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# In Service of Their Communities: Public Libraries Today

Croatia  
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August  
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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



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Uncommon  
Culture

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 *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<sup>1</sup>. 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-

The City Library  
in Pula  
- the interior



development 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<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> 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

Zagreb Digitized Heritage:

Mala zorna obuka. Zagreb 1903. Digitised by Zagreb City Libraries, 2008.

[www.kgzdzba.arhivpro.hr/index.php?doctype=2&docid=301003973&vrstak=3](http://www.kgzdzba.arhivpro.hr/index.php?doctype=2&docid=301003973&vrstak=3)



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<sup>6</sup>. 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

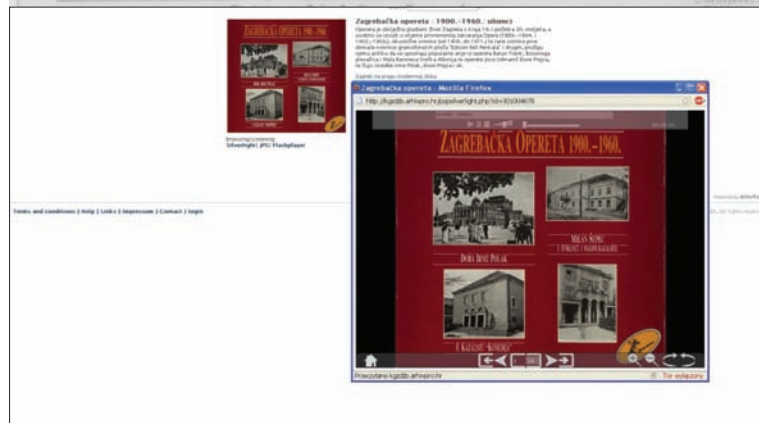
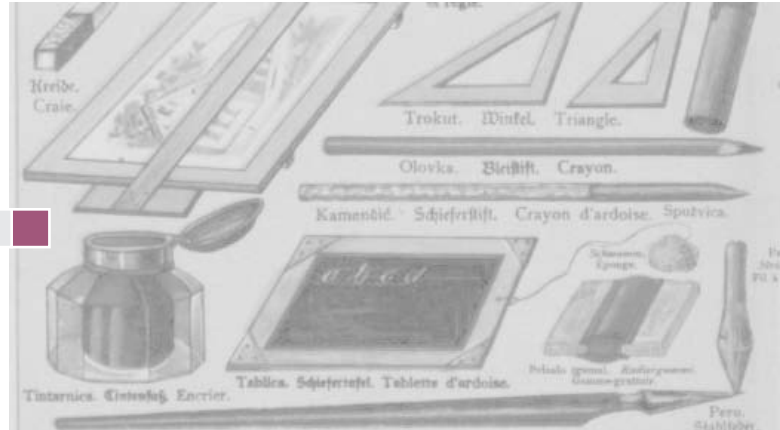
In a constantly changing and globalized environment, heavily influenced by information and communication technologies, what can public libraries do to remain pertinent to their

communities? Is society still interested in keeping them as instruments of the wider national policy towards its population? The answer is probably positive, but changes in the overall functioning of libraries seem to be imminent and inescapable.

For the last twenty years the public library has been described in various IFLA, UNESCO and Council of Europe documents as an educational, cultural and information institution. It has also been seen as a public access point to the Internet where free Internet access is provided for those who cannot afford it at home, and as a forum or a meeting place of its community<sup>7</sup>.

In 2000 the Lisbon Strategy, an important document for the development of the EU, called for social and environmental renewal. The fight against poverty and social exclusion was to become a part of the national politics of member countries. As a result it was expected from libraries that they empower their local communities and promote equality, diversity, and identity in the community. The term social inclusion (or exclusion) had become relevant for the society and consequently for libraries. The term, taken from the French sociological literature in the '70s and reappearing in EU documents in the '90s, pertains to the persons marginalized in every society: the poor, the handicapped, the unemployed, the homeless, refugees, members of minority groups, children and youth from poor or one-parent families, etc. The concept of social inclusion appeared in the strategic documents and national policies of the member countries.

Libraries can be powerful instruments in fighting social exclusion. They can provide the information and services relevant for socially excluded people and offer them the necessary support for the use of such information. But it also appears that in trying to establish and provide such services, libraries would need help by other institutions and organizations in the

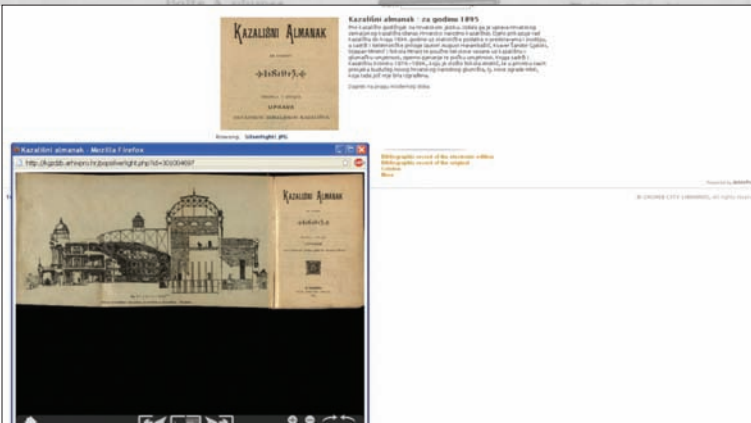
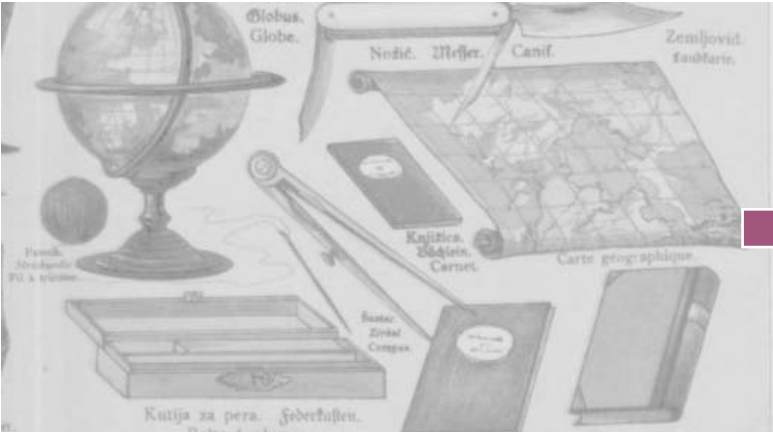


community, most often by civil society organizations, but also by companies and other institutions in the community. Libraries have been encouraged to become involved in various programmes aimed at specific groups of the population. A good example of recent involvement of libraries has been the CILIP *Libraries change lives award*. The recipients of the award have been libraries that provided programmes tailored for persons with special needs, members of minority groups, autistic children, and bibliotherapy.

In the last decade public libraries in Croatia have also been active in preparing programmes for special groups of users. As early as in 2003 the Croatian Library Association organized a Round Table on Free Access to Information for All, where the participants from the country and abroad gave presentations on the library services for the blind, prisoners, Roma children, elderly people and the handicapped<sup>8</sup>. Quite a number of IFLA guidelines for services for particular groups of users have been translated into Croatian<sup>9</sup>. Libraries throughout the country have offered programmes aimed at the development of specific services for the special categories of the population.

However, in the last few years even more radical views regarding library services for the community have been expressed. Pateman and





Vincent<sup>10</sup> discuss the concept of social justice and apply it to public libraries. They argue that public libraries mirror middle class interests and values and therefore cannot attract the poor and underprivileged members of the society who do not share the same values. The authors believe that a new approach is required based on the equality of all members of the community. They point out that libraries care too much about the traditional users of their services and put too much effort into the improvement of those services. Instead they should try to reach the various deprived groups of people in the community and organize services relevant for them. If needed they should provide service off site, i.e. outside of the library premises. 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. Librarians should contact representatives of non-users and try to involve them actively in the planning, establishing and provision of new services. The perspective has changed: users are no longer to be regarded as consumers of services created for them by librarians, but must have the power to decide what the library should be and what services it is going to provide. They

should actively help in organizing, maintaining and evaluating specific library services. Librarians act more as facilitators and less as creators of services.

Collaboration is necessary and libraries should find partners in other organizations, institutions, local authorities and companies in the community. Together with civil society organizations that often represent certain marginalized groups in the society, libraries should try to remove prejudices towards socially excluded groups, such as members of ethnic minorities, persons with special needs, elderly people, etc. and develop special programmes aimed at their inclusion in the use of libraries. The introduction of new services would require extra funding, and since libraries cannot look forward to special funding for new library programmes, reallocation of the budget will probably be necessary. Pateman and Vincent<sup>11</sup> do not hesitate to point out that savings might be achieved if the quality of traditional library services is sacrificed. Choy warns<sup>12</sup> that different factors can influence the sustainability and frequency of use of library services in the present-day surroundings. Convenience, attention, awareness and perception of value are the likely factors that influence the future use of libraries.

### Public library users

If indeed public libraries have to re-examine their present services and try to attract new users, they should first re-examine their present policies regarding membership charges<sup>13</sup>. Recent investigations conducted in Great Britain prove that even a small membership fee cannot be afforded by some. In Croatia all members of a family use the same membership card in order to save money. This prevents the library from knowing exactly who its members are and being able to tailor its acquisition policy according to their real needs. It is probable that the percentage of the population



who are library users in the country (12%) is in fact higher. It has been observed that libraries sometimes hesitate to provide service to walk-in users and require proof of membership even for reading a newspaper or consulting a reference book on-site. Apparently they have their reasons: librarians feel obliged to note down all services provided in order to be able to present the data on library use to the funding body. On the other hand, if they limit the provision of services to the registered users only, an increase in the number of uses is not easy to achieve. The prospective strategy for public libraries should seriously reconsider registration and membership fees, since this is a crucial issue for institutions which strive to become community centres.

To attract the non-users, libraries should become noticeable and popular in the community. The physical space has become important because it can make a library recognizable and recently many new library buildings have been opened throughout Europe. Croatia has followed the trend and at least ten new or completely refurbished library buildings have been opened in the last decade. The library space should be attractive and functional and should allow different kinds of engagement and use. The opening hours should be long and the library should be accessible during weekends.

It is important for libraries to know not only who their users are, but who their prospective users might be. It appears that certain groups in the population in pursuit of so-called serious leisure, such as collectors, hobbyists, amateur scientists, genealogists, etc. could be potential users, since they need various kinds of information on their hobbies. It is true that those people often share relevant information and experience among themselves, but it is quite reasonable to believe that they also need to consult literature and websites, attend courses, and exchange information in a wider circle. In other words, collectors and hobbyists

need to acquire certain skills and knowledge, and libraries should be aware of their needs. They are often members of social networks, where they share experience, news and knowledge and the library, which has its profile on the network, should envisage their possible interests<sup>14</sup>.

Tourists, especially backpack travellers, are another group who might need library material<sup>15</sup>. People reading for pleasure are the natural target group for public libraries. The information on the titles worth reading is most often shared among friends on Facebook, for instance, and again, libraries should note that fact and put the information on new and interesting titles on the library profile.

Popularization of science seems to be one of the current topics of interest in the EU. Public libraries along with museums might contribute to raising the interest of the public in science. Popular lectures about scientific phenomena can attract the public, but require that good and interesting lecturers are identified. An example from Croatia shows, however, that popularization of science might be a sensitive issue. The Technical Museum in Zagreb had invited an alternative therapist and man of many trades to open the manifestation *Days of Nikola Tesla*, the event celebrating Nikola Tesla, a well known physicist and innovator. The obvious idea was to attract a wider public, but it provoked some members of the scientific elite to protest, as was documented in the daily press<sup>16</sup>.

The transformation of public libraries into hybrid libraries undertaken in several European countries<sup>17</sup> has not yet been fully conducted in Croatia. It is true that libraries provide access to the Internet, but there is no access to databases, although licences for academic libraries have been negotiated centrally. One cannot but wonder how patients and hospital staff can access health information.



E-books still cannot be borrowed in libraries. Digitization projects conducted by individual libraries have been supported by the Ministry of Culture, as a part of the national programme of digitization of libraries, archives and museums. However, there is no mass digitization in the true sense of the word. Accordingly, copyright issues closely connected to the process of digitization, which currently pose so many problems in the EU, have not yet been regarded as being of particular interest for libraries. In 2010 the government adopted the National Strategy for the Development of an Intellectual Property System<sup>18</sup>. The Strategy tries to identify all stakeholders interested in

intellectual property issues, but curiously enough it does not mention libraries.

It seems that libraries must find the way to appear in strategic national documents, and this requirement widens further the scope of their activities. It is also important that public libraries develop a strategy for their own development in which they strike a balance between the needs of local communities and needs at the national level. It remains to be seen if the Croatian Library Association<sup>19</sup>, the umbrella organization of sixteen regional library associations, has the strength and the power to create a strategy that can be implemented and adopted by more than 200 public libraries in the country.



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