

Determining the place of libraries on the public agenda in Bulgaria

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Abstract.

In the process of adapting of libraries to the dynamically changing environment, extremely relevant among the Bulgarian Library College, becomes the question of their place on the public agenda. The situation in the library sphere in the country requires a clear answer what is the attitude of the authorities, the media and the public towards the problems of libraries - their financing, the construction of new library buildings, creating conditions for encouraging their activity. These questions are subject to intense discussion in the specialized library press and in various scientific conferences. The questions about the public vision of libraries and their future, of libraries as "third place" on the agenda of the individual and others become more recent.

The main problem, related with the clarification of the attitudes of different audiences (users and non-users) as well as the place of libraries on the public agenda, is the need for relevant information about the attitudes of different public and professional circles to libraries. This raises highly the question of the need to conduct various quantitative and qualitative researches. They are the only means of gathering information about the priorities of different public environments to respond what is the attitude towards the libraries and their activities, and where libraries are in the priorities of society. The observations over the Bulgarian practice show the existence of certain difficulties in analyzing the regard of the public, related to the nature of the information about the public attitudes which is available in the libraries. This indicates conducting of systematic surveys of individual segments of the audiences with purpose to answer what the public libraries can provide to the society to satisfy their different needs. Some preliminary observations of the public moods show, that especially in the small settlements, libraries have a significant potential to become an important place on the agenda of the individual by satisfying his needs for information and social contacts. The conducted separate quantitative and qualitative researches confirm the possibility of transforming the libraries into the small settlements into public- informational centers. The practice of using quantitative and qualitative method to examine the library audiences gives a possibility to extend the range of other activities that libraries conduct: cultural programs, self-education programs, lifelong learning, etc.

Keywords: public libraries, quantitative and qualitative methods, audiences, place of the libraries, Bulgarian practice

The proposed paper summarizes examples of the presentation of library problems on the pages of the specialized library issues "Library" and "BBIA Online". It reflects systematic observations on the practice of two university libraries - this of SULTSIT and this of the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, as well as other observations of daily teaching (professors) practice.

The problems of libraries, their momentary location and the perception of them, as well as the problems of their public vision and their possible role as informational, educational and cultural institutions are subject to very strong and lasting attention by the library college in Bulgaria. Various partial studies on this topic can be found on the pages of the specialized library issues, such as reports at the annual specialized conferences on library problems, organized by the Bulgarian Library and Information Association, the University of Library and Information Technologies in Sofia and the Regional Library in Veliko Tarnovo, as well as topics for doctoral dissertations and master's degrees.

The publications in the specialized library issues, and especially in the "BBIA online" magazine, provide a great opportunity to build a more complete picture of the momentary state, the main manifestations and the main issues in the library sector. This compensates for the lack of specialized individual or more thorough researches. A significant part of the publications highlight problems related to the future development of libraries such as: funding, new library buildings, conditions for activating the library activity, ways of adapting to the environment conditions, etc. The topics borrowed from foreign library practices, such as a brief debate about the posture of libraries as "third place" and about the possibilities this to be implemented in Bulgarian contexts, are also discussed. The "tight spot" of most of these publications is that they are based on a very limited factual basis.

The need for relevant information for knowing different audiences and professional circles feels tangible. However, they exist some considerable difficulties in obtaining such information. They are a result of a lack of financial funds; of trained specialists to explore; of an institution that simultaneously knows the specifics of the library sphere and that can carry out a specific research on the subject.

Attempts are made to assess the situation for individual libraries by applying SWOT and PEST analyzes. Moreover, these two forms of evaluation are extremely popular. They compensate for the limited possibilities for conducting other quantitative and qualitative researches.

Practice shows that, in the case of a differentiated use of quantitative and qualitative methods, and in a clear research program, can be created a basis from which a library can become a public information center or carry out activities that receive public attention and which satisfy the needs of some of them.

In Bulgarian conditions, the most widely used methods of research are the observation followed by the survey (written anonymous surveys). It is a problem that, in most parts, the surveys do not meet its purpose - they do not reflect a relevant part of the common set, they are conducted by people who do not consider with the relevant methodological requirements, the questionnaires are written in a way not to obtain the real assessment, but the desired answers. This is evident by the stereotyped responses that usually reflect the attitude of audiences - whether or not library users- to the library, the book, the reading as abstract concepts and activities.

However, from the surveys, can be drawn a number of conclusions about what the users' needs are, what expectations they have to the library, what their ideas about efficiently working libraries are.

The place of libraries on the public agenda is ambivalent. On the one hand, they are recognized as a main value, and for the cultural centers "chitalishte" with their libraries the understanding is that they are a specific national feature, an important element of the Bulgarian cultural development. Observations over various public environments show that libraries are formally given a large but undifferentiated meaning - meaning of the library at all, and not so much on the basis of the contact with a particular library.

The existing surveys give a differentiated picture of the attitude towards the libraries in which, besides recognizing the important place of libraries in the public space, the recommendations prevail. Very often the requirements of the public are considerably larger or differ from the capabilities of the respective libraries. The most important meaning of libraries, according to the analyzed press releases, is determined by their role in various cultural events or mass campaigns in connection with reading such as: book fairs, meetings with writers, book days, book weeks and holidays, days of children's book, "Plovdiv Read", reading marathon, presentation of books, organization of exhibitions, etc. Considerable attention is paid to the work of libraries with major groups of readers, above all work with children.

If we have to talk about a momentary picture of the library that is found on the public agenda and is beyond the stereotypical and inconceivable notion of the library as a democratic institution and a national cultural value it is for libraries as the main cultural centers locally. This is also related to their opportunities to popularize national-cultural heritage, a topic that has been very current in the last few years among society.

Regarding the notion of the role of libraries, it should be pointed out that there is a certain consensus between the representatives of the public and the college's ideas about the possibilities for libraries to become local public information centers. It should be noted that the regional libraries, as well as a number of libraries in some small villages and urban neighborhoods, are the main local cultural centers. The current tradition is that the cultural centers' libraries to be part of the local cultural club and self-education center. These specifics also determine the real position of the libraries in the Bulgarian society.

Although on the public agenda, libraries have a "reserved place", in the everyday life, they are hardly recognized among the main cultural institutions for a place. This is evidenced, for example, by their frequent absence from the tourist guides and other issues devoted to individual towns. It is significantly better their representation on the Internet, especially this of the regional libraries. Often the websites of the regional libraries are the main source of information about the cultural events held in the village. Observations on how the regional libraries' activity is represented in the media shows that the media attitude towards libraries (and reading) is campaigning. Libraries' problems are very rarely object of thorough observation. Mainly are presented the participation of libraries in the major national and regional events related to books and reading as well as the cases where in the library is held some literary or cultural program. At the same time, it is clear that individual journalists specialize in the problems of the respective libraries. Outside of the media agenda remain most of the libraries in the villages and in the small towns, the school libraries. However, they also remain outside the public agenda.

The lack of systematic research into the audiences' attitudes towards the libraries, of specific generalized information of the type of readers, of attitudes towards the reading readings does not give a possibility for making a complete notions for the society's reading needs, as well as what the users would like to receive from libraries.

For these reasons, the visions of the future of libraries do not have a specific character but merely repeat basic positions from foreign publications or reflect the subjective ideas of their authors.

The attitude of the authorities, the media and the audiences and as well as, generally, the place of libraries on the public agenda can be presented only by using different quantitative and qualitative research methods. Only they allow the confirmation or the rejection of intuitively perceived public moods. The Bulgarian practice shows the limitation of all the conclusions that have not been confirmed on the basis of the relevant studies. At the same time, it also illustrates the possibilities, through the application of quantitative and qualitative research, for conducting flexible library politics.

There, where exist clear ideas for the needs of the users and the expectations of the audiences, and as well as for the library resources, the libraries find and develop their readership segment - for example the regional libraries in Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Rousse, Kyustendil, Vratsa, Shumen, Plovdiv, the city library in - Sofia, the Regional and cultural center's Libraries in Stara Zagora and others.

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