

Interview

With Mrs. Leslie Burger,
Director, Princeton Public Library,
Previous President of the American Library Association,
To Mrs. Eva Semertzaki, editor of SYNERGASIA

We met Leslie Burger during her visit to Athens on the occasion of the 5th International Conference: "Designing the Libraries of the Future" organized by the Committee for the Support of Libraries in Athens on June 10-11, 2008. She presented a paper on: "*Building a new Library: how to achieve the results you desire.*"

*ES. Ms. Burger, it is an honor for me as a member of the ALA to talk live to its previous President. Thank you very much for accepting the invitation to discuss new technologies in libraries for **Synergasia**, our online journal. At first, could you tell us about your experience as President of the bigger library association in the world? How many members are currently enrolled in the ALA?*

L.B. The ALA is the largest and oldest Library Association in the world, consisting of 65.000 members. It includes all types of libraries: public, academic, school and some special, although Special Libraries Association serves the needs of special libraries. Currently there are 6.000 members actively involved in committee levels. Among the primary tasks of the ALA are promoting the value of libraries and librarianship, setting legislative priorities and standards for accreditation programs.

It was a joy for me to serve as ALA President. I had the opportunity to travel throughout the USA and the world to represent the ALA and its work, share ideas and develop cross-civilization relationship and understand similarities in the world of libraries. I recognized how similar libraries are throughout the world and that we all share the same values when it comes to serving our communities. In addition to my public appearances, I responded to hundreds of interviews in print and electronic media about topics, such as how libraries are different and why we need libraries today. As chief spokesperson for America's libraries I focused my energy of promoting the value and energy of librarians in the information age. The ALA also defends libraries and testifies before the Congress. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency wanted to close their libraries. ALA spoke openly about the need to prevent these closures in congressional testimony and was successful in getting the libraries re-opened.

ES. What is the influence of ALA to the political scene in the USA and how strong the Association is to persuade politicians and decision makers to support the library world?

L.B. The ALA supports libraries by its presence in Washington, DC where it tries to influence decisions taken for the benefit of libraries. It works to secure federal funding for libraries and

works with the Congress to represent library issues in pending legislation. In addition to funding we focus on issues related to copyright law, telecommunications discounts for Internet access via electronic telecommunication, privacy protection, and open access to government information. We testify before the Congress and collaborate with other interest groups that share our concerns, e.g. other library associations, publishers, non-profits. We involve members in grassroots efforts to speak to their local legislators and to people in Washington. We are very effective but it is not always possible to achieve what we want regarding libraries. The Committee on Legislation of the ALA provides expertise of what happens on each situation. Many times it is difficult to get federal funding but there exists the Library Services and Technology Act and the program of Laura Bush "21st century Librarians' Initiative" for providing scholarships to new generation librarians. We have done quite well in the last several years but we always require more.

ES. Melvil Dewey, the inventor of the DDC system, organized the knowledge in the late 19th century. Three centuries later what is the status of the library profession and the librarian in the USA today?

L.B. The situation regarding library profession is not entirely dissimilar to other countries. Advocacy and marketing efforts take place to reshape the concept of libraries. In the USA 99% of the public libraries offer public access computers and many times computers become the reason for people to visit libraries. It is a challenge for us to make ourselves indispensable to people. It means that we should be more active. We should talk to people, to communities, to local education and be pedagogic about what libraries offer. The ALA has created ALA/APA (American Professional Association) which deals with the status and salaries of librarians. The librarians' status remains a problem, but it depends on us to demonstrate exceptional services and change the image of the librarian, by boosting how libraries are indispensable. We should make people use libraries, a situation that fits to the changing image of libraries which should be more helpful to users rather than authoritative, to be partners but not unapproachable. We are gradually losing control, thus we need an inventory control for our catalogs. However, people do not use library catalogs, but go to Google to carry out their searches, so that libraries may be forced to be integrated to Google in order to meet users' needs.

ES. In your interesting speech at our conference on June 10-11, 2008, you mentioned that the Web has brought many people back to libraries. On the other hand, some people believe that libraries will disappear due to the Internet. How has the overwhelming presence of the Internet affected libraries these days? Which of the two, the Internet or the libraries, seem to dominate among users?

L.B. It is not an either or situation. On the one hand Google search is wonderful for people to find information because the search engine is so accessible. It integrates information and access. But libraries provide opportunities to bridge the digital divide because many people cannot afford to pay for Internet access. Librarians know how to search and help users find their way to libraries and to computers. They provide training how to use computers. Libraries provide high speed access to the Internet and function as a social and safe environment for people. It is similar to the Internet cafes scattered around Athens, as I noticed. Libraries enable everyone to be part of the information age, to visit libraries for filling in online applications for jobs. Consequently, libraries contribute to narrowing the digital divide. Many times users do not know what they want and they contact us seeking assistance. People can recognize now that librarians are very skilled and can save time to users. People are much more sophisticated in their searching the web and they feel that they can execute better searches when they seek assistance by librarians.

The question brings at the forefront the question what the role of a library is. It is the kind of creating community ideas, it is the institution that brings people together, it offers debates and opportunities for all; it is a free institution and belongs to its community by being part of it. Despite the social networks and the new technologies, the need for face-to-face contact persists. So libraries remain steady there and are exposed to their users. Technology is the means that allows libraries to be better. We should think to capitalize on technologies and exploit new technologies. We should get rid of practices that are labor-consuming. What is more important: to create quality bibliographical records or to create cultural programs?

ES. *Information technology has many applications to libraries of all kinds. How deeply do you think IT has affected the traditional functions of libraries? Do you think technology is strength or weakness/thread for libraries?*

L.B. Information technology has totally changed the functions of libraries. We now have IT professionals among the library staff. There is a strong focus on technology initiatives for libraries which shows how to adopt new technologies in libraries and to offer services that are convenient to users. Technology offers opportunities to enhance the collections. It is better to have reference services, continuously updated, where more people are served at once and to provide effective services but not to provide routine jobs. For example, sending overdue reminders is easier and less time consuming than before. The e-mail facilitates the service. Now the technology helps sending a reminder note a couple of days before the due date. We use the technology in our library to create an e-newsletter which is sent out every month. It includes the programs of the month, ways to be more personal with users, and excited about the opportunities technology offers. Our future is to be smart but not threatened by the technology.

ES. You have recently inaugurated the new building of Princeton Public Library. Which are the new developments in the new building concerning the implementation of technologies in the library?

L.B. The implementation of technologies ranges from the building system to library functions. All building system components, i.e. ventilation, lighting, disaster prevention, temperature, shades, panels going up and down, are fully automated. All those parameters are shown on the screen. All updates in the software of the computers are monitored via a central computer and commands go to the desktops. The servers with firewalls are more sophisticated than before. We have more PCs available for the public (100 public access computers) and a wireless building with no charge for library's users.

ES. How do you anticipate that your users will embrace and be acquainted with the new technological features?

L.B. Users' reaction to the new features of the library is great if not somewhat reserved at first. We now serve users with lap-top computers by offering wireless access throughout the building. We offer downloadable audio books and music that people can load on their PC or MP3 devices. It is interesting that we are surveying people for generations, from babies to 90 years of age, from born-digital to traditional generations. But we offer the same content in various formats and have balances of the content and technology to satisfy all user needs.

ES. Do you think that introducing new technologies in libraries requires that users should be computer/technology literate? How does your library deal with information literacy and computer literacy for the users?

L.B. We have a Technology Center and offer classes throughout the month. The training sessions consist of how to use a computer to how to set up free e-mail accounts, or how to make digital photos, what the i-phone is, what a digital camera or a digital recorder is. The training sessions are in English and in Spanish. We offer hands-on experience on machines where users can try. We offer training on how to install new software on a PC or how to create web pages, how to edit photos or how to proceed with e-publishing and how to use Access to create a database.

To implement those complicated sessions we have technology aids that help people with printing and sending e-mails. The library staff that offers training sessions is IT people or trained librarians.

ES. Working at a modern library requires an equivalent quality level of the staff. How do you deal with enhancing the skills of your library's staff in order to be able to use the new technologies in favor of library users? In addition to knowledge about library science, which are the skills necessary for a librarian of the 21st century?

L.B. Library staff is often sent to offsite seminars or international conferences. We participate in the "Web 2.0 challenge." We challenge library staff to learn more: to set up their own blog and to explore new technologies. We do training in the Technology Center for our staff by vendors. Then we teach users at the moment they need help. We have a combination to support training.

In addition to library knowledge it is very important for librarians to have the ability to interact with people, to be friendly, customer-focused, and feel at ease to teach them new technologies.

ES. *I have recently read Robert Darton's opinion, Director of Harvard University Library, about the future of libraries. He believes that libraries will survive in the demanding world of the affluence of information, but library staff should struggle to keep libraries vivid. What is your opinion about the future of libraries in the age of globalization?*

L.B. Make sure to re-invent what libraries are about, and not link to past practices. Invest in marketing and shutter bad images associated with libraries. Create a level of vitality and excitement. It is a challenge to impart the information that makes people come to libraries.

ES. *Concerning Greek libraries, although they exist since the 4th century B.C., contemporary libraries are not as developed as they should be compared to other countries. What could you broadly suggest to Greek librarians that will assist them in their efforts to contribute to the development of libraries?*

L.B. I have noticed Internet cafes in Athens. It is an opportunity for libraries to capture people from Internet cafes and offer them free Internet access in libraries. You could also think about creating a model public library in a location that is visible to thousands of people. The library will become a teaching lab for the library community. The idea of a significant investment is really valuable. Let's consider public libraries as an alternative to "Public" the hi-tech store in the center of Athens. It includes audio books, print books and new technological instruments. If the municipal library cannot provide these things then it will be replaced by the store. It is an opportunity to understand how libraries can behave in the 21st century. Libraries in the Netherlands and France are fully integrated. You are a small country and a network of public libraries, physical or virtual could be a reality.

ES. *Mrs. Burger, thank you very much for your ideas and advices and thank you for your lecture in our conference.*

Athens, June 11, 2008