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What are we as librarians lacking, in order to be able to communicate with municipal politicians?

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Abstract

If we consider the public library as a local cultural institution, which, besides providing information to the community, must analyze, contribute to, and attend to the citizens' information needs, then librarians must take advantage of the opportunities that the information society offers in order to overcome communication gaps with local representatives and those who hold municipal office. In order to foster beneficial two-way communication, librarians must consider themselves representatives of the municipal culture and work in collaboration with the regional elected members, thereby proactively contributing to the cultural development of the community.

Summary:

Our slightly individualistic societies often pass on to our elected representatives exclusive responsibility for the deficiencies or mistakes present in public services management. Nevertheless, we see the main responsibility of local political leaders as being receptive to the needs of their citizens and making appropriate decisions to satisfy those needs. There is, however, no need for politicians to be experts in every area covered by their offices. Expertise is the responsibility of specialists: in the field of public services, the public library is a good example of that.

Politicians often entrust librarians to provide library service that is vaguely defined and which we then must describe in detail. Our most important responsibility, which is also our most pleasant or creative role, must be in designing a clear model for library services.

This article avoids allocating responsibility to others and seeks to find ways in which we can provide new models that assign responsibility to our profession. We see the framework of librarianship as a specific area of cultural politics: the communication and transmission of knowledge from a cultural institution standpoint, or in other words, the public library.

We are starting from a premise that appears obvious to us in the democratic system of public politics, which periodically allows citizens to show support for the decisions of its elected officials or to remove them from office. Elected offices are the best a community has to offer. It is implicitly acknowledged that we are all responsible in the popular saying "every nation has the rulers it deserves". As librarians, we are doubly responsible as citizens and as cultural specialists.

Our approach is much more than a marketing plan that corresponds specifically to each region and library: it points to generic strategies to keep in mind when considering greater inclusion in local cultural politics of the public library as a cultural institution which should fall within the realm of the local region.

In order to improve communication between the public library and its public office representatives, we recommend paying greater attention, from the standpoint of each librarian's competencies, to the needs of specific regions. This will contribute to each

region's development, even if there are glitches in the optimal operation of democratic representation.

1. *Current municipal cultural services*

The public library's provision of services to citizens is fully located within the scope of cultural services, which, like the majority of public services, are characterized both by basic and value added services. The basic levels of library services cannot be equal for all, but must satisfactorily answer implicit demands or needs, so as to, along with the service, foster new demands or needs, and therefore, a greater request for those same services. In our case, we must continue to nurture knowledge within our community.

Currently, the citizens' expectations in relation to public services are not limited to accessing basic services. It is imperative to establish a new model for the provision of public services that strives for the satisfaction of citizens through value added elements that, all in all, determine service quality.

Given that our goal is to fully satisfy library users, it is all about supplying services to satisfy the foreseeable demand. Service quality will be determined by the degree to which the services rendered meet the citizens' expectations. Therefore, it is all the more important that librarians understand the expectations, the "problems, needs, and desires" of the public we serve, the satisfaction of which constitutes the criteria for quality.

Not only must we understand the goal of our services, the documents, and their information content, but we must emphasize the real reason for the existence of the public library: meeting the information needs of the regional community that we serve, thereby nurturing an increase in the knowledge of its members, or, more generally, contributing to human development.

It is necessary that we know more about our local target community, its sensibilities, its present or future plans, and especially its information needs. It is only from such knowledge that we may satisfy the "problems, needs, and desires" of our service users. It is our way of encouraging the community not only in its established plans, but also in its emergent ones. As soon as we learn to show off our success and pride in our accomplishments, the esteem of municipal leaders concerning our services will grow.

Librarians' competencies are not limited solely to the domain of information, but also include the analysis and consequent knowledge of our user community, home ground, or turf. Expectations concerning our services are completely met only when we match explicit or implicit information needs with the information that satisfies them.

We see basic library services (availability of the collection, document lending, fulfillment of leisure needs…) as falling fundamentally within the area of the institution itself and in the competence that the librarians reflect. At the very least, this turns out to be acceptable to political officials. Adding value to contents and available space befalls

those who work with the collection: the librarians. Municipal leaders expect librarians to show off their ability to fulfill these expectations.

Therefore, it is important that we do not limit our emphasis on basic services, which are fully formulated in our job descriptions, and that we advance, without waiting for it to be an actual request from a potential office, in the analysis of expected information needs present in the region. In turn, we hope that this will generate concrete ideas and actions that can satisfy our users' needs.

In reality, our analysis of the community constitutes a study of the market and of the value that we are able to generate. We may consider our intervention in a local region not only as an improvement in the quality of our services, but also as a means of promoting the library that seeks continually to strengthen its social position[1]. Furthermore, one must keep in mind that our progress in this analysis will constitute a competitive factor when speaking with municipal politicians, because this is a question that concerns them.

Without compromising our ability to provide basic services, which can be mostly devoted to levelling access inequalities to and sharing information, we need to complement our basic responsibilities with the establishment of value-added services that motivate or generate new demands for information.

We are not only seeking answers to the needs arising from the current reality, but also wish to take part in the growth of information communication, as well as the growth of knowledge and the know-how within the community. It is necessary that we actively exercise our ability to produce such value-added services. There is no doubt that we are capable of such a mandate, including the sensitivity to understand our region. Furthermore, we benefit from our daily on-the-job experiences, which place us in the midst of communication interactions and, therefore, in pertinent analytical situations.

We believe that the existing inadequacies arise from our attitudes rather than our abilities. Therefore, we uphold that we can find opportunities for value-added services in our wholehearted intervention in community development. Rather than emphasizing information, we must communicate knowledge and, grounded on community awareness, foster the production of information within the community itself.

2. *The public library: a cultural service for community development*

In a world where the costs of disseminating information are decreasing more and more quickly, knowledge economy does not boil down to the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). Knowledge itself is a primary production factor. Therefore, it is important to define the social system that facilitates the various courses of action in learning to use information and in translating information into knowledge.

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[1] In a way we can consider this as quiet marketing, since it must lead to the continual growth of the library along with the growth of the community, which can also happen with the intervention of the library.

Anglada[2] notices three unanswered social questions involved in strengthening the information society:
- information as a "problem": knowing what exists and how to access it
- knowing how "to read information": having sufficient reading ability in coding and decoding information
- the difficulty in transforming information into knowledge as a subjective process that depends on individual abilities.

The service delivery of the public library must be strongly involved in maintaining its quality, given the three tasks that clearly concern librarians: information services, reading promotion, and support in translating information into knowledge.

We believe that emphasizing knowledge involves becoming more and more conscious of cultural diversity and the plurality of needs. Situating this diversity within a regional framework leads to a growing will to participate in the community's business and influences the politicians' decision-making which, in turn, can influence the common progress of everyone concerned.

In maintaining the quality of these aspects, we, as library professionals, must draw attention to our services as part of local information policies, which we consider secondary to cultural policies, since in reality cultural policies regulate and promote communication processes.

Given that human resources truly constitute the principal potential of any business, its culture can lead to consensus producing synergies, which boost everyone's work in order to meet the community's goals.

3. *Knowledge communication*

"Know-how" proves to be more important than "knowing how to do something." People's abilities to see a project through depend more on the know-how found in a specific concrete environment than on a generic one. Herein lies true citizenship. Therefore, it is necessary to place knowledge at the core of community development.

Whether the community's prospective response is global, local, and/or motivated by thematic or local affinities, citizens who become involved socially, individually, or collectively, require a strong world vision and, at the same time, an identity rooted in their immediate surroundings. Therefore, because citizens are overloaded daily with information, it is necessary for them to find answers to their needs, in light of which citizens must make (or fail to make) decisions. Nevertheless, information rarely arrives as a response to a need, or even coincides in time or with the person seeking it.

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[2] Lluís M. ANGLADA i de FERRER. "El paper de les biblioteques a la societat informacional: propostes per a l'administració pública catalana". En: *Catalunya davant la societat de la informació: nous actors i noves polítiques públiques*. Eugènia Salvador (ed.) Barcelona: Mediterrània, 1999. p.76.

The current situation shows that information concepts, understood more and more as broadcast knowledge, are growing further apart from their knowledge counterparts, which refer to understood knowledge. While information is external, collectible, lifeless, and potentially abundant, knowledge is human and internalized: it grows slowly and leads to action. Today, the excess of information often generates noise, redundancy, and banality, including absenteeism, for the receiver.

Information becomes knowledge only when it is learnt within the existing knowledge framework of those who receive it: that is, when information comes into contact with the receiver it answers his or her needs, problems, or desires, which, all in all, constitute a felt deficiency in knowledge. Therefore, information has little use if, at the start of the appropriation or learning process, an explicit or implicit request has not been made from the knower or the information does not permit one to come to some kind of reasoning or objection.

Clearly, such a request is often neither concrete nor expressed, because its objective is always to influence or surpass the recipient's own knowledge by means of what is "yet unknown." Such are the requests that we librarians must know how to answer through the library, which, as an institution, is empowered with the necessary potential knowledge. Therefore, it is essential that we focus our abilities, above and beyond the information field, towards knowing our community's needs.

Interaction, as a method of exchanging information, paves the way for the active participation of the receiver, who thereby gains access to that which answers his or her present needs. Interaction helps him or her choose adequate information in a sea of resources and discard any noise, because the information found more likely fits within an appropriate frame of knowledge.

As a result another communication model, contrary and complementary to mass communication media, can promote knowledge growth more effectively. In a society where lifelong learning is strategically important, libraries become spaces that facilitate the transformation of information into knowledge. We believe that the transformation originates in the sometimes-implicit information needs and comes to fruition in the production of pertinent answers. The strategies that we put in place must influence citizens and their production of knowledge, more than simply making information "available." These strategies belong to the realm of cultural democracy, rather than the democratization of culture.

The objective of cultural policies does not involve as much the correction of information supply as the orientation of the demand. Strategies that involve the mere distribution of culture must give way to others that seek to influence the abilities and motivation of citizens.

It would clearly be useless for the public library to offer the same services as the mass media, with which it is possibly competing. It is not sufficient for the library to

"broadcast information" and to evaluate its ratings afterwards. In a time of globalization and the growing importance of the immediacy of information through present-day "live" or "real-time" communication technologies, we believe that the library must take the chance with differed communication, not out of whim, but to answer the information needs when they exist in the "present time."

In a sense, library services may seem reactive, because we answer expressed needs. However, in order to be effective, it is necessary to be proactive in detecting implicit requests by anticipating them through the selection and acquisition of documents and sources of information that may lead to satisfactory answers.

We librarians, as managers of specific cultural matters, are more aware of the community's needs and of its explicit and implicit requests for information and public reading goods and services. Therefore, we must know how to be mediators between the community's information needs and the citizens' search for answers. We can contribute as much to social unity as to the promotion of the community's potential projects: in other words, to help "*foster the community's cultural and historical specificity, encourage the citizens' participation, and open the community up to the world and to modernity*"([3]).

We need to be active in drawing up policies that promote reading. When evaluating, developing, and especially designing policies, we cannot exempt ourselves from being detectors and bearers of what Bassand calls "the daily whisper of latent creativity, through which a group's collective memory becomes reality and social projects are built up"([4]).

It is essential, in order to influence change, to pay attention not only to information, but also and especially to the community, to its needs, problems, and expectations. In this respect, we librarians have a strong position based on our experience in giving personal attention to explicit information requests. Nevertheless, we also have a weakness: our tendency to work behind closed doors and to be unaware of the general public despite knowing our users fairly well.

As a result, we must understand that the library, far from a publicly accessible knowledge repository or a media *superstore,* is a communication medium between individuals, or their encompassing community, and the various access points to their information needs. If information needs go unknown, communication will not be successful. And without communication, the library's collection is useless.

  4. *Intervention in the knowledge of one's own environment*

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[3] Silvio GUINDANI i Michel BASSAND. *Maldéveloppement Regional et Identité.* Lausanne: Presses polytechniques romandes, 1982. p.188.
[4] Michel BASSAND, *Cultura y regiones de Europa.* Barcelona: Oikos-Tau, Diputació de Barcelona, 1992, p. 140.

As a corollary to the above, it is clear that, concerning its channels of knowledge communication, the library must stay in touch with its immediate regional environment inasmuch to detect foreseeable needs or to develop its collections and other sources of information useful to answer questions, as to define and profile patron needs and project or initiative-oriented information requests ([5]).

Rather than considering taking on new more or less precise actions, we librarians are better off reflecting on and analyzing the possibilities for the library to become an information provider that clearly stakes out the local community's real needs. Such analysis must give rise to the search for close cooperation with other local information services, as well as with other institutions, educational centres, and local organizations that represent the main user groups. According to Thorhauge, "*The basis of specific information related services is <u>cooperation</u>, which contrasts with libraries that are collection based.*" ([6])

If cooperation is the foundation, then the evolution of the collection is a logical result. If we systemically analyze the public library, it will be easy to see that what comes in must not only be information and knowledge, but also information needs, including citizens and their knowledge.
While on the one hand the local public library must give access to universal knowledge that can contribute new knowledge of interest to the community, on the other hand we find its work, or better yet our work, especially useful in collecting information available for the integration and participation of local people.

The collection and reproduction of information relevant to the community is an area where we can concentrate our value-added services. At the same time this task will bring us much closer to the analysis and knowledge of our patrons' needs and feelings. Furthermore, the building of databases from the collected information will, in turn, contribute to the entire region's knowledge, which any consultation of the databases will clearly indicate.

As a result of the continuous production of knowledge <u>in</u> and <u>for</u> the community we can strengthen community or local information services. Mª Ramona Domínguez presents, in her excellent guide ([7]), the planning of such services, which, we agree, could encourage the library to pay attention to the "disadvantaged," for whom the library does not provide

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[5] Projects and initiatives relate to, among other areas, health, education, business, citizenship, hobbies, solidarity, …
[6] THORHAUGE. "Una imagen básica de la biblioteca pública en la sociedad de la información: funciones, tareas y servicios de la biblioteca pública. En: *Las bibliotecas públicas y la sociedad de la información*. Comisión europea, DG XIII /E.4. Madrid: CINDOC, 1998. p.17.
[7] DOMÍNGUEZ SANJURJO, Mª Ramona. "Capítulo 8: Información a la comunidad." En: *Nuevas formas de organización y servicios en la biblioteca pública*. Gijón: Trea, 1996, p.151-179.

an adequate service, since it overlooks their needs or their weaknesses, which Barugh says are due to "*the inability to put information to use*". (⁸)

Although we consider these services very important, we should not satisfy ourselves with simply adopting them. It is not sufficient to compensate for inequalities: we must extend the benefits of the local library, in order also to encompass, as a centre of information, the whole region and the specific interests of its citizens. Furthermore, as for our work that consists in structuring information on our community, we must emphasize not so much the correction of the past, but more so the useful information for future services. Mathew Lesco reflects on this issue and poses, as a conclusion, a question that rings true with us: "*in our information society, why isn't the public library the most important building in our community?* " (⁹).

It is in broadening its provision of services to a wider range of population sectors, that the public library will manage to overcome the current indifference of the majority of potential users, who perceive the public library, perhaps too stereotypically, as a "temple of culture" for the sole enjoyment of students and scholars.

Coming up with satisfactory answers to various social groups' problems and projects will have influence on community opinion leaders, thereby bringing them over to the library. Encouraging and helping the community's initiatives can also contribute to inspiring genuine library loyalty among users.
Consequently, it is especially useful, in order to align information services to prospective user needs, that the library implement a conscientious community study focusing on
   -   a target community profile,
   -   primary municipal information providers,
   -   the perceived and assumed information needs of citizens.

If such a study is executed thoroughly and continuously, keeping in mind current regional needs that must impel the library, it can give rise to the establishment of local information services, which can be taken as a reconciliation of needs and projects found within groups of the population. A community study can function interestingly enough at arms length to library information and reference services, the definition of which takes into account
   -   the geographic area to cover,
   -   its information scope, including intermediate or complete (¹⁰) reference services,
   -   the categorization of available information,
   -   information organization and processing,

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⁸ BARUGH, John. "Community Information and the public library". In: *Journal of Librarianship*, 16 (2) April 1984, p. 77-93.
⁹ LESCO, Matthew. "In Our Information Society, Why Isn't the Public Library the Most Important Building in Our Community?". *Public Libraries,* 31, núm. 2 (Mar/Apr 1992), p. 85-87.
¹⁰ Reference services direct the existence of specific services. Intermediate services operate between users and specific centres or services. Complete information services require specialized personnel to advise specifically on the questions that are raised.

- the provision of future complementary services,
- the dissemination of those services,
- and service evaluation using management indicators.

We are convinced that this will reinforce the library's social visibility, as well as its potential as a key institution within the municipality, which will place librarians on an equal footing in the communication process with other local employees who strive for community development.

5. *Taking on our own culturally democratic strategies*

The evolution of the modern state involved a change in cultural policies. Generally speaking, we have gone from proposing heritage policies, focused on cultural heritage preservation and conservation strategies, to cultural democratization policies, based on the dissemination of and provision for the use and enjoyment of this heritage. In other words, these strategies now involve putting at the reach of the majority of citizens the cultural realizations par excellence.

The appearance of a new cultural political paradigm took place alongside the appearance of new performance guidelines, which appended, complemented, and reinforced, but in no way replaced, previous strategies. On the new global scene, we preserve, conserve, and try to disseminate the cultural heritage to as many people as possible.

The public library, which originated as a heritage institution, is familiar with this evolution, because it has always been fully involved in the dissemination of artistic and literary works, as well as focusing on managing their quality.

More recently, the changing context of cultural rights from being the heritage of a few to becoming the right of all citizens has given rise to "bottom-up" cultural democracy strategies. All citizens now have the ability to participate actively in the development of their community. Cultural democracy modifies the object of public policies in their effect on not only one, more or less dominant culture, but on cultural diversity as a whole. Citizens, as subjects of cultural diversity, have also undergone great transformations: average citizens are no longer passive receivers of cultural products, but become actors in the cultural process.

Similarly, we used to perceive the conceptual framework of culture as the process or result of human intervention in nature, now we understand culture as a cyclical process of information, knowledge, participation, and decision-making, of which the result and analysis generates new information. Consequently, public policies at least have to influence the modification of the market in this sense, in order to reinforce participatory demand.

Cultural democracy, which Garcia Canclini ([11]) calls participatory democracy, aims to make citizens "members" of the cultural creation process, and, therefore, participants in the development of their community. In comparison to the actions of democratization, bottom-up strategies pretend to "elevate" creativity from its foundations to the rank of culture. Accordingly, Fernández Prado ([12]) says that "*the major figures of cultural democracy are not only the extremely important artistic creations in themselves, but also cultural movements, society itself, and its pre-eminent objectives: to make information and communication available to all, to ensure pluralism, to enrich possibilities, to facilitate participation,…* ".

Information can produce notable effects on democracy and on participation in the life of the community. Furthermore, information is also used intensively in the day-to-day life of citizens, who are more and more consumers of information and, at the same time, can easily become producers of information. Assumpta Bailac confirms that "*the library must not only provide access to information, but promote the development of abilities in interpreting information, which leads to the production of knowledge and values*"([13]).

Local information policies must also come to bear on the avoidance of cultural depersonalization, to which globalization could lead. This must be done with the idea of preserving and promoting the cultural identity of the local community's citizens. Policies also have to encourage everyone to make information theirs, which, in turn, leads to knowledge: in other words, to favour an environment of analysis, creation, and production of new knowledge within the municipality. Librarians, as implementers of these policies, must make the library a means of communication that acts as an intermediary between information and the citizens' needs.

Broadly speaking, our criterion for the solid involvement of the public library in a community's development, including its usual commitment to heritage and cultural democracy, states that the library must fully incorporate into its services cultural democracy's bottom-up strategies. We take the generalized presence of these strategies for granted; as a result, we only want to bring up those that we consider most significant.

We librarians must, of course, purpose to be dedicated to communication and to be aware of the community and its information needs. In other words, we must start from the knowledge of our cultural reality and take advantage of the great communication potential that, being an improvement tool, allows the library to stimulate demand. Therefore, we aim to
- provide the community with access to universal knowledge,
- create added value to the available and accessible information,

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[11] Néstor GARCIA CANCLINI. "Políticas culturales y crisis de desarrollo: un balance latinoamericano". In: *Políticas culturales en América Latina.* Guillermo Bonfill, [et al.]. Néstor Garcia Canclili, ed. Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1987. p.50.
[12] Emiliano FERNÁNDEZ PRADO. *La Política cultural: qué es y para qué sirve.* Gijón: Ediciones Trea, 1991, 197 p.
[13] Assumpta BAILAC I PUIGDELLÍVOL. "La biblioteca pública a Catalunya". En: *L'Avenç*, núm. 235, abril de 1999, p. 29-35.

- dedicate ourselves especially to information useful for future services,
- encourage local production of knowledge,
- cooperate with the other local professionals involved in development, especially those from other information services,
- become the community's window to the world, which has the double mandate of showing it off to other communities, as well as opening it to the world.

6. *Conclusion*

Despite, or perhaps because of, the strength of the library's daily services, we have few opportunities of organizing events, which are necessary in order to ensure the library's constant presence within the community. Furthermore, we notice other weaknesses, like the rarity of intra-regional cooperation (with institutions and local bodies) or the scant services that directly influence the development of the community and, more so, the making of decisions. However, we are convinced that today's public library, with its lengthy experience, has sufficient strength and that the information society offers it many opportunities to overcome its weaknesses.

Likewise, it is worth noting that cultural policies are not defined as an end all and be all, but as tools that aim to: develop the community, create social cohesion, assist in personal training, favour citizen participation, …, and lead to cultural development as a sine qua non condition of human development. All in all, cultural policies serve to "build the community."

People and society are at the centre of these objectives. If our abilities focus on cultural tools, our attitudes must be oriented towards society. Therefore, we believe that, as librarians, we must commit to the development of people, and consequently, we must become resolutely involved in the strategies that lead to cultural democracy. This is the only way we will be able to make the public library a key institution of community development.

Undoubtedly, if the library can be seen as a key institution in cultural politics, the voice of librarians will be better accepted and more influential. We must keep in mind that when dialoguing with other local cultural employees, we must not seek to make them understand our own methods and resources; rather we must concentrate on regional analysis, which is something, together with the objectives and results of our services within the community, that we can share with them. The dialogue concerning resources must consequently be focused on the analyses and evaluations we hold in common.

In conclusion, librarians must feel part of the municipal team, just like any other municipal cultural employee, in order to foster good communication with local and political officials of our municipalities. The objective is to be one of them, and with them, to be proactive in the community's cultural development.

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