

Working on LGBTQ+ issues in a library association: the French *Légothèque* working group

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Abstract:

Fighting against stereotypes in libraries is very important. It is our role as librarians and information professionals to be open and to welcome every single user, in its own singularity. That is why we set up a working group within the French librarians' association called Légothèque, dealing with « libraries', self-construction, and fight against stereotypes ». In a changing French context, both open and facing many challenges, the working group aims to raise awareness amongst patrons and librarians by spreading information, offering tools and training, and stressing the importance of welcoming for everyone.

Keywords: LGBTQ, homosexuality, library association, services, France.

Introduction

Fighting against stereotypes in libraries is very important. It is our role as librarians and information professionals to be open and to welcome every single user, in its own singularity. It seems that our institutions really have a role to play in the free diffusion of culture and, therefore, can lead the public to discover and open up to the world around them in all its forms.

If the world is a "*space in crisis*", to use Michèle Petit's expression¹, not only from an economic point of view but also according to the acceleration of social transformations, the increase of disparities and inequalities cultural and social, it seems to us that the library must oppose to it a space of opportunities, favoring the meeting of the other in oneself and facilitating the construction or the reconstruction of the individual.

¹ Michèle Petit is a French anthropologist. Her research interests include reading, relationship with books and libraries, reading in crisis spaces, and its role in self-construction.

It appears more specifically that issues related to multiculturalism, gender, sexual and sentimental orientation, are areas that allow us as professionals to rethink our missions, our services, and thereby our spaces and access to our collections. Growing and living and struggling in our societies is not easy for everyone, that's why we created the working group *Légothèque*, at the French librarians' association.

The library as a cultural institution and more importantly, librarians as mediators of the book and information, as cultural smugglers, really have a role to play in the construction of the individual by giving him access to collections and spaces in which he can question, construct and affirm what he is, what he wants to be, what he thinks himself to be.

1. *Légothèque* and the French librarians association

To put it in the French context, the French librarians' association (*Association des bibliothécaires de France - AbF*) was founded in 1906, and was recognized as a public utility in 1969.

It is the oldest library association in France, a country who loves to duplicate professional associations in multiples entities (one for academic libraries – ADBU ; one for major town libraries – ADBGV ; one for regional libraries – ABD ; etc.). The aim of the association is to promote the role of libraries in society through political statements (sustainable development, school libraries, public story times, support for harassed libraries), to foster professional debates by organising study days and publishing books, or to offer training to new information professionals. AbF has more than 3000 members (professionals and volunteers) which is not that much in a country like France but still is important and make it heard.

It holds a partnership with other associations and institutions for persons working in the books and information profession, and participate in the IABD (Interassociation Archives-Libraries-Documentation), formed during the DAVDSI bill. It also maintains structured international relations in the framework of IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), Eblida (European Bureau of Library Information and Documentation), Liber (League of European Research Libraries) and other organizations international cooperation.

AbF is led by a national council made up of the presidents of the 21 regional groups (who carry out local actions in phase with the specificities of each region) and 20 convenors of working groups on jail/hospital libraries, accessibility, videogames, trans literacy, advocacy, ethics, trainings... and, of course, *Légothèque*. This council defines the policy of the association and elects the governing board.

As a working group, *Légothèque* was born in 2012 with the aim to work on libraries as a tool to facilitate individuals' self-construction: how spaces, programming, collections and services can empower citizen, especially when they have specific issues such as gender issues, multiculturalism issues, sexual orientation issues. And these were terribly topical themes: in the very first years we were fighting versus censorship in public libraries, help librarians during same-sex marriage debates, or explaining to patrons and librarians that the famous "gender theory" does not exist at all, or creating a safe space for immigrants and refugees.

The name "*Légothèque*" refers to the Lego building game, to the ego, that is to say to oneself in Latin, but also to the verb to read in Latin (lego, legis, legere). At the same time, it refers to libraries (- "thèque"). It has a subtitle: « librairies, self-construction, fight against stereotypes ».

Accompanying the expression of minorities must also make it possible to fight against stereotypes by encouraging encounters and, if not creating awareness, at least facilitate the taking into account of differences. The challenge is to highlight the minorities in order to create surprise, to propose turns and detours to unexpected encounters and to encourage dialogue. The idea is not to tell patrons what to think, of course, but to give them tools to forge their own opinion based on scientific data and concepts.

We work toward both patrons and librarians, offering tools, advices and help for the latter, collection, spaces, services, welcoming for the firsts. Once again, we stress the importance of welcoming, the quality of presence, the fact of considering everyone as a subject, to be available. We must emphasize the importance of proposing collections, programming that address a multiplicity of points of view, not only favouring the dominant culture, conditions that are essential for proposing bridges between cultures. It is therefore not important for individuals to borrow or use resources, at least to feel recognized and welcomed, at least to open a place of possibilities.

Regarding LGBTQ+ people, it means making visible and giving back their place to LGBTQI + people and issues, namely, to enable LGBT youth to build themselves, for young people to find role models or legal resources, to make empowerment simply, but also to show cisgender and heterosexual people the existence of such collections and such issues. All the more important at a time when the aggressions are multiplying and where LGBTQI + phobias are disinhibiting. Not so much to say "the PMA is great" as to give examples of homo-parental families through which everyone can form his own opinion. It should be noted that often a LGBT thematic in the library is a gay man's theme and that a special effort should be made around the other identities of the acronym.

Today, *Légothèque* has 15 members (from all kind of libraries, academic, special, public libraries, but no school librarians as they are more considered as teachers than librarians in France). As a working group, it aims to grow reflections within the association, help professionals with tools, advices, trainings and relay what takes place at the international level.



Légothèque's flyer

2. Situation in France

Before I go further, I want you to pay attention of the French situation: of course, we're lucky. Neither homosexuality nor trans-identity are considered a mental disease (since 1981 for homosexuality, 2010 for trans-identity), homophobia is punishable by law (2004), and same-sex marriage is legal (2013)². This year the French government built an anti-cyber-harassment brigade and the Ministry of Higher Education has launched a list of measures "*to promote the inclusion of transgender people in student life and LGBT + students in general*". Among them: the recognized first name for the registration, the change of first name recognized on the diploma, the optional male/female mention on documents, the signing of a charter, etc.

However, everything is far from perfect. The same-sex marriage debates have released hate and homophobia and, these past years, violence against LGBTQ+ people have increased. According to SOS Homophobie association, 2018 was a dark year for LGBTQ+ people in France with 1,905 testimonials of LGBT-phobic acts collected by the association, which is a 15% increase over 2017. Lesbophobia continues to grow: +42% in one year. As for physical aggression reported to SOS homophobia, their numbers faced an increase of 66%³.

So we have to work on these issues and to help patrons.

Of course, we also consider some issues:

- How to be neutral when being a librarian, in France, when it is "compulsory" to be a civil servant? The principle of equality and neutrality in public service is a major one. Equality in public service is a logical translation of the principle of equality

² See at : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_France

³Rapport sur l'homophobie 2019 [in french]. Paris: 2019. Available at https://www.sos-homophobie.org/sites/default/files/rapport_homophobie_2019_interactif.pdf

before the law as proclaimed by the Declaration of Human Rights. This principle has a constitutional value. The principle of neutrality outlaws any distinction based on religious, political, philosophical, ethnic, or cultural affiliation. Is serving specific communities, which is often understood as serving communitarianism, a system that harms integration by dividing the nation⁴.

- Another question is when, in a municipal setting, the library exists between the will of the elected officials and the work of librarians. In law, they are each carrying legitimacy, democratic for the first, and professional for the second. Of course, there are threats to budgets like everywhere else, but what happens when your mayor asks you to hide LGBTQ+ books? He is your boss, how do you react and underline your very own legitimacy?

Regarding these issues, we have here a few challenges to solve:

- Social issues: Promoting diversity;
- Digital issues: Respect for life privacy, raise a cyber-awareness discriminatory harassment; Gender issues, for example coding and games for girls (sessions in mixed choice?)
- Professional issues: Facilitate the recognition of LGBTQ+ collections in the catalogue as well (which key words are used for indexing? Which classification to use when we know that Dewey does not help us? How to promote?: using a pink shelf or not?); Recall the role of professional documents, charters validated to protect colleagues; to admit the changes of pronoun, the question of mixed toilets or not, reducing administrative hassle, raising awareness of the structural obstacles that may arise...

And that's why we created *Légothèque* working group, to promote the idea of a library not only open and tolerant, but also truly active.

Lately, at our later French annual congress, we distributed a survey on LGBTQ+ and libraries. It appears that librarians are not really trained to welcome these specific patrons and their very own tools does not help them either. Library catalogues obliged you to specify the gender of your patron at the risk of misidentifying their gender. In French libraries, there are scarcely specific places and collections, even few specific services and programming (when there are ones, it is workshop, FB posts, conferences... from time to time without real consideration or strategy).

So, as a working group in a librarians' association, what do we do?

3. What do *Légothèque* do to fight stereotypes?

At first, we began to share information about various initiatives from our various communities. We have a [blog](#) where we have a post per week, including our watches summary, books selected by various libraries, and some reflections. We also introduce thematic libraries and write about academic essays. For example, when Lille's Faculty of Law showed an exhibition highlighting the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, we asked them the objectives of such an exhibition, the reaction of users, how it fit in the library project, etc.

⁴ Read for instance, that blogpost [in French] : <https://cricteurspublics.blogspot.com/2017/04/apres-la-bataille-neutralite-pluralisme.html>

Légothèque
Bibliothèques, construction de soi et lutte contre les stéréotypes

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Association des Bibliothécaires de France



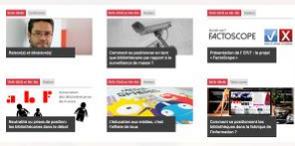
CHARTRE du Centre International de Recherche et d'Information sur les Bibliothèques

« Esprit critique, es-tu là ? »

Publié le 12 juin 2018 par fabbib

C'est l'intitulé d'une journée d'étude qui a eu lieu le 19/04/2018 à Tours.

Cette journée a été organisée par **Bibdoc 37**, un réseau départemental ouvert à tous les professionnels des bibliothèques et des centres de documentation, qui organise une manifestation professionnelle annuelle. Les présentations des intervenant.e.s sont désormais toutes en ligne.



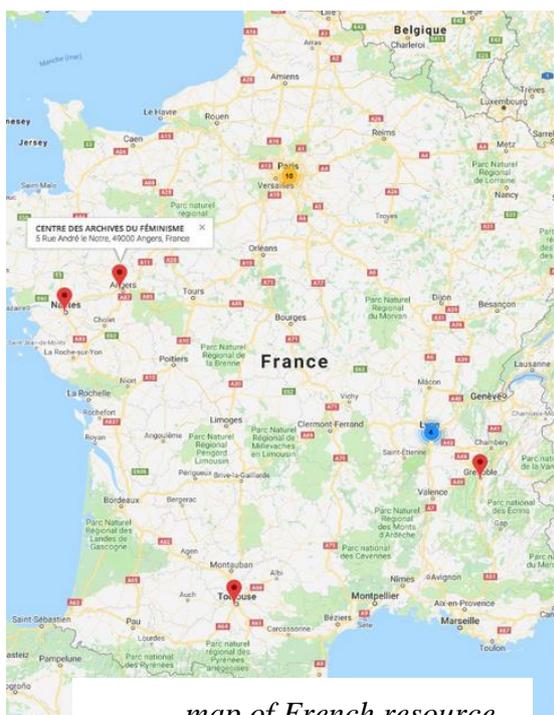
Pendant la journée, les personnes présentes ont participé à 2 ateliers au choix par les 4 suivants :

- l'éducation aux médias, c'est l'affaire de tous ; neutralité ou prises de position : les bibliothécaires dans le débat ; comment se positionner en tant que bibliothécaire par rapport à la surveillance de masse ?
- Présentation de l'EPIT : le projet « FactoScope ».

La conférence inaugurale de **Sylvain Delouée**, maître de conférences à l'Université de Rennes portait sur les notions de « raison(s) et déraison(s) » et la table ronde en fin de journée interrogeait le positionnement des bibliothèques dans la « fabrique de l'information ».

blogpost on critical thinking screenshot

We also maintain a collaborative watch on Diigo, and feed a collaborative intelligence that allows anyone interested it to subscribe to it. It enables us to get informed on what happens in our domains of interest and helps us to write posts for the blog. The posts can be what libraries do for the Day Against Violence Against Women; relay a study day on stereotypes in youth literature; promote training, which fosters gender equality in media; highlight a selective bibliography to deconstruct the stereotypes; alert about sexual violence in library etc.



map of French resource centers on gender

Genre ? Vous avez dit Genre ?

En français, le « genre » a longtemps été le **genre grammatical**, pour différencier la bibliothécaire du bibliothécaire par exemple. Dans le champ des sciences sociales, il a progressivement remplacé l'usage du terme « sexe » pour permettre de s'interroger davantage sur les **rapports sociaux** engendrés par le sexe.

Genre ou Gender

On parle parfois aussi de « Gender », pour marquer son origine étatsunienne, mais il est tout à fait possible de parler de genre dans la langue française.

De la même façon que la French Theory aux Etats-Unis traite des études sur un mouvement philosophique et littéraire français des années 60 et 70, la Gender Theory traite des **études de genre**. On les appelle d'ailleurs aussi Gender Studies.

La notion de genre est plutôt une **méthode** que les chercheurs utilisent ponctuellement et par ailleurs avec nombre de variations, ce qui encourage à parler d'**études au pluriel** plutôt que d'une théorie au singulier.

La théorie du genre, vraiment ?

Le contexte du débat français autour du mariage pour les personnes de même sexe a contribué à une **confusion entre les études de genre**, un champ universitaire à part entière, et les **politiques publiques** en faveur de l'égalité et de la lutte contre les **stéréotypes de sexe**.

L'expression « théorie du genre » est une formule utilisée pour critiquer indifféremment études de genre et politiques publiques, en s'appuyant sur l'inquiétude ressentie par certain-e-s de voir supprimer toute différence sexuelle entre les hommes et les femmes, chose qui n'est en aucun cas annoncée par les **obstacles de leurs critiques**.

Écrire le genre

On appelle épistémè, le fait de rédiger un texte en faisant intervenir le **rapport de visibilité** des personnes et des territoires.





exhibition on gender

Of course, we work within AbF on our subjects, and it is very important for us to work also within the association and make it change from the inside. Thanks to the working group, AbF signed the national commitment agreement for communication without gender stereotypes; opened non-gendered toilet at the annual congress or published political statements on our subject.

We actively build tools to help other professionals address these issues. We build collections with bibliographies, but also to help them react against censorship by giving them a reminder of the fundamental texts and values that underline the profession of librarian, reminding them of elements concerning the document charter, giving clarification on the "gender theory" or reminding of them of similar events, and publishing reactions from colleagues in press. We even created tools such as a free downloadable exhibition on gender for them to promote in their very own libraries and a google map with LGBTQ+ collections in French libraries. Of course, we take part of reflection by publishing articles in the French librarians' magazine and work with other associations like IFLA LGBTQ+ SIG.

Finally, we try to train professionals, by raising their awareness and conscience of these issues in the libraries. We organised living libraries, roundtables, and offer mixed toilets at AbF's annual congress.



*sign and explanatory text announcing mixed toilets
at the 2019 Congress of the AbF*

We also work with training centre and libraries to build efficient training sessions (on advocacy, professional practices, discrimination, representation in movies or in videogames, etc.) and, of course, participating in and even creating professional study days and conferences. Examples of these efforts include diversity in youth literature (2019), neutrality and librarianship (2018), and libraries and citizenship (2018) for the most recent ones.

Conclusion

Having a thematic working group in your professional association is more than a chance, it is a tool and a considerable force to change minds and bring more empowerment to your colleagues, as well as to your patrons.

Because we hope to promote the idea of a library that is not only open and tolerant, but also active, this group of "libraries, self-construction and fight against stereotypes" has the goal of sharing references and working with the community of librarians interested in these issues.

We are hopeful about uniting our energy already working in this direction, creating new synergies sharing our experiences and fostering new projects for the future.

Acknowledgments

We thank all Légothèque members, past, present and future for their commitment in the working group, and to the AbF who made this possible.

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