

Contemporary Library and Its Role in the Community

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Contemporary libraries need to redefine, to diversify their activities and services so that they can face the challenges of the new information and communication environment. To reach this goal, libraries need to integrate into the community and play an active role in educational, cultural, and social activities.

This article aims at portraying the contemporary library from the perspective of its role in the community. It aims at synthesising opinions and results of sociological research in North American literature, thus pointing out theories and good practices for the Romanian space. Literature shows that ensuring access to information and documentation is no longer the dominant activity of libraries. Together with this activity, there are also educational and cultural activities and even leisure activities that define the community role of a library.

People come to a library not only for information, research, and reading activities, but also, increasingly, to carry out group community activities, for cultural activities, or even for socialisation activities. Contemporary libraries need to be keepers of a community memory and a reliable partner of authorities and community institutions in their endeavour to carry out projects and activities.

Keywords: *contemporary libraries; community space; library technology; cultural and educational activities*

1. Introduction

The contemporary library seems to be in crisis. The increasingly higher exigencies from the community and the impact of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) force libraries to redefine to meet the new information and documentation exigencies. A few questions have arisen: What is a library to a community? Do communities really need libraries? The answers supplied by literature are encouraging. Libraries are the memory of communities: they have a moulding role supporting non-formal education, they represent a cultural area, they actively support local cultural events, they have an active social role, and they are free-access, non-discriminatory public areas. All these are arguments in favour of contemporary libraries and of their role in the community.

This article aims at portraying contemporary library from the perspective of its role in the community. It is an attempt to synthesise opinions and results of sociological research present in North-American literature, and to point out theories and good practices useful for the Romanian cultural area.

2. Changes, advantages and vulnerabilities of contemporary library

Contemporary libraries differ from the libraries decades and centuries ago. These differences are the result of changes of the social environment in which these structures of information and documentation exist; these differences are obvious in the changes in mission and objectives, in the diversification of the activities and of the services and products offered, in the placing of library

users in the centre of specific activities, and in better integration in the community life.

Changes in our contemporary society dominated by information, communication and technologies have caused significant changes of the paradigms influencing library activity. To note as dominant the influence of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) that have substantially changed the vision of institutions on their own activities, products, and services, and determined changes of specific library activities. Libraries are also compelled to shift from relative passivity to an active state of involvement and collaboration, and to meet users' needs. To also note the shift from the function of conservation of collections to the function of communication or, in other words, the emphasis from document to user and his/her need for information. The quantitative explosion of information, its globalisation and the implosion of the communication time have a special, multiple impacts on the community. There has also been expansion and diversification of the community, as well as a considerable increase of users' exigencies and needs for information.

The changes of contemporary society have brought to light a number of advantages and vulnerabilities of the library, as well as of the professions of information.

The main advantages would be as follows:

- Libraries remain specialised structures in the building-up, processing, use, communication, and conservation of documents and information;
- Libraries develop their own competencies as managers of information and knowledge;
- Libraries are acknowledged as competent in preserving and archiving documentary heritage thus becoming keepers of local, regional, and national cultural memory;
- Libraries are involved in the life of local communities fulfilling their educational, cultural, social, and informational functions;
- Libraries and other information and documentation structures play an active role in society making cooperation, communication, and sharing of information resources and of good practices with similar structures or with any other type of institutions in the social environment extremely conspicuous;
- Information professions internationalise; therefore, all information professions require the same competencies, no matter the country or the community;
- Competencies specific to information professions slide towards professions specific to other fields of activity thus making their interdisciplinarity more obvious.

The vulnerabilities that libraries are forced to face are both external and internal because of the lack of effective adaptation to the changes of the social environment.

For the first time in their history, libraries have lost their position of single owners of information and are compelled to evolve in a competitive environment. The Internet is both a competitor and a partner of libraries. The Internet is the most important competitor because it supplies its users with information products and services in digital format and accessible no matter the distance. Moreover, due to ICTs, there are numerous specific applications making possible all functions and activities allowing the organization, recuperation, and archiving of information resources. The Internet becomes a partner of libraries if the latter manage to use all the advantages supplied by the former to extend the community they serve and to diversify the offer of information and documentation products and services specific to this type of institution.

The most important internal vulnerability is libraries' lack of response to change. Used to be in a state of relative passivity because the users would come to the libraries and because their main function was to inform, libraries need now to meet users' needs and become active, get involved in the communities' activities, and make their presence and usefulness noted because of the changes and challenges in the social environment. The measure in which libraries manage to adapt to changes is the measure of their integration in the communities they serve. If they fail to do that, they are the only ones to be blamed for driving away the community public; they end up by self-isolating and their specific functions are taken over by other institutions or structures that are not

necessarily specialised in information and communication.

Another vulnerability is the fragile status of the library professions. The place and role of library professions in society is a measure of the society's recognition of their importance for the community. The status of specific professions becomes fragile when specific competencies acquired in professional training institutions do not match the real necessities of the professions. Employing in libraries people with no special training has a double negative impact on the social status of library professions. On the one hand, people lacking minimum specific competencies are employed as specialists; on the other hand, the perception is that library professions are simplistic ones that do not ask for specialised training. Negative effects of such approaches are obvious in libraries' activity and in the difficulties they face, difficulties that are increasingly more difficult to overcome. The status of library professions is uneven at European and international levels. In the countries where special training is essential (e.g. France, U.S.A., United Kingdom, etc.), libraries have an established status in society and are actively involved in their communities, while in the countries where library profession are not established, they are less developed: they are not involved in the communities they serve and they have relatively the status of tolerated public institutions.

3. Social role of libraries

The American Library Association (ALA) synthesises the reasons why libraries play an important social role within their communities (American Library Association s.a.). The main reasons would be:

- Libraries support disadvantaged groups, playing an important role in non-formal education (e.g. literacy of children from disadvantaged environments);
- Libraries bring cultural and social added value to inhabited areas: studies carried out in the U.S.A. show that people prefer to live close to libraries because such areas are considered safer and libraries are indicators of a high standard of living;
- Libraries are socialisation environments since they facilitate meetings between people and groups of people;
- Libraries are important for their collections and for the support in information and documentation;
- Libraries are spaces for public meetings, reunions, and debates - true Agoras of the community;
- Libraries support cultural activities and community members that wish to perform (in small communities, libraries are the main exhibition and cultural areas);
- Libraries are working areas for individuals or groups, managing to ensure proper working conditions and relative privacy to their visitors;
- Libraries are true suppliers of technology, of necessary ICTs for different users.

These remarks on the role of libraries in their communities show that access to documents and information no longer ranks first and that libraries on the whole, as institutions gathering community members count most. People see libraries as community spaces, as places where everybody is welcome, free of charge and indiscriminately, a space where everybody can enjoy cultural, educational, and social activities. It is more and more obvious that libraries become suppliers of technology and infrastructure for community activities making them get involved actively in the most diverse community activities.

4. Configuration and reconfiguration of library space

In contemporary libraries, the documentation, reading, and individual work area is no longer dominant. Group activities and modern technologies determine configurations and

reconfigurations of interior architecture and design.

Libraries need to understand that they are parts of their communities; therefore, they need to meet the informational, cultural, educational, and social needs of the community. The diversification of services provided for the community and the increasing exigencies of the users have caused change in library interior architecture and design (University of Southern California 2018). The requirements regarding contemporary library buildings have determined changes in the architectural and building standards of these specialised buildings. There is expansion of working areas, of socialization areas, and of cultural areas in contemporary libraries. Periodical repositories make room for open access to documents and traditional reading areas make room for digital technologies and services. Library technology should not be inferior to that people have access to at home, on the contrary. Last generation technologies, specialised information applications, specialists that can provide assistance and proper instruction can be assets of useful libraries.

Literature claims that modern libraries should design their interior so that it provide four types of areas (Petra 2017):

- A social area for interaction, communication, and exchange of knowledge and information, for group activities, etc., i.e. a true area for human socialization;
- An area for study and contemplation (reading rooms or other silent areas ensuring the quiet and privacy necessary for the users' study and work), i.e. an area for individual activities;
- An area for technologies or for innovation that allows the use of ICTs and the development of competencies in the use of specialised technologies and applications;
- A neutral area for the public (cultural areas, exhibition areas, or areas for social and artistic events).

It is worth noting that access to information and reading in the public area is no longer dominant among library activities. Together with individual needs of the users, other user group, public, and community needs become equally important and, in some contexts, dominant. The community as whole and homogeneous groups of people are, now, specific library users. It is necessary to configure and reconfigure library space to meet the new demands and exigencies of individual and group users.

5. Library and community

Of all library types representing the national library system of a country, public libraries represent community the best.

Public libraries are characterized by serving a very heterogeneous public from the perspective of age, level of professional training, personal and professional pursuits, fields of interest, etc. and, in addition, users of public libraries can also be users of other types of libraries (school libraries, university libraries, scientific libraries, specialised libraries). Public libraries fulfil their mission and social role if they manage to harmonise the needs of all categories of users thus becoming an identity element of the community served.

What would be the specific elements that could become assets of libraries in their relationship with the local administration and the community? The study *Library Services in the Digital Age* (Zickuhr et al. 2013) lists the strengths of contemporary libraries:

- Libraries are community centres that really link the population with community institutions (libraries are partners of schools, of cultural institutions, and of social work, and they are involved actively in supporting their specific activities);
- Libraries provide indiscriminately, free of charge access to information resources in both traditional and digital formats (libraries are supported by their communities through local authorities aiming at mediating in a professional, specialised way access to information for all community members);

- Libraries play an important role in continuous education and a complementary role in education (libraries are involved in non-formal education);
- Libraries are characterised by flexibility, quick assimilation of new technologies, provision of training in their use, and by diversification of activities for the public;
- Libraries are permanently open to innovation and technology, to digital products and services, and to providing distance access;
- Libraries play an active role in user training (individuals or legal persons, individuals or groups of individuals) and are open to cooperation and partnerships with similar institutions and with the most community institutions;
- Libraries are managers of knowledge, i.e. information science theories and techniques are acknowledged as the most performing in organising and finding information.

The above remarks show that contemporary libraries are institutions with a high degree of involvement in community activities, a partner of other community institutions, a support of the most diverse activities, and a central place of the community or the area where every individual or group of individuals can find their places.

Another study identifies 23 reasons why libraries can be considered the most important place on town (Edwards et al. 2013). These reasons are grouped into five categories describing the mission of contemporary libraries.

The basic principle is that libraries are community areas and active parts of the community. Thus:

Libraries are binders of community, i.e. they help to revive disadvantaged areas, and they are partners of community in the most diverse long-term sustainable projects. The development of library collections also reflect the concerns and needs of a community and of each user, and libraries are responsible for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the community, i.e. they are responsible for the preservation of the archives, preservation, and conservation of documents and even of the objects reflecting local history and community, including minority groups. Libraries promote democratic values and are active parts of the local community life; they are socialization areas in which people meet and communicate with other people. Libraries also “speak” through their architecture, culture, and identity of a community. Libraries are, usually, historically or architecturally representative buildings.

Libraries are community centres for different people and populations (they reflect the features of the community), i.e. they support minority communities and immigrants willing to integrate disadvantaged people due to their mission of addressing indiscriminately all social categories and groups and all types of individuals.

Libraries are art centres, i.e. they promote and support local artists, professionals, and amateurs, and ensure access to artistic events for all.

Libraries are closely related to universities, i.e. they are integrated in the academic community, where they provide distance access to documentation and learning resources, they help the members of the academic community develop and manage documentary content for information and learning, and they promote civic discourse.

Libraries are partners of the youth, i.e. they teach youth basic life concepts, they organise tutorials, and learning programmes, summer schools on different topics as acknowledged support for children education.

Acknowledging the role of libraries in the community resides in the measure in which local authorities and community members use competencies and resources provided by this type of public institution. A community eases its own work and solves a lot of problems if it knows how to effectively use its libraries.

Contemporary libraries are not only active parts of a community, but they are increasingly seen as building up communities (Twomey 2017 or 2018). How is that possible? Through the promotion

by libraries of educational and cultural programmes for the local community, by facilitating interactions between people, by involving libraries in the social activities of the community (debates, discussions, different topical campaigns, etc.), by conserving local written heritage (and they should be asked to do so by local authorities). Libraries are and should be in the centre of community and support local culture and other activities of the community (Morris 2011 cited by Twomey 2017 or 2018). Even if an individual does not come to a library for its services, the simple fact that he/she uses the institution is enough to show the importance of libraries in a community. A library space is considered the third space used by people after family space, job space, or school space (Oldenburg 1991 cited by Twomey 2017 or 2018). In addition, it is the space of an institution where one can spend his/her free time free of charge on cultural, educational, and recreational activities, which does not always happen to museums or performance institutions like cinemas, opera houses, or theatres.

6. Supporting contemporary libraries

It is unanimously accepted that contemporary libraries are compelled to face unprecedented challenges. The dynamics of changes in the world of information and documents has forced libraries to adapt continuously to the new realities of the community and social environments. Overcoming difficult situations on their way to accomplishing their social fate, redefining their mission are possible with the support of professional community at national level - through professional associations - and at international level - through specialized, regional or global associations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions - IFLA) or international organisms such as UNESCO. To support contemporary libraries and the professions of information, these institutional structures have developed and promoted official declarations, resolutions, and directive documents affirming the place, role, and mission of the structures of information and documentation in society and community, the necessity of free access to information for all people, education and culture for all, preservation and promotion of local and national cultural heritage. The *IFLA-UNESCO Manifesto* from 1994 (IFLA&UNESCO 1994), which redefines contemporary public library and its social, community role presents its new mission and objectives. Contemporary public libraries should be an integrated part of a community and should participate actively in educational, cultural, and social projects. Access to information is only one of the activities contemporary libraries should carry out. This official document was followed by the *IFLA-UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto* (IFLA&UNESCO 2006), *IFLA-UNESCO Manifesto for Digital Libraries* (IFLA&UNESCO 2011) and the *IFLA Guide for School Libraries* (IFLA 2015). The translation of these documents in numerous national languages shows the interest of national professional communities in their promotion at national level and in their contemporary mission are continuously changing all over the world; to do so, society on the whole and authorities become aware of this and support libraries.

Other ways of supporting libraries are legislative initiatives making up a clear, coherent legislative framework, local, regional, national, and even international programmes specific to library activities (heritage, cultural, educational), common projects to support local communities. The exchange of good practices and promotion activities could really support these institutions.

Promoting research in the field of Information and Communication Science, specialty, scientific and professional publications are ways of averment in community and society of information professions.

7. Conclusions

Literature concerning contemporary libraries and their role in society allows several conclusions to be drawn.

It is clear that we witness a redefinition of the mission of libraries and of their functions, which draws restructuring, remodelling, and design of library space in accordance with its new attributions and requirements. Contemporary libraries come out of a state of relative passivity and play an increasingly active role in the community sphere. Starting with the 21st century, libraries pay an increasing importance to educational, cultural, and communicational function. Providing *access to information and documents* is still one of their basic activities, but not necessarily their main activity. Are equally important *non-formal education activities* that make libraries partner of schools, *cultural activities* providing citizen the opportunity of expressing their artistic side and also access to diversified culture, and *local heritage conservation and valorisation activities*. From an architectural perspective, contemporary libraries focus on public, cultural, exhibition areas rather than on storage facilities and reading rooms as in the past.

Libraries build up and link communities. Libraries are open institution where free, indiscriminately access to information, technology, training, culture, social and community life are ensured, thus contributing to the development of the community they belong to. Libraries continue to be areas where citizens act like people interested in finding a document or some information, and who need specialised assistance to do so, either as people interested in using a technological infrastructure for public use, or as people interested in using a public space to express themselves artistically and culturally or simply as people in a community area enjoying spending free time in a relaxing, educational manner.

Contemporary libraries are true community areas expressing their communities.

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