

Severe cutbacks in the budgets of Public Libraries: strategies to overcome the emergency

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The international financial crisis has deeply affected libraries worldwide. Public Administration confronted with the necessity of very harsh decision tends to consider cultural activities as something unnecessary and certainly not vital. Emblematic in this respect is a recent statement issued by the Italian Minister of Finance, Giulio Tremonti, who stated publicly that "Culture does not feed people!"... He probably meant physically disregarding the importance of education. But let's have a general look at what happened in some countries.

Christopher Caldwell wrote an article published in the Financial Times on 16th April 2011 that the recent cuttings in budget in the UK entailed the closing of 400 libraries. On the other side of the Atlantic 15 per cent of libraries have reduced their opening time in the recent months and others are desperately trying to find help to avoid doing the same thing. In addition to that Texas is considering cutting the funds for libraries by 99 per cent in 2012. In addition to the further loss of 8 billion dollars from the Federal Government in Florida, the Senate has cancelled 100 per cent of funds to libraries and in California, where the public budget is in a state of confusion, cultural services are bound to be curtailed severely.

The cuttings have caused very serious damage to the whole system of Buffalo & Erie County Library. Twenty branch libraries out of 52 had to be closed down with the consequent loss of 100 jobs and the inevitable sale of books and equipment to stem partly the economic deficit of 6 million dollars. The case of Philadelphia has also raised some impressions. The decisions made by the local Mayor involve the closing down of 11 out of 54 branch libraries with the consequent loss of 111 jobs. More dismissals have been scheduled in San Diego (California), in Hawaii, and in Trenton (New Jersey).

The situation is not so rosy in other countries either. In Germany, for instance, in the last decades the financial cuttings have brought about the closing down of 2.500 libraries with negative effects particularly for the weakest social classes, such as children, elderly people and public schools. (Jan Peter Barbian, *Die Öffentlichen Bibliotheken im Auge des Hurrikans*). A lot of dissatisfaction is simmering among librarians together with public protest by the Directors of libraries in Frankfurt, Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Dresden. A special case is represented by the libraries in Berlin where, after the unification in the wake of the financial crisis, funds have slumped from 6,6 million Euros in 1992 to 1,9 Euros in 2003 and due to the reform of city boroughs, libraries have diminished from 173 to 99.

In the UK things sometimes are really dramatic. As an example I can quote an article published in *The Guardian* on 6th February 2011 portraying the protests staged against the planned closure of more than 459 library services. Mostly hit are the libraries in south Yorkshire, Lancashire, Gloucestershire, Dorset and Oxfordshire where 20 of the 43 libraries still running are earmarked for withdrawal of funds. Even worse is a proposal for local groups to bid for grants and then run libraries voluntarily, which would only promote the "culture of amateurism"

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In spite of this negative trend, paradoxically enough, the present financial crisis has not affected the opinion about the value and importance of library services and we can mention some positive examples the other way round.

In fact the Amalia Herzogin Library in Weimar, Germany, recently damaged by fire, has been reconstructed and reopened to public. The same is valid for the technical Library in Wildau, near Berlin, set in a building previously designed to hoist locomotives. According to the article published by Jean-Marie Barbiche in *Le Bulletin des bibliothèques de France*, several examples can be mentioned for France as well, such as the library in Bordeaux which hosts currently up to 2,300 users.

It is also worth mentioning the recent case about the *André Malraux Médiathèque* in Strasbourg, built in the industrial port of the old city. It cost 64,5 million and stretches along 11,800 square meters. It is open 46 hours a week hosting 3,500 users a day, plus 6,000 on Sundays. Outside Europe, in Canada, *La grande Bibliothèque de Montréal* can be mentioned for its remarkable activities in time of crisis.

In a time of serious crisis, what kind of strategies can be envisaged for libraries to resist, to be able to offer their services now and in future, including innovative services? The first answer that comes into my mind can be expressed in one word: Politicians! Let us face it: public libraries are still no private companies and librarians are still public officials. Therefore, constructive relationships with politicians are essential to run and develop libraries properly. Paradoxically it is only too often that relationships between librarians and politicians are marked with distrust and lack of confidence and, in quite a lot of cases, librarians are responsible for that. Timidity, perhaps, or a sense of inferiority complex sometimes affected interpersonal relations with politicians dramatically, I am sorry to say, but according to my experience, librarians are not always victims. Constructive relationships with politician cannot be built exclusively on an individual basis but they must be supported by a network of interpersonal relations focused on and around libraries. Users must be urged also to express publicly their appreciation and positive judgment of the services they are offered. Press conferences, letters to newspapers, social networks must be used constantly to bring about a sort of positive atmosphere around libraries, to change the idea of inefficiency which quite often affects the public attitude of our profession. Politicians quite often do not have to be necessarily addressed to by librarians directly. Librarians have to monitor the inputs to politicians by users who, incidentally, are voters. Not that I mean to say that it is an easy job. There are risks of interference on the part of politicians, such as a kind of censorship in the purchase of books and in the general criteria of running libraries. It is true, but it is a kind of lobbying which cannot be dismissed. Bib Usherwood, the British librarian well known for his publications about public libraries, attaches a great deal of importance to political lobbying reminding of a research led by IFLA on the relations between librarians and politicians. In addition, more influence is effected if National Associations are involved and, it is even better, when various significant events about libraries take place in a particular location. Speaking from experience, I have been able to appreciate how deeply an IFLA world conference can influence administrative decisions by politicians who suddenly realize that libraries can move thousands of participants at the same time. Very significantly it is worth mentioning a meeting held in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in January 2005 by librarians, archivists and documentalists in order to work out proper strategies to deal with politicians. It is no accident that the Library Journal nominated the Governor of Delaware and her secretaries as "Politicians of the year" for 2007 for their cultural interest and financial support to libraries. Let me also mention the Editorial by Doris Schneider published in Germany under the title "Liebe Leserin/ Liebe Leser (Biblioteksforum Bayern, Oct. 2008) starting with the motto at the meeting of Bavarian librarians: "Bibliotheken brauchen Lobbyarbeit" which must be a permanent activity in spite of results which only too often modest. And, last but not least, 7th international conference organized by the Committee for the Support of Libraries, Athens, National Hellenic Research Foundation, October 7, 2011

one cannot avoid mentioning EBLIDA for its indefatigable lobbying work. More details can be found in the following website but a few words must be allowed on the subject. Lobbying in EBLIDA is divided into several specialized fields each of which is headed by a Commission of specialists. Single items are considered and deepened (such as copyright, professional training, culture and libraries) in order to produce documents to be presented to politicians in the European Parliament. Every single National Association is involved to make this work more effective. Please, join us!

A second answer however comes to mind in this time of serious crisis; optimization as well as rationalization of all the resources available through widespread policy of coordination. In this respect it is interesting to mention two examples relating to Italian libraries: one on a national level and another on a local level. On national level I am referring to the national library service (SBN) which I remember portraying in its main features on a different occasion here in Athens; the other one concerns the library systems in Lombardy. The basic principle is very simple and can be summarized in this phrase: "No man is an island ...and no library is an island either".

The National Library Service (SBN) is the Italian libraries network which is promoted by the Ministry for cultural Heritage and Activities in cooperation with the Regions and the Universities, with the coordination of the Central institute for the Union Catalogue of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic information. (CCU) Based on a protocol signed among the above mentioned institutions, the service aims to overcome the fragmentation of the librarian structures by bringing public libraries, local bodies, universities, schools, academies and private and public institutions into one network. In this way, libraries are gathered into nodes on a territorial basis, according to the areas where they run their services. The nodes, in turn, are connected to the SBN index which contains the Union Catalogue of the publications located in all the member libraries of the network. Thanks to SBN procedures, the libraries are completely autonomous and at the same time are joined together in a cooperative system based on an a national network. Shared cataloguing is the main function which makes both integration as well as economic optimization possible. Shared cataloguing brings about considerable savings in the budget of individual libraries since in SBN a document is catalogued only by the first library which acquires it. Therefore, all the other libraries which have to catalogue the same document only need to download the bibliographic description already present in the Index and add their own location. Loans and or / access to the documents are also coordinated enabling libraries to work rationally with one another. The multimedia database which currently contains Antiquarian, Modern, Music , Graphic and Cartography materials is available 24 hours a day at the following address : <http://opac.sbn.it>

On a local level it is worth mentioning that in Lombardy there is a special law (law n° 81) in force today. The law concerns the organization of libraries and was passed as early as 1985: The principle the law is based upon is the " Library system". (← full stop added here) The territory has been divided into areas with the main distinction between administrative provincial centers, which are eleven, and the rest of the territory. Each administrative center, which includes several libraries in its own territory, has been declared a library system. Outside these centers various municipalities have been grouped together to form a system with the maximum of habitants. Inside every system a central library has a coordinator's role, which involves a common policy about acquisitions, cataloguing, loans and promotional activities. Budgets are run individually but decisions are made jointly. Statistics are in common as well , so the territory can be monitored on a common basis staff are run individually because they are paid by each and every municipality but their activities, technically speaking, are coordinated by their system. In most cases libraries are part of the national service so they do not have to catalogue individually but can download 7th international conference organized by the Committee for the Support of Libraries, Athens, National Hellenic Research Foundation, October 7, 2011

data from the Union Catalogue. All the systems, both in the administrative centers and on the rest of territory, are coordinated by the Regional Library Office which is also responsible for maintaining and promoting the regional SBN node. Professional education and training also belong to the professional competence of the Regional Administration which also provides guidelines for the future development of libraries.

A third answer comes to mind now: focus your work on changing peoples' perception on libraries. This will enable libraries to face the challenges which this century, the new generations and the digital revolution are bringing along. It is only too often that both ordinary people as well as politicians still regard libraries superficially as heaps of dusty books which nobody is going to read. It is part of our professional commitment to act to alter this vision by pointing out that libraries nowadays have become a point of access to knowledge through all the forms that knowledge is available, which means printed materials as well as non-book materials, the evolution of which must be followed very carefully . At this point one question inevitably rises? How do libraries have to change their organization if they want to overcome the present financial grip? I think they have to attract more users and they have to become part of a wider range of services that are perceived as necessary.