The social role of public libraries in the community

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The public library plays a vital role in the communities it serves, being the main institution that provides information and documentation services in various forms and in different contexts. Thus, it contributes to the personal development of its users through formal education, through lifelong learning, through after-school activities, information literacy, leisure, skills development and access to public information. Another aspect covered by a public library is linked to social cohesion, institution space transformed into a meeting place and center for community development. The culture and local identity are problems with a significant impact of belonging to the community which is served by the public library and the imagination and creativity develop people's interest in cultural activities. All these situations are the most convincing evidence that a public library plays a very important social role for the community.

Keywords: public library, community, culture, personal development

Introduction

The public library, according to the Romanian Law for Libraries[1], is a library of an encyclopedic type in the service of the local or county community assuring the equality of access to information and to the documents needed for information, permanent education and development of its users' personality, regardless of their social or economic status, age, gender, political, religious beliefs or nationality. At present, in the context of an obvious informational explosion, the public library needs to redefine its mission and responsibilities to positively answer the increasingly diverse 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: work, nature, capital. The impact of the new information and communication technologies has led to the creation of modern services, which require high-quality equipments, Internet access and specialized personnel.

Regardless of the kind of services provided by the public library - traditional or modern -, their impact on the personal development of the individual is significant, with consequences on: formal education; lifelong learning; development of information culture skills or access to public information. Being a meeting place, libraries also take on the role of multifunctional cultural and local development center, the community groups being helped to have an equitable access to information and to nourish their interest in aspects related to the local culture and identity, which in turn gives the libraries a special impact on the feeling of belonging to the community. Another aspect worth considering is that at present an increasing number of libraries provide information services on health or the business environment specific of the local firms. There is an indirect link between the use of public libraries and social inclusion by the development of skills in the

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information domain, the real area of the library turning into a meeting and leisure space[2].

The impact of the public library on personal development

Regarding the domain of personal development, here the role of the library is the most visible, because the immediate results are the easiest to identify. Here, we include, first of all, the aspects concerning the relation with the learning process. The activities proposed to the young public, such as *Story Time*, *Public Readings, Tell the Character* etc. are meant to develop the reading skills and the correct language usage among the young, in general, and especially among children. All these aspects involve learning and relaxation techniques, personal understanding, and the activities highlight the importance of reading in the life of the participants and the importance of the public library in support of this activity.

At present, one can hear more and more often about the development of the information culture skills, which the professionals from any library should be able to share to its users. They, in their turn, shall be able to recognize the need for information, to localize the informational sources, to intervene critically on the information and to manage to integrate it in the basic knowledge to be able to use it efficiently in order to realize the activity they had in view. The aim of information culture is to give every individual a minimum knowledge allowing him to use information, to have diverse skills, in a context requiring informational resources. All these skills that a library user can acquire lead towards an increased motivation for learning, increased self-esteem and also the acquisition of independence from an informational perspective. Yet, one cannot obtain special results without the existence of high quality informational sources, without an adequate environment and well-qualified personnel. At the same time, efficient partnerships are necessary between libraries, schools, health institutions, in order to intermediate and facilitate the learning process.

The direct and indirect impact can be noticed looking at the access on the labor market, because the library can provide data on the labor force and on the GDP/GNP. Libraries need to publicize their access to electronic information, need to know to present the services they provide. At the same time, the gathering of unofficial data of an economic nature, supported by surveys applied to the users may lead to the initiation of entrepreneurship services and services with added value for the local enterprises, chambers of commerce etc. Consequently, the unemployed can find jobs using the library resources, thanks to the skills obtained by means of an information literacy course. We shall keep



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in mind that some firms are attracted to such a location due to certain factors such as: the facilities provided by the local library; existence of a qualified labor force (which labor force can be influenced by their use of the library resources). The research in the public libraries has combined qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the impact of its activity in the community, and during the last few years, a series of studies have been carried out concerning the extent and the nature of the services provided, especially in point of social inclusion and community development.

The activities organized by the library have a major impact major in relation to the social goals of the authorities, bringing benefits to the community. These benefits can be direct: in the sense of the number of the active users; in the sense of the development of the collections, so as to cover a very large array of the users' reading and research options; by the investment in the modernization of the library areas and last but not least, by the provision of diverse and smart services attracting an important number of users. Out of the indirect benefits, we can mention: the contribution to education, to understanding democracy, to employment or the participation to 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 department", knowing that if they need a piece of information, they can find it there whenever they need it. No wonder that, under these circumstances, people need to become aware that they can go to the public library when they have to solve a personal problem of any type: administrative, public, sanitary, educational or related to the spending of their holiday etc. It is sure that the public library of

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the future will rely more on the citizens' information needs, yet, in order for this tendency to become viable, the authorities of the central administration need to allocate consistent funds for technological development, for the development of inter-sectorial projects, elaborating at the same time regional information management strategies. The pieces of information produced in the public administration are of key importance for the citizens. For this reason, one of the principal tasks of the public libraries consists in making this information accessible to everybody, which involves a redefinition of the principle of basic information and the determination of the conditions in which it can be accessible to the users.

Concerning the cultural impact, it can be noticed in terms of the increase of the quality of life. For instance, in terms of reading and literacy, the libraries contribute to supporting the development of children's reading skills, but also to the improvement of these skills among the adults. To economically inactive people, the library offers leisure activities, as an information and socialization source. We are aware that the public library is a service of great value for the community and losing it would have a negative impact on literacy, intellectual development, imagination and the education level. For this reason, all the efforts should focus on the development of this public service of such a great use for the community.

The most convincing evidence on its impact is from the domain of personal development, because the immediate results are easier to identify and are less questionable in point of the cause-effect relations. 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, increased communication skills through linguistic development etc.

The provision of specific services in the public libraries

During the last few years, the public library has taken important steps towards very different services and activities compared to its aspect as an institution in the past, making efforts to open itself towards an increasingly diverse public. It is true that some people talk increasingly often about a disneylization of the library, about its decline as a public area in favor 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 the context in which competition in the informational environment is increasingly intense.

The creation of a new library service involves the analysis of the needs of the community it serves, based on sociological studies, to avoid a wrong use of the financial and human resources available at a certain moment in the respective institution. Based on these studies, one can draw certain conclusions leading to information on the community profile, possible partners of the library, user demands etc. Any newly created service needs to be monitored and evaluated in order to be made sustainable, checking its impact on the users, the results obtained during a certain period of time, the efficiency of the 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 regarding the perception on this public institution, only 1 % of the respondents considering them useless. The new technologies support a large array of activities, from individual study to the finding of a job and the construction and maintaining of social networks using the internet.

Auditions of classical or modern music, accompanied by presentations of books or art albums represent another service provided by the art or multimedia sections of the libraries. The beneficiaries of these activities are people educated in this sense and who come with propositions of specific events or users who want to find out as much as possible about a composer, an artist or become familiarized with the respective domain. Usually, these activities are organized in partnership with artists, painters, musicians, music or drawing teachers who can provide important and new information regarding the aspects presented.

The presentation of a movie - accompanied by the presentation of the book it was made after -, the presentation of an author or of an epoch are programs that have enjoyed a real success and which have led to a growing interest in reading among the young public.

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

The organization of courses for users according to their demands is a relatively new service in the Romanian libraries. To the community members, libraries offer areas where they continue to learn, developing their basic skills necessary to their participation in the social, cultural and economic life of the community. This supposes the development of the general culture, studying languages, developing reading skills, developing technological skills etc. By activities organized in a differentiated way for different categories

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of users, libraries stimulate ideas, discussions, a culture of dialogue and implicitly creativity. In Romania, by means of 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, the immediate result being the holding of diverse courses in an organized environment.

The activities based on volunteering have developed increasingly intensively lately, because very many of the library activities can be organized using volunteers. They need to be recruited, trained and coordinated in agreement to the Law no. 78/2014 concerning the regulation of the volunteering activity in Romania.

The technological evolution has allowed the public libraries to develop a series of special services for visually impaired people. In this sense, libraries have bought books in a Daisy (Digital Accessible Information System) format, by means of the Foundation "Cartea Călătoare" (The 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 oriented towards target groups win more and more supporters in the libraries that have become aware that it is more efficient to address a target public in particular and to create services adapted to particular needs than to act in a general way. For example, by means of the Biblionet programme, national partnerships have been implemented, such as the one between the Agency of Payments and Intervention for Agriculture (Agentia de Plăti şi Interventie pentru Agricultură - A.P.I.A.) and the local libraries, the target group being represented by farmers, who can use the IT equipments in the public libraries to apply online for subventions, and financial support for the plot of land they have[3]. Another target group considered by the libraries is that of the unemployed people, who are helped to find a job by means of 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 storing and spreading information in a community. Investing in a public library is maintaining a civilizing institution with a great impact in the cultivation and information of a people. Local and national authorities need to elaborate a strategy in the domain of the libraries and of information in agreement to the international norms concerning this aspect.

In this sense, one has to create a management unit for libraries and for information in the central administration availing itself of qualified personnel resources, sufficient to cover the needs of the knowledge society. A library is an institution enriching the life of many people, enriching their chances of living - via education and job opportunities -, promoting social cohesion, all these being community landmarks that reinforce the identity of the population. Public libraries have a special contribution to the creation of social capital, because they assure social inclusion[4], bring people together, promoting tolerance and an understanding of cultural diversity.

Libraries represent the binder between the community and the government, a connection materialized on different levels of responsibilities. By offering governmental information and contents, libraries promote a friendlier appearance of governance. For many users, libraries are or will be in the near future the first contact point with the e-governance. With the appearance of an increasing volume of online governmental information and services, libraries become the most important place where people can access services, while librarians can offer them the necessary assistance in order to use these services.

Note:

1. *Legea bibliotecilor* nr. 334/31.05.2002, republicată (*The Romanian Law for Libraries, republished*), in *Monitorul Oficial*, Partea I, nr. 132/11.02.2005.
2. Meredith G. Farkas, *Social Software in Libraries*, Medford, New Jersey, Information Today, 2007.
3. Corina Ciuraru (ed.), *Servicii pentru comunitate în bibliotecile publice din România*, Brăila, Proilavia, 2013, p. 46.
4. Dave Muddiman (ed.) *Open to all? The Public Library and social exclusion*. [Accessed on 07.04.2015] Available at: http://eprints.rclis.org/6283/1/lic084.pdf

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