New approaches to the presentation of Bulgarian regional libraries in the virtual space

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Abstract: The publication summarises the results of a study conducted by the Department of Library and Information Studies and Cultural Policy (DLISCP) at the Sofia University on the topic of "Assessment of the information value of the websites of regional libraries in Bulgaria. Development of a recommended website model reflecting the performance of regional libraries." Regional libraries (RLs) are seen as modern organisations, which need to increase the visibility of their capabilities in order to find partnerships and to demonstrate their real benefit to people and society. The websites (Internet pages) of RLs play a role in shaping public perceptions of their effectiveness and attitudes towards their activities and services. In the context of the Information Age, the adequate presentation of RLs in the virtual space is a prerequisite for the full use of their potential and for an objective assessment of their importance in addressing the challenges of the period. Within the framework of a thematic project, a survey of the state of the websites of the 27 RLs was carried out according to a system of indicators presented in a matrix. The websites of 12 public libraries in other European countries were also reviewed, following similar indicators. The collected and systematically organised data serve to assess the state of the websites of the Bulgarian RLs, as well as to compare the approaches to their construction with those in other European countries. The results of the surveys and the comparisons that were made serve as a basis for the development of a sample model for the information architecture of the Internet pages of RLs. The principles for its development focus on modern approaches to presenting the effectiveness of public libraries in the virtual space in an engaging manner.

Key words: regional libraries, public libraries, project, websites.

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Нови подходи към присъствието на българските регионални библиотеки във виртуалното пространство

Абстракт: Публикацията обобщава резултатите от изследване на Катедра „Библиотекознание, научна информация и културна политика" (БИНКП) на СУ на тема „Оценка на информационната стойност на уеб сайтовете на регионалните библиотеки (РБ) в България. Конструиране на препоръчителен модел на уеб сайт, отразяващ резултатите от дейността на регионалната библиотека." Регионалните библиотеки (РБ) се разглеждат като модерни организации, които имат нужда от повече видимост за своите възможности, за да намират партньорства и да доказват реалната си полза за хората и обществото. Уебсайтовете (интернет страниците) на РБ участват във формирането на обществените представи за тяхната ефективност и отношението към дейностите и услугите им. В условията на информационната ера адекватното представяне на РБ във виртуалното пространство е предпоставка за пълноценното използване на техния потенциал и за обективна оценка на действителната им значимост за решаване предизвикателствата на времето. В рамките на тематичен проект е извършено проучване на състоянието на интернет страниците на 27-те РБ по система от показатели, представени в матрица. Обхванати са и интернет страниците на 12 обществени библиотеки в Европа по аналогични показатели. Събраните и систематизирани данни служат за установяване на състоянието на уеб сайтовете на българските регионални библиотеки, както и за сравнителен анализ на подходите в

изграждането им в България и в някои от европейските страни. Получените резултати от проучванията, направените сравнения и съпоставки, служат за основа в разработването на примерен модел за информационна архитектура на интернет страниците на РБ. Принципите за тяхното изграждане са насочени към съвременни подходи за атрактивното представяне на ефективността на обществените библиотеки във виртуалното пространство.

Ключови думи: интернет страници, регионални библиотеки, обществени библиотеки, проект, уеб сайтове.

(A study of the Department of Library and Information Studies and Cultural Policy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" on the topic of: "Assessment of the information value of the websites of regional libraries in Bulgaria. Development of a recommended website model reflecting the performance of regional libraries.")

Introduction

Nowadays regional libraries are developing as modern organizations, searching for different partners and are fighting to better present their potential to be useful to people and society. The full use of this potential and the impartial assessment of their importance in the contemporary world of information require that libraries be adequately represented on the internet. Thanks to their websites they shape the public views on their effectiveness and the attitudes towards the benefits of their activities and services.

In the framework of this project we examined the contemporary status of regional libraries' websites according to a system of indicators. The information was collected through a special set of criteria concerning the contents, layout and navigation options of the websites of the 27 regional libraries in Bulgaria. In the study we also included information about the websites of 12 public libraries in Europe, collected according to analogical indicators. The collected and systematized data served to specify the status of the relevant websites, as well as to analyze the approaches to their development in Bulgaria and in some European countries.

On the basis of the results and the conclusions from these comparisons, an exemplary model of information architecture of the websites of the Bulgarian regional libraries was created. The main principles of this model are directed towards the identification of the contemporary approaches to attractive representation of the effectiveness of the biggest public libraries in Bulgaria on the internet. The model was piloted in 3 regional libraries.

Due to the current topic and the importance of the issues concerned, the professional community is expected to show an increased interest in the project results. Because of that several publications were prepared, and the members of the scientific research team will actively participate in different forums to announce the achieved results.

The importance of the project goals and the project implementation results is enhanced by their versatile and multidimensional application in the learning process. There are reasons to discuss the long-term value of this project in several aspects: creating similar models in all library networks by type of library; examining the achieved results and higher performance effectiveness by the model implementation; studying the changes, induced on public attitudes and the policies towards libraries.

Currency of the topic

There has been no independent study on this topic so far. The authors of several dissertations, monographs and articles have partially treated some of the problems, concerning the representation of the activities of the regional libraries on their websites. Students, which use

the relevant websites in connection with their exercises and course work, often mention a number of difficulties, which they have had in their work. The general feeling is that the information is incomplete, fragmented and not always up to date. If we add the bad design and the difficult navigation in some cases to the above facts, we could say that in fact the websites are not suitable for obtaining reliable information and do not provide fast and reliable access to useful information for the users and partners of regional libraries. (For example, we could point out that Bulgarian libraries have always had a big problem in defining their vision and specifying their objectives, because in Bulgaria there are no strategic plans for the development of the library sector and the publications on this issue are almost an exception. The library sites, which have been explored so far, show that the respective library's mission is defined in only 3 of them. In the majority of the websites the objectives are outlined according to the current legislation, without being specified, revised or supplemented for the relevant region. They are not arranged in priorities either. Some of the libraries do not even consider it necessary to inform their users or stakeholders about these objectives. Half of the libraries outline their task only as art of their regulations. All these facts do not allow drawing conclusions whether the libraries have developed strategies and whether they are willing to accept upcoming changes.)

Over the recent years, reliable data about library activities have taken an important place in the studies on library roles, tasks and activities. European documents about cultural and information policies call for support for data collection about the key features and initiatives of the European public libraries. These documents indicate that at this stage there is no sufficient information about the activities of public libraries. Collecting more detailed and reliable data and facts about the extent to and the way in which public libraries are used by citizens is useful for clarifying their role in society as well as about how their activities could help implementing the EU policies.

Because of that a team from the Department of Library and Information Studies and Cultural Policy at Sofia University has agreed that it is pressing and necessary to make a study on the following topic: *"Assessment of the information value of the websites of regional libraries in Bulgaria. Development of a recommended website model reflecting the performance of regional libraries."* The study was carried out within the frameworks of a thematic project, which was awarded a research grant in a competition for research projects at Sofia University and had the following goals:

1.   Creating innovative approaches to the representation of the contemporary libraries on the internet.

2.   Developing an applicable model to increase the visibility of the benefits and the effectiveness of library activities, initiatives and partnerships of regional libraries.

3.   Collecting data in support of the key features and initiatives of Bulgarian libraries and presenting them within the system of European public libraries.

4.   Enriching the learning process with useful practical examples of (not) good practices of public libraries; with up-to-date knowledge and skills to illustrate libraries performance on the internet.

The project has set the following research tasks:

1. Analysing the main guidelines for presenting the results of the work public libraries do to the benefit of society.

2. Analysing the information, published on the websites of regional libraries, on the basis of preliminary determined criteria.

3. Examining the experience of at least 10 European public libraries. Benchmarking the effectiveness of the published information about the respective library.

4. Developing a recommendation model for information architecture of a website, representing the activity and development of the particular public library in the most effective way.

Project methodology

The project methodology is based on standard and well-tested management tools and activities, which include:
- Analysis of websites;
- Examination of the documentary flow, related to this issue;
- Comparative analysis of Bulgarian and foreign practices;
- Methods of administration and control, distributing the responsibilities among the participants. Control of the project feasibility by drawing up an operational plan, etc.;
- Methods of monitoring and evaluation;
- Methods of identifying best practices.

The role of the project participants is distributed according to their expertise and experience. Thus, the filling of the individual library cards was given to the students, participating in the project. There are several goals in this respect:
- To give the students the opportunity to identify the existing models of organizing library websites and to receive useful information about regional libraries in the country, as well as about some foreign public libraries.
- Their lack of sufficient experience in working with library websites places them in a close position to library members themselves and is a kind of a test for the qualities of these websites, their navigation, the access to basic information about the relevant libraries, the representation of the useful and necessary information, etc. The expected admissible errors in the cards could be interpreted as indicators of the information value of the website.

This expectation proved to be correct. The initial set of data in the individual cards for each library was prepared by the students – participants in the project team, according to indicators defined in advance. Subsequently, 40% of the gathered information had to be corrected by an additional review of the websites by the teachers and PhD students. The purpose of such a phased data acquisition is reduced to several objectives and foreseen difficulties. In most of the websites, finding specific information requires more experience and time to gain an insight into the relevant source. The students that participated in this project are in the role of insufficiently prepared consumers, searching for specific information.

Where specific expertise was required even in the process of the collection of empirical data, PhD students were included.

The following types of activities were performed within the project framework:
1. A set of criteria for analysing the websites of regional libraries was created. It should be noted that, within the framework of the available resources and in view of the emphasis placed on the project – representation of the effectiveness of libraries, **the project was limited to examining only the part of website development related to the representation of their activities, i.e. the information about the library activities**. The other aspects of a website, such as design, graphic layout, navigation options, hosting, support, domain, etc. are not subject of the analysis. The set included *Indicators for assessment of the information quality* of the website, based on the standards for statistical representation of the activities of the libraries and their results. The selected indicators, included in the work set, outline the possibilities to organize and clearly represent the effective presence of regional libraries on the internet.

Thus the indicators were grouped into several main sections and headings*:

GENERAL REPRESENTATION – LIBRARY CARD (ABOUT US)
History of the library
Mission
Objectives and activities

Regulation/Documents
Structure
Public report
Careers
Editions
Projects
Virtual presentation
About us in the media
RESOURCES
Library collections
Electronic resources
Digital collections/digital works from the library collections
ACCESS
Catalogues (traditional)
Electronic catalogues
Union catalogues
Card files – subject, local, etc.
Access to digital works, collections and libraries
SERVICES
Office hours
Registration of users
Getting out of library documents
Electronic order for documents
Interlibrary loan (within the country and abroad)
Access to specialized databases
Access to e-government services
Internet use
Reference, bibliographic and information services
Copying, printing and scanning documents
Training courses for users
Other
COMMUNICATION WITH THE USERS
Ask the librarian
FAQ
Option for sharing opinions and recommendations
Social networks
Other
PUBLIC RELATIONS
Calendar
Events/Exhibitions
News
Partners
Donors
Contact us
Competitions/Announcements/
Buyer profile/ Tender procedures
HEADINGS, WHICH ARE UNIQUE/SPECIFIC FOR THE RELEVANT LIBRARY

Note: The repetition is due to different aspects of assessment, directed to the same heading. For example, digital collections are also seen as a resource, but the access to them is also analyzed.

2.   The proposed set was filled with data from the websites of the 27 regional libraries. It was also completed for the other 12 foreign libraries, which are similar in type and activities to the Bulgarian regional libraries. Students, PhD students and scholars took part on a basic, correction and complementary level of data collection.

The information passed through quantitative and qualitative analysis and comparative analysis of the websites of Bulgarian and foreign libraries was done. The detailed results of this study could be seen in the following two publications in the 2017 Annual book of the Department, under the following titles:

1. *Aneta Doncheva, Sofia Peycheva. REGIONAL LIBRARIES – A REPRESENTATION OF THEIR RESOURCES AND PROVIDING COMMUNICATION WITH MEMBERS AND SOCIETY* (*Results of a study of the Department of Library and Information Studies and Cultural Policy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" on the topic of ": "Assessment of the information value of the websites of regional libraries in Bulgaria. Development of a recommended website model reflecting the performance of regional libraries."*);

2. *Eli Popova, Nadia Karachodzhukova. REPRESENTATION OF SERVICES, COMMUNICATION WITH MEMBERS AND ACCESS TO LIBRARY RESOURCES ON THE WEBSITES OF REGIONAL LIBRARIES* (*Results of a study of the Department of Library and Information Studies and Cultural Policy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" on the topic of : "Assessment of the information value of the websites of regional libraries in Bulgaria. Development of a recommended website model reflecting the performance of regional libraries."*)

Main conclusions:

1.   Bulgarian regional libraries, big and small, already offer websites to their users, which contain lots of well-ordered, modern, interesting, easy-to-navigate and intuitive information. The new, high-tech environment, in which libraries function and develop, creates new communication models between the institution and its real or potential users. The websites represent their adaptation to the digital environment and reflect the media policy of the relevant library, whether or not a strategic document has been developed.

2.   It should be noted that in the comparative assessment with foreign libraries, the websites of some Bulgarian libraries do not yield such content and vision.

3.   Many of the websites provide information about the library presented the main library resources; organized uninterrupted access to the relevant library, bibliographical and information resources; introduced the new forms of on-line customer services (terms, products, services, communication); raised the prestige of the library and shaped its image.

4.   Libraries are constantly expanding their activities, implementing innovative practices and creating their own image.

5.   There is a big variety of structures, contents and formats, in which the mandatory information is published. There is no page unification, which can be interpreted both positively and negatively.

Along with many positive practices, qualitative changes and progressive steps in building their virtual face, regional libraries could still improve their representation on the Internet. The project focuses on an important element of the website design philosophy – to highlight their effectiveness. There are many ways to assess the quality and effectiveness of a library website. We try to pay attention to the negative sides and omissions in achieving optimal information quality of the websites, to search for and recommend good examples of these indicators. As a

whole, the requirement is to present the information clearly, unconditionally, adequately to the names of the headings and subheadings; to find this part easily, which is decisive in using the library services; to put information on the websites, proving that the library's interests meet public interests, etc.

These are some of the noticed negative elements:

1. *Identical headings, containing different information*
2. *Subheadings, represented in inappropriate headings*
3. *On the websites there are headings, which are not updated*
4. *Inequivalent parts of the websites*
5. *Unnecessary repetition of information*
6. *Difficult navigation, etc.*

Detailed examples of each statement are given in the published content analysis of the collected data.

The analysis shows clearly that libraries are aware of the importance of their representation on the internet, of providing access to library resources, innovative services and products for all types of users and applying best practices. Therefore, it is not surprising to conclude from the study that libraries are addressing this challenge by constantly improving their websites.

Proposals and recommendations

For the improvement of the websites - the subject of the present study - could also serve as *a recommendation model of information architecture of a website* to represent the results from the relevant regional library's activities in the most effective way.

Proposal №1. Although each website is individual and has to represent a particular library, real practice shows that, in view of the representation of the type of the relevant regional library, according to its place in the library and information structure of the country/region and according to its objectives, defined in a general normative act, in this case, the Law on the Public Libraries, should include several common basic parameters to represent and measure *the effectiveness* of the regional library. After the analysis, it turns out that we have been right in connection with the criteria and indicators in the set. It is important for each library to represent the following elements on its website:

➢ **INFORMATION ABOUT THE LIBRARY – LIBRARY CARD (ABOUT US):**
  - Mission
  - Tasks and activities
  - Structure
  - Public report

➢ **RESOURCES**
  - Library collections
  - Digital collections/digital works from the library collections

➢ **ACCESS**
  - Electronic catalogue
  - Union catalogues

➢ **SERVICES**
  - Office hours
  - Registration of library members
  - Getting out of library documents

- Electronic order of documents
- Interlibrary loan **(within the country and abroad)**
- Access to specialized databases
- Access to e-government services
- Internet use
- Reference, bibliographic and information services
- Copying, printing and scanning of documents
- Training courses for users
- Other

➢ **COMMUNICATION WITH THE USERS**
- [Ask](#) the librarian
- FAQ
- Option for opinions and recommendations
- Social networks
- Other

➢ **PUBLIC RELATIONS**
- Events/Exhibitions
- News
- Partners
- Donors
- Contact us
- Competitions[/Announcements](#)
- [Buyer](#) profile[/ Tender](#) procedures

On the basis on the extensive analyzes, the listed sections and headings could be defined as mandatory and form a "standardized" core of the contents. In the process of work each library is free to decide what is important and necessary to its visibility and, of course, to experiment and include much and varied information. It is mandatory to monitor whether the website works and whether it is optimally effective.

Proposal №2. Although such topics could and have to be tested in every website, it is important to note that some of them are more important for allowing users to search quickly and should be better visible and more quickly accessible. As such, we note:
- The access to the electronic catalogue of each library
- The availability of digital resources
- Access to documents and resources of other libraries
- All the headings, related to innovative services
- The options for sharing and communication with the library team
- Information, directed to public relations

Proposal №3. Here it is important to note that when creating the individual headings and their contents, the terminology should be standardized and as a point of departure ISO 2789: 2015 should be used (Information and documentation. International Library Statistics and ISO 11620: 2015. Information and documentation. Performance indicators for libraries).

Proposal №4. The project team proposes to examine on a regular basis the use of library websites and users' opinions of their effectiveness.
We propose a competition for best website of a regional library.

Proposal №5. Websites should combine information and interactivity properties as successfully and as usefully as possible users, i.e. the transformation of the internet audience from a passive user into an active participant in the library-user communication have to be widely used.

Proposal №6. Options for access to the website for visually impaired people, i.e. specifically designed software to present web content for such people should be provided.

Proposal №7. The Paris Declaration on Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Era (2014) assigns libraries and librarians a new, more important role - to develop as education centres for media and information literacy. Thus, the institution website should be seen as a specific educational media, it should provide not only information, but it should also stimulate the analytical attitude of the publics towards the activities of the institutions, it should stimulate people to think and demand new knowledge and information. [1], [2]

Piloting of the set in regional libraries
At this stage, we turned to several regional libraries in the country. We presented our colleagues with information about the work on the project, the main conclusions, some of our recommendations and proposals; with our comments on the different sections and headings of the surveyed sites; with comparative data tables.

Our request was to receive the opinion of the colleagues on the submitted materials and their proposals for corrections and additions. In order to generalize the data easily and more visibly, we have formulated several basic questions on which colleagues can pronounce.

The first and most important thing to note is that the teams of the Republic of Bulgaria in Varna, Kyustendil and Gabrovo first responded professionally to the request to evaluate the results of the research and the proposed information model on their websites. Their opinions and recommendations are competent and enrich the study by initiating a fruitful discussion between the scholars and practitioners in search of an optimal and effective product.
Several other regional libraries have also declared interest and desire to provide their feedback. After publishing the results, increased activity is expected in an open discussion.

Our colleagues provide the following opinions on the study in the project framework:
- "The team of the Pencho Slaveykov Regional Library welcomes the study presented by the lecturers, PhD students and students of the Sofia University. We believe that this study is of interest to the library community and will receive a good response ... ";
- "The results, provided by the Project, gave us the opportunity to review our page in more detail and to analyze it critically…" (the regional library in Kyustendil);
- "We would like to thank you for the detailed analysis of our website and the valuable recommendations. Both were very useful…" (the regional library in Gabrovo).

All colleagues have given us very detailed remarks, some of them critical, other explanatory and third - complementary, on the proper coverage of the data in our study. So we hope to fix a number of inaccuracies in the contents of the websites.

The colleagues have thoroughly and professionally identified the positive aspects of their websites. Nowadays we could say that the regional library in Varna has one of the most modern websites so far. It has achieved it by submitting the website structure and architecture for discussion, as well as the design and colour layout. All these topics have been discussed by the board of directors. They have also studied the consumer attitudes and this process took them

around 7 months. Currently, they possess a complete product, which should not be subject to further change. The colleagues in Gabrovo believe that their website provides a lot of information and assesses the following three platforms as useful: "For the children", "Gabrovo region" and "E-education", as well the Green Page, etc. The colleagues in Kyustendil believe that their website is well organized, systematized, and that it is easy to search it.

At the same time the libraries would like to find new links, to introduce new headings and to correct some old ones.

Concerning our conclusions:
- Concerning *Proposal №1.* Everybody agrees with the standardized sections and headings, sometimes on the condition that they should not be obligatory and they could introduce some ideas on the inclusion of some of the headings.

- *Proposal №2 and Proposal №3* are accepted by all the colleagues.

- Concerning *Proposal №4* for the competition for best website, the regional library in Varna considers that "...it is not a good initiative, because there are no clear criteria for what consumers will compare - the design and vision or the contents part", while the regional library in Kuystendil suggests that "...there could be one general poll, which will be published on the websites of all the libraries, and the choice will serve as the basis of the received results".

- Concerning *Proposal №5*, the regional library in Varna proposes "...In order to develop library-user communication more successfully and optimally, it is necessary that libraries direct their energy to training their staff in the field of web and digital marketing, as well as to provide people that will to be responsible only for the library website".
- In this connection, the colleagues offer to organize a training course on Digital Marketing for the colleagues from all the libraries. The target group will be librarians, not IT specialists.

- Concerning *Proposal №6* there are some ideas from the regional library in Varna regarding the technological options to install software for people with visual impairments.

- *Proposal №7* is adopted positively by all the colleagues.

- We have also received many valuable opinions:
For example, the colleagues from the regional library in Varna believe that the conclusions are well formulated, including the critical elements. However, they have added the following: "It is very important to point out that the libraries start developing their websites without a preliminary study of the best practices and without an analysis of the trends in website development - both regarding the graphic vision and contents. Websites are one of the most dynamic parts in the field of information technologies and the trends in their development follow the trends in programming, as well as the trends in consumer attitudes and requests. We could note that most library websites have "outdated" design, even though they use popular blog platforms – such as WordPress and Joomla. The template designs remain incomprehensible as a model of organization firstly to web designers who do not understand library structures, and secondly, to librarians that do not understand the organization of the

websites. The information organization, as well as the formulation of the different headings, are done by intuition and follows the concepts of the librarians, rather than those of the clients. This fact was correctly outlined by the project team. Here the lack of basic knowledge and information about website development and the non-professional approach to the topic by most libraries could be clearly noticed."

- The colleagues from the regional library in Kyustendil believe that "...it is better to put the information, regarding "Public Relations", in social networks. So the information about the events and their subsequent coverage is transferred from the library website to its Facebook profile. This fact provides bigger information opportunities and the published material reaches the consumer faster. The number of the informed persons could rise also by chance (for example, "a friend liked this" or "a friend invited me"), while in order to see the information on the website you should go to it purposefully. And it is easier also in terms of administration...".

The comments of the authors of this study on such an opinion is to distinguish between the place and role of these two forms of communication. Facebook is defined as a more operative and close opportunity to the communication channels of contemporary consumers. Without denying that social networks are bringing libraries to everyday forms of communication and sharing and that in this way they are becoming interlocutors in participants' personal space, the authors defend the place of the website as the official representation, the "library card" in internet. The rules for business communication and the ethics on different levels of contact should not be overlooked. When people search for authentic information about each organization and phenomenon, they use the verified official information on the relevant website where the strategic goals and interests are presented to the possible partners and followers. Because of that we believe that the public library website is the portal to study its overall effectiveness.

- The colleagues from the regional library in Varna point out as an omission in the project the lack of information about what percentage of libraries offer an English version of their website as an important part of improving the library image although the publications with the results of the study mention that the information is presented in other language as an important advantage of the visibility of the library.

Our *expectations* in this study were related to:
1. Helping each regional library improve the effectiveness of its website with the proposed recommendations.
2. including the project results in the learning process as examples of best practice (or vice-versa) for a regional library.
3. Involving students in the development of the model – course assignments / papers, thesis papers, etc.

Conclusion
In conclusion, we should note that the results and interest in the issue exceeded our expectations. During the discussion initiated in the professional community more sides and aspects of this topic were brought to the fore. However, it is impossible to cover the whole set of issues and problems within the framework of only one project. For the research team it is important that the proposed topic is current, extremely important and that it provokes the library community to search its modern representation on the internet and to achieve an appealing image of the library effectiveness in the public life of the country.

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