

Skills of Romanian Librarians in 2021. Their New Mission During the Pandemic

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The problems libraries have to face nowadays have diversified and the librarians that work in Romanian public library system have a completely different role; they now have to contribute immensely to the evolution of society by facilitating better access to endless sources of knowledge to the community. The implications of reorganizing libraries, heavily influenced by the rising use of technology, have had a big impact on the librarian's overall activity. The article answers the lingering question of "What are the competences a librarians need in their portfolio to practice this profession" and "What projects have they developed throughout the pandemic to make the best of the resources they had at hand?".

With the help of collaboration, passion and creativity librarians are capable of building newer strategies and of creating an innovative management in their libraries.

Keywords: *Public library, competences, abilities, projects, strategies*

Introduction

During these past few years, topics such as the continuous transformation of public libraries and the major influence that the internet has brought to the work of librarians has been largely discussed. The problems faced by libraries have diversified, and the trend is shifting towards libraries acting like community platforms that create content and generate knowledge and exchange information. The implications of the reshaping libraries, as well as the increasing use of technology, are strongly affecting the work of all librarians. Librarians must play a new role in the evolution of today's society by facilitating access to their communities. Technology had a major influence in all areas. The increase and development of artificial intelligence have had a great impact onto the economy of all countries and have also influenced all cultural and social fields.

If libraries have existed for over 4,000 years, they have undeniably survived simply because they have been able to continuously reshape and transform in order to meet the needs of their communities. This is also largely due to the involvement of librarians that are open to always adapt their skills to the new challenges and requirements.

Two decades ago, students were graduating from library schools/programs with just skills to provide a few services to readers. Checking out books and archiving services according to classifications were the main tasks completed by librarians. Subsequently, the internet gradually conquered our world, which again changed a librarian's duties. This led to online catalogues, online training activities open to the public, that are aimed to inform about the use of equipment and virtual communication. Libraries, through their staff, have continuously metamorphosed in order to support the cultural development of their communities. "What I would tell citizens is that

In 2014, the Dutch Library Institute (SIOB) published a book about the future of the public library, *The library of the future: junction of knowledge, contact and culture*, (Cohen et al. 2014). This publication stresses the importance of “less collection, more connection” in the library of the future; less collection meaning less physical books, and more connection in four different ways. As stated by Marina Polderman, “In the future, the library needs to focus on creating, stimulating and facilitating valuable connections:

- Connection between people and information: the library as portal to knowledge,
- Connection between people: the library as platform,
- Connection between and within the community: the library as societal heart,
- Connection between information sources: information in context” (Polderman, 201

Librarian Skills

In 2020, librarians had to develop and use different skills than in 2019. Librarians had to manage information electronically, to digitalize it, use new software and of course, be active users of online networks and platforms. In addition to this, librarians had to think creatively, build new projects and coordinate teams of volunteers.

Meredith Schwartz (2016) wrote an article about the skills of future librarians; the author included the use of technology among the eleven skills listed: collaboration, advocacy/politics, communication/people skills, creativity/innovation, critical thinking, data analysis, flexibility, leadership, marketing, project management and technological expertise. Five years after Schwartz’s article, but also after the onset of economic crises caused by the pandemic, we can say with certainty that the use of technology is at the top of the list when it comes to librarian skills. Knowing how to work the new equipment when the IT market is constantly evolving or knowing new programs is not exactly easy, especially for elderly workers. Librarians continuously work hard to demonstrate that they are capable of successfully working their way through challenges. So what are they left to then? Librarians need to be forever flexible and ready to adapt and never pass on a learning experience. In this context, it is up to the library’s management abilities to shine a light on every librarian’s strength. However, one competence stands out, regardless of times: responsibility. Librarians must work responsibly to achieve their goals.

Transformation

In the mission of many libraries nowadays we see the aspiration to be a cultural-educational center. Librarians have proven to be creative, or even innovative. They have expressed their quick-thinking and communication skills through such high-quality services that the number of facilities has diversified in recent years. Also, non-formal education workshops became available in libraries, which contributed to improve the image of the institution. At the same time, national programs for librarians and public libraries, such as “Biblionet - the world in my library, through the Global Libraries programme”, (taking place from 2008 to 2013 provided the oxygen librarians needed. Bringing in thousands of dollars of investment and providing internet access in villages and communes has been a challenge primarily for rural librarians. Their training was an important step in improving the skills of librarians, a process that has developed continuously.

The Coronavirus Pandemic

Sadly, 2020 brought the entire economy to a standstill and librarians felt it was their duty to help communities. Given that public library services are free of charge and the space of the libraries can be easily adapted, librarians have put all their skills to good use and have come to meet their patrons (Pundsack 2015) with new services: knowledge in electronic format, virtual workshops/events, online communication. But don’t these services also require new skills? Certainly, developing them was not easy and it is not for librarians. Even though “there is a constant flow of new ideas, the truth is that change is most often motivated by the need to respond to a certain external stimulus”. The pandemic was one of the most intense stimuli ever. discontinuity was created and as Hamel & Breen (2010) explain in *The Future of Management*, “what is important is not the competitive advantage, but the evolutionary advantage over time. It was the desire to build (a library) capable of keeping up with evolution” .

To keep in touch with their patrons, libraries have gone beyond their physical space, to accommodate virtual interactions. Since March 2020, with the onset of the pandemic in Romania, patrons of public libraries have been offered books in digital format and access to databases; librarians started to read aloud to children and to meet with the public on online platforms. These changes occurred because librarians mobilized quickly: they thought critically, analyzed available resources, studied training modules available on the market, and managed technology. The whole range of new skills was developed in a context where the common denominator was the “counter-time”, so as not to cut the connection with the community. Moreover, to be able to make visible their efforts so far, librarians must know advanced methods of communication and promotion used in marketing. With schools and universities closed, many partnerships between libraries and school institutions ended. This led to another required skill: librarians must know now how to manage collaborations and continue running STEM activities (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) in different formats, all to get people to view the library as an investment, not as an expense. Therefore, libraries were involved in supporting health institutions and lower-income families, and in bringing the books closer to children.

Trends

Many of the trends in the Romanian library sector come from overseas. If Kennedy's exhortation “If not us, then who?” still vividly echoes for American librarians even today, for Romanian librarians echoes the slogan of the group “Sfoara virtuală / The Virtual String” created in March 2020: “Ne dezvoltăm împreună! / We develop together!”. Facebook has managed to attract more than 30% of the world's population through free access and public sharing. Romanian librarians work in a network. Librarians around the world have been able to build safe spaces, provide people with valuable information resources, contribute to the development of digital skills, fight for “the pleasure of reading” programs and encourage healing through reading. But for each engagement, librarians need increasingly complex skills.

Can libraries be called community centers in 2021? In an article published by *National Geographic* (Kaplan 2020) in September 2020, Melanie Kaplan said that “libraries morphed into architectural marvels and gathering places.” In her article, she quoted the opinion of Richard Reyes-Gavilan, executive director of The Martin Luther King Memorial Library (Washington), “You don't have to be a book lover or a reader to enjoy libraries today.” All this thanks to librarians and the eleven skills already listed, to which the twelfth skill should be added: responsibility.

The Virtual String

Inspired by the desire for communication, support and the need to share concerns, *The Virtual String* is a professional group started by a librarian from Brasov. Melania Luana Butnariu is the one who brought this initiative to life, starting from a WhatsApp group that slowly extended from a couple of friends to tens of librarians from all over Romania on March 23rd 2020 a number of 100 librarians from Romania and the Republic of Moldova. In just four months group's progress became visible even internationally, through partnerships, projects, competitions, book launches, courses, symposia, etc. In July 2020, the group was counting no less than 200 librarians and in September of the same year it reached over 300 librarians. One by one, through collaboration, the ideas resulting from this “virtual community of librarians” came to life in projects that grew from day to day, on a scale that even the librarians had not estimated.

At the initiative of librarians from that group since March 2020, a total of 20 projects have been carried out in partnership with municipal, city, county, school libraries or in collaboration with other institutions, NGOs, etc. Among them we recall:

1. STORY MARATHON - 70 Stories for 70 International Children's Days

International Children's Day is celebrated each year on June 1st in 150 countries around the world, including Romania. June 1st 2020 marked the 70th celebration of the International Children's Day in Romania. On this occasion, a group of 70 librarians from *The Virtual String* mobilized and read aloud 70 books and stories: 22 stories from Romanian literature and 48 stories from universal literature, in a *Marathon of stories* that ran live on Facebook, on a page created by 5 librarians from *The Virtual String* project, who also took over the role of coordinators of the marathon.

The 70 librarians of the 55 public, school and community libraries came from 21 counties and 2 national capitals (Bucharest and Chisinau), from Romania and the Republic of Moldavia. More than 65 audio, video and text materials were created to increase the visibility of the project in the community and to ensure the success of the event.

The live-streamed Story Marathon had 21,000 views, comprising 41,000 minutes of viewing, impacting over 40,000 people, during the 8 hours of live streaming. The 70 librarians managed to convey the charm of stories read aloud and they reached out to all those who love children and stories. This celebration of childhood was an additional opportunity for parents and grandparents, supported by librarians, to spend more time with the little ones, offering them the gift of read-aloud stories and meetings with magical characters.

The project was carried out with the support of the National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries of Romania (ANBPR), the National Library of Romania, *Cartea Copiilor* Publishing House, *Signatura* Publishing House and other partner publishers.

2. SUMMER SCHOOL FOR NEW LIBRARIANS

On August 3rd-7, 2020, 32 librarians, all employees of Romanian public libraries, up to 35 years old or that have worked in libraries for less than 5 years, participated in the online edition of the Summer School for New Librarians.

Organized by the National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries of Romania, this initiative aimed to create a network for young librarians to develop their creativity and ability to innovate in their place of work.

For five days, for up to three hours a day, the Summer School was organized as an informal and virtual space, dedicated to applied learning and the exchange of experiences, ideas and information, through new technologies, incredibly necessary to the times we live in. With this event, we, as organizers, have developed a network of new librarians trained to initiate strategies to create new and innovative library services that made sure the visitors had the best experiences provided for them.

During the workshops, various professional issues were discussed, mediated and coordinated by professionals from libraries and community development organizations.

3. COLIBLITE (Good Practices Related to Digital Education in Romanian Libraries)

An acronym for COmmunity LIBraries and digital LITEracy skills, COLIBLITE is an ERASMUS+ project, run from September 2017 to August 2020, led by the Utrecht Library (Netherlands) and coordinated internationally by Mira Media. This was another opportunity for Romanian librarians, that are now part of the newer project *The Virtual String*, to prove that better results come out of collaborations. The countries involved in the project were: Italy, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Romania.

In its first stage, this project was carried out in 8 Romanian public libraries, namely the county libraries in: Argeş, Braşov, Brăila, Maramureş, Prahova, Sălaj; Titu Town Library, Dâmboviţa County and Ocniţa Municipal Library, Dâmboviţa County, the next step being the inclusion of more replications in several public libraries in the respective counties.

The main objectives of the project were: undertaking national research on the development of digital citizenship/education and expected skills, developing and implementing organizational and policy action plans, training of trainers/librarians, creating projects and pilot activities for children, young people, teachers, and parents, sharing results and strategies with other similar institutions in the county or in other counties.

The participating libraries provided courses on digital skills and digital citizenship to students in the community and to people who can support student in becoming effective and responsible internet users (teachers and parents). The topics covered were: online bullying (cyberbullying), responsible content for shared information, online games as an education tool, cell phone use and screen time management. During the course delivery as part of the project, the library staff was supported by ActiveWatch and the Romanian National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries.

In the first year of the project, a database was organized at the level of public libraries in Romania, including types of activities that can be carried out in libraries/schools on the topic of digital education. In the second year of implementation 8 librarians-trainers were formed, who in turn transferred the information to 169 other librarians. The latter held 90 information sessions, of which 79 were organized in libraries in person, and 12 sessions were organized online. There were 2048 beneficiaries following the courses, of which 238 were teachers or parents, and 1810 were children and young people.

In the last year of the project, other librarians were trained, and the information was conveyed to even more people in the community. A website (<http://www.coliblite.org>) has been created, that includes all the materials used during the project, namely lesson plans, experiences, implementation directions, useful resources for all those interested in such activities.

Mircea Toma, President of the ActiveWatch Association and trainer of librarians declared, “Professions we have become accustomed to think of as solutions for our livings are disappearing at a vertiginous pace. What remains in their place? A new world, where we will operate in a new language: the digital language. Future occupations may not be known reach school age, but the digital language can be learned in time to be able to choose when the time comes. The condition of adapting to this future world – which has already appeared – is the development of digital skills”.

4. FRIENDSHIP... ON A... VIRTUAL... STRING

On April 2nd, 2020, the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth of the County Library "George Barițiu" Brasov started the project *Prietenie... pe o... sfoară / Friendship... on a... string...* to celebrate International Children's and Youth Book Day.

From one year to another, the aforementioned project was joined by dozens of libraries, so that in 2019 the partnership included no less than 170 public libraries from 38 County libraries. Each registered librarian presented the project in an average of 10 classes, resulting in 170 libraries x 10 classes x 25 children in a class = 42500 children who encountered the library, with information from librarians, with an author, a reading, drawing and an unforgettable activity - in a single edition.

Given the pandemic in 2020, the Brasov County Library “George Barițiu” announced the development of the International Educational Partnership “*Friendship... on a... virtual... string*” from August to October 2020. For the 8th edition of the project, they encouraged Public libraries, school libraries, non-governmental organizations, children's clubs, or any other organizations that work with children and support the priorities of the partnership to participate. Then, the partnership's actions were also dedicated to promoting children's literature and stimulating children's interest in reading. The proposed topic was devoted to the celebration of the work of Roald Dahl. The organizers made available to the participants (as every year) all the information necessary to carry out the activities (content, worksheets, promotional materials, etc.). Thus, in 2020, 202 public and school libraries were registered, the participants of the event counting no less than 202 partners. Afterwards, every library held an exhibition where children’s drawings were presented on a string.

The desire of librarians for 2021 and for the years to come is to extend this partnership in all public libraries in Romania and to bring to the attention of children, but also parents and educators, as many valuable books and as many children's writers as possible.

Drawing a conclusion, we can say that the inventive mind of librarians allows that most of the projects implemented in previous years have a natural continuity even in the online environment.

5. CHRISTMAS TOGETHER

Giving this event its deserved value, during the most beautiful time of the year, when we celebrate the birth of Christ, the librarians of Romanian public libraries, consistent and keepers of traditions, highlighted the charm of these days, being closer to all those who cross the threshold of libraries, book lovers and keepers of these customs.

The start of the event CHRISTMAS TOGETHER was given on December 17, 2020 at 17:00. For 16 days, until 1 January, 2021, the CHRISTMAS OF YESTERYEAR has been celebrated in online environment, through short or long videos, stories, carols and memories. Christmas holidays are an extra opportunity for parents and grandparents to spend more time with their children and share with them traditions of yesteryear. All posts of the librarians could be traced on the official page of the event: <https://www.facebook.com/70depovesti>, on the Facebook pages of Romanian libraries and on the blogs of libraries participating in this large-scale project.

Through the means and methods used to organize such an event, librarians have shown, once again, that they adapt to the times, keep up with the novelties and latest discoveries of technology and science — even if this event represented a novel element for many of them.

The results of the project were:

- 43 librarians from public libraries, all partners of the project parteneri in proiect
- 43 stories, stories, memories, carols, etc. uploaded online
- 12 counties involved
- 89114 views of the videos posted on the official Facebook page of The Story Marathon

6. COMICS OLYMPIAD

This project was unique in the world and brought together 80 libraries and more than 200 participating children. 100 years after the first official presentation of the Olympic flag, the historic moment was marked by the first edition of the Comics Olympiad, a national Comics contest, promoting the Olympic spirit and awareness of national, European and international cultural values among primary, secondary and high school students. The Comics Olympiad is a concept of the comics-author and comics-teacher Mihai I. Grăjdeanu

The project was carried out with the support of the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee, in partnership with the Caraș-Severin Branch of the Olympic Academy, and the Bucharest City Museum. With the help of *The Virtual String*, librarians from all over the country taught kids just how comic strips are created. The goal of those who took part in project was to create, in the end, a comic with the theme *100 years since the first official presentation of the Olympic flag*.

The Virtual String was the most important source of information for the 300 librarians from all over the country and the Republic of Moldova. The effervescence of the *virtual string* meant primarily a fruitful exchange of experience between librarians, transferring information between them and participating together in webinars, conferences, workshops, book launches, symposia and projects. On "the string" there were also promoted local activities with the aim of making visible ideas. *The virtual string* has attracted numerous partners, institutions, NGOs and foundations from Romania.

Conclusions

It is important that the Romanian authorities understand that librarians need to be constantly learning in order to implement new services. Also, following these needs at the national level, trainings can be organized to help librarians and therefore, communities through local libraries.

The community of librarians associated under *The Virtual String* proved that libraries need innovative management. In Romania, the pandemic has changed not only the structure of school programs and multiple other services, but also the supply of services provided by public libraries. For librarians, this change meant achieving new goals, building new development strategies in new directions, and this implies vision and responsibility. Many activities have minimal budgets, but nevertheless this has not been an obstacle in their organization. The work of librarians is also influenced by the social environment or the economic system, but their motivation comes from the analysis of data on the needs of communities. Many reports show that in recent years, libraries are the ones that identify their patrons' requests, as opposed to the 19th- and 20th-centuries, when it was the reader looking for the library. Libraries are "information havens, ideal communicators, because beyond meaningful information, they convey relationships and polysemies dedicated to fulfilling expectations." (Stoica 2016)

Are public libraries successful in their mission to work as cultural-educational centres? Have librarians managed so far to build the third space in the community? It's hard to say at the moment. Maybe 2021 will finally give us an answer. The fact is in 2021 librarians have multiple skills and abilities, work with passion, still want to meet the needs of the community and are professional in information management. Few have not been able to understand the message delivered by Prof. Hermina Anghelescu "it is time for librarians from all types of libraries in every corner of the world to change their old ways, to get rid of their old mind-set and start to open up to the modernization of library services, to embrace new attitudes and behaviours, in order to be able to take on new strategies for the collaboration with the public" (cited in Woodward 2005).

It is the inner motivation of librarians that makes them take the fight further, to place the public library in a poll position in people's minds; it inspires them to build strategies with a vision.

Librarians, going forward, have an incredibly difficult mission. They now need to not only come up with marketing strategies that will bring in visitors, but they also have to do so by incorporating the ever-evolving technology to benefit both themselves and the users. In order to do so, librarians need to also master the 12 key abilities presented earlier, to the best of their knowledge. The numbers show us that the blue ocean of opportunity, as stated in *Strategia oceanului albastru* (Kim & Mauborgne 2015), is not in shape yet. The so called "blue ocean" represents a problem that has yet to be solved, it represents a new market where you are the sole competitor. It still has to contend with the stereotypes and mind-sets of certain leaders until "citizens understand the power of a library to transform lives and give meaning to life".

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