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# Public libraries and vulnerable categories of users

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## **Abstract:**

*This study deals with a current concept, that of social inclusion, in relation to the public library – an institution with a strong civic responsibility. Regarding the need of aligning with the dynamics of society, the library is constantly undergoing successive changes, assuming new roles and transforming from a passive space for documents storage, to an active centre for social interaction, a community space, a place of diversity and dialogue, a meeting place for all members of a community. The role of public library in facilitating the process of social inclusion, namely the inclusion of vulnerable people in the community, can be considerable, but the relationship between these concepts is still little explored, at least in the Romanian bibliographic landscape. The second part of this study presents a brief typology of vulnerable people in Romania. The choice of the described categories starts from the main problems facing the Romanian society at the moment, the emphasis being placed on the needs of vulnerable people and on the role that public libraries can have in satisfying them.*

**Keywords:** public libraries, community analysis, social inclusion, Romania

## **Introduction**

The role that the library has at the present moment in a society is quite different from the one with which it was initially invested or, better said, it is an expanded one. In principle, any library, regardless of the community it serves – public, school, or academic – must be focused on the character and needs of that community. There are still libraries today that spend too much time preparing books for use in proportion to the amount of time devoted to their actual use, or that focus too much on their cultural role, investing time and resources in promoting the image of the library as an elitist space, in proportion to the time and resources allocated to increasing the quality of life of community members. This is probably the reason why the possibilities of the library for social influence are so little recognized, despite the fact that social inclusion has become one of the most important themes in contemporary debates.

## **1. Literature review**

Theoretically, the modern concept of the library as an institution dedicated to serving the general population appeared relatively late, starting from the 19th century, according to LIS specialists Pamela Richards, Wyne Wiegand and Marja Dalbello (Richards *et al.* 2015). The obvious

consequence of this paradigm shift was the emergence of studies on users' information behaviours, needs, interests and perceptions. In the late 19th century librarians began to recognize that in order to provide better library services, they needed to be more sensitive to the needs of those who step on their doors and more informed about their community and their surroundings. In 1896, Mary Cutler, a pioneer in library education, wrote in the *Library Journal* about a process that would later be known as *community analysis*, suggesting that librarians must be proactive in learning about their community, to catch the spirit of civic life and relate the library to the whole - “[the librarian] may catch the spirit of the civic life and relate the library to the whole...that he may select books, establish branches, open up new avenues of communication between the library and the people” (Cutler 1896, pp. 448).

Community analysis, an activity that involves gathering a wide variety of information about the community, in order to evaluate current services and establish a plan for the future, has been seen by specialists in the field, such as Debra Van Tassel and Haight Sarling, Larry Bone or Charles Evans, as being an important landmark in the strategic planning of a public library, an essential prerequisite for it to be able to provide effective services.

The approach to library services from the perspective of the needs of the intended users was accentuated in the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, evolving, shifting its focus from funds, human resources and collections to population and focusing on finding solutions to problematic situations that people face in their everyday lives – like studies and models of analysis by Brenda Dervin, Elfreda Chatman, Kirsty Williamson or Reijo Savolainen. Gradually, researchers' attention was directed to certain categories of population, especially to those disadvantaged, from well-defined geographical regions – we can mention Mary Bundy's doctoral thesis, published in 1960, on the use of the public library by the rural population of Illinois (Bundy 1960), Margaret Peil's study on low-income families in Chicago (Peil 1963) or Mindy Whipple and James Nyce's study on the information behaviour of the rural population in Lunca Ilvei (Whipple and Nyce 2007).

Vulnerable people have increasingly come to the attention of the most important international organizations and associations that promote free and open access to information for all, and represent in the same time the interests of those who rely on the services offered by libraries and the interests of LIS professionals. Thus, IFLA, in collaboration with UNESCO, developed a series of guidelines for the development of public library services, which represent important milestones in clarifying the role of the public library in the life of the community it serves and its contribution to the well-being of its members.

For certain categories of users, IFLA has developed dedicated guides: *Guidelines for Library Services for Young Adults* (1996, 2008), *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Children aged 0-18* (2003, 2006-2007, 2018, 2022), *Guidelines for library services to prisoners* (1992, 1995, 2005, 2023), *Guidelines for Library Services to Deaf People* (1991, 2000), *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia* (2001, 2014), or *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness* (2017). A series of articles and studies related to the categories of users with special needs have been published within *Division 3 Library Services*, which are available online, in *IFLA's institutional repository* – 28 are about library services to children (including babies and toddlers) and young adults, 205 about services dedicated to people with special needs and 78 about services for multicultural populations (the research was made by subject, in *IFLA Publication*, in all languages).

Starting from 2014, *American Library Association* has firmly directed its strategic direction towards social inclusion, by establishing a working group for *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*. The main task of this group was to develop an action plan that promotes among ALA members, and all those are active in the library science field, as well as of the communities served by them, from all

over the world, those three concepts, both at a strategic – declarative level, as well as through the appropriation practices to support them. *Inclusion* has been defined by the ALA as an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and with respect, are valued for their distinct abilities, experiences and perspectives and have equal access to resources and opportunities.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Users' typologies

Defined as a process of improving the conditions and possibilities of participation in social life, by offering opportunities, access to resources, equal rules with the rest of society, respect and the possibility of involvement in the decision-making process of a society, social inclusion refers especially to the vulnerable categories of population. Diagnosing a community and identifying the needs of these vulnerable categories in order to implement the most appropriate development strategy, is not only a challenge for public libraries, but also a measure of their value for society. Before identifying the needs, however, those segments of the population affected by certain vulnerabilities must be known (recognized). An users' typology, even a general one, from the perspective of the problems that people are facing can represent a benchmark for librarians from public libraries.

The existing users' typologies, at least in the Romanian librarianship literature, are made according to criteria like age and socio-professional status and, occasionally, the attitude towards library collections or reporting to new information technologies. Taking into account the limitation of Romanian research in this field, we cannot talk about an actual approach to the needs of vulnerable people, about a strategic direction oriented towards offering library services dedicated to them or about an inclusive library model, but, rather, of isolated events (influenced by certain situations or passing social trends or imposed by outside regulations/recommendations).

Although the vulnerabilities may be different from one community to another, each geographical area having its own particularities, there are certain trends that characterize, at a given moment, the society as a whole – the level of poverty, the degree of ageing, the ethnic attitude, etc. – and a typology of vulnerable people in Romania can be created starting from these trends or characteristics. In this endeavour, it is important to refer both to the strategic and legislative framework at national level – especially to national policies with impact on people considered vulnerable, to legislative documents related to combating and preventing phenomena such as anti-Semitism, xenophobia, marginalization, discrimination or to the protection and promotion of the rights of certain vulnerable categories of the population in our country – as well as to the EU's policies and strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation.

Having as a general reference points the *National Strategy regarding social inclusion and poverty reduction for the period 2022-2027* and the *2024 Country Report – Council Recommendation on economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Romania*, we find that the most vulnerable population category is represented by children, especially those who live in poor families in rural areas, the disparities between the different regions of our country being very strong.

### 2.2. Categories of vulnerable people in Romania and their relation with public libraries

Poverty is the main cause of vulnerability and social exclusion. Among the people particularly affected by this are people living in rural areas, the elderly, children and vulnerable groups (including the disabled and the Roma).

Romania's poor children are born in families that live in poverty and are socially excluded, have parents with a low level of education and qualification and few work opportunities or with a low work intensity. If they are not abandoned or institutionalized and in the absence of adequate help, children inherit, adopt and transmit from generation to generation a system of non-values and specific behaviours – they drop out school, do not use medical services, increase their family despite material challenges and never dream that they might overcome their condition. Marginalization also occurs when representatives of public institutions decide that what they are already doing for "everyone" meets the needs of a certain population, regardless of the conditions faced by that group.

In Romania, all public libraries have the obligation to hold specialized branches for children, where they carry out activities adapted to their age, most of them in accordance with their generally valid needs, following the previously mentioned principle, that services dedicated to "all children" can also satisfy the needs of vulnerable categories of children. Analysing annual activity reports displayed on the institutions' websites, it appears that programs and projects for children are best represented at the level of each county library, whether it is national projects, carried out annually, at the initiative of similar institutions in the country or non-governmental foundations, whether it is about local cultural-educational projects or holiday programs. Unfortunately, only a small part of these are dedicated to children with special needs, institutionalized children or those in hospitals, children with disabilities or vulnerable children from rural areas, from poor or broken families.

We believe that public libraries can serve as complementary spaces to schools, where, with the help of suitable infrastructure and qualified human resources, children can benefit from help in meeting basic needs – such as help with homework, but also aspirational needs, by getting involved in creative and participatory learning activities (tech clubs, STEM or DIY activities). Also, public libraries should consider organizing early childhood education programs and educational programs or workshops for families/parents.

In Romania almost a quarter of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 face severe poverty, which is the highest percentage in the EU. Here, the education and training systems face persistent challenges in terms of quality and inclusion, which leads to early school-leaving among young people. The phenomenon is caused by a series of other factors associated with poverty, such as the seasonal work performed by young people to support their families, the limited level of training of parents, a low degree of accessibility of education services or limited infrastructure.

Another problem of young people in Romania is that of socio-professional integration, as a result of the situation generated by poverty. The percentage of young people who are neither employed nor in any form of education or training – a concept known as NEET in English abbreviation – is among the highest in Europe. The recent Covid 19 pandemic has led to or coincided with an increase in mental health and substance use problems, increased risk of abuse and family violence, and dropping out school, especially among school-age youth.

Although young people are mentioned in most library documents as a distinct category of users, in terms of activities, they are included in the same types of projects and programs as children (of course, on a different level): library vacation programs, homework help, theatre and film workshops, reading clubs, creative writing competitions, programming and coding courses, robotics workshops, occasionally personal development or drug prevention courses. Young people from the NEET category are not mentioned at all.

It would be appropriate that national support policies applied to young people, aimed at combating school leaving, to include multidisciplinary teams from which librarians should not be absent. Also it would be useful if public libraries would implement support and professional training programs in order to recognize individual abilities, to develop certain skills (especially digital skills) or to identify employment opportunities.

Elderly people, especially single ones from the rural area, are also exposed to the risk of poverty, ending up living below the poverty threshold or at its limit, due to low incomes. Beyond loneliness and poverty, the older generation faces inherent health problems. The recent Covid 19 pandemic demonstrated that the representatives of the older generation also suffered the most losses, being the most vulnerable both in terms of the high risk of infection and death, as well as the degree of social exclusion caused by the distancing measures and self-isolation. Ageism – a term used to reflect the way of thinking about older people, based on negative attitudes and stereotypes about ageing – has recently become more evident as a form of discrimination.

Libraries can be an important source of reliable and trustworthy information to help elderly people learn new things, a source of computer access and digital literacy training to help them connect with family, friends, or learn about health and government services. Through engagement and education opportunities, dedicated programs and services, including mobile services, literacy and lifelong learning opportunities, or outreach, public libraries can become key players in supporting older adults. Moreover, elderly people are often one of the most active user groups of public libraries, as they offer them a safe meeting place and contribute to the expansion of social circles – many elderly users create social groups within public libraries, such as are the reading clubs.

The responsibility of public libraries to serve all communities and demographics, equitably and according to specific needs, makes it imperative that they direct significant efforts to the most marginalized groups in society, which obviously includes those without shelter. Almost half of the young people in Romania live in severe housing shortage. At the European level, the percentage is four times lower.

So-called "street children" represent a special category of the poor Romanian population. They end up like this firstly because of dysfunctions in the families of origin (domestic violence, emotional abuse, exploitation, alcohol, divorce, remarriage, multiple partners, etc.), and then, following the failures of reintegration by governmental or non-governmental institutions. Although it may seem like the main problem of homeless people is the lack of material and financial resources, in fact, is the effect of deeper, although less visible problems, such as the lack of education due to early school leaving or the lack of professional training, which make it difficult the process of their socio-professional (re)integration.

The challenges faced by homeless people can be effectively addressed if they are provided with the necessary information about jobs, public utilities, health services or shelters available in their vicinity – needs that can be met by a public library, but only if it is desired that its services be directed to a population group considered problematic and with negative intentions. Beyond meeting basic needs, homeless people's participation in civic life and their right to attend mainstream public places are important, as this allows them to experience belonging and move out of marginal spaces. Public libraries can provide opportunities for homeless people, because they legitimize their presence in the "prime" space, rather than the marginal one.

Similar to NEET young people, homeless people do not appear mentioned in Romanian public libraries reports or strategies. They could and even should constitute target groups of public libraries. It would be helpful if these public institutions would adopt measures aimed at facilitating access to information, finding employment opportunities, participating in public places, etc.,

Disability is a second major cause of social exclusion, not necessarily associated with poverty, although most of the disabled are over 65, a segment of Romanian population in the most risk of poverty. People with disabilities face a number of other problems besides medical ones, problems related to lack of autonomy and dependence on family or other people, social labelling in a way that considers them inferior and denies them the ability to work, limited access to spaces,

resources and services. In Romania, disparities based on disability criteria (as well as gender disparities) in terms of employment are very large, far above the averages recorded at the EU level.

Public libraries could play an important role in ensuring their independence and social inclusion. Unfortunately, most libraries in our country face a series of problems related to accessibility of collections and services, mainly generated by the lack of adequate funding. Even if a great number of them understand the important role they have in supporting people with disabilities, very few manage to provide accessible documents and assistive technologies or to rearrange their spaces, so as to facilitate physical access to documents and equipment for people with disabilities.

Belonging to an ethnic group can be an important determining factor for a person's situation or for the position on social scale, and this can be explained, on the one hand, by the discriminatory attitude of members of a nation/community towards foreigners, and on the other hand through the (self)victimization of the ethnic group members – a “consciousness of stigma”, as Ryan Brown and Elizabeth Pinel call it (Brown and Pinel 2003).

The Roma represent the largest ethnic minority in Europe, and in Romania they occupy the second place, after the Hungarians. Policies at the national level are advanced in terms of their inclusion in the community. Regardless of where they are, their main characteristics are that usually they live in difficult conditions and that they are often discriminated. Roma community members are being considered marginal and difficult to integrate both because of stereotypes and prejudices and of that "consciousness of stigma", previously mentioned.

The role of public libraries in the process of social inclusion of Roma is demonstrated by numerous examples at the European level. Public libraries in Denmark or Croatia, for example, have implemented and supported many programs dedicated to the promotion of Roma culture and traditions or to sensitizing the community to the problems faced by the Roma population in everyday life. Although there are several such examples in the Romanian space as well – the most recent is the *Roma children's library project* (2022), initiated by the *Communities of the Future Association*, together with the *Conțești Municipal Library*, the *Perșinari Library*, the *Șirna Municipal Library* and the *Măcin City Library* – we believe it is absolutely necessary that this inclusive role that public libraries can play regarding vulnerable Roma people, to be constant and persistent. An aspect worth mentioning due to its singularity is that the *Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens belonging to the Roma Minority for the period 2022-2027* recommends libraries among the solutions for Roma people social inclusion, as viable and credible institutions of training and identity representation, even if the recommendation refers to the establishment of new libraries and not to the exploitation of the existing ones potential.

A relatively recent phenomenon is that generated by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which caused some population fluctuations, with more than 83,765 Ukrainian refugees residing in Romania at the end of 2023. The integration problems faced by immigrants or refugees did not attract, in particular, the attention of Romanian public libraries before 2022, mainly because they were focused on the local community needs. The influx of Ukrainian refugees has triggered a transformation process, with libraries becoming support centres for third-country nationals, offering a wide range of services and programs aimed to facilitate their integration: educational and language support projects (Romanian language learning clubs, English language classes, creative and IT workshops cultural, coding and robotics clubs), cultural integration and emotional well-being projects (recreational activities for children, psychosocial support and emotional accommodation, cultural and reading activities, parenting and support workshops, cultural connections through native language materials), civic participation and community engagement projects (IMPACT clubs, community integration events), information and counselling services, access to digital tools and equipment, support for daily living and medical services.

## Conclusions

Many of public libraries from our country have no other target than registered users (“loyal clientele” or people which are familiar with the library); their programs and activities are mainly addressed to children (all of them) – at least this was the situation until 2021. Starting from then libraries became aware of the crucial role they can play in the process of social inclusion. We can affirm that the critical point from which the process of library transformation began is directly connected to the two major crises – the COVID pandemic and Russian-Ukrainian war, especially because humanitarian aid involved a joint effort, an effort from which libraries could not remain indifferent. Those crises opened an intervention field for libraries, and they promptly responded, offering support to isolated people or to Ukrainian refugees through shared activities or new learning experiences.

We cannot yet talk about the existence of an inclusive library in our country – by inclusive library we understand a public institution capable to respond, practically and efficiently, to the needs of all members of a community, not only of a particular vulnerable category. But we are in the right direction. Although there should be a common direction and a set of unitary norms (non-existent in the Romanian librarianship landscape), there is no single size for all libraries and no similar approach regarding the development of services, resources or programs for public libraries, because each community is different and, in fact, the community itself contains several sub-communities, with distinct particularities. Differences may include, but are not limited to, the following characteristics: demographics, education level, income level, family size, poverty rate, race, ethnicity, interests, sub-community cultures, geography, cultural history, life challenges, knowledge gaps. All these variables, along with many others, influence the kind of programs the community will participate in, what books/informational resources the community members want to access or need, or how the library itself is viewed.

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## Notes

This study is based on the doctoral thesis Public library as factor of inclusion in community / Corina Dovîncă, Elena Tîrziman (coord.), Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, June 18 2024 (public presentation).

# Mission and operation of the Reference Service of the American University Library

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## **Abstract:**

*Therefore, the existence and operation of a university library in the contemporary era cannot be conceived outside of the computerization and digitization process, and a collection that does not include documents on this innovative type of support is a nonsense. That is why the permanent training of librarians in the area of information and documentation technologies, communication and information in real time, accurately, are determining elements in the contemporary process of modernization and continuous evolution of libraries in general and university and specialized libraries in particular. If the reference librarian doesn't fulfill his duty, the library fails in its mission. The reference librarian is the key to the success of the services rendered by the library. The library services must revolve around information users. Since the university and academic libraries provide the informational support to a homogeneous, well-defined public, the introduction of new information technologies in libraries led to the need to diversify the range of services provided, beyond traditional library services and products. Reference librarians have practically become IT specialists rather than book handlers or "collection keepers", good connoisseurs of one or more languages of international circulation. The future of university libraries, given that they are no longer the only information managers, depends on how they will manage to adapt their services and collections to user requirements. To this end, I have briefly addressed in this paper-work, the way reference services are organized and function within university library systems from USA.*

**Keywords:** *reference service, academic libraries*

## **Introduction**

Today, information is the driving force that ensures the dynamics of change as bases of ultra-fast progress. Digitization technology has changed the traditional relationship between user and the document, a situation similar to the transition from the manuscript to the printed book in the second half of the 15th century. Running a university library cannot be conceived outside computerization and digitization process, and a collection that does not include new media documents is hard to conceive. That is why the permanent training of librarians in the area of information and documentation technologies, communication and information in real time, accurately, are determining factors in the contemporary process of modernization and continuous evolution of libraries in general, and university and specialized libraries in particular.

A library can have the most modern and fitted location, it can have the most comprehensive collection of documents, the best-made catalogue, but if the reference librarian, that information worker who comes into contact with the user, does not do his duty, neither the library fulfils its mission, regardless of its profile. The reference librarian is the key to the success of the services rendered by the academic library to the information users. The introduction of new information technologies led to diversifying of the range of services provided, beyond traditional library services and products. Reference librarians have practically become IT specialists rather than book handlers or "collection keepers", and good connoisseurs of one or more languages of international circulation. This paper-work addresses the way reference services are organized and function within university US library systems, a country with a long tradition in information dissemination practices from the library to the user, identifying possible solutions to increase efficiency.

## **1. A brief history of Reference Services in American University Libraries**

Reference Services were introduced in the USA around 1876, at the time when it became generally accepted that both public education and library services should be accessible free of charge. As in the case of any new trend, efforts to obtain a free reference system for the general public had a conceptual basis that started from the idea that the only way to accelerate the performant society's modernization process is to create possibilities for unfettered dissemination of information to all social and educational compartments.

For the first time, the idea of intensifying reference practice for readers was launched at the Conference of Librarians in Philadelphia on October 5, 1878, where Samuëll Sweet Green explained the need for a program of assistance vis-à-vis readers. His ideas were published in the article "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers" published in the *American Library Journal* (1878), (which is issued today under the name of the *American Journal* (Green 1877, pp. 74-81)). He draws the librarians' attention to the fact that many users, especially professionally active people, do not have time to search for information, so all the more the librarians have obligation to research and provide users with the necessary documentation. When students and researchers came to the library, S. Green recommended the use of encyclopedias and book indexes. Simultaneously with these tools, he also recommends requesting the help of librarians, if the information sought was not found. He also emphasized that very often librarians are asked to help select materials for reading or for carrying out certain researches, being actively involved in collection development policies. Then, gradually, the reference system began to develop the research technique, the process of making connections to find information and the cataloguing of information sources. Green also presented his vision regarding the reference services, simultaneously with the editing of *Dewey's Decimal Classification Tables*, a fact that significantly facilitated finding information in the library more easily. Although some librarians and researchers considered these tables to be sufficient, during the 1880s-1890s the need for additional trained personnel, with solid knowledge in various fields of knowledge and advanced information retrieval techniques, increased considerably. This new activity, originally called "readers' assistance" by 1890 was already known as "reference work".

In 1883, in several libraries in several large cities in the USA, classes were opened for the training of reference librarians (reference assistants). In 1887, in the organizational framework of the *College of Columbia*, the first School of Librarianship was opened, the training plan of librarians being focused on user assistance. By 1900, several university libraries were structured in

such a way as to have reference rooms, where the collections were organized in a free access regime, and the reference librarians were ready at any time to provide support to their use.

In the first half of the 20th century, the concepts and methods of reference activity were expanded, specialized services were introduced, such as, for example, the consulting service. At the beginning of the century, the reference services provided by librarians also included offering answers via phone to information requests. In 1900, the *Legislative Reference Service* was organized in the American state of Wisconsin. Following this example, specialized libraries were reorganized into scientific research centres, business centres, health protection institutions, etc. Starting with the year 1913, specialized collections began to be organized in libraries for areas such as: business, science, music, art, etc.

To conclude, Green outlined four basic functions of the reference system, these being:  
 training the library staff to provide the best answers to users and to help them solve some of the problems encountered;  
 satisfying information needs: presenting new purchases, cataloguing volumes according to certain criteria, facilitating access to information sources;  
 developing the collections by studying the market and accessing funds;  
 the relationship with the public and the promotion of the library; creating cultural events, inviting cultural personalities and inviting the public to various workshops.

Starting with 1876, libraries began to adapt to the functions of the new reference system, modernizing themselves to reach the stage we know today. Richard E. Bopp wrote that "until 1876, librarians were responsible for developing collections and arranging volumes on shelves, and users searched for them independently"(Bopp and Smith 2011, pp. 4). Gradually, the reference system began to develop the research technique, the process of making connections to find information and the cataloguing of information sources. France Bouthillier estimated in the work "La concurrence dans les metiers de la documentation" that: "in the information environment there are three large groups of interacting actors: those who use information, those who create it and those who mediate access to it" (Bouthillier 2002, pp.39).

At the same time, the increase in the number of specialized libraries had a particularly important influence on the conception and methods of carrying out the activity of reference services. At the same time, another author Rich Soo Young draws attention to the reference system in the article "Changing reference service environment: a review of perspective from managers, librarians, and users" on the existence of two concepts:  
 "the variety of activities associated with personalized assistance provided to library users, including selection, bibliographic instruction and implementation of electronic products";  
 direct librarian-user interaction, which takes place at certain service points, usually at the reference desk."(Young 1999, pp.179-186) The two views have undergone changes over time and with the help of technology have transformed the role of libraries and librarians.

The reference service underwent radical changes during the 20th century. As part of its evolution, the reference service became more and more efficient and, in certain circumstances, began to offer assistance to users by other means than direct interaction at the desk or at the reference desk. Gradually, reference services appeared and were used via the telephone, as well as

through the postal services. This fact led to the loss of direct contact between the librarian and the user.

In the specialized academic libraries, the reference services were transferred from the reference desks to the library offices, the reason being the significant increase in the number of information services in certain fields. Currently, there is a strong process of expanding the reference services through some modern means of work: accessing scientific databases, online library catalogues, electronic mail, etc. In many US libraries, reference desks have been replaced by alternative models, such as the triage system or service, which consists in prompt reference services rendered by professionals at the reference desk, with in-depth research following to be carried out by reference librarians. Professor Ionel Enache wrote in his paper work *Planning and organization of library services* that: "Processing includes all the material and intellectual operations, which are carried out from the moment the document enters the library, until it is made available to the reader"(Enache 2004, pp.96).

Another way to modernize the reference service is to establish several levels of staff. Administrative staff or students can answer more simple requests so that reference librarians can focus on more specific issues. If the staff at the information office cannot provide an adequate answer, they redirect the user to the librarian located, as a rule, in another office of the relevant institution. This method became known as the "Brandeis" reference service model after Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts adopted it in 1990. However, in the vast majority of public or academic libraries, the "face to face" method is still predominant for providing reference services, according to D. Tyckoson in the work *The advantages of the reference service* (Tyckoson 1999, pp. 40).

## **2. The role of the librarian and the modern library vis-à-vis real and virtual users**

The movement to support reference service reform began with the article "Reference Service Failures: Coping with Success and Failure of the Reference Service" by Bill Miller and published in the *American Libraries* journal (Miller 1984, pp. 303-306, 321-322). It was a moment that led to a radical change in the debates about the reference service.

Since 1984, new challenges began to appear for reference librarians: the need to be experienced teachers, to be able to write and read in as many foreign languages as possible, to have online search skills, to be skilled computer users. And, all this, complementary to their traditional duties. Miller advocated the idea that libraries must have adequate resources for each service they provide to the user. The activity of information services consists both in a simple search for a simple address or a telephone number, as well as in finding bibliographic references and disseminating documents on a specific topic. Although the number of answers offered with the help of electronic resources increases, the efficiency of information services in the vast majority of cases depends on printed resources. The reference service will continue to transform with the development of resources and technologies, but the assistance given to each individual user will remain basic, because the organization of information, the various and multiple reference books and the process of finding information in a cultural universe that is so diversified are operations far too complex to be entrusted to people who visit the library occasionally. The so-called "direct access" inhibits the transfer of information, instead of accelerating it. For the public, learning and relearning how information is organized in libraries is too much of a time investment with often limited benefits or success.

In the American outlook, the responsibility of a library must be extended beyond the collection and organization of information and library materials, to an active, personalized role in the dissemination of information. Librarians must act as mediators, catalysts between library resources and the public. This dynamic role was crystallized in the reference service.

In the 20th century, the theoretical basis of library science has a solid foundation in the works of the great Indian mathematician, philosopher and librarian Ranganathan.

Among other fundamental contributions to information science, Ranganathan enunciated in 1931 the five fundamental laws of librarianship. These five laws expressed simply, reflect Ranganathan's deep spiritual and practical thinking, being unanimously recognized as standard principles of the discipline, namely:

- *books exist to be used;*
- *to each reader-his book;*
- *each book-with its reader;*
- *save the reader's time;*
- *the library is a developing organism.*

Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman adapt these laws and thus present them in the book "Future Libraries: dreams, madness & reality" (Crawford and Gorman 1995):

- *Information exist to be used;*
- *To each consumer - the necessary information;*
- *Each information-with its consumer;*
- *Saves the information consumer's time;*
- *The universe of information is constantly developing.*

The implications arising from these laws had particularly profound consequences in library science thinking and in the way of organizing work in United States libraries. The proliferation of computers at home, databases that offer complete texts and various information, accessible from the desk, fax transmission, reference services by phone, the Internet, tend to reduce the need to visit libraries today.

If the future would decide the disappearance of libraries as they are known today, with shelves and files, this does not mean that the organization of information and the librarian will evaporate along with them. On the contrary, if the universe of information is constantly changing, the mentality, the way to create, organize and offer reference services must also keep up. In Bill Katz's view, presented in the work "Introduction to reference work (Katz 1981, pp. 20), it is necessary for the reference librarian to develop certain behavioural characteristics, among which we select a few that seem essential to us:

- solicitude, benevolent attitude, receptivity;
- the permanent desire to detect the real need for knowledge;
- cultivating the ability and tactfully approaching relationships with difficult people;
- responsiveness to users in difficulty;
- knowledge of all library collections, alternative resources and appropriate connections ;
- knowledge of university problems and relations with other libraries;
- knowledge of the specialized area and the use of reference materials;
- inclination towards thoroughness;

- clarity of thinking;
- memorizing details;
- the ability to quickly obtain the necessary information, imagination and intuition of related areas.

Kathleen Kern showed in the paper *Communication, patron satisfaction, and the reference interview. Reference & User Services Quarterly* the fact that, "the way in which the interaction occurs between the user and the librarian (online or face to face) is of secondary importance, what matters first is an equation which takes into account the library and the communication with users with their expectations " (Kern 2003, pp. 47).

If in the past, info-documentary structures focused their attention on books, document collections, all activities (purchase, processing, preservation), with the main goal of preserving the knowledge heritage of humanity, today, users must be at the centre of the concerns of all information structures. Guinchat and Menou show in the work *Introduction generale aux sciences et techniques de l'information et la documentation* that: " the user can participate in most of the operations carried out within the documentary chain: signalling and evaluating information sources, selecting purchases, facilitating access to non-conventional literature , the creation of work tools, the use of products and services, the production of information and documents, the circulation of information" (Guinchat *et al.* 1990, pp. 486).

Today, the reference librarian within these culturally complex bodies must contribute substantially to the development of the library's collections, both digitally and on paper. It is also imperative that the reference librarian understands the users' requirements , both in terms of the quality of the types of materials, as well as their volume. Specialist librarians must serve as instructors to teach readers how to use the various types of equipment. Fortunately, users belong to multiple categories: young or old, students or scientists, interested in what they do or willing to move on to another more interesting work. Many do not know how to word the need for information and either ask very general questions or they do not know how to precisely formulate the topic they are looking for, digressing. The staff must be expert in directing the discussions to obtain references, so that the user receives what is needed. It should not be forgotten that a satisfied user can be the source of great professional satisfaction for the librarian in question.

Eric Sutter demonstrates in the work *Services d'information et qualite: comment satisfie les utilisateurs* (Sutter 1992, pp. 11) that at the level of an info-documentary structure, design of products and control procedures, the quality of the service that accompanies the product, the quality of relations with users, the effectiveness of an information service, depends a lot the quality of the dialogue between users and specialists in the field of information, the skills of the latter and the attitudes shown by both sides. The library knew how to make itself indispensable to the public, both through its educational and cultural function, and as an inexhaustible source of useful information. In turn, the public loved the library and proved its attachment by using the library's services to the full and voting year after year in favour of library fees. Access to current, accurate and complete information, offered equally, regardless of social class, age, gender, religion or ethnicity, is the basis of a democratic society and is part of the human rights.

In the American librarianship system, any university or academic library offers information and reference services. On average, an academic library offers 77 reference hours per week, operating about 80% of the number of hours the entire library is open to the public. At the

University of California, Davis (<https://www.ucdavis.edu/>), reference services are open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day and from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday. On Saturdays and Sundays the reference office operates between 10-12 and after a lunch break between 13-17. On average, out of a 40-hours of work per week, an American librarian works at the reference desk for a third of the time, namely, about 13 hours. At the University of California (<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/>), each librarian works with the public two hours daily and in addition, four hours every two weeks during the weekend. In the other two-thirds of the time, the librarian has various responsibilities that may include: computer searching, bibliographic instruction, selection of books and magazines, administrative work, documentation and scientific research. Of all the library sectors, reference services frequently have the largest number of staff. This service employs an average of eight professional librarians. The budget of these collections also varies. On average, these libraries have an annual purchase budget for reference monographs that exceeds 20,000 dollars per year, and if the budget for reference periodicals (yearbooks, indexes, statistical compendiums) is added, the average amount rises to above 60,000 dollars annual.

To designate users of information systems, specialists in the field use the following notions: beneficiaries, readers, consumers of information. Rodica Mandea showed in the paper work Finding specialized information. Concepts and practices the fact that: "the term most often used is that of information consumer, while user denotes the consumer of modern services and supports, and the reader - the consumer of traditional services and supports" (Mandea 2004, pp. 71).

## Conclusions

The reference service underwent radical changes during the 20th century. Currently, there is a strong process of expanding the reference services through some modern means of work: accessing scientific databases, online library catalogues, electronic mail, etc. In many US libraries, reference desks have been replaced by alternative models, such as the triage system or service, which consists in prompt reference services rendered by professionals at the reference desk, with in-depth research following to be carried out by reference librarians.

Another way to modernize the reference service is to establish several levels of staff. Administrative staff or students can answer more simple requests so that reference librarians can focus on more specific issues. If the staff at the information office cannot provide an adequate answer, they redirect the user to the librarian located, as a rule, in another office of the relevant institution. This method became known as the "Brandeis" reference service model after Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts adopted it in 1990. However, in the vast majority of public or academic libraries, the "face to face" method is still predominant for providing reference services.

Technical developments in recent years have changed not only the volume of information, but also the procedures for its dissemination and acquisition. Consequently, the Internet has fundamentally transformed scientific communication, posing a particular challenge to libraries. It should also be noted that a rapid increase in the volume of information that is available online, as well as, with it, volume of necessary technical services did not manage to lead, as desired, to a simplification in their access. It is, therefore, necessary to continuously improve and train both librarians and researchers, dedicated users in order to search for the information they deem necessary.

The procurement, provision of access and presentation in electronic format of modern library services must be, at least, equal to all the traditional offers of university libraries. The continuous increase in the offer of products in electronic format in the coming years will have

significant consequences on the relationship between the library and users. At the same time, regarding reference collections or a library in general, we can say that no library can hold the entire recorded knowledge of a society. Space is limited, as is the staff. The only way libraries can respond to users' information requests to a greater extent is to pool their resources. This possibility would limit the duplication of collections and the unnecessary use of space.

Internet resources are present at some point, then they disappear. But, libraries have the responsibility of preserving information over time. The Internet has become a recurring theme, present in the media, with repercussions on libraries as well. They will have to define their position in relation to the network and the documents circulating on it, because these institutions have an important role in the capitalization of Internet resources. The long-term projects of libraries should take into account, in addition to the need for joint development with the Internet, and the clear evolution towards digital documentation. Digital documents represent the new documentary supports that libraries, through reference services, must process and make available to the user. The periodic evaluation of the reference service is extremely important, this evaluation being carried out by means of questionnaires that must be filled-in within a given time or through hidden questionnaires, to which the subject answers without knowing that he is being questioned. The evaluation can also be done by directly observing the activity from the reference desk, through statistics that represent a unitary assessment criterion.

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# The library business

## The Commodification of a Public Service

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### **Abstract:**

*In this article I investigate the way free market ideology permeated the public space of the library. Employing concepts borrowed from critical theory (such as the central concept of commodification) and from the field of critical information literacy, I attempt to outline the manner in which the free market has impacted the public library, from the privatization of management and outsourcing, to more subtle forms of commodification such as the push for information, entertainment and consumerism, to the detriment of knowledge, education and citizenship. I conclude the article by summarizing some propositions from professionals in the field which are meant to decelerate the advance of the free market on the domain of the public library and to reclaim it for the community.*

**Keywords:** *public libraries, free market, commodification, information science, capitalism*

## **Introduction**

Against all academic norms, the present paper begins with details of anecdotal and personal nature. Before being employed in the public library system and then in academia, I had the privilege of working in one of the largest commercial bookstores in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, namely the University Bookstore. Of all the peculiarities that come bundled with the job description of a bookseller – from the immense daily workload (at odds with the common misconception that it is a ‘cool job’), to the recurrent habit of book stealing –, one is particularly relevant to the matters I am about to tackle. It sometimes happened that a person, usually of younger age, approached the counter with his ID in hand, wanting ‘to register with the bookstore’. As the bookstore that hired me did not issue subscriptions of any kind, it was clear these clients were in error with regard to the services that we were offering (in fact, as we are about to see, these persons did not even enter the bookstore in their capacity as clients). To us employees, the confusion was easy to solve. The eager ‘subscribers’ were most probably first year university students who just wanted to register with the university library (possibly at the behest of their college advisor). And, as the bookstore where I worked was named “The University Bookstore” and had tons of books on its shelves, it seemed appropriate to these individuals that here was where they were supposed “to register”.

When I started working in the public library system, I noticed with some astonishment that among the numerous peculiarities of librarianship there also is the reverse of the situation I was confronted with while working as a bookseller. It sometimes happened that some patrons asked whether we sell one or other of the titles in our collections, usually those which are not on loan. Other patrons naively ask wherefrom can they ‘rent’ the books that they inquire about. As far as I can tell from other professionals in the country, the same happens in other libraries, as well. Even

more surprising to me is the fact that library professionals very often identify the persons who enter the library as clients, instead of patrons.

At a superficial glance, the matter seems rather trivial. Some absent-minded first year students have mistaken the bookstore with the library, while some patrons that barely use the library have found themselves asking whether they can buy and rent goods that are public. However, if we are amenable to having a more thorough look at the issue, the whole thing reveals troublesome truths regarding the social and moral state of our society. I cannot verify the fact, but the reasonable guess with respect to the students wanting to ‘register with the bookstore’ is that they most probably came from small towns and villages in Romania, where in the past thirty-five years half of the existent libraries have been closed to the public. The National Statistics Institute of Romania lists 16.665 functioning libraries for the year 1990; in 2023, only 8263 were still open (see TEMPO Online, no date). Bookstores are also quasi-inexistent in the very same communities. Thereby, for many of the inhabitants of these localities, the bookstore and the library equally populate the urban geography that they project in their minds when they imagine life in the big city. The confusion is easy to understand, if this is the case.

As for the acquisitive library patrons, there is no need for statistical data to realize that they are perfectly attuned to the spirit of the age, namely to the general consumerist behaviour encouraged by the media and the large corporations, but also by the state, qua actively engaged agent in stimulating economic growth and commodity consumption. Coupled with the fact – unveiled by the same statistics – that the number of library patrons has dropped by half in the past 35 years, we can grasp how alienated are all these individuals we are talking about from the sphere of public service. The fact that some professionals in the field of librarianship do not cringe at the thought of replacing the form of address from ‘patron’ to ‘client’, is yet another testament to the dislocation we all experience in the so-called late capitalism (Jameson, 2007).

In this interpretation, the ‘absent-minded first year students’ might very well be the most dutiful of freshmen, diligently following the advice of their advisor, being the first of their peers to go on the hunt for the library, possibly aware of the fact that they lag behind their colleagues from the city (who probably do not suffer from the same disorientation). The fact that they end up in a commercial store while attempting this, and even worse, the fact that they do not immediately differentiate the commercial space of the bookstore from the public space of the library calls for a serious discussion.

Similarly, the acquisitive library patron is none other than the long awaited new man of capitalist society, fully accustomed to the free market, an individual who does not conceive that some goods cannot be exchanged for money. Even when library patrons clearly understand the distinction between public and private goods, they often struggle to find the right words when interacting with the library staff, frequently referring to borrowing books as “renting”. The fact that language has been almost completely altered to only accommodate market friendly terminology is again telling of the extent to which market relations have managed to supplant all other social relations. Nevertheless, from the dominant perspective, there is nothing wrong with this new man who assumes the role of client in most of his interactions with the world. But the fact that he does not manage (as the above mentioned students) to differentiate between commercial space and public space begs the same serious discussion, which is certainly not limited to what is the proper terminology one should employ when interacting with public services?

As we shall see, the advance of the market on the realm of public goods and services is very much underway, and public libraries have not been spared. That the established terminology is questioned in favour of a different, more market-friendly one, is just a superficial matter, yet one that signals deeper transformations in the functioning of the public library. But before examining

these in more detail, it is necessary that we understand the more ample processes underlying all these transformations.

## 1. The Market and its Characteristics in Capitalism

For many, the mere fact that one must discuss about the market might seem superfluous. Free-market economics tries to convince us ever since the 18th century that the market and the propensity of man to exchange goods and services are as old as the world, therefore as natural as any of the basic needs of humanity. This being the generally accepted narrative, what other explanation do we need besides the naturalness of the market?

The problem with such free-market arguments is that they were formulated some 300 years ago, while the observable reality that free-market thinkers of that age had access to (and on the basis of which they drew their conclusions) was not that of the world in its geographical entirety and historical span, but that of the western societies in their immediate reach. Subsequent historical knowledge and the contact with other types of social organization that the geographical explorations of the following centuries occasioned (this time not limited only to plunder and the exploitation of the peoples that inhabited these regions, but to anthropological research as well) revealed the marginal nature of market societies on the global and historical scale. Karl Polanyi is as trenchant as one can be on this matter:

“[...] previously to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets. In spite of the chorus of academic incantations so persistent in the nineteenth century, gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy. Though the institution of the market was fairly common since the later Stone Age, its role was no more than incidental to economic life”. (Polanyi, 2001, p. 45)

Market society is therefore a creation of capitalist modernity, and this realization has grave implications in the way we perceive our world. First, it tells us that until not much long ago many of the things we pay money for today were not traded on the market. Evidently, the bulk of man's necessities were produced in the household economy (from food, to clothing), only rare or luxury goods being bought from the market (and only providing that household surpluses were generated in enough quantities in order to be traded for the mentioned goods). The transition to a market society meant that most of these necessities became commodities, a process that went on to bear the name of *commodification*.

Second, the same process of commodification triggered by the onset of capitalism, also attracted in its orbit goods that previously were not the object of the market. Karl Polanyi, in his extremely influential work, *The Great Transformation*, concentrates on three such “fictitious commodities”: *human beings* – commodified through the sale of their labour power; *nature* – turned into commodities through the sale on the market of land and natural resources; and *money* – which became a commodity like any other through the mechanisms of *financialization*. Although these might seem incongruous with the present discussion, the conceptual framework developed by Polanyi can be enlarged to accommodate matters closer to the public library, such as education and information, which have been affected lately by market relations, as we shall see.

Still, one question lingers in the background: why should we be wary with regard to commodification, when the last few centuries – elapsed under the aegis of the market – are also those that marked most profoundly the progress of humanity? Karl Polanyi is again trenchant on the matter:

“To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society”. (Polanyi, 2001, p. 76)

In a different part of his study, Polanyi is also unforgiving with the highly touted improvements that capitalism brought forth: “Improvements, we said, are, as a rule, bought at the price of social dislocation” (Polanyi, 2001, p. 79). In fact, his book entirely documents the first 150 years of capitalism, detailing the dissolution of society that *the great transformation* left in its wake. If this devastation was not complete, it was because each time the disastrous shift towards the market generated a counter-movement within society which slowed commodification, and which presented itself in different forms, from social protection and the welfare state, to economic protectionism, or more disturbingly to fascism and soviet style socialism.

Similarly, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) trace the history of capitalism noticing the same periodical renegotiations with the free market asserted by the various critiques formulated against it by the larger society. These critiques often result in the renewal of “the spirit of capitalism”, forced to meet its own social and cultural exigencies. With each incarnation, capitalism proves to be incapable to satisfy these exigencies, therefore being in a permanent state of instability. According to Polanyi, the stability of the market system is inherently unattainable because, as he puts it, the free market is nothing more than a “utopia”.

At a different, more profound level, where value forms in the market society, commodification is nothing but the appropriation of the social substance of human beings – their effort, creativity, labour invested in the production of commodities – by the market. Beyond such formulations, which might be considered as ‘mystical’ by some, lies an incontestable truth: stripped off its raw materials and the wear and tear of the machinery employed in its production, any commodity is nothing but the human labour invested in it. Moreover, in market societies, in contrast to previous societies, when the product of man’s labour almost always had an immediate and direct use value for its producer, commodities are exchanged for money. And, as Anselm Jappe (2014, p. 56) points out, in capitalism “human beings have delegated their collective power to one metal, attempting afterwards to re-appropriate that lost social substance” through the acquisition of commodities. This process is very alienating for society as a whole, the social relations between people appearing as relations between things (the impersonal exchange of commodities), while things – the very same commodities – appear as “beings endowed with willpower” (Jappe, 2014, p. 36).

Capitalism has undeniably driven unprecedented technological advancements and created levels of wealth previously unimaginable, even in its relatively short history – facts acknowledged even by its harshest critics. However, it is equally true that humanity now stands on the brink of an existential crisis, facing the collapse of ecological systems, widening structural economic inequalities, global pandemics, the spectre of political authoritarianism, and the threat of war – all of which can be directly traced to the current dynamics of capitalism (Fraser, 2022). At no point in history Polanyi’s undiluted conclusions, formulated some 70 years ago, were more prophetic than today.

## **2. The Market and its Characteristics in Capitalism**

To the unsuspecting eye, the public library might seem defended against the most harmful aspects of capitalism. Everywhere in the world libraries are (still) part of the public sector of sovereign states and with negligible exceptions they rarely engage in selling commodities (for example, in their own coffee shops or through the sale of memorabilia, etc.). Given this fact, can we truly speak of the commodification of libraries?

There is, no doubt, a climate of opinion that pushes things in this direction. The most flagrant example in this sense, which is frequently quoted in most critical studies on the matter, is that of Steve Coffman. A librarian Himself, Coffman advocated in 1998, in an article in *American Libraries*, that libraries should be organized and run in the manner typical of the great commercial bookstores (D'Angelo, 2006, p. 2; Fister, 2018). More recently, in 2018, Panos Mourdoukoutas, an economics professor at LIU New York, advocated in an opinion piece in *Forbes* that public libraries be replaced by *Amazon*, while other services of the public library could easily be replaced by *Starbucks*, where clients can connect to the internet and socialize in front of a warm beverage; *Netflix* could easily take over DVD borrowing (Grigsby, 2018; Lyons, 2018). Both of these stances were met with justified negative reactions from librarians and the greater public, Mourdoukoutas' article in *Forbes* being shortly afterwards removed from the magazine. But in the background, the commodification of public services carried on unabated. I have identified four avenues of commodification, and in the following sections I will explore them in more detail.

## 2.1. Privatization/private administration of the public library

The most obvious pathway to the commodification the public library is that of the privatization of the management. There are already private companies that offer their services to public libraries. In essence, these firms profit from the pressure exerted on public administrations to cut costs and reduce their budgets, and manage this way to obtain contracts for the private administration of public libraries, with the promise of more efficient library services (Anstice, 2012b, 2012a, 2017). Library Systems and Services, Inc (LSSI) is one such company. In the United States, this company prides itself with the largest market share in the business of private management of public libraries (Maybe not incidentally, the above mentioned Steve Coffman is the Vice President for Product Development of the company, according to his listing on the ALA's website, <https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/steve-coffman>). The way that such companies manage to 'improve efficiency' and deliver lower costs in the functioning of public libraries comes down mainly to cutting employee wages, staff reduction, turning full time jobs into part-time jobs or offering poorer healthcare coverage. After restructuring, as Meg Klinkow Hartman (2011) points out, "the administrator is often the only professional in the library", the staff that still operates is very often non-specialized, their lower salaries being thus justified. Moreover, the management contracts are "almost always written by the vendor" and do not specify precisely how library services are going to be improved. "The language used in the contracts reduces the public library to a commodity and patrons to customers", Klinkow Hartman adds, while oversight of the business is delegated to an administrator under the contract to the private company.

Library management outsourcing is probably the most radical form of the commodification of public space (surpassed only by the complete privatization of the public library system, of course). On the global scale this is fortunately only a fringe phenomenon. But the push towards the market along the same line of outsourcing can be witnessed all over the world. Many libraries, reluctant to accept the outsourcing of management, were not quite as reticent to alienate some of the

services that they administered themselves until recently in the hands of the market. Examples go from matters not necessarily specific to libraries, such as cleaning, bookbinding or IT maintenance, to aspects more central to the functioning of libraries, such as acquisitions, cataloguing, or reference desks. Whatever the case, outsourcing library services has the same effects one notices in the privatization of management, namely wage cuts, precarious employment and scant and unjust supervision (D'Angelo, 2006, pp. 114–116).

The threat posed by the market to the public library system can also manifest in other ways, such as through the traditional mechanism of competition. It is not difficult to imagine that, just as large sectors of the public domain—such as healthcare and education—are being challenged by private alternatives, public libraries could face a similar fate. In Romania things seem to be well advanced on this matter. Since 2013, a “public library under private law” “rents” books to the employees of some of the largest private companies in the country, based on subscription fees paid by their employers (see at length Vătavu, 2023). Under the name *Bookster*, the said company boasts at the time this article was elaborated with impressive numbers that reflect its activity: 1.355 contracts with private companies, more than 190.000 individual readers, 7 million book loans and more than 130.000 available titles (the numbers are listed on the company's website, <https://www.bookster.ro/landing/>). According to an interview given in 2016 by Bogdan Georgescu, the company's founder, the model for such a business was not any of the big public libraries of the present, but *Netflix* (Voiculescu, 2016). In practice, *Bookster* arranges deals with other private companies in the country, that pay the subscriptions for their employees as employment benefits, the books being delivered to the subscribers at their workplaces. Book acquisitions are not made on such criteria as cultural relevance or the diversity of opinions, but rather on the basis of the reading lists of Harvard (one of the largest private universities in the world) or various MBAs, but also on “the recommendations of celebrities, such as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet.” (Voicu, 2019).

*Bookster* is indeed a “public library under private law”, being licensed by the Ministry of Culture and approved by the National Commission of Libraries. This way, the company is legally covered in its loan activities, making it possible for the company to advertise itself as “the first modern public library in Romania” (as stated on its website as recently as May 2021). Moreover, the company frequently advertises itself as an “experience” or an organization that promotes reading (for instance in Voicu, 2019), rather than a shrewd and successful business. These actions and statements fail to obscure the fact that under the pretence of a public service, the company engages in profit-making commercial activities. This became especially evident during a legal battle between the company and ten major Romanian publishing houses, which took place between 2020 and 2024 (Hopulele, Stoleru and Matzal, 2024). Essentially a lawsuit against *Bookster* for encroaching on the publishing industry's profits, this case serves to highlight the company's true primary interest, i.e. profit.

In any case, why should we think of *Bookster* (or any other similar company for that matter) as a threat against the public library? There are, after all, private healthcare clinics, or private schools, that function alongside those of the state, so why can't there be private book rental services? If we broaden the perspective, I believe that there can be only one satisfying answer to this question: profit-oriented schools and healthcare infrastructures, and in our case profit-oriented libraries, should never be allowed to exist. Some goods (education, healthcare, etc.) should simply not be turned into commodities and be haggled over on the market. This is the main argument of the present paper and it points to how menacing commodification can be, not only against public

libraries, but against society as a whole.

But regardless of the larger debate over which goods should be handed over to the free market, book rental businesses can easily become a genuine threat against the public library, especially in countries like Romania. In such countries, frequently exposed to market experiments and structural adjustments by such international organisms as the World Bank or the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the spectre of privatization constantly looms over public services. Poor and with strained budgets, these countries are practically forced to become indebted, these debts being ultimately paid from the public purse, through budgetary cuts in all areas. Underfunded, with precarious personnel, unmotivated and insufficient for the needs of the proper functioning of its services, the public system gains the bad reputation of inefficiency. In the empty space left behind by the feeble administration of public services, private companies (very often foreign) manage to install themselves and compete with the state. But things rarely stop here. Benefiting from considerable resources, the support of international organizations and the popular discontent with regard to the functioning of public services, these companies often times manage to influence the political agenda towards the privatization of public goods (Hickel, 2019, pp. 158–164).

Businesses like *Bookster* are in the most favourable position in this regard. As we have already seen, the public library system in Romania has already lost almost half of the libraries which were functioning in the country in 1990, and it never was listed among the budgetary priorities of the state all this time. The number of patrons has decreased by half as well, while the rate of functional illiteracy has surpassed 40% among 15 years old students, as shown by PISA, in their assessments (Vasile *et al.*, 2020). *Bookster*, on the other hand, has a significant yearly growth of subscriptions and prides itself with a yearly average of 12 reads per subscriber, contrasting the national average which is just at two books per person. It is not hard to imagine the situation being as it is, and the state of affairs more and more in favour of privatization, *Bookster* or any other similar business could be seen as the solution – even a partial one – to the ‘inefficient’ public library system.

Like any other privatization of the public good, the privatization of the national library system would also mean the layoff of an important number of employees, their workloads on the shoulders of an insufficient personnel, it would bring along dwindling numbers of professionals in the trade (because employees with a diploma must be better paid) coupled with the destruction of trade unions (always a hindrance in the way of profit extraction). The general public, already strongly antagonized against public service workers, might not be so impressed by the matters detailed here, and might rather inquire about the impact of privatization on the quality of service. In this respect, there is a wide consensus that contrasts the negative experience of the public with public services, with the more positive experience of the same public with services in the private sector. Evidently, the general perception is clearly skewed due to the prolonged neglect of public services by the authorities over the past few decades. That aside, it is easy to envision how such services would evolve within a private enterprise.

First off, a profit-oriented and market efficient business will ultimately be interested in the balance of expenditure and the profits generated for the shareholders, and not in the services it brought to the community. Public systems, generally based on needs, are therefore more suited in this matter, because they serve their citizens even at unprofitable costs. For instance, a book rental business could deem such titles as James Joyce’s *Ulyses* or Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* as unprofitable, although they are of inestimable importance in the universal culture, despite their slow circulation among library patrons. Additionally, a commercial chain of libraries

that seizes public goods through privatization could consider the activity of an existent library branch or that of a rural library does not generate enough profit, and consequently shut them for the public, depriving entire communities of library access. To turn in profits, such businesses would not be bothered by the increase in price of the services they provide (especially in monopoly conditions, as is frequently the case when public goods are privatized), placing supplementary barriers to free library access. Moreover, businesses such as *Bookster*, which are delivery-oriented, push further the ongoing erosion of public space. With no real public infrastructure (reading rooms, meeting spaces for debate, etc.), such businesses can never be truly communitarian, despite their claims, because they do not provide a space for rational deliberation, as public libraries do (D'Angelo, 2006). Capitalist efficiency has nothing to do with proper public service, because the purpose of the latter is to serve the public, and not the maximization of profits. Public services should therefore function beyond the laws of the market, and they should be freely available to the community, with no metrics of profitability being involved.

## 2.2. Information to the detriment of knowledge

The partial or total privatization of public service is the most evident form of commodification that threatens the public library. But commodification can also occur in subtle forms, even where the logic of the market has not penetrated the administration or the day to day functioning of the library. One of the manners in which the public library ends up being instrumental to advancing the commodity society (in Anselm Jappe's terminology) is that of adopting *information* to the detriment of *knowledge*, as the preferred object of its activity.

Today, the area of expertise of librarians everywhere in the world is known as *information science*, a syntagma invariably added to the more traditional name of the discipline: *librarianship*. Taking this into account, to say today that one of the manners in which the public library has exposed herself to the destructive effects of the market is by veering in the direction of information, could be seen as no less than a full-frontal attack at the core of the profession. But, as Maura Seale (2013) demonstrates, information literacy and the label *information science* are recent innovations in the trade, beginning in the 1980s, and they mark the neo-liberal turn to which libraries all over the world had to adapt. This label is therefore not innocent. Seale studied the *American Library Association's* (ALA) annual reports, and she shows how the reconfiguration of the public library in the last decades was made inside the confines laid out by the free-market ideology. In these reports:

“The freedom and well-being of individuals and societies is thus repeatedly framed using the vocabulary of economics and business and is thus reduced to a «freedom of the market», in which individual workers must compete by becoming more and more flexible”. (Seale, 2013, p. 48)

From a different point of view, the adoption of the label of information specialists by the entire librarian profession can only seem ridiculous today. Central intelligence agencies, as well as IT industry giants can more easily and rightfully make such claims, than any national (or international) library system. On the part of sovereign states, if one studies the budgets allocated to intelligence agencies and compare them to those given to public libraries, we can easily figure out which of the two public services are seriously treated as information specialists by the governments they are subordinated to. As for the IT sector, any performance in *information retrieval* – a claim often associated with librarianship – pales in comparison with those obtained by *Google, Facebook,*

*Amazon*, or, more recently *OpenAI*. This is something that even professionals in the field of information science begin to admit (Rubin, 2017, p. 213).

Such a situation should not discourage, nor disqualify libraries as a useful service to society. The argument here is that libraries should not even engage in the retrieval and delivery of information, but should rather concentrate on the production, conservation and imparting of *knowledge*.

There are fundamental differences between *information* and *knowledge*. Information, treated strictly in its conceptual dimension, is ideologically neutral and impartial – therefore neither in the service of the general good, nor in the service of evil. Information can be employed in the generation of profits (as social media giants do), to manipulate the masses or to oppress and surveil the citizens (as intelligence agencies do, and, more recently, the aforementioned social media companies). Indeed, as Nathaniel Enright (2013) and David Ellenwood (2020) point out, information is closely linked with the development of neoliberalism, being considered central to commodity exchange even in the founding texts of the economic system that ended up defining the last part of the 20th century, and the decades of the new millennium that have already passed. For Ellenwood, the economy based on information ends up defining the current sociol-political system in its entirety, under the moniker *information capitalism*. A commodity like any other in the market economy, information is therefore produced with the purpose of making profits. The desires and the beliefs of the consumers are transformed and altered through the consumption of information, not with the edification and the improvement of the individual in mind, but with the aim of maximizing profits (D’Angelo, 2006, p. 49). Ed D’Angelo points to the fact that “information is not the same as meaning”, but a vehicle for meaning, that is something that “allows us to encode meaning”. He draws a parallel between the way that capitalist economy (in its most extreme manifestations) reduces the use value of goods to their exchange value, and the way in which the post-modern economy of information similarly reduces meaning and knowledge to mere information. Its potential to educate and edify is of course present, but in the post-modern information economy, information is much more often consumed only with the purpose of producing pleasure to consumers, in the form of entertainment (D’Angelo, 2006, pp. 82–82).

*Knowledge*, on the other hand, D’Angelo further argues, although it definitely can produce pleasure to those who pursue it, manages to do this through edification and education, with lasting effects and without pandering the public, the way that information delivered as commodity does, in a frivolous manner (D’Angelo, 2006, pp. 27–34). Therefore, as opposed to the neutral and dull ‘information’, knowledge implies learning, engagement with and pondering of information on the part of the subject. I consider that libraries should commit to engaging with knowledge, rather than claiming, unrealistically, the impartiality with which they deliver information to their patrons.

Knowledge also has its pitfalls, of course. Because it involves engaging with information, knowledge can be elaborated so as to serve the various competing interests extant in society. Maura Seale (2013, p. 42) draws attention to this fact, arguing that “the production of knowledge never occurs outside power relations – whether capital, colonial relations, or social hierarchies such as race, class, gender, and sexuality – and knowledge contributes to the maintenance of these hierarchies”. But the fact that we should be aware of the contexts in which knowledge is produced and of the ways in which it is employed in society, operates as a safety net for the pitfalls that surround knowledge. This awareness should only make us more vigilant and more thorough as professionals, with regard to the public mission and the social commitments of the library. Adopting core values that prioritize the common good over the impersonal interests of the market is, therefore, a fundamental issue in librarianship. As long as these values are fully internalized and

remain non-negotiable, there is no reason to fear the consequences of the knowledge that public libraries seek to generate, preserve, and share.

### 2.3. Entertainment to the detriment of education

Related to the discussion about the nature of information, overlapping with it here and there, is the one regarding *entertainment* and *education*. If knowledge and information at least seem to be part of the same picture, in the case of entertainment and education it is easy to draw the conclusion that they are unrelated. However, Ed D'Angelo clearly demonstrates their descent from information:

“Education is the consumption of information for the purpose of improving our understanding and, insofar as desire depends upon understanding, of improving our moral and aesthetic choices. Thus education is edifying as well as illuminating. Entertainment on the other hand is the consumption of information for the purpose of pleasure only. It is neither educational nor edifying. Education and edification do not necessarily exclude pleasure. Pleasure is necessarily a part of education insofar as education makes higher levels of pleasure and the pleasurable consumption of information possible. We consume education and we are pleased by it. But it is possible to consume information without being educated or edified.” (D'Angelo, 2006, p. 27)

Public libraries have always been places of education par excellence, and lately – when the focus has moved away from books and towards leisure and programs for the community – its educational dimension seems to have been gaining more weight. But we have to ask ourselves one thing: can we honestly qualify as education (in the terms of the definition above) most of the leisure activities unrolling in public libraries? Or do they look more and more like entertainment?

There is no doubt that a consistent part of the programs designed by libraries everywhere can truly be qualified as education, in D'Angelo's understanding of the term. But in some aspects, the contours of these activities are polluted by the entertainment industry. Handy examples can be found, for instance, in the *disneyfication* of children's programs, *disneyfication* proper in this case, but also in the wider meaning of this sociological concept (Matusitz and Palermo, 2014). Librarians frequently resort in their programs (out of ease or ignorance) to Disney characters (or characters from different, equally commercial universes) which are painstakingly created and adjusted in the creative laboratories of the said company with the maximization of profits in mind, and not to humour its customers or to promote standards of morality or patterns of good behaviour. The universe created by such companies is not meant to stimulate the imagination of children but, through aggressive advertising and the promotion of hybrid consumption (i.e. blending various forms of commodity consumption, from theme parks, to toys, action figures and other consumables), this universe manages in fact to supplant the imagination of younger minds, depriving them of one of the most important elements of education, and contributing to the cultural levelling unfolding now all around the world.

One can also qualify as entertainment the book acquisition policies which are based on the various bestsellers lists, or the growing influx of self-help titles. Ed D'Angelo classifies all these under *market populism*, a current of opinion which states that through spending money on the market, individuals actually participate in an even more democratic plebiscite than political elections. In actuality, this plebiscite is based on the purchasing power of the individual, favoring the rich, and disqualifying the poor, being in fact the antithesis of democracy. The discussion here is

more extensive, but what D'Angelo evidences is that by accepting the selection undemocratically made on the market, without the expertise and the competence of librarians, the public library abdicates from its historical role as *gatekeeper* of high culture. Moreover if, as we have already seen, information in capitalism is nothing but a commodity as any other, produced with the purpose of generating profits, then the desires and beliefs of the consumers will necessarily be transformed by the contact with information (bestseller lists, self-help books, etc.), not with the aim of edification and education, but with that of maximizing profits.

But as was the case with knowledge, we should not deplore the ground lost to the entertainment industry, as it often happens when the numbers of library patrons, in constant decrease over the last decades, are compared to those of shopping mall clients. The competition with malls, genuine temples of commodity consumption, – just like the one with IT giants – is not only a losing game to libraries everywhere (which cannot compare their resources with these industries), but also a useless competition. Because the purpose of the library is not to offer frivolous distractions and facile occupation of leisure time, but to educate and edify the general public. Things that one hardly finds on shopping mall shelves.

#### 2.4. The citizen replaced by the consumer

Just like knowledge, the production of education does not take place outside power relations, therefore education has its pitfalls as well. Maura Seale (2013, pp. 49–58), in her study of the reports produced by ALA, demonstrates how the education promoted by American libraries was refashioned in the past decades as an instrument to bring up entrepreneurs and consumers, that is individuals perfectly adjusted to the market. We must therefore return to the issue that sparked this discussion, namely how we define and classify the public that steps through the library's doors? Is it patrons? Clients? Entrepreneurs?

'Patron', as a label, although more suited in our context than that of client, does not say too much about the interactions of the individual with the library, besides the fact that it signals the ordinary usage of its services. There surely is a purpose behind these frequent visits at the library, a purpose that cannot certainly be reduced to that basic relationship of the individual with the market. In order to find out which are the values that these institutions try to instil in their patrons, we can draw inspiration from the past, from the historical mission of public libraries, but we can also browse through the mission statements of various libraries and professional associations.

If we are to look back at the historical mission of the library, we will notice that the aim of the first truly public libraries, those of the 19th century, was to improve the condition of the poor and uneducated, with librarians identifying themselves as agents of social improvement (Rubin, 2017, pp. 58–62). Today, most library professionals agree that promoting democracy and civic engagement are part of the central values of the public library (Lankes, 2016, pp. 19–23; Rubin, 2017, pp. 92–101), while the most important professional associations list the same values in their guidelines and their mission statements (ALA, 2004; IFLA, 2008; ANBPR, 2010). Ed D'Angelo states from the first page of his book that one of the main functions of the public library is to advance and conserve the democratic values of society:

"[...] government policymakers have missed the most important function of a public library, which is to promote and sustain the knowledge and values necessary for a democratic civilization. Conversely, the condition of public libraries may be taken as a litmus test for the state of democratic civilization. Any threat to the core values of a democratic civilization will

be reflected in the state of its public libraries; and, any threat to public libraries will weaken democracy”. (D’Angelo, 2006, p. 1)

The forming of a vigorous citizen body should, therefore, be the final purpose of the knowledge and the education that the public library produces and preserves. In practice, as shown by Maura Seale, but also by the programs of libraries everywhere, very often what is encouraged is the entrepreneurial or consumer aspects. In part, this situation is caused by the already mentioned market populism, which equates commodity consumption with the democratic plebiscite, or from a different perspective, by the commonplace and erroneous association between capitalism and democracy. A different idea that contributes similarly to demoting the individual to the condition of mere actor on the market is that of *human capital*. Having its roots in the same neo-liberal milieus that are to blame for the introduction of other innovations mentioned here, this idea posits that one can invest in people just as you would invest in real capital (machines, buildings, technology, etc.).

But as Nathaniel Enright (2013) demonstrates, what this notion manages to do is to create the impression that the differences between the working class and that of the employers can easily be effaced if individuals invest in themselves, through education and specialization. In practice, most individuals, despite their efforts to gain a better education, depend their whole lives on their capacity to sell their labour, leading precarious lives regardless of the skills and abilities they have accumulated. Education, however liberating it claims to be, Enright argues, contributes as such to the reproduction of capital and the subordination of labour to capital, being employed rather to boost the economic productivity of the individual, than to edify or improve him.

As the idea of human capital gained credit, libraries went their way to contribute to expand this capital, for instance by enhancing access to work for the individuals in their communities through workshops that helped them to write their CVs or cover letters for job applications, through adult education lessons, or computer and internet classes, all with the aim of boosting these individuals’ employment chances. Evidently, considering the fact that most people’s existence in capitalism is conditioned by their employability, such initiatives cannot be held against public libraries. On the contrary, the more that libraries contribute to the easing of misery and precarity – and boosting employability is one such method to that end –, the closer they get to accomplishing their public mission.

On the other hand, I must add that without a critical perspective on work and labour relations under capitalism, efforts to enhance employability will only perpetuate the misery and precarity inherent in free-market societies. People need to have access to work, and the library must of course be involved in any such endeavour. But it is equally important that, as promoter of democracy, the library should also for instance add to the existent ‘curricula’ some classes on labour legislation, trade unionism, forming co-ops, etc. Also, because we should plead for universal knowledge and education at the public library (in the double meaning of the concept: *universal*, as in ‘for every one’; *universal*, that is, of universal character), these values should be championed in themselves, for the self-actualization of the individual, and not as tools that serve the present dynamic of capitalism. Moreover, as the privileged site of knowledge, the public library has the duty to employ the knowledge that it produces and facilitates to overtake the debilitating social relations of capitalism, harmful both for the individual and climate. Boosting employability should therefore be doubled by efforts of boosting civic engagement.

### 3. What is to be done?

In the face of the threats posed by this “satanic mill” (the name given by Karl Polanyi to the free market, borrowing William Blake’s expression), the question of Leninist origin “What is to be done?” gains urgency and must be posed unironically. In part, the answer to this question, vis-a-vis the public library, was sketched out in the previous sections. Resisting any efforts to privatize and outsource library services; a more thoughtful approach to information, along with its aggregation into knowledge; an emphasis on education, the sort of education that forces the public in the direction of critical reflection; encouraging civic engagement, they all contribute to strengthening the public library as a public, community space which fosters rational deliberation, as Ed D’Angelo suggested. But we can also think of more extensive strategies, or even policies with various degrees of applicability on a smaller or larger scale.

A central idea, advocated by all the professionals in the field who have studied the library’s relations with the free market is that of the necessity of a *political economy of information* (Trosow, 2014; Ellenwood, 2020). Just like traditional political economy – which tells us not only how goods are produced, but also who controls the production and distribution of the goods –, a *political economy of information* should make explicit the processes of information production, the way it is disseminated and the purpose of its dissemination. We need what progressive information science professionals call *critical information literacy*. In the words of the editors of an important collection of studies on the matter:

“Critical information literacy differs from standard definitions of information literacy (ex: the ability to find, use, and analyse information) in that it takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption.” (Gregory and Higgins, 2013, p. 4)

Once internalized, critical information literacy also entails the abandonment of an idea very dear to librarians everywhere, namely the idea of neutrality. Heralded throughout the history of the modern library, neutrality has no place in an institution conscious of the social, political and economic contexts that influence the production and dissemination of information. Furthermore, any organism that assumes a set of values and a public mission, just like the public library does for a couple hundred years now, cannot realistically assume a neutral position. And when it does that, the rewards are reaped by the elites and the large corporations. As Samuel E. Trosow (2014, p. 26) cautions. “A progressive librarianship demands the recognition of the idea that libraries for the people has been one of the principal anchors of an extended free public sphere which makes an independent democratic civil society possible, something which must be defended and extended. This is partisanship, not neutrality.”

Other proposals rather reactivate abandoned practices, than initiate new ones. Ed D’Angelo, for instance, deplors the deterioration of role of *gatekeeper* that libraries used to fill, alongside prestigious publishing houses. These were public instances with enough moral authority to decide what was culturally valuable, and what was not. Of course, such a position attracted the justified critique against the elitism of public libraries. But in the empty space, left behind by the retreat of these institutions from their duties as gatekeepers of high culture, the free market (along with market populism) managed to insert itself, the sole criterion for selection being this time the exchange value, and not the cultural value (D’Angelo, 2006, pp. 47–63, 117–119). As professionals, we can of course be circumspect about the universality of our moral judgements, when we select the cultural products in the general public’s name, and we can also renounce our privilege. But under capitalism, the alternative is to leave the entire process to carefully curated bestseller lists designed

to maximize profits, dubious advertising schemes, automated book acquisitions, or the reading preferences of elite figures like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett—much like Bookster does, as we have already seen.

The elitist excesses of the public library could nevertheless be tempered through democratization. In some places of the world there are already community councils which are consulted by the library with the purpose of improving the quality of its services. Engaging the community, the “members” – as R. David Lankes (2016, pp. 61–62) suggests we should call our patrons, thus answering the question that ignited this discussion – in taking decisions regarding the activity of the library could have a de-commodifying effect. To treat our patrons as members of a community organized around the library, Lankes argues further, is suggestive of co-ownership, of the co-managing of the public good, which gives birth to a set of social relations different from that of client-salesperson that the market encourages. Involving the community, through activating citizen councils with voting rights with regard to the policies enacted by the library, could therefore act as a brake on the commodification already unrolling in most places.

Above all, we must realize that the library is but one of the components of the public sphere threatened by the unrestrained advance of the free market. In areas that are of no direct concern to librarians, but which are detrimental to the proper functioning of society, in education and healthcare, for instance, the market has already visibly wreaked havoc. The fight for the public sphere therefore exceeds the walls of the public library. As promoter of democracy and civic engagement, the library has the duty to prevent the erosion of the public good(s). What we know so far from the history of capitalism is that when the self-regulated market ends up threatening the interests of society, a countermovement against the market invariably takes shape, as Karl Polanyi demonstrates. This countermovement can take the form of democratic demands for the expansion of fundamental rights and the eradication of inequalities. However, it can also manifest as fascism and authoritarianism in various forms. The public library must ensure that its mission actively contributes to shaping the first scenario while rejecting any pretence of neutrality. As history has shown all too often, so-called impartiality merely paves the way for the unchecked rise of the second scenario.

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