The Role of Libraries and Librarians at present

The Public Library and its Role in the Community

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Abstract

The public library plays a vital role in the communities it serves, being the main institution providing information and documentation services under various forms and in different contexts. Thus, it contributes to the users' personal development through formal education, life-long learning, after-school activities, information culture, leisure time activities or access to information. Another aspect covered by the public library is related to social cohesion, the area of the institution becoming a meeting place and a community development center. Cultural identity and local identity are problems with a significant impact on the community and which need to be publicized by the public library, and imagination and creativity increase the interest of the public for cultural activities. All these demonstrate that a public library plays a special social role in the community, and the services offered by it foster the accomplishment of this role.

Introduction

The public library, according to the Romanian Law of Libraries (1), is an encyclopaedic library put in the service of a local community that assures equality of access to information and to the documents needed for information, permanent education and development of the users' personality, regardless of their social or economic status, age, gender, political bias, religion or nationality. At present, in the context of an obvious informational explosion, the public library has to redefine its mission and tasks to give a

positive answer to the increasingly various demands of its users. Just as in any activity domain, holding and obtaining relevant and updated information has a positive influence on the decisions adopted at any institutional level, information being considered a very important resource, along with the classical ones: labor, nature, capital. The impact of the new information and communication technologies has led to the creation of modern services, requiring hi-tech equipments, access to the Internet and qualified personnel.

Be they traditional or modern, the services provided by a library have a strong impact on the personal development of the individual, having significant consequences on the formal training, life long learning, information culture skills development or access to public information. Being a meeting place, libraries also assume the role of multifunctional cultural center and community development center, the community groups being helped to have equitable access to information, and contribute to the growth of these community groups in the aspects related to the local culture and identity, which have a strong impact on the belonging to the community. Another significant aspect is that, at present, an increasing number of libraries provide information services on health or on the business environment specific of the local firms. There is an indirect connection between the use of public libraries and social inclusion, through the development of the skills related to the information domain, the real space becoming a meeting and leisure space. (2)

The impact of the public library on personal development

Concerning the personal development domain, here the role of the library is the most visible because the immediate results are easiest to identify. Here we include, in the first place, aspects regarding the relation with the learning process. By the activities it proposes to the young public, such as *Ora de poveste* (Story Time), *Lecturi publice* (Public Reading), *Recunoasteti personajul* (Guess the Character) etc. the intention is to develop the reading skills and the skills related to a corect use of the language with the young, in general, and especially with children. All these involve training and relaxation techniques, personal understanding, and emphasize the importance of reading in the participants' life and the importance of the public library in supporting this activity.

At present, one can hear increasingly often about the importance of the information culture skills, which are skills that the professional personnel in any library should be able to impart to its users. The users, in their turn, shall be capable to recognize an information need, to pinpoint information sources, to view information with a critical eye and to manage to integrate it in their basic knowledge to use it effectively to carry out the activity they had in mind. The aim of the information culture is to provide each individual with a minimal luggage of knowledge allowing him to use information, to have various skills, in a context requiring information resources. All these skills acquired by a library user lead to an increased motivation for learning, an increased self-trust, but also to gaining of an informational independence. Yet, one cannot attain special results without high-quality information sources, without an adequate environment and without well-trained personnel. At the same time, efficient partnerships are needed between libraries, schools, and health institutions, in order to mediate and facilitate the learning process.

The direct and indirect impact is noticeable in the access on the labor market because the library can provide data on the labor force, and information on the GDP/GNP. Libraries need to advertize their access to electronic information, need to know to present the services they are providing. At the same time, the gathering of unofficial economic data, supported by questionnaires addressed to the users can lead to the initiation of entrepreneurship services and of services with added value for the local companies, trade chambers etc. In this way, the unemployed can find a job using the library resources, due to the skills obtained following an information literacy course. We shall remember that some companies are attracted to a certain location due to certain factors, such as: facilities provided by the local library; existence of a qualified labor force (which, itself, can be influenced by the use of the library resources). The research in public libraries has combined qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the impact of the library's activity in the community, and during the last few years, a series of studies has been carried out on the dimensions and nature of the services provided, especially in point of social and community development.

The activities organized by the library have a major impact in relation to the social goals of the authorities, bringing benefits to the community. These can be direct, in the sense of: an increase of the number of active users; the development of the collections, so as to cover an array as large as possible of the users' reading and research options; the investment in the modernization of the library areas and also in the provision of services, as diverse and attractive as possible, able to attract an important number of users. Out of the indirect benefits we shall mention the contribution to education, to understanding democracy, to finding a job or to participating to the cultural life etc., the library being a living and active institution of the community. At the same time, we need to take into account the potential users as well, those for whom the library has the value of an "emergency room", as they know that if they need a piece of information, they will surely find it there whenever they need it. No wonder that, under these circumstances, people ought to be aware that they can go to the public library when they have a personal problem of any nature: administrative, public, sanitary, educational or related to the spending of their holidays etc. It is sure that the public library of the future will focus more on the citizens' information needs, but, for this to become possible, the authorities of the central administration ought to provide consistent funds for technological development and the development of intersectorial projects, elaborating at the same time regional information management strategies. The information produced in public administration is extremely important for the citizens. For this reason, one of the main tasks of public libraries is making this information accesible to everyone, which includes redefining the principle of the basic information and determining the conditions in which they can be accessible to the users.

Concerning the cultural impact, it is noticeable in terms of the increase of the quality of life. For instance, reading and literacy classes can contribute to supporting the development of the children's reading skills, but also to the adults' continuing education. Economically inactive people are offered leisure activities, as information and socialization opportunities. We are aware that a public library is a very valuable service and losing it would have a negative impact on literacy, intellectual development,

imagination and education level. For this reason, all the efforts should focus on the development of this public service, which is so useful for the community.

The most convincing proof of the library's impact is in the domain of personal development, as the immediate results are easier to identify and less difficult to determine in point of causality. These results are expressed in terms of personal satisfaction, acquisition of new skills, trying new experiences, increased trust and self-respect, creativity development, cultural awareness, improved communication skills through language development etc.

The provision of specific services in public libraries

The public library has taken important steps during the last years towards services and activities differing very much from the way the institution was envisioned in the past, and significant efforts of opening toward an increasingly diverse public have been made. It is true that people talk increasingly often about a *disneylization* of the library, about its decline as a public space to the benefit of entertainment and under the influence of the marketing principles of the private sector. The problem should not be perceived in this way, but as an opening in a context of increasing competition in the informational environment.

The creation of a new library service requires an analysis of the needs of the community it serves based on sociological studies, to avoid the wrong use of the financial and human resources available at a certain moment for the respective institution. Based on these studies, one can draw certain conclusions leading to information on the profile of the community, possible partners of the library, users' demands etc. Any newly created service needs to be monitored and evaluated in order to assess its sustainability, analyzing its impact on its users, the results obtained during a certain period of time, the efficiency of its activities etc.

The access to ICT in libraries has been very appreciated by all the categories of beneficiaries, as it results from the numerous studies carried out on the perception regarding this public institution, only 1 % of the people interviewed considering them useless. The new technologies support a large array of activities, from individual study to finding a job and building and maintaining social networks using the internet.

Classical or modern music auditions, accompanied by book presentations or art albums represent another service provided by the art or multimedia sections of the libraries. The beneficiaries of these activities are people trained in this sense and who come with propositions of specific events or users who want to find out as much as possible on a certain composer, artist or who would like to get familiar with the respective domain. Usually, these activities are carried out in partnership with artists, painters, musicians, music or drawing teachers who can provide important and new information concerning the aspects presented.

Watching movies accompanied by the presentation of the book, when the film is made after a book, by the presentation of the author or of the respective epoch are programmes that have enjoyed a real success and have led to an increased interest in reading among the young public.

Public reading is meant to increase the interest in reading among the young users especially because at present reading has moved into a cone of shade if we compare it to the offers of the online environment (especially the virtual one). For the contemporary society, in which diversity, culture and an adequate language still represent social values, reading represents so far the most adequate way of attaining these desiderata.

The organization of courses for users depending on their demands is a relatively new service in the Romanian libraries. Libraries offer the community members areas where they continue to learn, developing their basic activities, necessary for the participation to the social, cultural and economic life of the community. This supposes the development of one's general culture, the study of languages, the development of reading skills, the development of one's technological skills etc. By the activities organized in different ways for various categories of users, libraries stimulate ideas, discussions, the culture of dialogue and implicitly creativity. In Romania, by the Biblionet project, the perspective on public libraries has changed and a consequence of it was the training of an impressive number of librarians as trainers, whose result has been the holding of various courses in an organized environment.

The development of activities based on volunteering has grown increasingly intense lately, as very many library activities can be organized using volunteers. They need to be recruited, trained and coordinated in agreement to Law no. 78/2014 regulating volunteering activity in Romania.

The technological evolution has permitted the public libraries to develop a series of special services for visually impaired people. In this sense, the libraries have acquired Daisy (Digital Accessible Information System) books through the Foundation *Cartea Călătoare* (Travelling Book), consisting in the reproduction of the content of a document from a printed format into a digital format, accessible to blind and visually impaired people.

The services focused on target groups are gathering an increasing number of supporters in libraries, which have grown aware that it is more efficient to address a certain target public and create services adapted to its needs, rather than act in a general sense. For instance, by the Biblionet program, national partnerships have been implemented, such as that between the Payments and Intervention Agency for Agriculture (A.P.I.A.) and local libraries, the target group being farmers, who can use the IT equipments from public libraries to apply online for subventions, financial support for the agricultural land they possess. (3) Another target group considered is that of the unemployed, who are helped to find a work place through the services provided by the library.

Conclusions

At present, all the decision factors need to be aware that the public library is an institution of strategic importance, being the most important civil service meant to store and disseminate information in a community. Investing in a public library is maintaining a civilizing institution with a great impact on the cultivation and information of a people. The local and national authorities need to elaborate a strategy in the domain of libraries and of information in agreement to the international norms concerning this aspect.

In this sense, a library and information management unit should be created in the central administration, with qualified and sufficient personnel to meet the needs of the knowledge society. A library is an institution enriching the lives of many people, enriching their chances of life, improving their educational opportunities and the chances of finding a job, promoting social cohesion, all these being community landmarks that reinforce the identity of the population. A special contribution of the public libraries comes by the creation of social capital as they assure social inclusion (4), and bring people together, promoting tolerance and understanding for cultural diversity.

Libraries represent a binder between community and governance, and a connection materialized on different levels of responsibilities, and, by offering governmental information and contents, they also promote a friendlier face of governance. For many users, libraries are or will be in the near future the first point of contact with the e-governance. With the appearance of an increasingly larger volume of governmental information and services, libraries are becoming the most important place where people can access services, and librarians can provide the necessary assistance in order to use them.

References

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