

## Digital initiatives for local communities on the basis of Polish example

**Zbigniew Gruszka**

University of Lodz, Informatology and Bibliology Department, Lodz, Poland.

E-mail address: zgruszka@uni.lodz.pl



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### Abstract:

*The Internet offers many functionalities dedicated to people interested in the local history of their small communities. Many of them – maps, traditional and geocaching games, websites, escape rooms, are projected and managed by libraries. I am going to present the most important and interesting digital initiatives addressed to small local communities that help them to develop their knowledge about history, demography and value of these places. Thanks to digital environment and technologies, many ideas of regional point of view may be developed, shared but also co-created. The important question is how and why libraries should participate in developing them. The paper does not strictly show the historical perspective, but many of presented ideas arise from the historical experience in which libraries and other local institutions realized that they play a great role in development of local society.*

**Keywords:** local community, Poland, libraries, digital initiatives.

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Regionalism, interesting in local communities and local histories is sometimes presented in opposite to globalism, but may be also a form of complement of the wide perspective, detailing those issues that are not visible globally. In fact, the regional studies may be interesting for different specialists in literary, press and religious studies, political sciences, sociology, history, and also for book scientists.

To build conscious societies it is necessary to educate not only in globalism, but also in regionalism. The regionalism and regions are explored with regard to phenomena, processes and relations taking place in a specific territorial area miscellaneously defined. Sometimes it may be a province, district, estate or even street. Sometimes it is even difficult to define precisely the borders of local community.

In recent years, the Internet has evolved into the most important information and communication platform, allowing access to culture, knowledge and entertainment, reducing the time required for access to information. It has become an invaluable tool allowing regionalists not only to manage efficiently the collected documents, but also to allow them to

enlarge the collection and share it with the world. The impact of technology on the initiation of interest in the region among children and young people for whom the Internet has transformed into the main platform playing information, educational, communication and entertainment functions is also significant.

## **State of the art**

The research on regionalism has a long tradition in Poland. From the beginning from mid 20s of XX century, when Aleksander Patkowski published an article entitled 'The Main Ideas of Regionalism' in 'Przegląd Współczesny' and then wrote his first papers about Sandomierz Region and Świętokrzyskie Mountains. It soon became the subject of a lively discussion of scholars, journalists, writers and politicians. The effect of this discussion was reflected in the popularization of the idea of regionalism in the country and a number of activities on a local scale, activating smaller communities in order to extract their identity (Jadach, 1991, p. 23).

One of the numerous definitions of regionalism is presented as follows: 'Regionalism in general use is a certain ideological concept and a social movement, aimed at understanding of the values and forces found in small socio-spatial teams' (Kozołub, 2010, p.13). It is clearly visible in different achievements presented on the previous IFLA Congresses where terms of local community and values also appear:

'Local history focuses on a particular town or area with economic and cultural development of that locality, often using local records and resources (Oxford Living Dictionary, 2016). The local history of a people can amount to community ties when appreciated and discovered by those concerned' (Philip, Okon, 2017).

The great educational role in the introducing and developing of local communities belongs to libraries. The libraries of various types which function as a third place are also the repositories of valuable print and digital contents and their natural role is to preserve local history and collect the regional materials:

'Based on the example of sport associations in Lyon (and more specifically alpine and hiking sections) we will see, unlike common stereotypes, that they offer library resources with easy access (many of which are free and open to the public), beyond the original approach, bring benefits in the study of local communities. The researcher can find diversity of historical material through books, yearbooks, topo guides, maps, manuscripts, pictures, etc. that traditional institutes don't offer'. (Sagnimorte, 2014).

According to N.Androšiūnaitė and E. Sėdaitytė (2017) we need to agree that the information on local history is really in high demand and the main institutions popularizing knowledge about local environment and offering an access to scientific heritage, cultural and economic one are libraries (Słowik, 1999, p.16-17).

## **Functions of digital local initiatives**

The digital initiatives available on the Internet have various functions and play different roles. Both library and other subject initiatives dedicated to local communities comply the educational function augmenting the various tasks of school. They also integrate and activate local communities. Another is promotional and popularization function which depends on developing the knowledge about history, demography and value of local territories by offering the valuable content. The next function is preservation of very worthwhile documents and by sharing digital copies. The last one is entertaining function relying on offering content bringing back memories and initiating discussions about the past and present.

## **Types of digital initiatives**

Relying on the research results about types of regional materials collected by public libraries of Lodz District in Poland we can say that the most popular type is local (regional) book and press - both available in 96% of libraries. To document the local events many libraries collect press snippets on local topics (82%) and other ephemeral prints (61%). The collections of spoken histories, iconography, cartography are definitely less popular (Gruszka, 2016, p.521-522). It means that Polish public libraries generally manage only their printed materials to promote regionalism. The initiatives collecting non-print materials are naturally also available in Polish Internet, but they are developing by other cultural institutions like academic libraries and by local communities. It is needed to emphasize that presence of many local initiatives is possible thanks to the functional development of the Internet, which caused the growth of the number of websites and web services dedicated to such local communities like regional news portals as well as the other websites: blogs, social media groups on Facebook, websites owned by local government, enthusiasts, hobbyists, etc. often co-created by citizens on the basis of civic or mobile journalism.

The local initiatives may be divided differently. From the point of view of the use of printed materials, we can enumerate:

1. The initiatives based on print materials – mostly managed by libraries
2. The initiatives originally digital – developed by libraries but also by the other local institutions and individual enthusiasts

The meaning of library local initiatives is also various. It may be indicated by:

1. Those initiatives that are recognizable regionally
2. Those initiatives which are recognizable globally (nationally, continentally)

The other division include the presence of physical perspective. We may list here:

1. Initiatives present in the physical space
2. Initiatives present in the digital space only
3. Initiatives using digital platforms, but implemented in certain physical space

## **Aims and functions of digital initiatives**

All of the aforementioned platforms and digital functionalities have similar purposes. These include the promotion of the region and the cultural heritage of the local community, facilitating access to digital resources, educating the public as well as documentation and protection of written documents (digital libraries) and non-written ones (mainly digital archives). The functions of digital resources include promotional function, educational function, activation and integration function and a security and protection function.

## **Main digital initiatives for local communities**

In terms of the entity which manages digital initiatives, institutional services can be distinguished – those are conducted by libraries and consortia of libraries, museums, archives, societies, foundations, cultural institutions, media groups as well as non-institutional parties – created as bottom-up activities and informally by the Internet users; this group includes individual websites and accounts of regions and cities in social media.

The most important and interesting digital initiatives addressed to small local communities in order to help them to develop their knowledge about history, demography and value of these places.

The majority of initiatives related to books belong to libraries of different type. The local and regional materials may be found in academic and public digital libraries. On the basis of research of the website of Federation of Digital Libraries which associates over 130 cultural institutions (not only libraries). Its resources contain over 4 million objects – it was possible to establish that the subject matter of regional collections is very wide and includes:

- old prints, books and manuscripts – collected from thematic and geographical perspective with the division into regions with established regional identity
- periodicals - archival and contemporary ones of general and regional scope in the former and current languages of local communities
- ephemeral documents - leaflets, exhibition catalogs, posters, exhibition catalogs, jubilee books and school chronicles, official documents (local law, resolutions of city councils, counties, programs and strategies of local parliament)
- iconographic collections - postcards, individual photographs, photo albums, engravings, posters, graphics of artists associated with the region
- cartographic - maps and atlases about the region
- thematic collections - such as the Sport Collection in Jelenia Góra Digital Library (DL), Judaic and Masonic Collections in Silesian DL
- regional collections, for instance: The Siberian Collection in Jeleniogórska DL, a collection devoted to the Eastern Borderlands of Podlasie in Podkarpacka and Śląska DL, a collection associated with Galicia developed by the Podkarpacka DL.

Their number in digital library of each district vary from 1.000 to quarter of a million units.

A particularly interesting way to develop the interest in the region and to document its past are digital local archives. The biggest archival initiative in the promotion of regionalism is undoubtedly the project of the Karta Center Foundation that concerns initiatives: the Digital Archive of Local Traditions and Digital Social Archives. The development of the above-mentioned archives involved county and community libraries as well as non-governmental organizations that since 2010 on websites managed by the KARTA Foundation provide access to documents related to the tradition and history of the local society. By 2016, 113 archives of the local tradition were created, and librarians (Digital Archives) were involved in creation of many of them.

State institutions – archives and museums also take part in the creation of digital archives. The widest initiative is the service run by the State Archives in Lublin under the name Lubelskie Digital Archive since 2015 is planned as a place where digital copies of archival materials related to the city are made available, and in the future – those, which are connected with the region.

Smaller institutions such as the Minsk Museum also run similar initiatives where Minsk Digital Archives manages the site, and Societies – for example, the Pomeranian Branch of the Society of Vilnius and Vilnius Land Lovers, which includes the Digital Archives of the Pomeranian Kresowiak's website. Apart from institutional initiatives, there are also individual civic projects among the organizers (for example Bemowo Digital Archive) and non-governmental organizations (for instance Miastograf - Digital Archives of Łódź).

## **The social initiatives**

Hobbyists from local communities realize many of initiatives and many of them pretend to be a valuable source of information and documentation about regional spaces. However, not always websites are characterized by innovation and originality – especially when they only duplicate documents taken from other sources. The initiatives that involve researchers representing scientific institutions and hobbyists, for whom the materials collected and made available constitute a workshop of original creative work, have a better chance of success. The local communities are addressed by associations, friends of local towns, sometimes private individuals, local portals devoted to the history and present times of cities, historical regions, etc., enabling the sharing of knowledge and documents (mainly photographic) concerning the region on forums, blogs and other platforms. [dolny-slask.org.pl](http://dolny-slask.org.pl) (about individual towns of Lower Silesia); [kepnosocjum.pl](http://kepnosocjum.pl) (dedicated to Kępno, Wieruszów and the surrounding area), [sedina.pl](http://sedina.pl) (associated with Szczecin and the surrounding area), [graudenz.pl](http://graudenz.pl), [lukow-historia.pl](http://lukow-historia.pl) (concerning Grudziądz and Łuków cities). Their development is possible through the involvement of regional activists. Websites and groups on social media websites that collect photographic materials with or without a comment constitute a separate category are: [dawnysopot.pl](http://dawnysopot.pl), [staraczestochowa.pl](http://staraczestochowa.pl), [lubsza.org](http://lubsza.org), [historialomzy.pl](http://historialomzy.pl), [fotokresy.pl](http://fotokresy.pl). The example of the website [fotopolska.eu](http://fotopolska.eu) is of particular interest as it uses the involvement of users to document places, people and events with photos and comments from all over Poland.

The popularity of Facebook means that some of the websites, for example [haynau.pl](http://haynau.pl) – the historical portal of the Chojnów city, previously functioning as a separate webpage – is currently only available on the aforementioned social networking site.

Another social initiative is the local and regional encyclopedia projects in the digital space, created by libraries, non-governmental organizations and private individuals, sometimes using Wikipedia engine developed on the basis of social participation; for example Ozopedia (Encyclopedia of Ozorków), Zamosciopedia (Encyclopedia of Zamosc), Gedanopedia (Encyclopedia of Gdańsk), the Great Internet Encyclopedia of Toruń E-wietor, Glogopedia (Encyclopedia of Głogów), Kwidzynopedia (Encyclopedia of Kwidzyn), Encyclopedia of Warmia and Mazury, [regiopedia.pl](http://regiopedia.pl). In this category it should be also classified the Elbląg Music Encyclopedia that combine the functionality of the website, digital archive, encyclopedia and database.

A common feature of community initiatives is their development that is often bottom-up and social in nature. It depends on the fact that users, voluntarily and free of charge, share sometimes invaluable materials that enrich knowledge about places which are close to them. They form – as an online community – a ‘small world’ focused around place, town and theme.

## **Other digital initiatives**

There are also websites where the main recipients are children and teenagers. An example of a site of this type is the Eduś Digital Platform ([www.deus.ibrbs.pl](http://www.deus.ibrbs.pl)). It is intended for regional education, supervised and run by the Regional Research Institute of the Silesian Library in Katowice (Platforma cyfrowa, 2017). Another example of a website addressed to a younger user is the Digital Children Encyclopedia of Wielkopolska’s People ([www.encyklopediawielkopolan.pl](http://www.encyklopediawielkopolan.pl)). It was created as an educational project with the participation of children from 226 primary schools of the Wielkopolskie Voivodship to promote knowledge about the region among the youngest generation.

The ideas that use digital technologies, but taking place in physical space, are growing in popularity. These include city and field games, tourist games, escape rooms and geocaching. They use effectively the knowledge about the region to increase the local activity of their participants. According to Olga Smoleńska, the urban game is meant to 'enable participants to have fun, enable to have live contact with the history and culture of a given region. The city constitutes a game board and participants – players face specific tasks' (Smoleńska, 2009, p. 34). Mobile city games are becoming more and more popular in Poland. Their implementation is possible thanks to technologies for smartphones with geolocation. What is more, there are also other digital versions of games – tourist games – with the ability to print and solve tasks or games in a closed space – the so-called escape rooms.

Thanks to urban and local games, the urban space may be additionally marked with regional content by the use of the elements of gamification by the authors, so that the user becomes involved in the task in a non-linear way. So far, several platforms have been created to enable this type of games to be implemented, for example lokter.pl or the recommended by the goodbooks.pl Finnish software ActionTrack from Team Action Zone.

Similar mechanisms related to geolocation as a function of smartphones will be used during geocaching. Both institutions and individuals can perform games that use GPS data to mark and communicate information related to space and local history. The search for boxes takes place using internet services containing location data – gecaching.pl and geocaching.com are the most popular in Poland. Local governments are the creators of many local initiatives. It is worth to mention the following local, regional and cross-border examples:

- Kaszëbë Project – Geocaching (Projekt Kaszëbë, 2014)
- Geocatching System in Leszno and in region (Geocaching zawitał, 2017)
- System of hidden places established by Kłodzko Community in the scope of 'Tourist Promotion on the Polish-Czech Border' project (Lista skrytek, 2015)

The use of modern technologies and mobile devices is an attractive way to develop interest in the local environment among representatives of the young generation. Once more, such local governments as Wrocław's and Koło's ones encourage to make amateur films by the use of mobile phone about the cities. Once a year, a festival of films made in this technique takes place: The National Festival of Short Films OFFK-a, organized by Bałucki Cultural Centre in Łódź (Bałucki Ośrodek Kultury, 2017).

### **How libraries may proof their offer in preparing digital initiatives?**

All of described activities belong to the aforementioned IFLA/UNESCO Public Libraries Services Guideline, which states the purposes of the public libraries. The authors claim that 'The public library should be a key agency in the local community for the collection, preservation and promotion of local culture in all its diversity. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, for example, the maintenance of local history collections, exhibitions, storytelling, publishing of items of local interest and developing interactive programmes on local themes. Where the oral tradition is an important method of communication the public library should encourage its continuation and development' (The public library service, 2001, p. 9).

Unfortunately, not all of these ideas are developed by Polish libraries but by the other cultural institutions. The main barrier may be the costs (of for example software) but also lack of professional staff. It seems that the majority of initiatives will need the cooperation between various institutions to offer a wide range of digital solutions to the communities.

Certainly, public libraries have a great opportunity to become the local platforms of collaborations and to become leaders while developing local information systems.

## Conclusions

Thanks to the Internet the access to knowledge, opinions, information resources of libraries and archives has become extremely easy from anywhere in the world. The time of access to information has shortened. What once required tedious research is now available on the smartphone in a few seconds. The new technological solutions that are constantly being introduced make the Internet not only an invaluable tool for work and entertainment, but also they create a virtual reality accessible to everyone more and more often.

The development of digital regional initiatives is a response to the growing interest of the Internet users in local communities and a relatively new area for use by both public and non-public institutions (for example by non-governmental sector). The various functions of regional collections using digital technologies enable shaping appropriate social and educational attitudes based on knowledge about the region acquired in a modern (via the Internet), and sometimes unconventional (for example collecting recorded oral stories) way.

Most of digital initiatives have similar goals motivating their functioning. These include the promotion of the region and the cultural heritage of the local community, facilitating access to digital resources, educating the societies as well as documentation and protection of writing documents (digital libraries) and non-literacy (mainly digital archives).

The popularity of social media sites in delivering locally important content is increasing. New forms of access to electronic regional resources and their enrichment with accompanying material and additional functions of presentation indicate the new questions about the boundaries, role and meaning of the digital text in social communication and requires further research.

It is worth to mention that the implementation, developing and co-creation of all the digital initiatives presented in the article is possible in modern public libraries, which play a great role in popularization of the idea of small homelands and are the important part of every local community.

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