SHORT ARTICLES FROM CLOSED DOORS TO OPEN GATES

In Service of Their Communities: Public Libraries Today

Croatia
Aleksandra Horvat

August Cesarec Library in Zagreb

Introduction

It is no doubt a truism to say that public libraries are societal institutions that genuinely mirror the society in which they have been set up. In spite of the fact that they are normally established and funded by the local communities, their activities reflect the broader policies of a particular society towards its citizens. The contemporary society in which public libraries act today has been characterized by specific, highly prominent traits, which strongly influence the libraries' activities and have to be taken into account in any discussion on libraries. Some of these distinctive traits are:

Globalization - a series of norms developed at the transnational level crossing the borders of individual countries and striving to overcome the present technical, geographical and political obstacles to the free movement of people

A new bibliobus - the Zagreb City Libraries

The new library strategy should be the planning and development of services for non-users. Non-users represent a large category of the population and libraries should be interested in learning the reason for their abstinence

and goods. Several of those transnational norms have already been widely accepted, such as respect for human rights, democracy and "good governance". Those norms have become even more important than the ones imposed by the national governments. The governments change the national legislation in order to harmonize their business and commerce norms and remove the barriers to business and trade. Globalization has an impact on culture, too. The creation of Europeana, the digital library intended to display the rich cultural heritage of Europe, is a clear example of globalization in culture. The idea that all people should have equal right to access information is a global norm accepted by many libraries throughout the world.

Migration is a contemporary fact of life; a great number of individuals are constantly on the move, in search of better employment, safer life conditions, and quality education. In each country there are foreigners who came to stay for a short period of time or permanently. For the politicians this means that they have to make decisions on new issues they did not have to confront before; for the citizens this means that they have to learn to live with different people and become more tolerant of different cultures. Migration has significant consequences for libraries, since they have to take into account the demographic changes in their communities and adapt their services to the changed needs of different users.

The City Library in Pula - the interior

The *Internet* has irrevocably marked the society of today. Its influence as a powerful information and communication tool has been enormous in almost every sector of life. Its appearance has helped diminish inequality among citizens by allowing them to access all kinds of information and control political decisions. Social networks, quite a recent phenomenon, allow every individual to establish informal channels of communication and voice her/his opinion freely. Libraries provide free access to the Internet for the public and join social networks where they advertise their services and display their holdings, hoping to increase the number of users. Nevertheless they have to watch carefully the recent events concerning the Internet, since they will almost certainly have an impact on them too.

Today the Internet is used by more than 2 billion people in the world[1]. It appears to be free and accessible to everyone. However, there are obstacles to its use: in the first place the absence of the necessary infrastructure for Internet accessibility in many parts of the world. The so-called information gap between the North and the South has been a topic of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005. The representatives of IFLA, the highest professional authority for libraries and librarians, took part at the WSIS together with other NGOs, trying to persuade the decision makers to do what is in their power to reduce the information gap. The recommendation finally adopted at the WSIS was that individual countries should develop and adopt national strategies for the deve-

Zagreb Digitized Heritage:
Mala zorna obuka. Zagreb 1903. Digitised by Zagreb City Libraries, 2008.
www.kgzdzb.arhivpro.hr/index.php?doctype=2&docid=301003973&vrstadok=3

lopment of the information society.
Internet access and content have also been controlled in many countries, although this is not always apparent. The trends to control the Internet have their origins in specific national cultures, traditions and customs. Certain content is not considered acceptable in certain parts of the world[2]. The present national legislation concerning the Internet differs in different countries. Many governments wish to protect the children as a particularly sensitive category of population; others are concerned about the privacy of their citizens, national security issues or protection of copyright. Sometimes Internet content is simply not considered decent and is prohibited by national law. Hate speech and pornography are examples of such content. Sometimes Internet content is blocked simply to prevent malicious content, spam or viruses. Measures such as filtering or blocking of the content, addresses or websites are taken by different stakeholders, governments, local authorities, companies and institutions or individuals. The OpenNet Initiative identifies the cases of filtering and surveillance of the Internet[3] and reports on them. According to the OpenNet initiative a number of countries which block certain Internet content has been on the increase since 2000. In 2008 the European Union commissioned a study on new filtering technologies in order to learn how to efficiently remove the illegal content. Blacklists of unwanted content, such as the one mounted by the Internet Watch Foundation in Great Britain, are available. Programs such as The Safer Internet[4] strive to gather all stakeholders interested in protecting children from harmful or illegal Internet content. When considering the introduction of filtering, libraries should bear in mind that filtering is still an imperfect technique that sometimes blocks quite innocuous and useful content. It is also important to keep in mind that libraries provide access to the persons who do not have an Internet connection at home. In Croatia, for instance, about one and a half million people cannot access the Internet from home, and libraries have been very successful in attracting new users who need access. Therefore, libraries should exercise caution when a decision on introducing filtering is to be taken.
Is access to the Internet an individual right? The answer to this question is important for libraries. Lately, there have been serious attempts to limit access, such as the introduction of the HADOPI legislation in France, or adoption of the so-called three-strikes legislation in the English speaking countries. In Great Britain Digital Economy Act adopted in 2009 requires Internet providers to control the users and prevent those who illegally download music and films from accessing the Internet. On the other hand, in some countries such as Estonia or Greece, access to the Internet is officially considered to be a citizen's right. The United Nations has recently warned governments and the private sector to refrain from restricting the flow of information on the

Internet[6]. In Croatia, librarians have not been involved in the discussions on the future of the Internet and the new legislation, and filtering has been introduced in some school libraries, without any wider public debate.

Public library services

In a constantly changing and globalized environment, heavily influenced by information and communication technologies, what can public libraries do to remain pertinent to their