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#OURREGION: Building the Identity of Alytus and Vilnius Communities in the Public Libraries

Neringa Androšiūnaitė

Methodology and Management Centre for Region's Libraries, Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library, Vilnius, Lithuania.
E-mail address: neringa.androsiunaite@amb.lt

Edita Sėdaitytė

Reader Service Centre, Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library, Vilnius, Lithuania.
E-mail address: edita.sedaityte@amb.lt



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Abstract:

In this article, Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library is presenting implementation of their project “#OURREGION: Building the Identity of Alytus and Vilnius Counties in the Public Libraries”. The aim of this project was to renew a website Vilnijos vartai which contents information about local history and ethnography in Vilnius County. The renewal of Vilnijos vartai was strictly connected with need of community. Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library together with partners have initiated a survey in which community were asked, how public libraries can improve their local history services. The result of this project include two new local history websites, 4 educational programs, 7 training sessions for librarians and 1625 new articles about local history and ethnography.

Keywords: ethnography, local history, projects, communities

Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library is working with local history and ethnography for a past fifty years. All public libraries under the municipalities of Vilnius County are doing researches on local history. They are collecting information on the attended territory and its people, preparing and keeping papers on local history. Public libraries have compiled the number of valuable bibliography entries in connection to the history of the region

and papers on local history, which they would like to make available to the public. Some of these resources are the unique material, which has never been published and which has only been made available to local users.

But the goal of the librarians is not only to collect information, but also to disseminate it. Some Vilnius County public libraries have already attempted to present the information on local history on their websites. However, the origination of the communal website of local history for the entire county, where libraries could present the information in a unified manner in accordance with common methodology, would improve the quality of such information and its dissemination. Because of these reasons since 2008 information about local history and ethnography of Vilnius County is located in a website *Vilnijosvartai*.

Works with the website *Vilnijos vartai* started in 2008 in pursuance of the project „Dissemination of Information on Local History of Vilnius County on the Internet” performed by Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library. Funds were assigned according to financing of library development projects from the state budget. This website *Vilnijos vartai* is aimed at the dissemination of information on local history of Vilnius County libraries on the internet. Though the internet is full of diverse information on local cultural heritage, it is not always reliable, as it is often does not have any reference to the information sources. The information on local history is really in high demand: people show interest in the history of Vilnija region as well as cultural heritage, merits, and memorialization of people – relatives and families. The objective of the website is to reveal to the society, a remote user (Lithuanians abroad, students, everyone, who is interested in Vilnija), concentrated, systemized, and selected information of enduring value based on bibliographical lists about Vilnius County – a region with dramatic history, rich material and spiritual culture, as well as distinctive traditions.

But in 2015 Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library started a project to improve this website. The new version of the website was developed in 2016 in accordance with the project “#OURREGION: Building the Identity of Alytus and Vilnius Communities in the Public Libraries” (“Libraries for Progress-2”). It was funded by Melinda and Bill Geits fund. Two of the main tasks of the project was to renew old website *Vilnijos vartai* and to create a new one for Alytus Region Public Library.

There are 13 municipalities in Vilnius and Alytus Counties. These counties are located in two ethnographic regions. Each of them are unique and have its own history, traditions, culture, famous people, natural and urban heritage. There are about 1 million people in Vilnius Region and almost 150 000 people in Alytus County. Members of this community differ in their nationality, language, and experiences. Nevertheless, they are one community that shares same region and same history, and also the same problems. The main problems in Alytus and Vilnius counties are illiteracy, unemployment, and emigration. All these issues are arising from ignorance, limited access to information, inability to actively participate in cultural and social life.

But public libraries are like little lighthouses in the dark. They are located in the epicenter of these problems. When people lack information for their studies, or when they are searching for new job opportunities, when they are looking for information about regional traditions or are interested in nonformal education, they come to the public libraries. So for this project Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library had initiated a survey, to collect data, and to get

to know the opinion of the communities, how public libraries can use local history and ethnography to improve lives of their users.

Together with Lithuanian Library for the Blinds and Institute of Libraries and Information Science in Faculty of Communication in Vilnius University Adomas Mickevičius Public Library implemented a survey. The results of the survey revealed that people are very interested in their local history, traditions, famous people, local attractions and culture. Majority of the respondents noted that all public libraries in Alytus and Vilnius regions are collecting very interesting information. However, this information is not available for everyone and people can't find and use this information online. Majority of the respondents noted that they would use a website *Vilnijos vartai* more if the search system and navigation would be more convenient, if there would be more interactive services. Also the majority of the respondents have confirmed the idea, that there should be some educational programs based on ethnographic information. These programs should be oriented not only towards children, but also adults, and seniors. Various educational programs can contribute to lifelong learning.

So this research had confirmed the previous assumptions and allowed to start the project. The main goal of the project “#OURREGION: Building the Identity of Alytus and Vilnius Communities in the Public Libraries” was to increase the availability of ethnographic information online, so it would be available for more people. Users of a website *Vilnijos vartai* suggested themselves what could be done. The structure of the website should be renewed, the search system should be improves. Users need the possibility to create themed routes on the digital map. Based on *Vilnijos vartai* new website *Dainavos krašras* for Alytus Region was created.

New websites are offering more options for their users: advanced search, search for individual objects (cult buildings, monuments, museums, objects of nature, etc.) on the map. One can create a sightseeing route around Vilnius or Alytus County. The website introduced a new section on local history of communities. It also contains the news column and the calendar. The website is optimally designed for use by web surfers with visual impairments and it is also mobile-friendly.

Based on the partnership principle Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library cooperates with all eight of the following public libraries under the municipalities of Vilnius County: Elektrėnai, Šalčininkai, Širvintos, Švenčionys, Trakai, Ukmergė, also the Central Library of Vilnius City and of Vilnius District. The collaboration in developing the website content is organized by the bibliographers of the Readers Service Center of Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library.

The database consists of four sections: Regions, Personalia, Land History Works, and Honeycomb. Information, literature, and sources on Vilnius County and its regions are presented under “Regions”. “Personalia” covers the biographies of honoured persons rewarded with various nominations, also of notabilities, the memory of whom is commemorated in the regions of Vilnius County. This section covers the description of famous people, to whom the memorial museums, monuments, or memorial plates are built here. The lists of works prepared by local history experts of Vilnius County and digital versions of more valuable works (manuscripts or limited editions) are presented under “Land History Works”.

All project partners wanted to include as much members of their communities as possible to the project. Because of that, volunteers were invited. 70 volunteers have worked in three groups and participated in 5 ethnocultural expeditions. Volunteers have traveled to special cultural areas of Vilnius and Alytus regions, collected interesting information about that place, its famous people, have taken photos and written reviews. Volunteers have shared their work and experiences in special part of renewed website “Honeycomb”. “Honeycomb” is the local history of communities, where everyone is free to present his/her textual/visual material of local history nature about the regions or people of Vilnius County.

In presenting the material, the priority is given to printed sources and the presentation of reviews of the most valuable literature. The texts are given with the lists of literature, sources, and compilers of such texts. The database content will be updated and inaccuracies will be corrected on a regular basis. In preparing the website it is attempted to comply with the copyright requirements. The content of this website can only be used for non-commercial purposes by taking into account the applicable laws protecting the copyright and related rights and giving reference to the source – the website *Vilnijos vartai*.

So in one and a half year Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library together with partners created two new modern websites, based on real, researched needs of Alytus and Vilnius communities. This information with the help of modern technologies is used to create new educational programs for different age groups, to help include our communities in more active cultural and social life. During this project, four new training programs for libraries’ specialists were created, based on renewed website *Vilnijos vartai*. 181 libraries specialists were able to improve their knowledge about local history, digital information sources and websites management in seven training sessions. 488 articles about local history were renewed and 1625 articles created. And public libraries in Alytus and Vilnius Counties have renewed, modern tool for their work with local history.

References

“Vilnijos vartai” <http://www.vilnijosvartai.lt/>

“Dainavos kraštas” <http://www.dainavoskrastas.lt/>