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CI Lab Notes

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The future of the Romanian library

By Claudia Şerbănuţă, U. of Illinois

Interior of the Voineasa-Valcea Public Library.

Thanks to print and electronic technology and prompted by planetary issues of all kinds, everyone today is part of a global discourse. The Community Informatics Lab itself includes students and scholars from China, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, and Syria, as well as the United States. And we see one of the tasks of community informatics as to help design the future of public computing, which includes the modern library.

Accordingly, this Lab Note reflects the Community Informatics Lab as catalyst. A discussion in the lab encouraged the author, a future librarian and student of community informatics, to write this article for a publication in her home country (and language). We also encouraged her to translate it, knowing that other countries could learn from the experience of Romania, however unique it has been. An earlier version was published in Romanian in the weekly Dilema Veche (Old Dilemma) http://www.dilemaveche.ro/index.php?nr=215&cmd=articol&id=7953. *Cristina Stanciu, PhD candidate in the English Department at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, provided invaluable help with translation.*

I would like to believe that Romanian libraries will have a future similar to those of the European Union countries. There is a lot of buzz about the future of these institutions, the necessary changes, the resources allocated toward those changes; professional organizations also debate these changes that will impact the future of the profession and LIS students are aware of them. Unfortunately, the European Union moneys alone cannot improve standards and services in Romanian libraries, as many hope. The current state of the library system in Romania, along with the appropriate professional training for librarians and the creation of a new vision that will see to the allocation of European Union resources, are likely to determine the future of Romanian libraries.

The present: Extensive infrastructure and professional discourse

Libraries in Romanian serve a population of a little above 22 million people. The library system, as presented in Anghelescu (2005), consists of 42 county libraries (representing a total of 2,815, including all the branches, public libraries in villages and the National Library of Romania), 146 academic libraries (48 for state universities and 98 for private ones), 988 special libraries, 9,389 school libraries and the National Academic Library. There are two

professional associations that have regular meetings and are on a national level: National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries from Romania (ANBPR) http://www.anbpr.org.ro, Association of Romanian Librarians (ABR) http://www.abr.org.ro (which used to be called The Association of Education Librarians until 2007). In Romania there are also associations on local or regional level like: Association of Bucharest Librarians and Documentarists, Romanian National Library Librarians Association http://abbnr.bibnat.ro/, Romanian Hungarian Librarians Association(RMKE).

Romanian librarians started, shyly and relatively late, to use the Web as a tool for finding and exchanging professional information. Besides electronic mail and instant messaging other web tools used for professional communication by Romanian librarians are listservers (one maintained by "Mihai Eminescu" Central University Library from Iasi since 1998 and one for RMKE that started in 2001), individual blogs that cover themes from book reviews to LIS Conferences and latest news in the field (first one started in 2004), blogs of professional associations (ABR, ANBPR) and collective blogs that gather together librarians from different type of libraries and offer a space where comments on sensitive subjects can be made. The online presence of librarians is not overwhelming but is offering a space where conversation about everyday problems and achievements of librarians can start.

The past: Tradition and trauma

The history of Romanian libraries resembles, to a certain extent, the history of other European libraries. It starts with the first institutionalization of libraries within monasteries, and continues with school libraries, the emergence of a network of public libraries and the National Library. Romanian libraries have played a significant part in defining national identity and in educating the populace. From the very foundation of these institutions, public intellectuals have supported them warmly: Nicolae Cretzulescu,[i] Spiru Haret,[ii] and Nicolae Iorga[iii] helped passed laws that supported the development of Romanian libraries. The Royal Foundation "Prince Carol" also invested in local cultural houses that hosted public libraries in rural areas.

In the 1930's Dimitrie Gusti[iv] theorized the role of popular culture to the formation of modern culture. According to Gusti, "The work of culture may not impart the same cultural level to everybody, but it offers occasion for everybody to develop their own cultural level." Taken in the context of Gusti's own time, these words don't illuminate a whole lot; taken in the context of today's information society, however, they offer new meanings worth considering.

The communist era was as bleak for Romanian libraries as it was for the country as a whole. A series of questions emerges slowly about the role of libraries in Romanian society, the effects of censorship and state propaganda in libraries, as well as their role in the long death of library science as a field of knowledge and expertise and the development of the librarian profession. These questions are relevant and demand urgent answers.

The isolation of Romanian libraries during the Communist regime has led to a major decline of the institution as well as missing an important change that took place in Western Europe—the shift in cultural field from elite to popular culture in the 1960s. This major shift saw not only the development of the culture industry, but also the encouragement of "everybody's culture" that Gusti had anticipated but which never saw the light of day in Romania. Of course, Western European libraries adopted these changes, making the citizens' cultural needs central to their mission. It was thus discovered that a library can and must help the people, regardless of their educational level, and that it must offer assistance in their search for information. Therefore, the reference librarian, along with the shared catalog, the inter-library loan system, the use of the library space as a community meeting ground have become common staples of Western European libraries. In Romania, however, they are scarcely making their way. Romanian libraries have not yet fully grasped or assumed their meaning and importance.

The difficult transition following the fall of Communism has also impacted the country's libraries. One of the first steps setting the wheels in motion has been the decentralization of public libraries. Unfortunately, local administrations have not been encouraged enough financially to sustain the public libraries efficiently. It is also worth mentioning that the intellectual population segment that libraries had heretofore served has not helped in this endeavor. There are still instances when the mayor's office decides on the location of libraries; in these circumstances, the buildings allocated to libraries are usually not the best facilities. Moreover, there are documented instances when the mayor's office decided to interpret recent legislation to the disadvantage of librarians' income; at the same time, when it comes to the administration of the local budget, the libraries' budgets are the first in line to be sacrificed.[v]

The Soros Foundation, which invested in libraries in other countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Moldova has not chosen to finance cultural and educational activities in Romania, and thus to contribute to the development of the country's libraries, the Foundation's PR representative told me. Underlying the Foundation's choice was the idea that, unlike other former Communist European countries, Romanian libraries cannot play a part in fostering and developing democracy. This decision represented not only a loss for Romanian libraries but also for Romanian society at large. Democracy also presupposes a public meeting space (the needed and discussed "public sphere") where the community meets and interacts. NGOs cannot offer this kind of space that libraries, especially those in small communities, can. This lack of interest in the future of Romanian libraries from many angles has led to an unusual instance where the country's librarians emphasize that "we still have a way to go to catch up with Moldavian libraries," Moldavia being arguably the poorest country in Europe.

The future: An information society needs information literacy

The future of Romanian libraries depends on their capacity to adapt to larger changes the country is going through as it undergoes the turn toward a post-industrial society. As Giuseppe Vittiello noted about the politics and legislation of European Union libraries, libraries are hybrid institutions: a third is devoted to the cultural segment, a third to the educational, and a third to the informational segment. Along with the information centers, these hybrid institutions are fully dedicated to creating a national informational infrastructure. If we apply this lens to Romanian libraries, we are faced with a completely different image.

In this country, the informational society has become, courtesy of the EU, a priority of the Romanian government; thus the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology invests primarily in the physical information infrastructure, whose main targets are the development of the IT market, bridging the gap between the rural and urban digital proficiency by supplying villages with computers and connecting them to the Internet. Needless to say, the conversation about how the population will actively participate in this information society hasn't been started yet. Other aspects are still little talked about: how the new technology will be used in the learning process with a view to enhancing awareness about people's rights. The guiding principle still in place is that necessity is the mother of all inventions. The question, however, remains: does contemporary Romanian society cultivate the need that would determine the population to participate in e-governing, for instance, when people hardly make it to the voting booths?

One issue remains clear: libraries should and could help in consolidating a country's informational literacy process. Nevertheless, two major drawbacks hinder this process. The first one is the assumption that libraries are an important component of an informational society, an assumption shared by external financing sources. But when the money gets to Romania, the decision-making agents overlook the role of libraries in fulfilling an important mission in an informational society. Therefore, the money is often invested in centers of information and documentation started from scratch, without any professional expertise or network. On the other hand, the local administration in most localities in Romania is still too poor to sustain financially the existing libraries and their network, hence the expectation to receive support from the European Union.

The second drawback, perhaps more dangerous than the first, is found at the local level: libraries try to cater to patrons using all the means at their disposal, while patrons use the library's limited resources they have known for a long time without any high expectations. Because the patrons don't publicize their information needs (online information and media access), librarians often disregard them. Librarians are thus caught in the middle of this conundrum: they have no support (financial or logistical), their professional training is inadequate to the current demands of the market, and they fail to understand what their role is in the present and future of the Romanian library system. A manifesto[vi] that the International Federation of Librarians Associations (IFLA) and UNESCO signed in 1994 (!) seems like a nice dream but dreamt by other libraries…perhaps the Romanian libraries of the future.

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[i] Nicolae Cretzulescu (1812-1900) was a Wallachian-born Romanian politician and physician. He served three terms as Prime Minister of Romania: from 1862 to 1863, again from 1865 to 1866, and finally in 1867.(Wikipedia.org)

[ii] Spiru C. Haret (1851-1912) was a Romanian mathematician, astronomer and politician. During his three terms as Minister of Education, Spiru Haret ran deep reforms, building the modern Romanian education system. (Wikipedia.org)

[iii] Nicolae Iorga (1871 - 1940) was a Romanian historian, university professor, literary critic, memorialist and politician. He served as a member of Parliament, as President of the post-World-War-I National Assembly, as minister, and as Prime Minister(1931-1932). (Wikipedia.org)

[iv] Dimitrie Gusti (1980-1955) was a Romanian sociologist, ethnologist, historian, and voluntarist philosopher; a professor at the University of Iaşi and the University of Bucharest, he served as Romania's Minister of Education in 1932-1933. (Wikipedia.org)

[v] Hermina Anghelescu has a number of articles about the situation of Romanian public libraries before 2006.

[vi] IFLA-Unesco manifesto, http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/unesco/eng.htm

The Community Informatics Lab is a research facility opened in January 2008 in order to study the interaction of local communities and information technology in the tradition of the bench sciences, with a physical lab space for multiple projects. Its goal is to perfect current methodologies and develop new ones. Current projects include eChicago (ethnic communities and technology use), TOP Data Archive (creating and using an archive of 600+ community technology projects), eBlack (creating and using two online datasets regarding African American Illinois and African American Studies), Pnet 15 (reviewing the 15 year history of Prairienet), and Community Technology on Earth (coding and analyzing documented instances of community technology).

The CI Lab looks forward to becoming a research tool available for faculty and students studying local communities or carrying out research in local communities. We welcome inquiries and visits from across the university, the state, and beyond. A Wednesday night pot luck dinner during the semester is open to all.

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