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LIBRARIANS OF LATVIA IN THE ELECTRONIC ENVIRONMENT: AN EXTRACT FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

The intellectual public in Europe and all over the world is still engaged in the traditional book reading, though its life is unthinkable without electronic resources. Both of these things are librarians' competence. The incorporation of public into knowledge society depends straight on the degree of librarians' capability to orient in the World Wide Web and other massifs of the electronic information. It is the subject of librarians' powers, - acting as searchers, designing structured information and proffering service.

At present a gradual library automation process is going on in Latvia. It will develop faster with the implementation of the project of constructing the new building of the National Library of Latvia (NLL). The introduction of a joint national library information system, or so-called 'nets of light', is a significant part of this project. The typhoons of the electronic information do not cause any threat to the traditional reading and to books as the main information carriers. Still in the flying sweep of life where the speed of acquiring information is the uppermost factor the future is unimaginable without the Internet resources.

Librarians' goal is to master fairly the potentialities of the electronic information, so as to keep on the top of the wave of information suppliers and to provide for the development of actual information society. The results of the sociological research work 'Electronic resources in libraries: management, usability, prognosis', including the inquiry of 505 librarians from automated libraries, gives a possibility to estimate the skills, acquirements, success and failures of Latvian librarians.

Computer skills

With the prevalence of automation librarians' computer skills have improved: 38,6 % of the inquired librarians recognize their skills to be good or very good. Every second librarian of a research library or university library (according to statistical data these libraries are automated) acknowledge, that he or she can cope with computer successfully or very successfully. Though the automation level of *pagasti* (villages) libraries does not surpass 30 %, librarians there feel as fish in water. The librarians of city and town libraries slow a little bit, - in total 30,7 % of librarians there have efficient skills to work in an automated regime.

Every second librarian has a middle level computer skills, but 14,3 % has a lower level. Concerning city and town libraries there only 20,2 % of librarians have reached a

middle level skills. The general level of the city and town libraries' automation also might be much higher.

The exploitation of computer programs

When a library acquires a computer, at first it is operated mainly as a typewriter. In *pagasti* and in cities and towns, in research, special and university libraries the most employed program is *Text editor*. More than 90 % of the inquired librarians are familiar with it.

As soon as the Internet connection is acquired, librarian becomes a voyager of the Internet highways. The numerous browsers become an unalienable part of the work and also of the private life of librarians. On the average 80 % of the respondents have fully acquired the skill of browsing. The city and town librarians have been a bit more inert.

E-mail use has become an everyday procedure for 62,8 % of librarians. The specialists of research, special and university libraries are far ahead to the others: 84 % of them are familiar with e-mail advantages and actively benefit from them every day.

More or less actively tabulation facilities (55,2 %), presentation programs (28,7 %) and data base management systems (13,1 %) are mastered and employed.

The data of this research work unfortunately show also that 3,8 % of city and town librarians and 1,1 % of research and special library workers have not get acquainted with any programs. In the conditions of non-efficient level of computerization neither access, nor training is available for them.

Skills, intensity, and the ways of the Internet use

All in all 45,9 % of the workers of automated libraries participating in the inquiry have manifested good or very good skills of the Internet use. These people are able to give qualitative answers to requests and consult the information search in the Internet space. At the same time 41,6 % of librarians have fair to middling orientation in the World Wide Web, but 3 % does not use the Internet at all. This percentage indicates that training for the Internet search shall be much more frequent, more effective and profound. **Librarian can become a good hunter for information only in the case he or she feels the Internet to be a well know and accustomed area.** 68,7 % of librarians have got the skills in a self-education way; it also indicates that the level of training has been scarce. City and town librarians (66,2 %) and *pagasti*' librarians (83,3 %) have much more often been engaged in various Internet training courses. The librarians of research and special libraries have learned to orient in the Internet labyrinths by themselves. A very small part of library specialists have acquired these skills in the course of education (8,9 %). This fact proves that libraries' personnel become older and older because of the low salaries. For those still working in libraries the time of the official education is far behind.

The bulk of the inquired librarians (68,2 % on the average) use the Internet every day. Although not all librarians are so lucky: due to the insufficient number of automated working places they are to comfort themselves using the Internet few times a week; every tenth librarian can get access only once a week, once a month or even more seldom. Let

us stop cheating ourselves, and acknowledge that for those colleagues the Internet space is pale and scrimpy as the sun in winter.

The number of computers and the Internet connections will increase sharp, and these problems will disappear only when the program of “the nets of light” will be implemented. Within the framework of this program the number of the Internet connections in all types of libraries is intended to increase essentially. Hopefully the state agency *Culture information Systems (CIS)* with active participation of librarians will be able to provide for a continuous internetisation of the whole territory of Latvia.

The Internet search and its diapason

The quantitative indices acquired during the inquiry indicate that the librarians of the automated libraries most often (92,6 %) make the Internet search simply entering the web address; 72,4 % prefer various search engines; 42,6 % use hyper-links.

Yet 3,1 % of them have no sense how to search information, and they ask their colleagues for assistance.

In general librarians search data, news, other texts in various portals, the home pages of the official institutions and in databases. 86,1 % access various news’ portals; *pagasti*’ librarians are notably active in this respect (91,7 %). 55,5 % of the librarians in the countryside read newspapers and journals, 13,9 % take part in discussion groups.

Search engines, portals and home pages

According to the research data the most favourite search engine of the librarians of the automated libraries is *Google*, - 91,7 % of country librarians and 68,3 % of city and town librarians use it most. The national portal *Latnet* persistently is in the second place. Then follow *Yahoo*, *Alta Vista* and *Siets*. Only 8,3 % do not use any search engine at all. It is a good question: why so? Though everybody can prompt the answer: because there have been no possibility to learn.

As said before, the universal news portals like *Delfi* are expressly popular among the librarians (on the average – 65,3 % of the respondents use it; in the country – even 80, 5 %). *TVNet* is used on the average by 49,6%, *Apollo* – 32,8 % (in the countryside – 55,5 %). The home pages of governmental and self-governmental bodies, educational institutions and banks are actively used. Various reference catalogues are also quite popular (45,5 %).

For the time being Latvian libraries have no professional information portal of their own. Its creation is hindered because of the lack of funding. More often librarians get the applied information from the international library and information portals. The opinion of librarians on the necessity of a national professional portal is surprising: 64,7 % miss it very much. At the same time 32,2 % of the colleagues answer this question trivially: they say it is difficult to judge. In other words, - every third librarian is ready to stand without it. 1,4 % (in the country even 2,8 %) of the people of our guild say clearly they don’t need such a portal, and 1,6 % do not respond at all. What will be the future of the specialist not interested in theory and practice of his or her profession? This question remains unanswered. Sometimes we see the analyses of librarians’ insensibility towards

theoretical aspects of their profession in the international practice. Does it refer to Latvian librarians, too? Can we ascribe to them the popular verdict: those who don't read the printed professional information will not view it in the Internet portal either?

Use of Latvian data bases in CD-ROM format

The increase of the production and use of CD-ROMs in libraries in Latvia and everywhere else is undeniable. Many of these discs are published by the means of various projects. However, the use of CD-ROMs is not so successful as expected. On the average 61,0 % of the librarians do not use them at all. In research, special and university libraries this percent is still higher – 68,7. Evidently **the use of CD-ROMs decreases as soon as online information is accessible.**

The most popular and favoured among Latvian librarians is the encyclopaedia "The History of Latvia" published by *TILDE* (24,9 %); after it comes "The Whole of Latvia" (8,5 %), "Interactive System of Maps" (6,1 %), "Money and Finance Institutions" (6,1 %).

Interlibrary data exchange and electronic data delivery service of NLL

Interlibrary electronic data exchange increases consistently. Nevertheless only 19,8 % of librarians take part in it more or less regularly. Librarians of cities and towns are more active in this respect (27,2 %).

On the average 60,8 % of the respondents do not take part in data exchange at present.

According to NLL Bibliography Institute data 30 libraries participate in regular data exchange with the main library of the state - NLL. Research, special, university and public libraries have been supplied with 971 451 record from the national analytics database and 3 116 records from the national database of monographs. Regional libraries on their turn have supplied the national analytics database with 3 809 records of the articles published in their regional periodicals. Libraries need *client servers* provided with Z39.50 to perform qualitative data exchange. At present only few of the public libraries can do it.

Librarians use mainly the electronic catalogue of NLL for information retrieval and reference work. 69,7 % of the respondents use it regularly (in the country – even 75,8 %). 36,2 % make use of the electronic databases of NLL. 11,9 % employ the electronic data delivery system of NLL.

Use of online databases and portals for search

For the main part the librarians use the national online sources when searching the information for their clients or themselves. The most popular and the most employed is the information system of normative acts *NAIS*. Average 33 % of respondents search information there. In research libraries this percent reaches 41,7. The second mostly used database is *LETA*, - 32,5 % of librarians make an active use of it. *LETA* usability is particularly high among the librarians of research, special and university libraries (53,3 %) and among country librarians (50 %). *LURSOFT* databases do not lag much behind. It

was interesting to find out that mostly *pagasti*' librarians use these databases – all in all 33,3 %. The librarians of research libraries employ them a bit less – 31,3 %, still less - city and town librarians – 30,1 %.

Popular and much used databases since 1990s are those of *Eltons B.Stephens Company*, shortly called *EBSCO*. The government pays for the licence packages of *EBSCO* spending on it 64 000 LVS annually. The state agency CIS has signed licence agreement with the independent international foundation *Electronic Information for Libraries - eIFL.net* about the access to *EBSCO* databases. Libraries of Latvia on their turn make co-operation agreements with CIS as the intermediary organisation to provide access to these databases. This way 44 libraries and other institutions in Latvia may use *EBSCO* databases in 2004.

The information acquired in the research confirms the fact that public library specialists have little chance to employ any of *EBSCO* packages because of administrative, technical and financial reasons. 44,5 % of research, special and university libraries' staff make use of these databases, but only 11,8 % of city and town librarians can do it. These indices show a tendency to grow though slowly, but persistently. **40,4 % of librarians ask for more intensive training to employ *EBSCO* databases.** I consider this to be a first-hand obligation of NLL Library Development Institute and CIS, because CIS is responsible for the *EBSCO* products' distribution and receives funding for its management.

It is interesting to mention that **77,8 % of village librarians who have no access to *EBSCO* databases practically, as it was mentioned before, want to get trained to use this information source.** At the same time 41,8 % of research and university library workers respond they don't need any training course on *EBSCO* database use.

EBSCO data package, as we know, contains a number of databases. In 2004 12 of them are available in Latvia. The most popular is *Academic Search Premier*. ~75,6 % of the inquired librarians make use of it. 33,9 % have preferred *Business Source Premier*, the world's largest full-text database on business and economics. To some extent favoured (29,6 %) is the bibliographic database on education formed by *Educational Resource Information Centre* in the USA, and shortly called *ERIC*. The full-text database of the international and regional newspapers, news agencies and other resources *Newspaper Source* has seemed interesting and challenging to 27,8 % of respondents. Medicine information data has a similar rating. Every fourth librarian has looked into the full-text database of the world's most popular magazines *Master File Premier* addressed to public libraries.

Estimating the use of *EBSCO* databases from a sociological viewpoint we can conclude that the respondents from automated libraries use all of *EBSCO* packages quite lively. However it is dissonant that 51,3 % do not respond to the question about *EBSCO* at all. Evidently these people know nothing about *EBSCO* databases, and accordingly do nothing to acquire access to these world significance information sources.

Concerning the reasons of the disuse of *EBSCO* databases more than a half of the respondents avers they have had no need to employ them. **No doubt, the distribution of**

EBSCO products in Latvia is on a low level. 18,6 % of librarians note that the information about it is more than insufficient. 20,2 % respond they have no skills to work with EBSCO products. Thus we again come to the non-existing publicity and insufficient training. My opinion is that CIS shall invite *eIFL.net* specialists to come and deliver information on these databases much more often. The state of Latvia pays properly for *EBSCO* service.

In various international discussions (*PULMAN*) the opinion is observed that information coverage in *EBSCO* databases is too large, therefore libraries (public libraries in particular) do not cope with it. The research work of NLL Library Development Institute does not affirm this: only 1 % of the respondents is dissatisfied with the coverage. Similar situation is regarding the price for administrating the service: only 3,9 % are discontent.

The Internet: for payment or free of charge?

Firstly, we shall remember that there is no such a thing as free lunch. Somebody must pay for the Internet service. The question is: who? Is it government, self-governments or the end-user? In the USA public libraries usually are not required to pay for the Internet use. Self-governments cover the costs. It is similar also in Latvia, for instance, in 7 of the Riga City libraries and in several village libraries self-governments pay for the Internet services.

The research shows the librarians' opinion on the Internet offer in libraries. **Quite unbelievable, but matter as a fact, city, town (63,1 %), and *pagasti*' (61,1 %) librarians advocate the Internet access for payment. They have forgotten about the economic situation in the small towns and in the country, and the low purchase power of information users. 8,3 % of *pagasti*' librarians and 3,8 % of city and town librarians even dare to say that the payment for the Internet is too small.**

However, the librarians of research libraries, when asked whether they agree with the opinion that the Internet service in libraries shall be free of charge, answer positively (61,5 %). Evidently they are closer to the world's dominating tendencies. Let us remind ourselves that any payment hinders information availability, and as a result - the access to knowledge.

Will the electronic resources replace the printed materials?

In general Latvian librarians wish to live in the traditional book world also in the future. 94,1 % considers that the electronic resources will never replace printed books. More eager supporters of the expansion of the electronic information are *pagasti*' librarians, - they acknowledge that however a time will come when e-books will be used instead of the traditional ones.

All in all 69,1 % of the colleagues consider that in the current conditions the usability of e-information is good or satisfactory.

The main obstacle in the distribution and use of the electronic information is the lack of funding, - 89,7 % of librarians (94,5 % in the country, 92 % in towns and cities) specifies this to be the main difficulty. The librarians point the insufficient competence of

the state authorities in e-information questions, they say that a part of the government and self-governments' leaders are far from acknowledging the significance of modern technologies and electronic communication. It leaves a negative impact on decision-making in IT questions.

19,5 % of librarians consider that the low competence level in IT problem solution is related only to the government. They don't take into consideration that public libraries are self-governments' property, and every owner of a property shall take care of it. As mentioned above, the state support is devoted to the libraries engaged in the unified state library information system and "the nets of light".

Librarians from social, demographic and financial viewpoint

The data acquired during the research indicate that 53,7 % of librarians have the higher or higher special education. In research, special and university libraries this percent is higher – 74,8.

The lowest percentage of such specialists is in *pagasti*' libraries – 27,8 %. **Thus 72,2 % of respondents have the middle or middle special education. Evidently this is the weakest point in librarians' education. Therefore extended on-going education programs shall be oriented towards the librarians having the middle education level. The syllabus of Librarians' Continuing Education Centre at the University of Latvia shall be improved and re-structured for the purpose.** Librarians' training should be extended and more elaborate not only in Riga, but in other regions of Latvia for the main part. The directors of district, town and city libraries in their reviews point that the most interesting courses and seminars usually take place in their own district centres where *pagasti*' librarians have no problem to attend them. Besides there is a possibility to invite the most popular lecturers and other specialists favored by the public, and the training programs can be adapted to the local needs.

The obsolescence of library personnel is the problem of Europe, Scandinavian countries in particular. It is topical also in Latvia. Thus for instance, 69,4 % of country librarians are more than 40 years old. The same situation is in town and city libraries. Among the librarians of *pagasti*' libraries none of the librarians is younger than 25. The graduates of the Library Science and Information Science Department of the University of Latvia after graduation get well-paid positions in other institutions. In fact the Department labors for the benefit of other realms, not for libraries. **The government and self-governments shall appreciate modern automated libraries as complicated establishments requiring well-trained staff with efficient professional skills and competitive salaries.**

The inquiry indicates that at present librarian's salary is 80 –120 LVL a month. In the country 16,7 % are part-time librarians, their salary does not reach 80 LVL. Only 2,2 % of the librarians have a salary surpassing 200 LVL a month.

Notwithstanding the fact that the salaries of Latvian librarians are the lowest in Europe, 60 % of the inquired librarians from self-governmental libraries have noticed income increase during the last five years.

Conclusions

1. At present a deliberate automation and internetisation is going on in the libraries of Latvia. It will intensify together with the construction of the new building of the National Library of Latvia, as the implementation of the unified national library information system – *the nets of light* is the important part of the construction project.

2. Librarians' challenge is to keep in step with library automation, so as to stay on the top of information suppliers, and promote the development of true information society.

3. Librarians' computer skills have improved with the increase of automation level. 38,6 % of the inquired librarians acknowledge their skills good or very good. In the research and special libraries (which according to statistic data are automated) every second librarian finds that he or she can operate computer well or very well. On the average 80 % of the respondents have domesticated the Internet browsing completely.

4. The most popular among librarians are the following universal Internet news portals: *Delfi* (average 65,3 %, in the countryside - 80,5 %); *TVNet* (49,6 %, in the countryside - 61,1 %); *Apollo* (32,8 %, - in the countryside 55,5 %). The homepages of governmental institutions, self-governments, education establishments and banks are actively used. Various reference catalogues are quite avowed (45,5 % of respondents).

5. For the time being the libraries of Latvia have no professional information portal of their own, unfortunately. There is little national information in the international library and information portals. 64,7 % of librarians feel a sharp necessity for such a source of professional information.

6. On the average 61,1 % of librarians do not use databases in CD-ROM format. This percent is even higher in research, special and university libraries – 68,7. The tendency is that **with the increase of the use of online information the exploitation of compact discs decreases.**

7. For the main part librarians use the electronic catalogue of NLL for information retrieval and reference work. 69,7 % of librarians use it regularly (in research libraries even 75,8 %). 36,2 % use the electronic databases of NLL from time to time and 11,9 % make use of NLL data delivery service (in the countryside - even 19,5 %).

8. Librarians search online information for the main part in the national channels. 33% use the information system of normative acts *NAIS* (research libraries even 41,7 %). *LETA* online database is in the second place - 32,5 %. Its rating is particularly high in research, special and university libraries – 53,3 % and in *pagasti'* libraries – 50 %.

9. The information acquired during the research confirms that the librarians of public libraries have had no practical possibility to use any of *EBSCO* information

packages. 44,5 % of research, special and university libraries do employ *EBSCO* products. The usage indices grow slowly, but persistently. **44,4 % of librarians demand to intensify training to acquire the skills to use these resources.**

10. The inquiry data show that 53,7 % of the respondents have the higher or the higher special education. In research, special and university libraries this percent is 74,8. **At the same time 72,2 % of *pagasti*' librarians have only the middle or the middle special education. Evidently, this is the weakest thread in librarians' education. Therefore the extended continuing education programs shall be addressed to the librarians having only the middle education.** The 130 hours training program in the Librarians' Continuing Education Centre at the University of Latvia shall be restructured and extended not only in Riga, but mainly in other regions.

11. The information acquired performing the research "Electronic Resources in Libraries: Management, Usability, Prognosis" concerning automated libraries specialists' knowledge and skills to employ online and offline resources **confirms that librarians have a great desire and ambition to incorporate into the electronic space. The results of the research indicate also the incapability of the existing training system (Librarians' Continuing Education Centre, the state agency "Culture information systems"(CIS), Library Development Institute of NLL, IT system ALISE, regional education centres) to provide for the training adequate to modern conditions.** There is an urgent necessity to improve and restructure the professional education system.

12. The librarians of the automated libraries have successfully incorporated into online electronic information producers', users' and suppliers' domain. To promote the formation of knowledge society it is recommended to develop legislation, so as to ensure the use of the World Wide Web as a standard of human rights for the residents of Latvia.

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