

The role of libraries in modern society

The information society development demands to re-define the position and objectives of all the institutions which work with information, knowledge, and culture. Of these, media and education have been discussed in the European Union actively. Libraries have been a marginal theme.

The situation is changing. Libraries have been identified as one of the key elements for open access to information, which is crucial to democratic information society development. In October 1998 the European Parliament adopted an own-initiative report "The Role of Libraries in Modern Societies", the first library policy paper in the EU. It defines the need for the most important pan-European actions on library field.

First, the general development of the information society is pushing to re-evaluation of all the institutions which work with information, data, and knowledge - indirectly also with culture. In this connection the roles of education and media have been discussed already quite largely also in the European Union. But libraries - as well as other memory institutions like archives and museums - have not been considered. Still, there is a clear need in the information society to maintain an institution which is concentrating in collecting and organizing information and offering general access to it. Until now, this work has been underestimated, but I argue the situation will change!

Libraries are especially important now when the whole idea of education is stressing more and more independent learning and acting. All citizens must be able to find and use information. It is the key raw material - but it is a zero resource, if there are no access points to it and if documents are in chaotic order.

Here we can see libraries enter the stage: *The unique function of libraries is to acquire, organize, offer for use and preserve publicly available material irrespective of the form in which it is packaged (print, cassette, CD-ROM, network form) in such a way that, when it is needed, it can be found and put to use. No other institution carries out this long-term, systematic work.*^{1*}

Culture must be nominated especially: it has an important and unique role in mobilizing resources of human beings. It has been described: *To some extent, culture makes its influence felt more indirectly than knowledge, but it is impossible to imagine how people's creative powers could be fully activated without the impact of culture, which extends into the depths of the mind.*^{2*}

The challenge to modern societies is that the basic resource, knowledge, is developing from information in very individual, capricious and unpredictable process. It cannot be commanded.

^{1*} This is a direct quotation from the own-initiative report "The Role of Libraries in the Modern Society"

Still, societies can support this development, e.g. by offering access to cultural and knowledge treasures.

This can even be translated into economic language: to get out the best from the human resources in Europe, this resource must be fed up with rich and various cultural and information contents!

I would like to stress especially the idea of organising information by libraries. It is often shadowed by the second important side of library work: offering access. But in the life-long learning and new technology context just all forms of organising documents are getting more to the focus. This is clear to anybody who has tried to find something from not-so-often-used Internet websites.

New lines in the EU - and in the United States

In accordance with these phenomenons, there are new political lines in the European Union:

The Maastricht Treaty in 1992 launched the cultural aspects. This was only after a long discussion, which made it clear that we have to remember to separate the national view and the European view.

The Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 declared citizenship as an important theme. A significant part of this are a.o. granting information skills and access to information to every European.

In addition to this, the European future strategies need to meet the democratic aspects of the information society development. One of the crucial points is again general access to information.

Libraries, especially public libraries, are a good tool in all of these new areas.

But the European union does not support whichever cultural or citizen concentrated projects in Europe. In the interests of the European Union there is always to find the European element.

So, what can be done in library policy on the European level, taking in account that libraries are primarily a part of national education and cultural policies?

The own-initiative report "The role of libraries in modern societies", adopted by the European Parliament in October 1998, is the first effort to answer these questions.

The same topics have been discussed in the United States. They have reached the point where especially the problems of those lacking access to digital resources have been studied. The report *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide* by the U.S. Department of Commerce was released earlier in July 1999. The report finds that minorities, low-income persons, the less educated, and children of single parent households, particularly when they reside in rural areas or central cities, are risk groups. The report calls for public policies and private initiatives to expand affordable access to critical information resources. But it also shows, for the first time as far as I know, that libraries and community centres really can diminish the information gap between haves and not-haves. The 1998 data from the U.S. demonstrates very clearly that community access centers, primarily public libraries, are

particularly well used by those groups who lack access at home or at work: e.g. unemployed groups used Internet in libraries three times as often as an average citizen.

Earlier actions in EU

In the European Union, there have been some efforts to mobilize "the treasures of the European libraries" since the mid-80'ies. These discussions and resolutions led to two special library programs under the 3rd and 4th Framework programs of research and development (1990-98). The later program has been known as "Telematics for Libraries". They have been strongly concentrated in IT, because it has been seen as a good tool to produce better access to the existing, underused library resources. These programs have had a clear impact in the European library co-operation and development.

Benefits of this work come to public libraries indirectly: common standards and working methods help in the end all kind of libraries. But a fact is, that nearly all the libraries active in these EU projects are national libraries or big research and university libraries. Two main exceptions are PubliCA, a network of European public libraries, and ECUP, which was a copyright awareness raising project, and reached public libraries as well.

A new beginning was the so called Morgan report in 1997 (The EP resolution of 13 March 1997 on the Information Society, Culture and Education). In this report libraries were for the first time put clearly onto the place where they belong in the information society.

As one result of the Morgan report, the European Commission informed that it will produce a Green Paper about the role of libraries in the information society. For one or another reason, this was made quite ready but was never published.

In this situation the Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the Media in the European Parliament decided to produce an own-initiative report about libraries. The main reason was that they wanted to influence the big issues under work in the EU, first of all the copyright directive and the 5th framework program, which will have a direct impact to libraries.

I was nominated the rapporteur of the own-initiative report. The report was adopted almost unanimously and with a very encouraging discussion in the Plenary session of the Parliament in October 1998.

Decisions of the EP concerning library policy

In short, when adopting the own-initiative report, the EP was calling the Commission and/or the member states to following actions:

- * Libraries must be taken in account in national and EU information society strategies and in the respective budgets.
- * Libraries need more resources for acquiring expensive books.
- * The Green Paper on libraries by the Commission must be completed.
- * **The users position must be taken in account in the copyright directive process, the balance must be maintained - this was politically the most important decision in short run.**

- * Support to libraries was demanded from the 5th Framework program of research and development, e.g. for networking, drafting standards, preserving, and transferring information; there is no more named library program under the 5th framework program
- * A clearing-house to solve problems of long-term conservation should be founded.
- * Studies concerning permanent paper should be done on European level.
- * The member states should take care of digitizing their cultural heritage for future.
- * There should be studies and concrete support to libraries in licensing matters, which are - will be the next big issue in library work.
- * The EU cultural and information budget should be opened to libraries as well, libraries and their co-operation should be taken in account in planning new programs.
- * Problems of legal deposit in international and multinational materials, especially in electronic materials should be solved.
- * The member states should provide all types of libraries with modern equipment, particularly with Internet connections.
- * Free of charge use of public libraries, in the spirit of the UNESCO Public Library Manifest, was demanded.
- * Free and easy access via libraries to material produced with the aid of tax revenues was demanded.
- * The members states should organize for their library professionals up-dating education and training.
- * A European Union focal point for libraries should be set up (tasks: coordination of library affairs and research, training)
- * The member states should found European information points at libraries in countries where they do not yet exist.
- * Library statistics should be better and more comparable both on national and European level.
- * The national Parliament libraries should be opened to the MEP's in countries where this is not yet the practice.

In addition to these, the report strongly stresses that the **library financing must be re-thought** in the information society. Without new resources libraries are unable to do everything they are expected to do!

After the EP adoption of this report, the European Commission informed that it will next prepare a communication about actions to do. It was stated that the report had already served as a discussion paper, and so the need for the Green Paper had disappeared. The communication is in summer 1999 still under work in the Commission DGXIII/2.

Traditions and new forms of work in the same house

As it was mentioned earlier, the European Commission R&D framework programs have concentrated in IT matters. The three cultural programs, Caledoskope, Ariane and Raphael, have not been very useful for libraries, because their scope has been quite narrow. E.g. the books and reading program Ariane has concentrated in translations. In the coming framework program Culture 2000 libraries will have more possibilities to get support also for their cultural actions.

What then will be the fate of the traditional tasks of libraries in general? Will the information society wipe out book loaning and poems?

According to my report these elements will survive, but will get completed by new media forms. It was stated earlier that culture has a special role in building up the modern society and in mobilizing the capacity of its members. The significance of reading is only growing in future. Demands to enlarge and deepen literacy skills get greater and greater. Literacy has a special role in guaranteeing the basic citizen competence to everybody. It is in general interests of the society to offer possibilities to all people for maintaining and developing their literacy.

In library work new technologies offer new possibilities to raise service level, too. Good examples can already now be found all over the world, mainly of course in those countries where Internet is used largely. Some models: Library catalogues are available via Internet, the patron can check her/his loaning data from Internet, and even renew the loans a country/areawide information service via Internet and e-mail; there are versions for link libraries or virtual libraries, where libraries collect and describe high-level link-ups discussion lists of librarians, where they can share their professional skills and knowledge, even take part in developing the library policy of the country/area.

There is one special comment concerning Internet which I have heard both from small libraries with rejected printed collections in Finland and from African libraries: In case you get reach in Internet, the resources your library can offer to the patrons are suddenly multiplied. All of once we have exactly the same resource as British Library or the Library of Congress. It is amazing, it is revolutionary, and we can use it!

In the complicated modern society libraries have many kinds of answers to many demands of the society, as well as those of the citizens. They have potential means to serve both the information society development and their traditional humanistic tasks. Maybe information technology will even make it easier to combine these elements in future than in the past!