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Librarians and politicians behind the same wheel

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Introduction

I am really proud and thankful that you all attend this workshop at this early hour and give me your attention. I am especially thankful because this might be the last occasion after more than seven years as President of the German Library Association that I can express some ideas about an important question. In a few days I will change my position and probably as a consequence my point of view on this subject in joining the board of directors of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

But with the knowledge of 18 years of local political responsibility I will focus on the subject with the eyes of an librarian politician or a political friend of the libraries.

First focus on the subject of my speech

Behind the same wheel: that should be at first sight more of a statement about a situation we are in now than a wish to be fulfilled. In many countries there are hopefully such statements. But what about Germany?

I must admit that I have to add a double question mark to the thesis because of many doubts that there is actually a single wheel behind which you will find politicians and librarians to push into the same direction!

Even more: there are many wheels and the librarians work too often as the fifth wheel of the actual policy, not much honored, often forgotten, rarely supported and shortly running out of pressure in the tire.

How is it possible that in a country like Germany there is such a weak system of support for public and universitarian libraries. I will not enter into an long description of the important parts of our system but mention only some details to understand our problem. Let us look on the librarian system itself.

Focus on the German Library Association

Our Association founded as fundamental political element of the libraries structures is relatively young. With its actual name and form as representative organisation for public and scientific libraries the DBV is only 30 years old, considering its German particularity that after many years of separation into the Western and Eastern organisation the united Association has only been existing since 1991. The first movements started in the post-war-period in 1949 when the Association of the Western public libraries was founded.

The DBV represents more than 2000 members and stays in close contact with the parliaments and governments on the level of the Federal Republic and on the level of the 16 states. Also partners are the national associations of the local authorities. We aim to influence legislation and parliamentary discussions.

In the same direction we are engaged in promoting intersectoral and interregional cooperation of all kinds of libraries.

In the yearbook of the Association which is sent to all members free of charge we give an actual report of our work and offer a platform and opportunity for all members to exchange experience and ideas.

Focus on the politics for libraries

I do not know how many inlisted participants from our national parliament, or of the 16 parliaments of the German states are to be found at the IFLA. There should be several dozens, there will be much less!

I am afraid that today you can count them with the fingers of your two hands. That shows just like a mirror the importance of library politics on the federal level as well as on the states level.

There is one clear and basic reason for that: we have no federal Library Act, we have no common sense in the 16 federal Parliaments and Governments that also there is a need for having such a basic legal framework for all the library services on the public or scientific level.

Consequently there is no mutual understanding of the position of libraries on the whole cultural, educational and social framework of our society; there is no legal definition of what a library has to offer, to give as a free service, to contribute to the media skills of young people and so on and so on.

Following our German Constitution all the Culture, all education Policy and all questions of financing, systemizing and personal in this political field is a basic task of the States and strictly not to be touched by the federal government in Berlin. So you might understand how hard such divided policy with 16 different approaches will affect the empowerment of a nationwide policy to have a better ranking in the international competition which is basically a competition of knowledge, of skills and innovation.

Germany has started another discussion about federalism and our 16 decentralized and independent structures but will not come to a better solution despite all criticism on the actual blockades of innovation.

So no wonder that there are no clear structural contacts between the federal level of parliamentary politicians and the German Libraries Association. And the different structures of the states branches of the national libraries association remain in the same weak position. There are a few very active members of the governments working for a active library policy of the 16 states but there is no clear line of tradition in working together for example at the board of directors of the association.

The only but strong tradition lies in the involvement of local politicians as me and this kind of pushing the same wheel will be continued by my colleague in the mayor's office of Tuebingen, Mrs. Russ-Scherer, who has been strongly connected to the culture politics since a long time.

The mutual understanding of representatives in the library system and the heads of cities derives from the position of the local authorities as funders of the libraries, their own part of a local structure of citizen-orientated services.

In an overall-survey over the involvement of politicians in library affairs there is a single conclusion: we have not yet got a good lobby and no ongoing support in parliaments and governments!

Focus on some negative developments

The actual testimony to that thesis is the closing down of the former German Libraries Institute DBI, which for a long period has been financed by federal and states money. But in a complicated assessment on the efficiency and in hard competition to other scientific institutes the financing of the DBI was cut to Zero through decision taken by the political partners in 1999 and till today there is no succeeding institute or what ever structure you may discuss.

The struggle is still going on to implement a new nationwide structure to support the international contacts and exchanges, the nationwide research, innovation and harmonization, the implementation of best-practice results in the daily life of local or university libraries and so on.

But the treasurers all over the country still tend to say no and the ministers for culture do not yet agree with their colleagues on the educational branch how and with what amount to finance an simple national coordination group for library affairs.

If there was a mutual understanding about the importance of libraries this result would not occur, I m a sure.

Focus on developments in the public library sector

To be successful by own means the DBV for example hands out every year a recognized price for journalists who write consequently and positively about the actual development in libraries. This price named after a former CEO of the DBV -Helmut Sontag- has been awarded already more than 20 times.

Much younger but connected with the price money of 25000 Euros is the price and recognition of the ZEIT Foundation for excellency in library work. The third Library of the Year in 2003 is the public library of Würzburg, a place to go for all of you!

But these successes also in the nationwide media are in total contrast to the current press-reports about local decisions of reducing costs in the whole republic and particularly in the cultural sector of communities. Almost every day we can read or hear about the closing-down of public library branches or about the fact that the budgets, personal staffs and opening times are strictly reduced.

In times of strong efforts to reduce costs in general the communal politicians are trying hard to define criteria how to save money in order to have good arguments in the coming discussion. This also applies to the librarian sector, of course.

The Librarians have to deal with this element of policy and have to find their own way of answering the question from the political councils which are in a rather difficult situation of finding strong arguments in cutting down budgets of local services.

The current attempt of the politicians to find the best relation between financial and personal resources and their result by economic methods is not new but still condemned to fail in the last consequence in the field of the libraries.

Of course, it is possible to define structures of costs and financing of different processes and you may ask whether any detail has been elaborated under economic aspects for instance the handling of a book - but the decisive question is: How successful can this service institution "library" be in fulfilling its task to support the community in the field of education and information of its citizens.

The fact that the number of book lendings goes down but the number of visitors increases: Is that good or bad? That the classics like Goethe's "Faust" are lent far less than the adventures of Harry Potter: Is that good or bad? That in the districts of the city with stable social structures the number of book lendings is sometimes distinctly higher than in districts with socially difficult structures: Is that good or bad?

I think that quickly taken political decisions by means of controlling instruments which only appear to be adequate are very dangerous. And we do have in the meantime instruments which do more than replace the still missing economic data for libraries. The index BIX is commonly used and acknowledged for the ranking of public libraries in Germany - knowing that not all the relevant factors can be measured or evaluated.

We have numerous examples of libraries who took the chance to use the comparison of efficiency as basis for the local destination, who further developed the definition of targets and strategies and thus achieved alteration and amelioration. And they find political support because of this ranking and the following discussion based on facts with the local politicians.

But in all municipalities fundamental questions still remain which cannot be answered according to numbers or controlling results. For example the question whether to continue a policy of decentralization and of small distances all over the city that is important especially in districts with socially weak structures.

A decision taken exclusively under the economic point of view is not possible in the end. However, in defining its desired and in more difficult times also sustainable net of offered services it will be possible for the communal politicians to consider the different services not as isolated items. They can and have to see all the public tasks which are carried out by these institutions as a whole and take decisions under this point of view.

Topics of a modern library policy as part of a modern local policy

Libraries are public places with a frequency of visits and use other public institutions can only dream of. I don't only think of the numbers of lent books but also of the use of all present and available media.

In contrast to the picture of the public book case with dusty magazines which some people still have in mind when thinking of the library the special task of the libraries lies beside its competence in media particularly in the provision of chances to communicate. The special strength lies in the availability of public room for learning and communicating and meeting for every member of the society without any threshold or impediment.

Communication, knowledge and education are fundamental elements of our future. But I think it is dangerous to consider education as something individual. Education is a subject and a factor particularly in and for the community. Both elements must be seen as a whole the same way like competence and creativity.

We must not pursue a policy which divides the society and leaves the individual in front of the screen in an anonymous environment.

In many rankings of last year for instance in the magazine „Focus“ factors like life quality, educational structures, network of cultural services, chances for the future of the population have extremely increased in importance. They indeed have become a decisive factor particularly for the young people.

This function is an fundamental part of a policy aiming at the strengthening of the social community in the municipalities. If there is no such link between individuals no technical communication network whatsoever can help. We need the library as a public location which must be placed even more in the focus of attention of political assessment and estimation.

Topics of the Library 2007 Project (B2007)

In an international comparison Germany lags behind in the field of education and in the information system. The bad results in the PISA study show the gap between our German standards and those of other countries.

Libraries have to play an important role in the future information and knowledge society. But so far the German politicians have not yet realized the enormous potential of libraries to contribute in closing the gap.

The Project “Library 2007 “– Library development in Germany – is started in a partnership of Bertelsmann Stiftung and the BDB, the umbrella organisation for the German Library associations including the DBV.

The aim is to show the results of an international best Practice research, an analysis of the framework conditions and the current situation of the German Library System and interviews with various stakeholders to the heads of the Government in Berlin as well as to the Länder.

I know from various talks to library specialists from all over the world that you don't agree so much with the idea of bringing the library system to close to the educational branch of politics. It is correct that libraries are much more than only a part of the institutionalized system of schools and universities.

Just remember the most important role of lifelong learning as well as the contributions to everybody's personal capability of being a part of an open, future-minded and motivated social society.

But in Germany we have to deal with the problem that libraries on the local level are traditionally a part of the self-government system of cultural services and are often brought into political fields as theatre, music schools, archives and museums.

We have to break this connotations and start with a new view on the libraries as an important part of a German learning society with the capability of increasing our future role in a greater Europe and a difficult world.

Networking on the local level with other partners in the educational branch

An important part in anchoring the libraries in the local politics as key partners is to create more and more networking with all the partners who play themselves an important role in education and formation, in training citizen's skills and social partnership.

Networking as a key to better results is easily said and promised. But it is so hard to practice especially on a local level where the partners are in a deep competition for public financing in times money is getting short. There is some struggle and jealousy between the local actors.

But step by step they realize that the network of local and even regional partners gives a strong net for the citizens. And they are realizing that politicians recognize such work as successful and therefore worth supporting as an indispensable part of local politics. The Bertelsmann Foundation plays a key role in supporting such efforts and we are able to present good results in special projects especially in networking of libraries with schools.

The aim of all the work in the field of libraries for a better local structure as well as a better nationwide competitiveness has to be the mutual understanding that a life without libraries is possible. But there is no good starting position into the future for our citizens without the chances libraries offer every day.

I am truly thankful that this conference shows the broad variety of chances libraries do offer worldwide. And therefor I have the hope that in reading the reports about our workshop and the other meetings, interested German politicians will realize that they are once more not in the first wagon of the train but in the last third of the line. The German Libraries Association will do its very best to bring them wagon by wagon to the front and I thank you to help us in this rather long run.

Thank you so much for your attention!