Libraries in the context of the pandemic:
Crisis and Opportunity

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Any crisis situation is a challenge for libraries. The pandemic caused by COVID - 19 cannot be compared with other crisis situations encountered by libraries. This crisis has profoundly affected the activities of libraries, their presence in the community, their relations with users, and even their mission and vision of institutional development policies and strategies. Forced to carry out most of their activities online, libraries have reorganized and resized their activities and have looked for new ways to best adapt to the digital environment. At the same time, the crisis situation is also an opportunity to analyse the risks and vulnerabilities that they are obliged to face and to develop institutional development strategies that protect and benefit libraries in a competitive environment such as the digital environment. Thus, libraries become concerned with strengthening their online presence, making and publishing their own digital content from their own collections, producing value-added products and services, reaffirming the heritage function by which they constitute and promote the cultural, social, and scientific memory of the community they serve, and partnering with similar institutions in order to ensure mutual support and resource sharing. This study presents a brief analysis of the online presence of Romanian libraries. The contemporary library thus institutionally redefines itself, in terms of its mission, specific activities, products and services, of its presence in the digital competitive environment so that it can effectively fulfil its role at the level of the community it serves and of society as a whole.

Keywords: *library, pandemic, digital environment, crisis and opportunity, development*

1. Introduction

The year 2020 has put libraries in the face of unprecedented challenges through the consequences for the institution's activities and, in particular, for institutional development, for the mission and vision of the institution in a changing society and where situations may arise in which social networking is being redefined. The global health crisis, restrictions on the movement of persons and on ways of social and individual relationship also have a significant impact on libraries. In this particular context, libraries are put, firstly, in the face of crisis management and, secondly, where they need to properly and objectively analyse their position and role in society and, consequently, develop sustainable, flexible development strategies that take into account crisis situations, the information and education mission of libraries, the use and exploitation of library collections in both traditional and digital form through the development of products and services accessed over the Internet.

2. Managing COVID - 19: Crisis Management

The pandemic is a real test for libraries, revealing how they can respond to a health crisis situation. The pandemic status was established quite quickly globally and allowed libraries to react quickly to the situation created, often without the possibility of exploiting situations of good practice from similar institutions. Libraries adapted on the go to the situation created and tried to respond as appropriately as possible to the requests. The main objective was to ensure the safety of

the institution's own staff and users – from compliance with sanitary and hygiene rules to the restriction or redefinition of activities.

IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) monitored the pandemic situation at library level based on reports of libraries and library associations in various countries. A first observation is that the management approaches to the crisis situation are different from country to country and, in some cases, even from library to library in the same country ranging from the total closure of institutions to the adoption of restrictions or limitation of activities according to decisions taken at the level of local or national authorities. According to the IFLA website, the most common situation was *the closure of libraries for a limited time* (the maximum level of pandemic manifestation). Closing the library did not necessarily mean stopping all tasks. From the reports to the IFLA, it has been noted that work from home was organised, staff were redeployed to digitisation and online publication of information resources and was even personally seconded to the local authorities to assist social and community assistance services. Another situation was *to provide minimal services* (i.e. libraries were not totally closed to the public but offered home publishing loan services, online references limiting as much as possible interaction with library staff as well as users with each other). In this situation, cultural, social and educational activities and events in libraries were prohibited. There are also reports of libraries remaining open but a number of *restrictions and obligations* have been implemented for staff and the user audience as well as special rules for groups of users considered at risk, additional hygiene and disinfection measures, specially defined circuits within the library, closure of public spaces, etc. (IFLA 2020) Regardless of the specific situation in which libraries have operated during the pandemic, crisis management has focused on implementing health and hygiene measures to ensure the health and safety of staff and the public. The biblio-economic aspects were limited to providing minimum services at the institution's premises and remotely via the Internet (Parksville 2020).

Preparing libraries to reopen and ensuring their full capacity is a shift from crisis management to current operating management. The premise from which it starts is that the next period cannot be the same as the period before the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, the experience gained by libraries during this period will need to be harnessed for possible crisis situations in the future. Libraries have developed rules, procedures, regulations, and guides for staff and users appropriate to the health crisis caused by COVID - 19. (ALA 2020, University of Arkansas 2020). The new rules are aimed at ensuring the health security of all persons entering, working or using library products and services and relate to personal sanitation and premises and surfaces, ensuring appropriate circuits for staff and users, limiting contact times between librarians and users, imposing and observing physical distance, identifying persons at potential risk of infection or removing infection, etc.

3. Library Activities, Products and Services in the Particular Context of the Pandemic

The pandemic period was a veritable test for the online presence of libraries. Three key reasons can be identified that cause libraries to be present in the digital space. Firstly, they want to expand the community they serve and provide remotely accessible digital products and services. Secondly, they use IT infrastructure as ways of interaction and communication. Thirdly, through digital technologies, libraries are institutionally promoting themselves and promoting their products and services.

The offer of digital products and services offered by libraries includes documents from their own collections and services developed internally as well as databases and other types of resources developed by third parties and acquired by libraries and for which libraries have only an intermediary function. The offer of digital documents from their collections differentiates libraries from the perspective of their online presence in this crisis situation when it was almost impossible to attend libraries. (Daily News Sri Lanka 2020, Redwood City 2020). The most popular online product offered by libraries is *the electronic catalogue*. Being, however, essentially a bibliographical database, it does not provide access to information but merely locates documents containing the necessary information.

In the context of the pandemic, and beyond, the library catalogue allows the creation of bibliographic information and bibliographic lists with a view to further access of documents. *The digital documents* provided by the library can be full text databases bought by the library (especially in the case of university libraries), e-books or articles of digital publications that can be borrowed if the book is not in open access or digitized documents from the libraries' own collections.

A service suitable for remote access provided by libraries is *the reference service*. References by phone, email or through specific applications are an effective way to promote library usefulness in the community and to keep library users in touch with the institution. By providing expert assistance in retrieving information (from their own collections, from the collections of other libraries or from the digital environment on the websites of other institutions providing information resources such as publishers, universities, media trusts, etc.), libraries affirm their recognized competences in retrieving, evaluating, and selecting information.

Digitization on demand can be another service provided by libraries during this period. Useful documents from library collections identified in the digital catalogue or by the reference service can be requested by users and the library staff will handle their digitization and transmission through the IT infrastructure (by email or by publishing them in a specific database on the site of the institution through free or controlled access).

Online tutors seeking to train people in retrieving information and documents in catalogues and databases or tutorials on training in the acquisition of intellectual work methods and techniques (information literature) can also enrich the provision of library products and services.

In the category of cultural offer provided by libraries during this period, the most common and accessible products are *virtual exhibitions* or the presentation of a document of cultural or scientific heritage value.

Such products are intended to promote the library and its heritage but also to keep an eye on the institution and its role in society.

4. Risks and Vulnerabilities of Libraries in the Particular Context of the Pandemic

The risks and vulnerabilities to which libraries are exposed in this particular context are no more than usual – they are only much more pronounced and obvious. The risks are the result of external causes to the library and relate to the environment and context in which the establishment operates, while vulnerabilities are due to internal causes of the library and, at least in theory, are easier to control.

The greatest risk remains the competitive environment. Libraries, from their beginnings until several decades ago, had a monopoly on information being the only institutions recognized at the level of the society as having powers and competences in organizing, retrieving, communicating, and preserving documents and information. The emergence of the Internet obliges libraries to evolve in a competitive environment and to clearly delineate their specific competences and, thus, reaffirm their place and role in society. The pandemic further highlighted the risk to libraries. If they remain merely an intermediary of documents and information created by third parties (publishing houses, universities, media), third parties may wish to promote their own products or other intermediaries will appear in the information resource market. For example, many universities buy databases and/or create institutional deposits without necessarily using libraries. Libraries must digitally promote their own collections and develop products and services that highlight their specific competences in the organisation, retrieval, and evaluation and communication of information.

Legislative inaccuracies and, sometimes, arbitrary decisions of the authorities constitute risks because they can leave libraries with low defence capacity in crisis or force majeure situations.

5. Libraries in Romania: Online Presence

The Catalogue of Information and Documentation Systems in Romania – CAIDSRO, based on its own data provided by libraries, includes 3642 registered libraries. All of these libraries are part of the National Library System and are grouped into categories by library type. Thus, there are the following types of libraries: the National Library of Romania, the Library of the Romanian Academy, 41 county libraries (including the Bucharest Metropolitan Library), 60 municipal libraries, 206 city libraries, 2569 communal libraries, 58 university libraries, 47 specialized libraries, 618 school libraries and CID (Documentation and Information Centre), 41 libraries of the Houses of Teaching Staff. School libraries and CIDs, communal libraries, libraries of the Houses of the Teaching Staff and many special or specialized libraries have no legal personality and are dependent, in many aspects, on the decisions of the guardianship institutions and this aspect is strongly reflected in their work (CASIDRO 2020).

A recent doctoral research, carried out at the Bucharest University by Luminita Gruia and publicly supported in November 2019, analyses the online presence of Romanian libraries. The data presented in this doctoral thesis helps assessing the extent to which libraries in Romania can cope with a crisis situation in which they are obliged to provide services only in a digital context (Gruia 2020).

The online presence of libraries envisages a broad and comprehensive presence of both the institutional presence (simple web page, website, blog or web page included on the website of the institution or guardianship authority) and the services and products offered by them. According to the research mentioned, of the total of 3,642 libraries, only 255 libraries have a *url* (a web address) where the library can be found on the Internet, either through its own website (72 libraries), or through a blog (66 libraries), or a page on the website of the guardianship institution (117 libraries), which means that only 7% of libraries are institutionally present online. If online presence is taken into account according to the type of library, the best represented are the county libraries (100%), followed by university libraries (87.93%) and municipal libraries (63.33%). Less than half of specialized libraries (48.94%), libraries of the Houses of the Teaching Staff (46.34%) and city libraries (22.82%) are active online. The least represented are school libraries (0.49%) and communal libraries (1.20%). The National Library, the Library of the Romanian Academy, the 41 county libraries, 61.67% of municipal libraries, 32.7% of university libraries, 30.58% of the city libraries are active on *Facebook* as the main social network. Communal and school libraries have the lowest attendance – 0.78% and 0.65%, respectively, and specialized libraries (1.67%) and those of the Houses of the Teaching Staff (3.33%) represent about 1 to 3%.(Gruia 2020). It can easily be seen that libraries without legal personality and, therefore, with limited decision-making power, are the least represented in the online environment.

In a situation where only 7% of libraries in the National Library System are found, in one form or another, online, we consider that we cannot speak of a real presence of these institutions, with their specific information, documentation in the digital environment as an alternative to traditional specific activities. Large and medium-sized libraries with legal personality are those that can be analysed in terms of their online presence and, moreover, those that also use the Internet as a medium for promotion and communication as well as an infrastructure to expand the supply of specific products and services. Through web infrastructures, Romanian libraries can provide access to the following types of products and services: institutional online catalogues, collective online catalogues, digital collections and libraries, and other types of electronic resources from their collections, databases obtained through purchase, access to integrated resources (internal and external resources of different types) through discovery-type services. Unfortunately, relative to the total number of libraries in the National Library System or only to the 255 Romanian libraries present online, the offer of digital content is very small. Of the 255 libraries that are present online, only 99 have *online catalogues.* This represents 2.7% of the total number of libraries in Romania and 38.8% of libraries with online institutional representation (95.1% of county libraries, 70.7% of

and 38.8% of libraries with online institutional representation (95.1% of county libraries, 70.7% of university libraries, 14.9% of specialized libraries, 8.3% of municipal libraries). Only one school library, one library of a House of Teaching Staff and 3 city libraries have online catalogues. No community library offers this service (Gruia 2020).

Romanian collective catalogues are also not very well represented online. *ROLINEST* is a collective catalogue involving 15 libraries using the same integrated library system, ALEPH (ExLibris). These are the following libraries: the Library of the Romanian Academy Bucharest, the Library of the Romanian Academy Iaşi, the Carol I Central University Library Bucharest, the Eugen Todoran Central University Library Timişoara, the Lucian Blaga Central University Library Cluj-Napoca, the Mihai Eminescu Central University Library Iaşi, the Library of the Horia Hulubei National Institute of Nuclear Physics, the Metropolitan Library Bucharest, the National Library of Romania, the Library of the Polytechnic University Bucharest, the Library of the Polytechnic University Timişoara, the Library of the Gheorghe Asachi Technical University Iaşi, the Library of the Technical University Cluj-Napoca, the Digital Library of Bucharest, the National Digital Library (ROLINEST 2020). *BIBLIO.RO* – The Collective Catalogue of Public Libraries in Romania is the second Romanian collective catalogue in which 27 libraries of different types and sizes participate: 16 county libraries (Arad, Argeş, Bacău, Bistrița-Năsăud, Brăila, Dolj, Hunedoara, Ialomița, Mehedinți, Satu-Mare, Sălaj, Timiş, Tulcea, Vaslui, Vrancea, Vâlcea), 4 municipal libraries (Adjud, Câmpina, Câmpulung, Tecuci) and 7 university libraries (ASE, the University of Architecture, th Danubius University, UNATC, UTCB, the University of Craiova, the University of Piteşti) (**BIBLIO 2020)**.

The *digital library* is essentially a full text database managed by an app and accessible online. Based on this definition, in Romania, the following libraries have developed the digital library service: the National Library of Romania (National Digital Library – www.digitool.bibnat.ro – about 9,000 digital items) and the Bucharest Metropolitan Library (the Digital Library of Bucharest – www.digibuc.ro – 60,000 digital items and over 10,000,000 scanned pages) have created digital libraries using the *Digitool* app (ExLibris). The Cluj University Central Library, the Bucharest University Central Library, the Lucian Blaga Sibiu University Library and the Sibiu County Library use the *open source* D-Space application for the digital library. Several county libraries (BJ Cluj, BJ Neamț, BJ Arad, BJ Craiova, BJ Sibiu, BJ Dolj, BJ Sălaj, BJ Vâlcea, BJ Prahova, BJ Iaşi, BJ Timiş) have cooperatively created a digital library using the Greenstone *open source* application, within the framework of the European Local and LoCloud projects.

Without digital library applications, Romanian libraries are concerned with *digitizing documents from their collections and publishing them on institutional websites*, on dedicated pages, most often in *pdf* format. We find thematic collections on the websites of the following libraries: the Academy Library, the Timişoara University Central Library, the Architecture and Urbanism University Library, the Carol Davila UMF Library Bucharest, and the Stavropoleos Monastery Library. County libraries also have initiatives in the field of digitization, mainly collecting documents of local interest.

In Romania, examples of good practices regarding *digital institutional repositories* are three university libraries: the Library of the Dunărea de Jos University Galați which offers free access to the results of research within the university through the institutional digital deposit AR-THRA; the Library of the Transilvania University Brasov which made the digital deposit AS-PECKT, which includes electronic resources developed within the university (PhD theses, bachelor's and master's dissertations) and the Central University Library Cluj-Napoca which organized a digital deposit within the digital library that can only be accessed from within the library.

A service offered by Romanian libraries, mainly found in academia and research is *access to the scientific resources available in databases purchased for a fee* by libraries and offered free of charge, in free or controlled access, to users. In Romania, access to subscribed databases is through the ANELIS consortium which has 102 members (58 Universities, 39 Research-Development Institutes, 4 Central University Libraries, and the Library of the Romanian Academy Bucharest) (ANELIS 2020).

Three libraries in Romania provide a *discovery*-type service in all types of library resources, both internal and external, both printed and electronic; the Cluj-Napoca Central University Library uses the EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) simultaneous search and retrieval interface; the Library of the Polytechnic University of Timişoara opted for PRIMO (ExLibris); the Galati University Library has created a unique search portal based on Google Search Engine, integrated into the home page of the library's website.

The assessments presented are quantitative. Issues such as site updating, quality of descriptions in catalogues, ease of access, compatibility between technologies and systems, etc. were not taken into account. During the pandemic, such a small presence of Romanian libraries online (7%) and a rather small and rather non-homogeneous volume of digital content showed some vulnerability in the performance of their basic function: access to documentary resources and information.

6. Libraries in the Post-Pandemic Stage: Development Opportunities

The pandemic period was and still is a period of real crisis for libraries around the world. It is a period which, first of all, cannot be compared to any other period of crisis experienced by libraries. After the initial shock and the day-to-day management of the created situation, corresponding to a crisis situation, the libraries as well as the entire library community are concerned with the life and work of libraries after this difficult and unprecedented period. It can be an opportunity for libraries to reaffirm their mission, their place, and their role in society. The starting point would be a lucid and objective analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the library as an institution, on its activities, products and services. Identifying the risks and vulnerabilities manifested during this period would allow them to be mitigated or even eliminated in the future.

Development strategies at institutional level or at the level of national library systems should take into account all the risks and vulnerabilities, advantages and disadvantages manifested during the pandemic period and be centred on the updated mission of the contemporary library (i.e. considering the evolution of the institution in a competitive environment; increasing demands from the community served, reaffirming the heritage function (constituting and harnessing the memory of the community, digitally harnessing their own collections), reaffirming the educational function (information training and tutorials, intellectual work methods, training users in the use of databases and other information resources).

Obliged to evolve in a competitive environment, libraries should make their specialisation known, differentiate themselves from other structures that provide information and documentation resources. The difference is given by products of added value provided by libraries, by specialized assistance in the retrieval, evaluation and use of information.

Also, as an opportunity for the pandemic period, it is possible to appreciate the concern of libraries to support each other, to carry out shared and cooperative activities, as well as to establish partnerships with museums, archives and other institutions in order to share good experiences and to ask for the public support of institutions (Institute of Museum & Library Services 2020). Also, the experience of the pandemic period in the American space shows our concern for the realization of the archive of the crisis period ("COVID memory") thus reaffirming the role of the library in the establishment and recovery of local heritage.

Such a documentary fund includes documents of all kinds (manuscripts, prints, photographies, local press, video recordings, etc.) from private individuals, public and private institutions, authorities that are a testimony over time to the real situation that the community has gone through (California State University 2020, Jacksonville State University 2020).

7. Conclusions

Can there be a library only in the digital space? Will libraries face similar future crises? These are the questions that remain in the wake of the pandemic situation. Forced to move their activities online, libraries have faced situations ranging from the redefinition or decrease of online activities, from difficulties in communicating with users, from the sometimes insufficient and inadequate digital offering to the limits of information systems, or to the fierce competition from other institutions providing digital documentation and information resources.

The main conclusion would be the need to strengthen the online presence of libraries through digital content appropriate to the needs of users, by providing expert assistance in the retrieval, evaluation and use of information activities, through educational and formative tutorials specific to library activities. The definition and redefinition of institutional development strategies should focus on strengthening the online presence of libraries.

The heritage function remains specific to libraries and allows them to constitute and capitalize on the cultural and scientific heritage of the local community and can be effectively achieved if the library makes its presence in the community served through partnerships with other institutions and local authorities.

Looking at the National Library System as a whole, it can be seen that, in Romania, there is a big difference between large libraries and small libraries, there is not enough political and administrative support for libraries and, consequently, the services offered by them to the community they serve are, in some cases, deficient. However, representative examples and best practices can be drawn which can be generalised. A lucid and objective analysis of the products and services offered by Romanian libraries during the pandemic period could contribute significantly to the elimination or reduction of institutional vulnerabilities, to the elaboration of institutional, regional or national strategies to support and develop the online presence of Romanian libraries.

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