

Participatory projects in public libraries – a tool for visibility and social betterment in local community

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Abstract:

“Fran Galović” public library in Koprivnica, a medium sized urban environment in Croatia, has a long tradition in organizing projects and programs in the local community in collaboration with numerous individuals, institutions and non-governmental organizations. Collaboration and networking are two management concepts, but also tools that can be used to overcome financial, staff and physical space limitations. At the same time, they broaden public visibility of public libraries and enhance their importance in the betterment of the local community.

This research was based on a case study, a semi-structured interview and a survey method. It has shown that collaborative relations are vital in transforming the traditional role of public libraries in a society, a process wherein a focus is not any longer on book collections, but rather on users and community needs. According to the research results, one of the indicators of Koprivnica library’s adaptation to contemporary society are its participatory projects, which revealed new audiences to welcome – babies and toddlers, children and youth, as well as socially vulnerable groups in the local community. The role of a librarian has also changed; from an expert in library science to cultural event manager and animator, PR expert, educator and communicator with different groups in the local community.

The research has shown that the library users recognised the library as the place that enhances social integration, social cohesion and social inclusion. But the politicians on all levels – local, regional and national should be more involved in recognizing the importance of public libraries in development of society. On the other side, library community should be more proactive in: promoting their positive role in the social changes, approaching to the new audience, understanding social macro- and micro environment and advocacy for its status in society.

Keywords: “Fran Galović” public library in Koprivnica - Croatia, participatory programs and projects, networking, social betterment, local community

Introduction

Library profile. The city and county library “Fran Galović” in Koprivnica is a medium-sized Croatian library, serving the population of the city of Koprivnica (32,000 inhabitants) and Koprivnica-Križevci County (122,000 inhabitants) in the north western, industrially the most

developed part of the country. It has 23 employees, 16 of which are professional staff. According to the statistical data, it had 9,200 members registered in 2015, 124,000 visits per year (500 per day) and 150,000 books and other media. The library acts as a local community cultural and information centre supporting education, lifelong learning and creative leisure-time activities. Its strategic orientation is expressed by the slogans *Library is open to everyone*, *Literacy for all* and *Library is more than just books*. Its good practice is reflected in the publications of the European Union [1] and the IFLA [2]. It has been awarded on the local, national and international levels for contributions to the promotion of reading and literacy, as well for innovative collaborative projects. These innovative projects have brought new audiences closer to culture, information and new information and communication technology, especially the blind and visually impaired and the Roma people [3].

The library has a long tradition of collaboration with numerous individuals, institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in organizing various projects and programs. Cooperative relationships are a very important management concept and a tool of the Koprivnica library. It uses these to overcome financial, staff and space limitations. They are also important for enhancing the library's visibility in a broader public sphere, as well as for underscoring its relevance as a poly-functional community center that promptly responds to the needs of its users and that acts for the betterment of the community.

Participatory programs and projects oriented to the local community

Koprivnica public library's participatory programs and projects support the local community in:

- knowledge and information availability and access (via library collections, media, technology);
- education and lifelong learning (via services such as book and other media lending, free access to information, promotion of reading and literacy, training of users in information and computer literacy);
- cultural development of individuals and the society (via programs and projects for all age- and socio-professional groups in the community);
- social integration, social inclusion and social cohesion (via programs for national and social minorities; the library as a forum and a promoter of positive lifestyles).

The library offers diversified participatory cultural and educational programs and projects. Its audience differs in its social and demographic characteristics, such as age (children, young adults, adults and the elderly), special needs (the blind and visually impaired, the disabled), multicultural community (the Roma), rural and sub-urban communities dislocated from the city center (served by mobile library).

In order to illustrate the possibilities of cooperative relationships used by Koprivnica public library, some of the programs and projects oriented to the local community will be presented [4].

Books for babies is a program that has been conducted in collaboration with the neonatal department of Koprivnica public hospital since 2001 [5]. Babies and their mothers receive a gift prepared by the librarians; the gift is delivered in the hospital by nurses immediately after birth. The package consists of picture books for babies and brochure for parents about the importance of reading to children from an early age. The goal is to raise awareness and encourage early literacy and family literacy [6].

Small libraries is a program based on collaboration with pediatricians in clinics and in the public hospital. The librarians disseminate picture books in the waiting rooms, enabling thus parents to read to their children while waiting for the service. The goal is to raise awareness of parents of the importance of reading to their children and of enjoying books from an early age.

Games, stories, memories is a program based on collaboration with the local House for Senior Citizens and kindergartens. Children and grandparents meet in the library to have fun in storytelling and singing. The aim is to encourage intergenerational transmission of memories from the older to the young ones.

Storytelling hours for babies, toddlers and preschool children are realised in cooperation with kindergarten teachers. The storytelling hours for babies and toddlers between 6 months and 3 years of age are intended to gather children and parents in the library; they can sing, play, get tips on successful parenthood and benefit from librarians' suggestions for reading. The storytelling hours for preschool children between 4 and 6 years of age are based on developing the pleasure of reading. The goal of both programs is common – to develop children's pre-reading skills and culture of reading from an early age.

Language globe is a program based on cooperation with teachers and associations of foreign language teachers (German, English, Spanish, Italian, French). The goal is to encourage visits to the library for the purpose of learning foreign languages in a fun way.

For young people is a program based on cooperation with local primary and high schools. The aim is to use the library as the meeting point for presenting students' creativity and exchanging information on their achievements in school projects.

Creative workshops for teens encourage their creativity and innovation in cooperation with local artists. The library serves as a get-together place where they socialize, learn and have fun. Along with encouraging children's creativity, these workshops are important for involvement of a large number of children and young people belonging to the particularly vulnerable groups - Roma children, the blind and visually impaired children, children with disabilities and children at risk, many of them coming from broken families. These workshops have an integrative character, enabling communication and connectivity among peers. In addition, the library organizes literary meetings for young people to encourage the reading interest and pleasure in reading.

Mobile library visits to the surrounding villages and sub-urban areas, dislocated from the stationed library, offer storytelling hours and meetings with authors in cooperation with local kindergartens and schools. The library also cooperates with the House for Senior Citizens in the lending service and in the co-organization of literary meetings and lectures. The aim is to spread solidarity and care for the elderly in the community.

Library service for the blind and visually impaired was launched in cooperation with the County association of the blind as a quite new service and pilot project in Croatia in 2006, using funds of the European Union [7].

During ten years of successful cooperation, numerous projects and programs were realized. These aimed at promoting: (i) equal participation of the blind and partially sighted people in

the community and society, (ii) better access to sources of knowledge and information in the library, (iii) greater social support and better understanding of their needs. In these efforts, collaboration on joint projects was extended to local kindergartens, schools, other local and national NGOs, the Croatian Library for the Blind and School for the Blind in Zagreb, Croatia's capital city.

Supporting the Roma people cover a number of programs and projects initiated in 2000. Although the Roma are one of the less numerous national minorities, accounting for about 0.1% of the population of the city and the county, most of them are not integrated into the society, unlike members of other national minorities and ethnic groups. Around 300 Roma live in segregated settlements in Koprivnica and its surroundings. Many of them are uneducated and even illiterate, with reduced employment opportunities and living conditions. Roma children, coming from poor and uneducated families, do not speak Croatian well and have learning disabilities. They are often exposed to prejudices and stereotypes. The Koprivnica library collaborates with local schools, the Open University, and the Roma associations to support children and young adults in their education, lifelong learning and free time. It serves as a cultural center that provides information and opportunity for socialization with the rest of the local community [8].

After years of organizing various activities for Roma children and young people, in 2010 Koprivnica's librarians launched in-house training programs in cooperation with local kindergarten and school teachers, school librarians, social workers, representatives of the Croatian Employment Service, Roma associations and local authorities in order to strengthen their competences with regard to the cultural and educational particularities of the Roma population. The aim was to raise awareness of the local community of their problems and bring about positive changes. The purpose of such self-organization of experts from various areas of the local community was an attempt to overcome the gap between the demands of educational system in respect of Roma children coming from deprived families on the one hand, and the lack of knowledge possessed by teachers and librarians on their needs on the other hand [9].

The library is more than just books - together towards employment is a program launched in 2014 in collaboration with the Center for Information and Career Counseling (CISOK) of the Croatian Employment Service [10]. It was a reaction of Koprivnica's librarians to unemployment as the biggest social problem in the local community and in the Croatian society in general. This was an attempt to help unemployed citizens by offering business information and materials on the current demands on the labor market, and by supporting them in finding a job or in starting their own businesses. The program includes the organization of forums and workshops where good practices on employment have been presented.

Koprivnica agora 21 program profiles *the library as a forum* that supports discussions on various topics relevant to the development of the community. It was launched in 2012, with a particular emphasis on the role of culture and education in this process. The program was initiated by the library, resulting in intra- and inter-sectors cooperation with the City Museum, Open University, university students and teachers, and other local institutions and individuals [11].

The conferences TEDx Koprivnica Library were launched in 2013 to encourage civic engagement and to strengthen participatory democracy through the library as a public,

common place open to all citizens in the local community. The purpose is to spread the ideas of individuals and thus inspire others to think about their own potentials and actions in personal and social life. The Koprivnica library was the first library in the European Union that obtained a TEDx license [12].

The *Health Information* program was first launched in 2008. Its aim is to spread health information and preventive education in collaboration with health professionals from the public hospital, the County's Health Institute and other experts. *Health tips under library parasols* is a very popular summer program, taking place on the terrace in front of the library building, in the very center of the city [13].

Green Library program has aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues in the local community since 2012. It is based on collaboration with non-governmental organizations and associations, interested citizens and bodies of local self-government. Workshops for all age groups and forums for adults are conducted. Promotion of library materials and information sources on environmental issues are also included in this program [14].

Local digital repository "Koprivnica cultural heritage" [15] was launched in 2013 in cooperation with local and regional cultural heritage institutions - the National Archives in Varaždin and the Koprivnica City Museum [16]. Since 2007, the library has carried out digitization projects of its protected, homeland collection [17]. The aim is to provide access to the information on the heritage of the local community and an insight into the history, traditions, and customs of the city and the region. The Koprivnica library has been cited at international conferences as the example of best practice because of its digitization model, which is now also available to smaller local communities and public libraries, and not only to major national libraries and other cultural heritage institutions [18].

Research results

In the Ph.D. thesis entitled *Public library as a local community centre in the contemporary society* (2016) the sociological and librarianship literature was analysed (*desk research*). In addition, several research methods were used - *case study*, *semi-structured interview* and *survey method* to explore the possibilities of Croatian public libraries, on the example of Koprivnica public library, to follow modern trends in transforming their traditional role in the society [19]. Besides book loans and acting as cultural heritage institutions, modern public libraries are also the multi-functional information, educational, cultural, and communication centres of their local communities with a focus on users instead of book collections. According to the research results, one of the indicators of the Koprivnica library's adaptation to contemporary society are its participatory projects,

The case study of the Koprivnica public library showed that during the past few decades its activities have been marked by prompt adaptation to social and technological changes in local and global environments as follows: (i) in promoting the use of new information and communication technology to overcome *the digital gap* in the local community between those who have and those who do not have access to it, (ii) in taking advantage of information technology and digitizing local homeland cultural heritage in order to protect it and make it available to the greatest extent possible, as well as to promote the local community globally, (iii) in introducing the offer of e-books to popularise the new technological possibilities of reading and e-services, (iv) in offering a training in information literacy to children and adults, (v) in offering other forms of non-formal lifelong learning for

users (library pedagogy programs), as well as in-house trainings for librarians and other experts.

New audiences, new roles of librarians. The library is particularly focused on offering participatory programs and projects to promote reading and literacy for children and youth and to serve as a communication centre of community. It also provides programs that support socially vulnerable groups in the local community thus reducing negative social consequences of the changes in the contemporary Croatian society. Its participatory projects revealed new audiences to welcome – babies and toddlers, children and youth, as well as socially vulnerable groups in the local community (the blind and visually impaired and other disabled persons, the Roma, the unemployed, the elderly). Besides, the role of librarians has extremely changed - from an expert in library science to cultural event manager and animator, PR expert, educator, and communicator with different groups in local community.

The method of semi-structured interview was used to collect the relevant information / facts from ten representatives of the city and county authorities, social minorities (the blind, persons with disabilities, the Roma, the unemployed, the elderly), mass media and librarians. The information was used to examine if the collected answers supported the findings of the case study. It also helped to identify the indicators needed to describe and analyse the role and tasks of public libraries in modern society [19].

The survey method gave an overview of the perception of the citizens of Koprivnica about the roles and tasks of the Koprivnica library, their suitability to meet the requirements expected of a public library in contemporary society in the context of social processes of globalisation, information technology development and networking [19]. The survey data were collected using a sample with controlled quotas: two separate independent samples, each with 150 respondents. One sample was composed of registered library members, and the other sample was composed of library non-members. The examinees' attitudes regarding *the library's services* (existing and potential), *social impact* and *current library problems* were explored. The most important finding of the survey study is that the library is still recognised primarily as a place of book lending, i.e., its traditional role, regardless of its diversified participatory programs and projects. Unlike the research results in the UK and the Nordic libraries that point to a diminishing degree of book loans, this study illustrates that due to low living standards, book purchases are hardly available and perceived as a form of "luxury" for most people in Croatia. Although library users recognize the importance of new offer of services and programs that Croatian libraries are turning to, book loan is ranked on the first place. However, on some level these results coincide with the findings of Niels Ole Pors from Denmark [20], who pointed that there was a discrepancy between the perceptions of experts on the contemporary role of libraries in the society and much more traditional perceptions of library users about public libraries' services. According to Pors, besides the economic situation, the introduction and proliferation of new services, as well as the prioritisation of these services presents a very important challenge for public libraries all over the world.

The perception of the importance of the library's cooperation with other institutions and individuals in the implementation of library services and programs was also investigated by the survey (Figures 1 and 2). Networking is one of the features of modern society, in both physical and virtual spaces. Hence, the development of a network of partners and cooperative relations is one of the most commonly used business models that libraries also use when responding to the ongoing social changes and to the permanent reduction of financial and staff resources. Sharing the knowledge and experience of professional staff from various

fields, physical and virtual spaces and financial resources with other co-workers is one of the most important and popular strategies in library management.

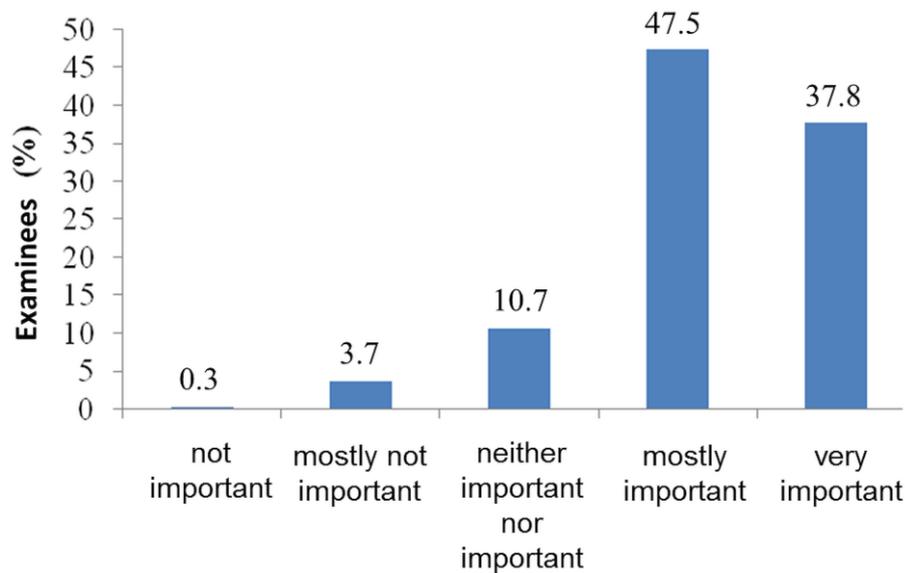


Figure 1. The survey results on the importance of cooperation between libraries and other institutions (n = 300)

According to the survey results (Figure 1), the examinees considered cooperation between libraries and other institutions important (i.e., 85.3% of examinees said that cooperation between libraries and other institutions is "most important" or "very important").

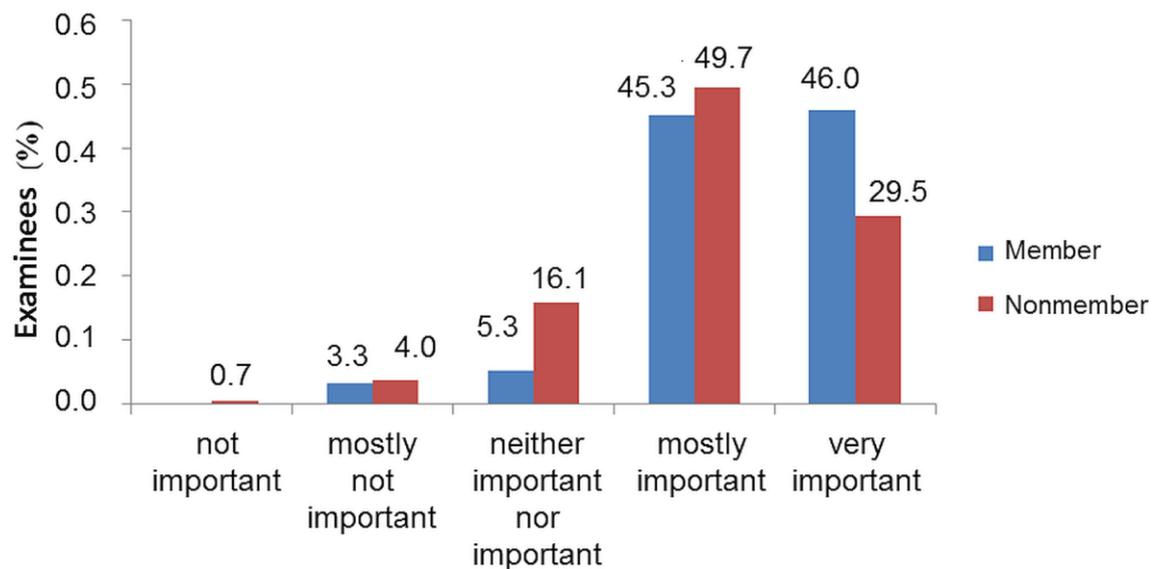


Figure 2. The survey results for members and non-members of “Fran Galović” Public Library (n = 300) on the importance of cooperation between libraries and other institutions.

The Mann-Whitney U test showed a statistically significant difference between the “Fran Galović” library members and non-members (Figure 2) in the perception of the importance of

cooperation between libraries and other institutions ($p < 0.001$). In doing so, members of the library, as active beneficiaries of such participatory programs, significantly more than non-members, i.e. their non-users, considered cooperation between libraries and other institutions and individuals important [19].

The research results showed that the library users recognised that Koprivnica library with its participatory programs and services contributed to the empowerment of the community as *the place that enhances social integration, social cohesion and social inclusion*. They also confirmed that politicians at all levels – local, regional and national failed to recognize the importance of such projects in the development of the society. Specifically, motivations to change the libraries' traditional role in the Croatian society were not politically driven, but were the result of the librarians' insightful perception of the need to move from professional issues to a socially proactive role in the development of the community. On the other side, research results [19] highlighted the need of the library community to be more proactive in: (i) promoting their positive role in social changes, (ii) approaching new audiences, (iii) understanding the social macro- and micro environment and (iv) advocating for its status in the society.

Conclusion

Koprivnica public library belongs to those public libraries that have selected a proactive strategy in the society, besides their traditional role in providing book loans and free access to information. Participatory programs and projects support its ambition to be visible in the community, contributing to its development and social betterment.

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