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### **Knowledge Society and Public Libraries**

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#### ***Characteristics of the Knowledge Society***

Words, as essential elements of all speeches and languages, describe the reality around us. In other words, they describe certain things, events, phenomena, persons, processes, etc. As a matter of course, as it is otherwise in life, not all words have the same (social) meaning, more precisely, all events and phenomena which they describe do not have the same meaning neither for an individual nor for society as a whole. There is no doubt that in terms of a particular meaning, some words stand out namely: civilization, culture, education, science, learning, knowledge ..., words which denote essential terms of reference and components of that which can briefly be called cultural and civilized life and the development of man and mankind throughout centuries. In this (con)text, we shall particularly examine knowledge.

Historically, it is correct to say that one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, knowledge always followed the development of man and mankind. Moreover this knowledge (in general, concept, meaning not only scientific knowledge, even if we define science as José Ortega y Gasset as "anything that is permanently under discussion") would be the main source and pillar in its several millennia long "journey". This can be seen as kind of measurement of the success and achievements of mankind. Consequently, the progress and growth of mankind were achieved through and accompanied by knowledge. In a way, to a great extent, man lived from and with knowledge. Nevertheless, no society until ours has ever been called "knowledge society". This term, which developed relatively shortly after the term "information society", which is still often (frequently) used, was introduced in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

However the expression, "knowledge society", already recognizable and more or less common in the time we live in, although more as a social project than a sign of the times, is not without foundation and substance. On the contrary. We are not entering here into a definition of knowledge, or into differences between knowledge and information, between knowing and being informed, in other words being acquainted with something. We are simply taking knowledge as a collection of verified data in its broadest meaning, about something (object, event, person ...).

And therefore where is the difference in relation to previous times, and why is today's society, especially that of tomorrow rightly called knowledge society? We are introducing here, in our opinion, several essential terms of reference, that is, components of knowledge society.

First of all, there is a huge quantity of newly created knowledge in all fields continuously expanding and exponentially growing. Statistics are known about the exponential growth of knowledge in relation to the quantity of today's knowledge to the entire past historical period, including all kinds of publications as one of the proofs of the whole process, therefore we shall not quote them here. It is similar with the total number of researchers in the world, as it is with the entire research capacity and potential. This simply cannot be compared with past times, or the more recent. Not only the number of literate people, but also that of educated and highly educated people has increased enormously in

the whole world which also means a huge increase in the number and types of schools. To this we need to add new possibilities of informing, communicating and teamwork (including distance or outreach), which were incomparable and unthinkable earlier.

Modern information and communication technology has connected the world on all levels (personal, professional, social, national, international, etc.) so closely, that the entire globe has become a net from which we can connect practically from any one point to another. The possibilities and the speed of communicating, the transfer of information and knowledge, the acquirement of new ideas and views, not to mention the experience of it are so incredible that Manuel Castells, a renowned American sociologist, rightly calls today's society a "network society".

All this creates thus far an unprecedented frame, environment, foundation, encouragement and conditions for the development of new knowledge and awareness, uninterrupted progress and development. This process is advancing with such speed and dimension, that all those who are not directly or indirectly involved will ultimately stay on the fringes. Although this process is most obvious and most developed in the fields of science and technology, as well as in economic progress, this is directly or indirectly connected with all other layers and parts of society (education, information, culture, entertainment, including sports ...) therefore in such an interconnected society, one cannot distinguish one from another. Therefore, if we can state that knowledge in the past was in a way "connected" with an individual, it is today the characteristic of the society as a whole, an interconnected society. In fact, an individual cannot exclude him/her self. To a certain extent, we are all "inside", the question is only how to use it properly.

Such a knowledge society, in which knowledge plays a crucial and decisive role, with its entire mechanisms and organization gives an impetus for new knowledge, ensuring the conditions of its inception and use, which further increases new knowledge, etc., etc. Society is therefore structured on knowledge, it is simply deeply penetrated so that the complete functioning of society, including the entire development and progress, rests on knowledge.

### ***Place and Role of Public Libraries***

Where is the recognizable place and what is then the specific role of public libraries in such a knowledge society today and especially tomorrow?

Firstly, it has to be stated that libraries as communication agencies have always been, besides their acquisition and preservation functions, in the service of transmission of communication, that is, ensuring access to information and recorded knowledge in the broadest possible way regardless of the media format. This is a fundamental social role of public libraries, which have been realized in the course of time (centuries and millennia) in various ways, depending on available technical and telecommunication possibilities as well as on the needs of the users. We could hardly imagine the current civilization and culture without libraries. In the course of centuries and longer, libraries have been not only reliable and recognized keepers of the written word and recorded knowledge, but have also been irreplaceable and active mediators in the transmission of knowledge and guarantors of access to all sources of knowledge. This has been the case at all times and periods in which knowledge played an important and significant role.

Public libraries have always had a special and significant place and role as a specialized type of library which, except examples from antiquity and the beginning of the modern era, appear early in the

nineteenth century with greater growth and development occurring in the twentieth century, especially in its second part when they become a criterion for the successful cultural development of a particular society and its symbolic sign often represented through the library building itself.

On the other hand, these libraries were long perceived as places for lending and reading books, especially fiction and journalism, for personal education and information and were not identified with scientific knowledge. This view of public libraries is changing and they represent much more and are more successful than they were in the past.

What is the role and mission of public libraries in today's knowledge society?

Firstly, we have to state that the knowledge society is not a society in which knowledge is reserved for the privileged and the chosen individuals or specific groups regardless of the individuals or groups we have in mind, but it is intended and must be open to all individuals regardless of age, education, occupation and religion, and to all social groups regardless of ethnic origin, size and class origin. Since knowledge itself is a common and public good and as such intended for all, it must be accessible to all under the same conditions. Hence, each society and each state on its territory must assure the mechanism and ways that each individual as well as groups have access to information, sources of information and knowledge. It is the obligation of each state to build the knowledge society as a complete and fundamental program of its long-term development and at the same time measures to achieve this goal should be provided for. This means everything that is related to the efficient functioning of public libraries as special and irreplaceable factors that assure access to knowledge and the sources of knowledge.

What this means is that each individual and social group in the place of their residence would have equitable access to knowledge and sources of knowledge. This would allow them to improve themselves, their communities and society as a whole. Nobody could be excluded for any reason from this basic social process. On the contrary, the community and the state itself must assure, not only in a declarative way, conditions for free access to information and knowledge. All individuals are and should be equal subjects in the development of a society. In order to realize this goal, the basic precondition is the assurance of access to knowledge suitable to one's age, levels of education, skills and abilities.

These requests and obligations derive from the documents of the World Information Summit held in November 2003 in Geneva followed by the second part of the Summit held in October 2005 in Tunis. The adopted Declaration states: Assuring the opportunity of access and contribution to information, ideas, and knowledge is the essential determinant of the information society or the knowledge society. Furthermore, participation and spread of the global knowledge in the service of development can only be achieved by eliminating obstacles and barriers to the equitable access to knowledge and information in the economic, social, political, medical, cultural, educational and scientific fields and ensuring access to the public information including the use of the current information technologies.

From the above the obligation of the society, that is, state, is obvious as well as the irreplaceable tasks of public libraries. Indeed, the tasks and the mission of public libraries are specifically emphasized in the recommendations of the Alexandria Manifesto on the libraries in the building of the information society, which will be accepted at the pre-summit conference "Libraries – Information Society in the Making" which will be held November 10-11, 2005, in Alexandria, as a preparation and contribution to the world library association (IFLA and CDNL) to be held in Tunis a week later. This Manifesto

stresses again the irreplaceable role of libraries in the general knowledge, in the democratic process and in the information and knowledge society. All of this is based on the fundamental human right to knowledge, learning and communication without any barriers.

In such a society, which is a common and a long-term goal and program, the special and unique role of public libraries is irreplaceable.

Indeed, public libraries are intended for and directed to all that live and work in a certain community, to all ages, from children to the elderly, to all social, national and religious groups, to all regardless of level of education and culture, occupation or level of knowledge in order to serve their cultural and informational needs.

### ***Special Roles of Public Libraries***

In accordance with this, public libraries participate in five major fields of public life in the area of their local communities (place, municipality, city, county ...)

These are:

- *education* - especially self-education where public libraries have a long and successful history, also in life-long learning which is an irreplaceable way of personal and professional growth, especially in today's world;
- *political life* - participation in the realization of democratic and civil rights and duties, especially on the local level, (while) preserving local identity, particularly when different ethnic communities are in question. Especially today, in a general and unstoppable globalization, public libraries play an important role in offering so-called local information;
- *information* - ensuring access to information for all, has become an obligation in the realization of human rights;
- *cultural enrichment* - access to different sources of information and knowledge for all: for all types of groups and interests, especially when children are in question. This, as a matter of course, also includes literacy advancement, which today also means information literacy, as well as awareness of the need to read as an irreplaceable process on the way to acquiring knowledge, which means not only to see something, but to be informed and acquire knowledge, (because to see and to know is not at all the same experience);
- *economic development* - public libraries must act as a form of local economic information service, of course, in accordance with the main economic aspects of the area: tourism, agriculture, manufacture, technologies etc. Public libraries are also the most appropriate place to obtain all needed information and statistics concerning accession to the European Union (what an individual, entrepreneur, or group can expect from membership and how to best prepare for it, etc.) This is especially true for Croatia right now, as well as for other countries aspiring or preparing for accession to the European Union.

This is not the place, neither is our aim to list all the tasks, activities and programs of public libraries, not even in terms of developing and promoting knowledge society. Nevertheless, as a way of an example, let me point out the following:

- *reliable references* - owing to countless sources of information available, reliability, quality, completeness and up-to-dateness of public libraries is of a great importance;

- *managing new technologies and medias* - the world of technology is changing so rapidly that lagging behind would mean not only a new form of illiteracy, but also exclusion from numerous sources of information, in this case, not only from the most effective and the fastest sources, but often, as the only one available.
- *culture of reading* - in its broadest sense: promoting reading as a way of acquiring knowledge and information, as opposed to skimming and scanning;
- *culture of using verified sources* - this means that today, in an ocean of available sources, public libraries should be a trusted source of verified and reliable information;
- *effective accessibilities* - this means not only access to sources of knowledge and information, but access to expert services in today's ever expanding number of sources, networks and medias, which require experienced searchers and service providers;

No society can live on, especially it cannot effectively function without proper communication system. This is true even more in case of knowledge societies where the process of transmitting and accessibility of information and sources of knowledge are absolutely indispensable. Considering that public libraries play an irreplaceable and fundamental role in our societies, they should adapt themselves and gear their functions in that direction. This should be one of the strategic goals of their development which should, of course, be in accordance with the concept of national advancement of building knowledge society.

### *Historical Comparison*

This is not the right occasion to enter into even the most concise analysis of the (historical) development of public libraries. However, it seems appropriate to me to briefly point out a historical comparison when the subjects of discussion are public libraries and society. As we have already mentioned, the appearance and relatively rapid development of public libraries, as well as public institutions accessible to all, is well-known as opposed to other types of libraries and is marked at the beginning, that is, in the first half of the nineteenth century. This coincides, more or less, with one of the key processes, that is, periods, at least in the history of Western Civilization and Western society, with what is called the process of democratization, that is, the process of creating a civil society, in which a significant characteristic is, among other things, parliamentary democracy, that is, the selection of a (democratic) government through free elections with every citizen having the right of vote, leading and related to the achievement of a whole range of other rights and possibilities. On the other hand, this period was strongly marked by ever-increasing technological and universal development and progress, starting from industrialization, that is, the first industrial revolution, to today's information industry and evermore sophisticated technology. Also closely related to this process is the significant development of the school system, knowledge, culture, and an increase in the number of literate and educated individuals.

When speaking of Croatia, it's enough to mention the link between Croatia's National Revival, also noted in history as the Illyrian Movement, which took place in the 30s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the appearance and development, first of all, of reading rooms, later to be followed by public libraries. That process can, with regards to the opening and development of public libraries, be followed in its historical development and course: from central Croatia

towards Dalmatia and Istria, just as the Croatian National Revival took its course in these Croatian regions.

However, without a doubt, this was not (only) a concurrence in time or coincidence, but rather these processes were mutually connected. In short, this process of creating a civil society and democratization was, in a historically defining way, unachievable without the participation of a whole range of public institutions in the wider social plan, in which undoubtedly a significant role was played by precisely the public, accessible to all, libraries. And as is often the case, with many examples throughout history, this parallel process allowed, even accelerated, the appearance and further development of public libraries. This was true to the point that the whole process was nearly unachievable in all of its aspects and dimensions without public libraries. However, in the same way, the relatively rapid and successful work and expansion of public libraries was also nearly unattainable with regards to scope of activities, to new services and to territory, without that key social process.

Any historical and social analysis would demonstrate this. And not only this. This process, that is, example, one could say paradigm, clearly distinguishes that the needs of the surroundings, society, users (individuals or groups) are important preconditions for the appearance and development of libraries, in this case public libraries. Their needs and development are more important the more "connected" they are with key social processes, as was the case in the stated instance. Government, governing bodies, schools, education and so on, with time, were increasingly, totally or mostly, out of the hands of individuals, that is, particular and privileged social elites, who had earlier, for this purpose, guaranteed sources of knowledge and information. For achieving these rights and obligations in a different social environment, an institution, that is, a service was necessary that would allow everyone accessibility to necessary sources of knowledge and information, at the time, mostly books, then afterwards, increasingly, as they began appearing, books and magazines. All of this became decreasingly reserved for individuals and elite groups, and increasingly a public duty, that is, a public good. As the circle and scope of accessibility to sources of knowledge and information grew so too did the circle and scope of widespread progress, democratization and so on.

A similar paradigm is taking place nowadays as well in the knowledge society. Namely, just like the process of parliamentary democracy and the creation of the civil society, which was, in a way, revealed and initiated already with the ideas of the Revival, could not have been accomplished without the suitable institutions (schools, universities, academies, libraries, gazettes...), open and available to all, not only to privileged individuals, groups or classes, so too the knowledge society could not be built or could not function without the suitable mechanisms, that is, institutions and services. Without a doubt, today's society, from social, cultural and civilizational aspects, is more complex and interwoven than ever up to this point in history. It is, as we have already said, a networked society, in which certainly the most important and most recognizable connection and link is knowledge – information.

This paradigm is also clearly discerned, not only in relation to the whole and complex (social) process, but also in relation to its major parts, that is, components. For example, the same can be said for acquiring and expanding literacy at the time, as well as acquiring and expanding modern computer literacy. As the process of acquiring and spreading literacy was unachievable back then, so too is the information society, knowledge society impossible

without computer literacy today. And in this context, the particularity of tasks of public libraries can be discerned.

### *Challenges of the Knowledge Society*

This, among other things, means that all of (social, cultural, scientific, educational, economic, political...) life and all activities are based mainly on knowledge and that, without knowledge, there is no progress. In such a society, besides other obligatory institutions (schools, universities, academies, institutions, organizations...), irreplaceable is the unique role and meaning of public libraries as the most open and, according to many criteria, the most accessible institution as a source of knowledge and information, as a universal and public good. It is possible to build a knowledge society practically to the level in which the institutes and services for ensuring accessibility, transfer and use of knowledge are established and efficient. That is the paradigm. There is no knowledge society without ensuring the institutes and mechanisms of its availability and use. Available to all. Therefore, one must be informed, aware, but one must also know.

However, in such a society, "lined" and overfilled with diverse knowledge and information sources and services, incomparable to previous times and periods, there is sizeable competition between these sources and services, which are often, easily and readily available. This means that competition exists concerning public libraries as well, that is, their services to the user society. From what has already been said, public libraries undeniably play a unique role and have a recognizable place, what's more, an obligation, in the knowledge society. However, no one can guarantee, nor ensure this for them except for the libraries themselves, of course, not only by their names nor by their 'past', but only and exclusively through their total activities, that is, by ensuring and providing users with unique and first-rate services adapted to their needs. Namely, we live in a time when practically any bit of information is accessible from practically anywhere.

Another well-known occurrence, after all, is that we live in an age of incessant changes that occur in our surroundings, changes that directly or indirectly also affect the providing of social roles by public libraries, of course, and other libraries and institutes, which is a source of continuous new possibilities and real challenges. This situation simply does not allow one to be static, but requires, from public libraries too, dynamic behavior. This, in other words, means that modern libraries must incessantly change their methods and forms used to fulfill their social roles, by which they will, even in the knowledge society and in spite of all of these changes, retain their uniqueness and remain irreplaceable. All the more, they, in a certain way, must anticipate these changes, in order to be able to, readily and in timely fashion, be able to adjust to them given that, with regards to the quickness and complexity of these changes, each late reaction can mean irrecoverable loss of positioning in the information space. And the history of libraries can prove this.

In order to be able to anticipate changes, public libraries must incessantly track and notice them on time so as to be able to efficiently adjust their fundamental social role to new challenges. It is known that, in all of this, an especially important role will be played by the productive use of modern information technologies that are "not simply tools that must be applied, but processes to be developed" (M. Castells). Seeing as modern communications and information technology, with hardware, software and networks, provide important, up till

recently, unimaginable possibilities of communication and transferring, it is up to libraries, including public ones, to provide, according to their roles and tasks, users with suitable content. That is not only their task, but also their challenge. All of this must be governed by the fundamental principle: users are at the center of everything; they are actually the main criterion for all adjustments and changes.

In order for public libraries to be successful in all of this, they must also adapt, that is, change their (inner) organization and must do so (gradually) in such a way as to become “organizations that learn” (as the famous American author Peter Senge calls modern effective and productive ways of organization in his nearly cult book “Five Disciplines”). This means that lifelong learning, that is, training library experts is not enough – the library as a whole must continuously learn.

Conclusion. Public libraries, as important and recognizable components of the knowledge society, therefore, accordingly, one of the significant terms of reference of national policies with regards to building the knowledge society, can truly take on/sustain their position only if they accomplish their fundamental, unique and irreplaceable social role in such an environment in exemplary fashion with their comprehensive activities. This means that all of their tasks and services must permanently and continuously be adapted, as with the methods of accomplishing them.