration of the ISSN records into the library management system. That very evening there was an intriguing documentary screening on the New York Public Library (prepared by Ex Libris) centring round the role of the New York Public Library in making a difference in the lives of the New Yorkers. Post-documentary it was an equally enjoyable moment with different library colleagues from Frankfurt and academics from other parts of Germany complete with Riesling and pretzels.

Day 4 : 11th April, 2019

The fourth day began with a session on the metadata services of the DNB. Here again, notwithstanding the technical aspects like the metadata selection procedures and the metadata services like DNB catalogue, SRU interface and so on, what seemed most important was the legal issues governing the metadata services. Post-lunch there was a session on the automated processes behind the online publications by Cornelia Diebel which proffered us a comprehensive walk-through of the laws governing the automate workflow, the online material file format types that are acquired and the various steps underlying the whole process of automated acquisitions. What particularly seemed quite intriguing to all of us was how the whole process was managed meticulously as per the given legal conditions which obviously is nothing permanent but refined upon time and again with changes in the digital realm. After this, we were taken on a tour of the German Exile Archive 1933-45 by Jesko Bender which was informative but alongside a rather poignant reminder of the terrible atrocities inflicted upon the Jewish victims and subsequently the terrible privations that many of them had to bear in newer climes. Personally speaking, I believe that this German Exile Archive is of utmost importance in this postmodern age, where the fact of authenticity/truth/coherence is untenable, because archival records as per postmodern sensibility is something dynamic that admits itself to myriad interpretations. Hence, we

information professionals need to create an informational culture so that patrons/scholars are emboldened to search for the myriad interpretations to better inform academic research.



[Photo credits : Eman Waheed, Reference Librarian, History Unit, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Egypt]

Day 5: 12th April, 2019

The last day we were feeling somewhat sad given the pretty enjoyable time we had at the DNB as well as the intriguing camaraderie that has developed among all of us. Today we had no presentation session but just one tour (both pre and post-lunch) of the whole library regarding the user services by Jörg Räuber. What most appealed to me was the fact that the DNB was contemplating the implementation of the concept of “Third Place” (a term coined by Ray Oldenburg) to provide a space bereft of stress, where patrons can give free vent to their creativity, is interactive and above all is a place that is inherently egalitarian where everyone enjoys the same privilege. After all, it's my personal conviction that there is more to libraries than just been purveyors of information. Another thing that impressed me was the study spaces which were staffed with workstations because it reminded me of the concept of makerspaces and intriguingly the DNB staff were also keen on makerspaces, not necessarily as a space for programmers but as an academic space which leads to flourishing of creative ideas.

Conclusion : Takeaways from the visit and much more

The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented.

-Dennis Gabor, Inventing the Future, 1963

The visit was short but nonetheless memorable in every sense of the term. As an information/library professional I felt that this visit was indeed a very enriching learning experience as it proffered an insight into various issues that affect the information profession, particularly the legal issues, which I personally feel is increasingly becoming important in this fast-changing digital age. Even though DNB as a national library is operationally and organizationally different from academic libraries or public libraries, yet I firmly believe that DNB as an institution is a proud example of how libraries ought to implement cutting-edge technological advancements as well as redefine the idea of patron engagement with libraries. Finally, the few days I was in Frankfurt am Main was really a pleasant experience, not only because of the pleasant climate and the sumptuous cuisine but most importantly because of the wonderful and amiable denizens who made me feel at home. For me, Frankfurt am Main was like my second home and so this will always be one of those memorable experiences that will be indelibly be etched in my mind. So in the last analysis, once again I express a deep sense of gratitude to not only the DNB staff who allowed me to participate in this information week and my wonderful friends at the Bibliothek and Information International who made possible this visit by proffering financial assistance but also to those wonderful and warm-hearted Frankfurt denizens who were like a second family to me.