The Bavarian State Library (Die Bayerische Staatsbibliothek)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Bavarian State Library (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek), which is located in Munich, the capital of the state of Bavaria in Germany. First, it provides a discussion of the library’s history, from its earliest manifestation as a court library of Duke Albrecht V in the 16th century, to its acquisition of materials from throughout the surrounding region and eventually the entire world, and up to its current status as one of Europe’s leading libraries with over 9 million volumes. It also outlines the library’s service philosophy, which is to provide information and technological support for the purposes of academic and scholarly study, while also collecting and preserving materials that are important to the history and cultural heritage of the German-speaking region in Europe. The paper also provides user statistics, discusses historical shifts in the library’s policies related to customer service, and describes the library’s efforts to foster collaboration between libraries and librarian training throughout the state of Bavaria. Finally, it suggests certain improvements for the library’s website.

Keywords: German, Germany, Bavaria, Munich, library, Europe, librarianship, education, technology, digitization, Google, collection, Library of the Year, reading rooms, academic, scholarship, students, public/private, collaboration, historical, development, culture.
Introduction

This paper discusses the history, current status, and environmental factors of the Bavarian State Library (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek), which is located in Munich, the capital city of the German state of Bavaria. It also outlines one area in which the library could implement some improvements: its website (http://www.bsb-muenchen.de/).

Background Information on the Bavarian State Library

The earliest manifestation of what is currently known as the Bavarian State Library was the court library of Duke Albrecht V, which was first developed in the mid-1500s. Albrecht V expanded the library’s collection throughout the late 16th century, acquiring library collections from several important scholars and collectors of European and Oriental materials, and having those materials moved from locations throughout Bavaria into the top floor of his residence in Munich. Albrecht V’s son, Duke Wilhelm V, continued his father’s work, expanding the library to include a number of other religious and secular publications from the surrounding region. By 1600, the library collection included about 17,000 volumes (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.; Zahn, 1997).

The library remained fairly dormant during the 1600s, before becoming more relevant to intellectual life in the region during the late 18th century. This was accomplished not only through its association with the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, but also through its opening to the staff of the court and to professors from the University of Ingolstadt. By 1789, members of the public also had access to the library (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.; Zahn, 1997).

From the late 1700s into the early 19th century, the library’s collection expanded as well. Mannheim’s Elector Karl Theodor assumed the Bavarian electorship and moved the Mannheim court library’s collection with him to Munich. In addition, the library acquired religious materials from several Bavarian monasteries and convents. By 1818, the library had over 500,000 print resources, and was considered at the time second in status, among European Libraries, only to the Bibliotheque National de Paris. The acquisition of unique materials, including handwritten musical compositions and East Asian
(particularly Chinese) literature, continued throughout the 1800s and well into the early part of the 20th century (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.; Zahn, 1997).

The library collection suffered significant damage during World War II. Although many important and valuable materials, such as handwritten manuscripts, were saved from destruction, it is estimated that one-quarter or more of the library’s collection was destroyed when Munich was bombed by the Allies. The library has since been able to procure replacement copies of around one-third of the destroyed materials (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

Construction on the current library building, which is located in the center of Munich near Ludwigsplatz, was completed in 1843. Before this time, the library collection was housed in various locations throughout Munich, including the official court residence and the Jesuit council buildings next to St. Michael’s Church (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

**Current Status of the Bavarian State Library**

The current General Director of the Bavarian State Library is Dr. Rolf Griebel. He is the outward representative of the Bavarian State Library and librarianship in the state, and is responsible for encouraging and facilitating cooperation between the state’s libraries. Dr. Griebel is a librarian by training, and his main scholarly interest lies in academic librarianship. (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

The library employs more than 700 people. They enjoy flexible working hours, telecommuting opportunities, and onsite daycare, all of which were implemented due to the library administration’s enlightened personnel management views. This is one of several reasons that the German Library Association awarded the library its Library of the Year award in 2008 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

The library appears to have embraced a dual role in the community like that described by Boaden (2005): not only does it support scholarship and learning, but it also serves as a heritage center for the community. In accepting the 2008 Library of the Year Award, Dr. Griebel articulated several important functions of the library, which have evolved and expanded throughout the library’s 450-year history. Not only did he see the library as an important provider of information services and a center of innovation for
scholarship, research, study, and learning, but also as a leader in preserving and memorializing the cultural heritage of the German-speaking region (Griebel, 2008). However, despite any cultural function the library provides, the library’s usage ordinance specifies that the library’s primary service is to the furtherance of academic, scholarly, and employment-related study and training (Bayerische Staatsministerium für Unterricht, Kultur, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 1993).

As of 2009, the library’s collection consisted of 9,530,000 volumes, 190,000 of which were digitized. Although its “active users” totaled only 55,000, the yearly totals of visits to its reading rooms and items lent were over 1,000,000 each, and its online catalog was accessed over 5,000,000 times (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

The Bavarian State Library is at the forefront of the movement in Germany to digitize library materials, and its digitalization center has developed into a primary provider of services and technology for libraries throughout Germany (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.). Reflecting its commitment to the digitization of its materials, it is one of a handful of European libraries to participate in the Google Books book scanning project. For more than 10 years, the library has used a robotic scanning machine to scan its older materials, including handwritten manuscripts, for inclusion in the Google Books online archive (Martin-Jung, 2008). This alliance has been criticized by some in Germany, including authors and others who are interested in protecting intellectual property rights, even though the only books that are permitted to be scanned for Google in Germany are those in which the copyright has expired, or those for which express permission to scan has been acquired by the copyright owner (Steinitz, 2008).

Impact of Environmental Factors on the Bavarian State Library

The library’s organization reflects its multiple functions as the official library of the state of Bavaria. Several of its departments, such as collection development, user services, and the departments related to specific subject or media collections (such as music, maps and images, and Oriental/Asian materials), perform the work necessary to the library’s daily operations. However, the library also includes several departments that facilitate the development of libraries and librarianship statewide,
including the Bavarian library school and the central administration for the Bavarian library consortium (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

The library has, in recent years, made itself more open to young people looking for a quiet place to study. In 2008, head of user services Wilhelm Hilpert provided some insight as to the current culture in the main reading room of the Bavarian State Library, or the “Stabi” as it is known by Munich’s young people, and how it had changed over time. According to Hilpert, until the 1990s, the library was regarded as a serious research institute, and student use of the workspaces in this reading room was discouraged. However, the General Director since that time has been much more open to the idea of young people using the library for studying, which fostered a change in the user services department to welcoming, rather than discouraging, students to study there (Wagner, 2008). The library has further embraced a more open attitude toward providing a quiet place to work by expanding its opening hours to be open seven days a week, from 8am until midnight (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

However, it is not only young students who appreciate the library. Although the state of Bavaria is relatively wealthy, and the library receives a high level of financial support from the Bavarian government, the library also has an active “Friends and Supporters” program, in which many wealthy donors participate. The library offers multiple purposes for requesting financial support from private individuals. These include collection management, such as the care, restoration, and preservation of the collection’s handwritten manuscripts and other rare materials, and collection development, such acquisition of a larger quantity of materials related to modern industry, business, and science, for the purpose of increasing the library’s relevance to a larger segment of the community. The library contends that such a public/private partnership is crucial to establish it in the global community as one of the world’s leading libraries (Förderer und Freunde der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek, n.d.).

**Suggestion for Improving the Bavarian State Library**

Improvements could definitely be made the library’s website. A substantial amount of information is available in English, and e-tutorial videos were provided in German, English, and the
Bavarian dialect. However, German and English are the only two languages in which information is provided. More than one million foreigners live in Bavaria, including more than 40,000 Turkish citizens in Munich alone (Augsburger Allgemeine, 2009). How many of them can really learn about the library when the only language options on its website are English and German? However the library’s main purpose is to support academic and scholarly work, so it is unlikely that its targeted constituents will not know one or both of those languages fairly fluently.

Furthermore, the overall design of the site is austere and uninteresting, the navigation is not highly intuitive, and its tiny default font makes the web content difficult to read. Although the site contains much information about the library as an institution, there is not a lot of practical information that is presented in a quick and easy format for casual users who want to learn more about the library and its services. If its service orientation has indeed changed to be more welcoming to young people, its website definitely does not reflect this. Therefore, I would recommend adding, at minimum, some bigger, bolder links, right on the homepage, to more colorful and interesting documents that market the library and its services. I would also provide some brief information about the library in languages other than German and English, so that the city’s immigrants can learn more about its history and services.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The Bavarian State Library is an impressive institution. From its earliest beginnings as the collection of the nobility’s valuable books, it appears to have evolved into a model of scholarly and academic support, an innovator in the technological preservation of fragile materials, and a committed leader in the development of libraries and library science in Bavaria. It has established an enviable public/private partnership to ensure that its multiple initiatives are properly planned and funded. Furthermore, it is committed not only to preserving historically fragile materials, but also in building a facility that is both a sanctuary for users and a decent workplace for its employees. Based on this research, I will definitely be paying this library a visit the next time I am in Munich.
References


