

Representing metro manila on Wikipedia

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Representing Metro Manila on Wikipedia

Structured Abstract

Purpose: The advent and wide use of new digital technologies suggests that the Internet is becoming a powerful new media for the imagination of city space. If this is the case then issues concerning urban representation on social media platforms such as Wikipedia provide an area of overlap and interest between urban studies and information studies. This article examines the representation of Manila, Philippines, one of the world's major mega cities, on the popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia.

Design: My broad approach to the study of Wikipedia is qualitative in nature. For this study the entire Metro Manila article was downloaded on May 3, 2017 and subjected to textual analysis.

Findings: While the Wikipedia article on Manila cannot be classified as promotional, it is clear that much of the city remains invisible in this work. Such a puzzle becomes understandable when we examine the urban studies literature where we find that the spatial logic of the city itself helps conceal much from view, so that what we read on Wikipedia is a view from the islands of privilege rather than the oceans of marginalization that make up much of the city's spatial form. If such a spatial structure is to change, representations such as found on Wikipedia need to be challenged.

Originality/value: Wikipedia is a key element of today's information infrastructure yet despite its importance it remains relatively understudied within the field of information science. More specifically, the role of Wikipedia in representing cities, the dominant settlement form in the world today, has not been previously studied.

Keywords

Manila, Philippines, Wikipedia, information studies, representation, cities

Introduction

In a recent article Wolfgang Stock rhetorically asks what links does city research and information science share? He answers “nothing at first sight”, but goes on to show that one area of overlap revolves around the notion of the informational city (Stock 2011). Jessa Lingel provides another point of intersection in her study of how migrants engage in information practices to familiarize themselves with New York City, directing her work “both at library and information science (LIS) scholarship in transnational experience and urban informatics as an area of study” (Lingel 2015, 1239). I wish in this article to add another area of potential intersection: the representation of cities in the era of social media.

Urban theorists have for some time viewed the city as a space constructed not only geographically or materially, but through the social imagination of its inhabitants and visitors. For James Donald, “the city constitutes an imagined environment” (Donald 1992, 422) while Rob Shields tells us that “the notion of the ‘the city’, the city itself, is a representation” (Shields 1996, 227). As entities possessing constructive force, representations of cities therefore have consequences. Sharon Zukin et al., for example, examine the histories of Las Vegas and Coney Island in the United States to build an argument that the representations of these urban spaces are equally responsible for producing the contrasts in their current fortunes (Zukin et al., 1998). A similar view is held by Richardson and Jens who develop “a sociology of space” based on “the dialectical relations between material practices and the symbolic meanings that social agents attach to their environments” (2003, 8).

The production and dissemination of representations is the job of various forms of media and media organizations (Greenberg 2000). Today the Internet, that amorphous network linking much of the world, is a powerful new media for the imagination of city spaces. A few studies have taken up this media as a focus for examination. Carl Grodach has studied the images appearing on the home pages on city governments and how these images reflect “the population, geography, and built environment” (2009, 182), going on to develop a typology of marketing themes. Florian Urban similarly conducted research on city government websites finding that they “represent themselves ...

in a surprisingly similar way, despite their different cultural and geographical settings” (2002, 56). More recently, Matthew Kelley has studied the creation of urban imaginaries in Seattle-Tacoma as part of the operation of geosocial services such as Foursquare, arguing that as these services “become more popular the data that are contained within their public databases have the potential to constitute an increasingly robust representation of the collective socio-spatial imaginary” (2013, 182).

In this article, however, the focus is not on government websites or geosocial services, but the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, one of the most popular websites on the Internet and a key element of our global information infrastructure today. Wikipedia’s strategic importance as a source of information for Internet users makes how it represents the topics it covers (and for that matter the choice of topics itself) an extremely important issue. Furthermore, given that the majority of people today live in cities the exploration of how Wikipedia is representing urban communities assumes vital importance to information studies and its allied fields.

In this article I will focus on the representation of one city, Manila. The capital city of the Philippines was chosen because it is a major urban centre not just in the southeast Asian region, but for the entire globe. Brinkhoff lists it as the eighth largest urban agglomeration in the world; after Jakarta, the largest agglomeration in south east Asia (2015). Furthermore, although Manila is not a centre of global finance or culture it still plays a major role as exporter of skilled and unskilled labour; a role increasingly important to global capitalism (Tyner 2000).

Metro Manila is comprised of sixteen cities and one municipality, each of which has its own Wikipedia entry. For the purposes of this study, however, the article on Metro Manila as a whole was chosen for analysis to gain an overview of how the entire urban area is represented in the encyclopedia. The Metro Manila article was downloaded on May 3, 2017 so that the analysis which follows refers to this particular version.

An anonymous user initially created the article on the 16 of August 2002. It consisted of a single sentence: “Metro Manila is the popular name for the NCR of the Philippines. It is the political, economic, social and cultural center of the country. It consists of eleven cities and five municipalities”. A list of these cities and municipalities followed. Several months later another editor added a further sentence: “Metro Manila is the 14th largest metropolitan area in the world with 13 million inhabitants”. By August 2003, the article had expanded to include sections on transportation and “interesting spots”. But growth in these early years was slow with only 32 edits in 2003 and 36 in 2004. The next year, however, saw an upturn, the beginning of a more vigorous period of editing that ended only in 2015. During these ten years, the article averaged 315 edits per year. The vast majority of these edits generated no controversy despite significantly adding or re-arranging the article’s content and as a result, the talk page for Metro Manila is surprisingly short. The text, which currently stands at approximately 10,000 words, therefore would appear to be a product of a consensus view of what should constitute the contents of an encyclopedic article on a major world city. The table of contents of the article as of May 3, 2017 is presented in Figure 1.

In the account of the Metro Manila article presented below, I deploy interpretative textual analysis to develop an understanding of the text as a product of a particular writing “culture”; namely, those editors involved in the work of creating the article. This analysis involves a close reading of the text’s content. The study does not pretend to generalize over the vast universe of Wikipedia or even the range of urban representations that it contains. What it seeks instead to do is problematize the issue of representation with the hope that further studies of how other urban areas are represented on Wikipedia will be conducted.

Representing Metro Manila on Wikipedia

If one were to broadly describe the characteristics of the Metro Manila text, it could be summarized as a list of lists. The article presents the reader with lists of Metro Manila’s attributes collected in

paragraphs and arranged under various topic headings. There are two kinds of these lists: superlatives, and (more common) institutional. As an example of a superlative list we can turn to the section on the city's economy where we are told that the city "has the highest per capita GDP of the country", that "Metro Manila ranks third for top business process outsourcing global destinations", and that its "retail sector remains strong" while it "remains as the least expensive capital city in the Asia-Pacific" for office space. The article also notes that the minimum wage is the highest in the country.

The superlatives continue with a discussion of the city's central business districts where it is noted that Makati is "the headquarters to most of the multinational corporations residing in the Philippines" and that "it is the home to the tallest skyscrapers in the region as well as the country". Another of these central business districts, Bonifacio Global City, "is the premier financial and lifestyle center of the metropolis." In all these examples it is not just a positive evaluation that is presented, but a classification of the characteristic as among the best or the best in the Philippines or even the region, hence the use of the term superlative.

But not all of Wikipedia's coverage of Metro Manila is devoted to the documenting of superlative characteristics of the city, in fact, these are in a minority. Most of the sections instead are composed of lists of institutions. In the infrastructure section, for example, healthcare in the city is described in this fashion. After noting that most healthcare in the city is provided through the private sector, we are told that the region has 179 hospitals, 590 doctors, 498 dentists, 4576 nurses, and 17437 midwives. It is also the headquarters of the regional office of the World Health Organization and the main office of the Department of Health. We are also informed that sixteen hospitals are participating in the Philippine Medical Tourism Program. A list of national health centres follows: "the Lung Center of the Philippines, National Kidney and Transplant Institute, and the Philippine Heart Center".

The main section on transportation is divided into five subsections, but the focus on listing institutions is clearly present. The first, and longest subsection, lists the city's circumferential and radial roads. After providing some definitions (the distinctions between local, national or subdivision roads, as well as what is a circumferential and a radial road), the section enumerates the key routes: Circumferential Road 4 (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue); Circumferential Road 5; Radial Road 1 (Roxas Boulevard and the Manila-Cavite Expressway), Radial Road 3 (South Luzon Expressway); Radial Road 6 (Aurora Boulevard and Marcos Highway); and Radial Road 8 (North Luzon Expressway).

Following the roads are sections for rail transport, aviation, buses and the Pasig River ferry service. Rail and aviation are developed in much the same way as the section on roads while the ferry service is a list of one. What stands out is the section on buses where instead of a list of principal routes or companies involved in the industry, most of the section deals with the Express Connect Bus running a number of bus routes connecting various places in the metropolis and boasting a double decker bus as part of its fleet.

But where the listing of institutions reaches its most extensive is in the section on government. It begins with two short paragraphs on the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA), "the agency responsible for the delivery of public services in Metro Manila". Next we are told that Manila is the "seat of the Government of the Philippines". Thereafter follows a list of the various departments headquartered in the city, as well as other organs and institutions of government such as Malacanang Palace, the Supreme Court, and the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas. A section on public safety lists the city's police districts and headquarters of the police, army and coast guard. Local government receives treatment next. The seventeen local government units are named and their population and geographical size listed in a table. We are told that the city is also divided into districts. These are also listed, along with the cities/municipalities included within them and their areas of population.

Like their superlative cousins these lists leave out the contrasts of the city; namely the lives and conditions of existence of the urban poor. This is done directly. For example, there is no discussion of the many jeepneys (small, often over-crowded vehicles in which passengers sit facing each other on long benches running along the sides), nor the routes they ply through the city as they carry numerous working class passengers to and from places of employment or education each day. Similarly, as noted above, there is little discussion of the numerous bus companies operating services in the city. Discussion instead focuses on a service, the Express Contact Bus, which is geared towards middle class commuters riding to work in the Central Business District. But the urban poor are also shut out by the article's habit of "freezing" the city's institutions in the form of these extensive lists, rendering them lifeless so that questions of how they work and more importantly for whom they work are not raised. In a sense they are akin to a presentation of the city's basic anatomy, rather than its physiology.

In the case of healthcare, for example, the frozen nature of the lists precludes a discussion of how they function by means of cost and lack of government support to exclude the urban poor from quality and timely medical treatment. The government of the Philippines devotes only three percent of its budget to health. It is not surprising therefore that only six percent of the country's total medical costs are absorbed by the public sector. The rest are squarely placed on the shoulders of Filipinos, most of whom cannot afford it. This compares unfavourably to Thailand, a logical point of comparison in the region. In that country the respective percentages stand at 13.6% and 60.3% (Olarde 2006).

In a similar way the listing of key methods of transportation does not open up much room for a discussion of how they work in the city. As Shatkin notes, much of the current development of Manila's transportation system is geared to helping its richer citizens get to places they want to go. Hence "government investment ... has focused on expanding the radial road system, constructing

tolls roads and the development of a light rail transport system", a process which has "disproportionately benefited automobile owners and wealthier commuters" (2004, 2475).

Finally, we come to the government, where the emphasis on structure over process or anatomy over physiology ignores the anti-poor bias of many government officials who in the past have subjected the urban poor to property destruction, evictions and general discrimination in the name of development, modernization, or beautification of the city (Murphy & Anana 1994; Storey 1998; Berner 2000). The recent visit of the Pope in 2015, which saw fences erected by local government to block the sight of the slum areas along the pontiff's route from the airport provides a clear example. But the Pope is only the most recent of a long list of individuals shielded from the other reality of the city, for as far back as the 1975 visit of US President Gerald Ford the government hid the urban poor from the sight of important visitors (Pinches 1994).

Explaining the representation of Metro Manila

After reading the Wikipedia article on Metro Manila, one is immediately confronted with a sense of puzzlement over the absence of sustained reference to the poor. Their existence receives only one mention. In the section on demographics there appears in a sub-section entitled slums, this single sentence: "In 2014, there are an estimated four million slum dwellers living in Metro Manila. Homelessness is also a major problem in different cities of Metro Manila".

This absence for a urban region that "clearly qualifies for what has long been described as a third world city or a megacity in the global South", a city where forty percent of the population live in "informal" housing, thirty percent do not have access to piped water (Spreitzhofer, 2002, 260-261) and where the average unemployment rate has been a consistently high percentage of the total population (Aoki 2008), is remarkable. Most surprisingly to anyone who has visited the city there is no mention of the informal sector of the Manila economy -- the economy of streetside vendors, selling anything from pirated DVDs to pineapple slices (Espinoza 2004; Resio & Gomez 2013) which

produce almost half the GDP of the country and who suffer low wages, poor conditions, and lack of social protections (Frianeza 2013).

One explanation would focus on the general orientation of Wikipedia to the West. Especially in recent years, the representational limits of Wikipedia's editorial community has been noted. Most attention has focused on the minority of female editors (Lam 2011; Reagle & Rhee 2011; Graells-Garido 2015; Gruwell 2015; Wagner 2015), but some commentators also stress that most editors are from the developed world of North America and Europe (Royal & Kapila 2009; Graham 2011; Graham 2014). Such a demographic composition would likely very easily overlook the distinct nature of mega cities in the South.

Another explanation for the flattening of contrasts and the invisibility of the urban poor is that the article's editors designed it to reflect a positive "spin" on the city. This would be in keeping with the efforts of urban governments worldwide to attract capital investment by presenting themselves in as favourable a light as possible in an attempt to project themselves as global cities full of life, vibrancy and opportunity (Atkinson & Bridge 2005; Smith 2002; Yeoh 2005; Paul 2004). There is some evidence that Wikipedia portrays the city in this way.

In the introduction we find the city referred to as "a global power city" that exerts a significant impact on commerce, finance, media, art, fashion, research, technology, education and entertainment, both locally and internationally. The section on CBDs also gets into the positive spirit when it discourses on Bonifacio Global City (one of Metro Manila's key financial districts), appreciatively noting its "numerous tourist attractions ... high-end shops, towering office skyscrapers and luxurious lofts and condominiums". Similarly we are told in the section on tourism that the city has been ranked as one of the best shopping destinations in Asia and that it is has "around 20 casinos ... featuring luxurious casino hotels and integrated resorts".

On the other hand, the article is critical at certain points. In regard to the government's plans to promote medical tourism in the city, for example, it notes that "lack of progressive health system, inadequate infrastructure, and the unstable political environment are seen as hindrances for its growth". Transportation is also faulted: "A problem with the circumferential roads are the missing road links ...", although here a solution is present as "the metropolis is resolving this problem through the completion of missing road links".

The article is also upfront about some of the city's other problems revealing that "Metro Manila has the highest rate of crime in the country" (although it also notes that due to a police anti-crime drive in 2015 the rate of reported crime dropped from 919 to 412 per week). It also informs readers that the city is the world's second riskiest capital city in the world -- not a statement likely to be found in promotional literature!

Hence it would be unfair to label the article as promotional literature. Instead I would argue that the portrayal of Manila on Wikipedia is more an attempt to normalize the city, rather than celebrate or exaggerate its virtues. The aim is to depict Manila as a large, capital city like others around the world. If we interpret the article in this fashion the institutional lists so prevalent in the text are understandable -- they represent so many requirements to enable classification or identification as a "normal" city.

If the aim of Wikipedia's editors has been to normalize Manila it is still enabled by the dominant spatial logic of the city; a logic which has created two separate Manilas -- a city of the rich and a city of the poor with the later invisible to the former. This spatial logic has its origins in Manila's colonial past. Initially colonized by the Spanish who barricaded themselves within the walled city of Intramuros, the country fell under the control of the Americans in 1898 who did much to continue the segregation imposed by the Spanish during their long tenure in the country (Shatkin 2005/06; Pante 2011). And, as argued by Marco Garrido, this underlying ideology of spatial difference

continued after independence as well, as a new generation of Filipino developers, the Ayala family rose to prominence with the creation of a new elite business and residential area in another suburb of Manila, Makati. The vision held by the Ayalas was to create a planned community to accommodate those fleeing the post-war devastation of the old city centre and able to afford to pay for the higher standards the development was to offer. Inevitably this worked to exclude the majority of the city's inhabitants, creating yet another enclave of prosperity within the expanding city (Garrido 2013).

Makati also established a blueprint for the creation of further privileged enclaves on the outskirts of the city, developments that were temporarily put on hold by the rise and fall of the Marcos dictatorship, but which returned with a vengeance as the political turmoil cleared in the late 1980s. Initially the development of new planned communities took place along the fringes of the city, but from the late 1990s, the inner city itself was also targeted for new developments propelled by an alliance of state, land developers, and the upper-middle class (Michel 2010). The state provided much capital for infrastructure, especially transportation infrastructure directly or in the form of subsidies. It also lent legitimacy to the projects as well as the force, legal and extra-legal, to remove already existing structures and their inhabitants. The developers provided the vision, of a beautiful community, secure and clean and desirable by its very exclusiveness. In this work they had already considerable resources to tap on. As far back as the Marcos period, distinctions were being drawn by mass media between the urban poor and the middle class that saw the two as representative of savagery and civilization respectively (Pinches 1994). As in the past, the creation of such a stark duality between two groups of people made co-existence seem a dangerous and unacceptable compromise.

Also helping developers was a structural feature of the Manila real estate market already noted as far back as the 1960s where the value of land was inflated in comparison with the Philippines's regional neighbours (Abrams 1964 as cited in Straussman & Blunt 1994). The over-valuation of urban

land was not due so much to scarcity, but to rural attitudes that saw it as the best asset to hold; an attitude that was imported to urban areas such as Manila. Together with the state's chronic inability or unwillingness to actively regulate the market, via a sustained programme of tax reform, this inclination to "hoard" land resulted in escalating real estate prices. For the aspiring middle class land was increasingly seen as offering the best investment returns and minimal risk so that much of their savings was directed to its purchase, cementing an implicit alliance with the large developers and their mega projects (Shatkin 2009).

Key to the success of these projects was the conscious production of difference. The new planned communities had to be the opposite of what the city was, or was imagined to be. And so they had to create and maintain strict borders with that other city (Michel 2010; Roderos 2013). The stark difference between these kind of communities and the rest of the city has led Shatkin to label such developments, "bypass-implant urbanism" a process by which profit is extracted "by cutting through the congested and decaying spaces of the 'public city' to allow for the free flow of people and capital and to implant spaces for new forms of production and consumption into the urban fabric" (2009, 384).

Shatkin's notion of bypass-implant urbanism reconfigures the city, taking its dual nature to extremes, as it allows for virtually no contact between the two halves of the city. Shatkin employs an island metaphor to describe this reconfiguration from the perspective of the rich or middle class who "increasingly experience Manila as an archipelago of carefully planned consumer, residential and work spaces ... connected by elevated, climate-controlled transport" (2005/06, 593). The other side of this metaphor, however, is that the "islands" are "surrounded by a sea of poverty, marginalization and despair" (Michel 2010, 399).

The explicit intent to limit uncontrolled contact between the poor and rich increasingly makes the latter invisible, a process Ann Markusen labels "ideological forgetting" (Markusen 2004, 2308).

Shatkin notes that in the specific case of Manila, while the urban poor "were treated as enemies of the state under the Marcos regime, they have been largely neglected and forgotten in the post-Marcos period (Shatkin 2004, 2477). From this perspective it is not surprising that Wikipedia's article on Metro Manila generally ignores the poor. The city itself is not one entity, but two, a dual city of rich and poor. And this duality has been constructed in a way to make the poor disappear, to be invisible. Wikipedia in this sense represents a view from the islands of Metro Manila, not its ocean.

Implications of Wikipedia's Representation of Metro Manila

Providing only a view from the islands is problematic on at least three levels. To begin with, and most obviously, it is only a partial representation of the city. It is, in fact, a minority representation of the city.

But besides this issue is the worthiness of the hidden city. The city of the urban poor is not just the opposite of the "archipelago" communities, nor is it a social void. Michael Pinches, for example, writes of the "distinctive spatiality" of Manila's informal settlements, spatial forms that "could only be navigated through the possession of particularistic local knowledge" and reflecting "an intimate and complex interpersonal order ... far more profound ... than what one could find in Manila's legal housing estates" (Pinches 1994, 21-22). Similarly, he argues that the landscape of Manila's squatter settlements is certainly an architecture of material hardship ... but it should also be read as an architecture of popular innovation and resourcefulness" (Pinches 1994, 22). The complexity of survival strategies of the urban poor and their resilience is also missed due to the invisibility of the larger portion of Metro Manila. These are topics that are eminently worthy of encyclopedic treatment. The tenacity of the urban poor in the face of such situations is worthy of documentation and is what the people of these communities also want outsiders to understand (Brilliantes 1991, 120).

Acknowledgement of the other side of the Manila coin is also essential if one is to understand how the city works. Berner reminds us that "the role of squatter colonies is fundamental rather than marginal: "the metropolitan economy is heavily subsidized by their existence and cannot function -- much less be competitive -- without this subsidy" (2000, 557). Pinches situates the urban poor in more theoretical terms: "their presence [reflecting] a process of proletarianization as more and more Filipinos have been uprooted from landholdings and incorporated ... into a national labour market ..." (1994, 23). But the point is the same. Manila's urban poor are not an extraneous part of the city's fabric -- they are necessary to its current operation.

Finally, a concern over how Manila is represented on Wikipedia is tied to the limitations that the current representation has for a creative re-imagining of what the city could be. Trevor Hogan reminds us that the current dominant response to Manila's challenges is for the wealthier classes to flee "overseas outwards, but also inwards ... to seek self-protection into the black, air-conditioned, four-wheel drive vehicle ... and into the 'aircon' high-rise 'condos' that shut out knowledge of Manila" (110). This is "a response that is perfectly understandable, perfectly reasonable, but perfectly unsustainable" (110-111). For Hogan, the path to building a more sustainable city lies in a different direction - in embracing the majority of Manila's population, the urban poor, recognizing that they "are not so much the problem but rather part of the solution" (123). Obviously, such recognition cannot take place if the dominant representation of Manila excludes them.

A role for the information professions?

Although much good would come from expanding the representation of Manila to include its more marginalized elements there is the practical difficulty that the urban poor are least likely to be able to contribute to such a project. Wikipedia right from the start required a reasonable familiarity with computers so that the slogan "the encyclopedia anyone can edit" was not at all true. And the years since its founding have seen an explosion of rules and regulations governing the operations of the

encyclopedia (de Laet 2012; Joyce, Pike and Butler 2013). Only those literate in this new “language” and possessed of reasonable amounts of free time can hope to contribute in a substantial way to Wikipedia. But if this represents a diminution of democracy on Wikipedia it also offers up the possibility of a mediating role between concerned information professionals and those groups marginalized from representation within the encyclopedia (this is not to say however that other groups such as concerned sociologists or urban studies experts should not be involved as well). This could take the form of direct interventions to add material or suggest to other Wikipedians the need to add material. Alternatively, information professionals could indirectly contribute by expanding information literacy programmes to include the editing of Wikipedia and the political economy of representation on Wikipedia as topics of instruction (Ford & Greiger 2012). This is especially important task as current Wikipedian editors tend to have a limited understanding of citation appropriateness, failing to distinguish between sources and relying far too heavily on free online materials (Luyt & Tan 2012). There also appears at least in certain cases, a lack of understanding of the extent and nature of the subject universe, in other words, the complex network of works, scholars, and institutions that comprise the subject’s scholarly community (Luyt 2012).

In a world where information professionals often seem to question and worry about their future here is a task that could revitalize their work. Of course, the issue of resources, financial and human, complicates this development of the profession. This is a chicken or egg situation, for perhaps one of the reasons resources are lacking is that the profession has been unable to carve out a distinctive space for itself in the digital world. However, there are luckily examples of information professionals getting involved with the editing of Wikipedia and the education of future Wikipedia editors (Orlowitz & Earley 2014; Paulas 2016; Tennant 2016)). If these developments point to a future where information professionals do engage wholeheartedly with Wikipedia, they are good signs indeed.

Conclusion

Wikipedia is an increasingly important element of popular information infrastructure in the world today. Hence its representations deserve scrutiny, not only at the surface level of accuracy, but also of blind spots and lacunae in presentation. Such scrutiny also provides another potential unifying link between the fields of urban studies and information science. This examination of Wikipedia's Metro Manila article is an attempt to do just that for one of the South's major mega cities. While the article cannot be classified as promotional, it is clear that much of the city remains invisible in this work. Such a puzzle becomes clearer when we examine more closely the spatial logic of the city where it quickly becomes apparent that what we read on Wikipedia is a view from the islands of privilege rather than the oceans of marginalization that make up the majority of the city's spatial form. If such a spatial structure is to change, representations such as found on Wikipedia need to be challenged. In this task a new role for the information professions can be foreseen.

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