‘Access for All’ and ‘Politics of Difference’:
Comparative Case Study of Two European Libraries

Rumyana Koycheva
Consultant Global Libraries – Bulgaria Project
Sofia, Bulgaria

Introduction

Since the beginning of the public library movement in Europe, around the middle of the 19th century, public libraries have always been about ‘access for all’. The birth of public libraries was inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, which advanced reason and knowledge as driving forces for progress. The movement also postulated that the great achievements of science and philosophy belong to all people. The justification for public libraries having an ‘access for all’ ideal was accepted by many countries for pragmatic reasons such as rapid industrialization, widespread urbanization, the necessity for educated workers (Allred 1972), and, the need for national revolutions to have knowledgeable people (Кирова 1975).

Within the last two decades of the post-industrial era, characterized by the boom of technologies, a knowledge-based economy as well as the infusion of the digital culture into all spheres of life, the philosophy of the Enlightenment was revived along two axes:

− First: The availability and access to ‘information for all’, combined with persons having the skills to produce and use knowledge in their daily and professional lives. These skills have proved to be key to personal, local and national development (Tise 2009); and
− Second: The ‘freedom of information’ or the access to information held by public bodies, is considered a universal human right by series of documents and by national laws that are now the law of the land in more than 70 countries, including some developing nations (UNESCO 2010). The enactment of such legislation and recognition of such international agreements represent advancements towards the culture of inclusion and democracy.

What implications do these developments have for public libraries as institutions given that they have as one of their primary functions the delivery of information and knowledge? As public bodies closely linked to their local municipalities’ agendas, public libraries are expected to identify and respond to a
diversity of user needs within their service communities through expanded activities and innovative services. Hence, public libraries need to take into consideration global phenomena such as the rapid diversification and segmentation of the world societies caused by liberalization, advances in human rights, globalization and migration. In practical terms, these require from public libraries the need to recognize distinctiveness within their local communities and for these institutions to constantly readjust their library products to meet ever changing demographics and different needs, in other words, to integrate the ‘politics of difference’ as part of their professional activities. This is one strategy through which libraries can ‘create opportunities for all members of the community to participate fully in the information and knowledge society’ as put forward in IFLA’s Strategic Plan for 2011 (IFLA Strategic Plan 2011).

A number of ‘activities and groups’ within the framework of IFLA contribute to the differentiation of library products tailored to meet specific user needs and practices around the world (IFLA 2010). The American Library Association (ALA), although not mentioning the concept of the ‘politics of difference’, goes further by promoting both ‘access for all’ and the diversification of library activities through its competition-based Strategic Planning for Diversity and Diversity Research Grants, run by the ALA’s specialized Office for Diversity (ALA 2010).

Overloaded or challenged? Libraries are supposed to operate in quite complicated contexts: neo-liberal regimes; a world economic crisis; and, shrinking welfare states. The case studies chosen for examination in this chapter provide evidence on how some European public libraries are currently providing ‘access for all’ and responding to ‘difference’ in their communities. These include addressing issues such as:

1. What scope do libraries have with dealing with diversity;
2. How public libraries reach diverse publics;
3. What strategies they apply; and
4. How library products get changed and improved based on needs.

The analysis will also speculate on the anthropology of public libraries and how these relate to the ‘politics of difference’.

Context

This chapter compares how the “P. R. Slaveikov” Regional Library of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria and the City Library of Gothenburg, Sweden provides access for all within a framework of the ‘politics of difference’. Several reasons determined this choice:

1 In this chapter the “P. R. Slaveikov” Regional Library will also be referred to the “Regional Library”.

Unauthenticated
Download Date | 6/3/19 3:17 AM
1. Both libraries are the biggest in their countries;
2. They represent two diverse cultural contexts;
3. Both are active in practicing the ‘politics of difference’ in terms of a philosophy that is grounded in ‘access for all’;
4. Both libraries have developed a conscious policy towards ‘access for all’ and ‘difference’ while developing different strategies to reach their patrons.
5. Both libraries represent a conscious policy in the creation of specific library products for specific communities.

Evidence extracted from the two case studies together outline the wide scope of diversity, the range of possible users communities and highlight the subtle matter of the ‘politics of difference’.

Methodology

The chapter uses a comparative case study method. Data was collected from fieldwork, in-depth interviews, professional discussions and correspondence, and an examination of diverse secondary data. The notes, taken during fieldwork in these two libraries in July and August 2010 serve as the basis for the study. A professional diary, reflecting on other European libraries visited in the last five years was also consulted during the course of the research.

Two in-depth interviews were conducted for the purpose of the study, one from each library examined, namely with the:

1. Director of the Regional Library in Veliko Tarnovo, Ivan Alexandrov; and the
2. Librarian-in charge of Europe Direct at the Gothenburg City Library, Daniel Backman.

In addition, many professional conversations and e-mails with colleagues from both libraries provided useful information for the study. Relevant research articles and web sites were also consulted.

Theoretical Background

The study has been designed around two major concepts: ‘access for all’ and the ‘politics of difference’. Both need some additional clarification. ‘Access for all’ with regard to libraries implies two meanings:

1. Access to information which tackle diversity; and the
2. Skills which may be of use to any individual to create knowledge.
In recent years ‘access for all’ is usually associated with availability of digital information and skills to use it in order to produce personal knowledge and to ‘create equitable societies’ (UNESCO 2010; IFLA Strategic Plan 2011). No doubt, the concept has acquired more meaning within the digital era, but is this the whole truth? Information literacy is a term that is also often confused with the application of ICT to library services, although the two terms are theoretically distinct (Catts and Lau 2008). The distinction tolerates also other channels and styles of creating knowledge. Library practices throughout the world show diverse examples – from learning gardening through doing it such as was done about five years ago in the yard of the Permeke Library (Permeke Library, Antwerp 2010), to creating knowledge through debating (Sofia City Library 2010). ‘Access for all’ must thus be seen as a wide term deserving a flexible approach.

‘Politics of difference’ often blurs with the concept of ‘diversity’. Then, it is difficult to find references or previous writing on the ‘politics of difference’ in the literature of librarianship. Thus, this area requires investigation by LIS researchers either as a concept or as a library practice.

Nevertheless, the library community has been involved in developing collections and services for specific groups, e.g. for the blind, from as early as the creation of the first public libraries in the middle of the 19th century. Also, since the first decades of the 20th century, a great number of activities and groups within IFLA have been launched to guide and unite the efforts of the international community with regard to multiculturalism, multilingual societies, people with special needs, illiterate communities, children and youth, among others. There is a substantial amount of literature devoted to ‘diversity’ in librarianship in general (Gulati 2010) or public libraries services for ethnic and cultural diversities (Skot-Hansen 2002); diversity in the community (Larsen, Jacobs and Vlimmeren 2003); the elderly (Sloan 2009); ethnic diversity and citizenship (Roach and Morrison 1998); as well as to immigrants and newcomers (Bender 2007). There are also some libraries which develop collections of gay and lesbian literature (City Library of Amsterdam 2010). While some collect self-published amateur literature (Sello Library 2010).

A look at the concept of the ‘politics of difference’ in other fields could be of help to explain its meaning with regard to libraries. The term comes from political science and it is usually linked to the liberalization of thought after the movements that have taken place all over the world dating from the late 1960s. The concept acknowledges the rights and voices of the ‘Others’ such as women, youth, ethnic and racial minorities, persons with disabilities and homosexuals. These changes have also influenced popular culture’s fast growth and legitimatization. Some authors claim that historically “the rulers in pre-industrial societies had little concern with the ethnic identity and cultural practices of their subjects as long as they paid their taxes” (Grillo 1998). In most of his work Foucault suggests that the foundation of contemporary institutions,
which can be traced to between 1500 and 1800, was intended to discipline or isolate those who differed from the mainstream, i.e. those who represented the ‘Other’ (Foucault 1991). In this period the passion for ordering and classification was implemented into the functions of the new asylums, hospitals, prisons, almshouses as well as towards nomads, foreigners, strangers and migrants (Foucault 1991). During the creation of modern nation states in the 19th century, integration policies aimed at suppressing differences and assimilating ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees into the mainstream of their host societies. The ‘politics of difference’ from its inception is associated with recognizing the differences, uniqueness and richness of human identity/ies. Consequently, the concept also has relevance to human rights and it is especially linked to the ‘right of expression’ for all segments of society (UNESCO 2010). It is also closely allied with issues such as identity politics, democracy, tolerance and inclusion. In humanities, the ‘politics of difference’ applies to subjects such as feminism (Weedon 1999); race (McCarty 1990); class relations (Harvey 1993); ethnic issues (Wilmsen and McAllister 1996) community development (Young 1995); pedagogy (Giroux 1992); medical research (Epstein 2007); and, disability (Humphrey 1999), etc.

A useful example of the ‘politics of difference’ in culture is presented by Mommaas with regard to the Tilburg Pop Cluster. This project is aimed at the ‘formation of multiform civic urban space’ (Mommaas 1999). It is about clustering several diverse music organizations – classical and popular – who jointly use a multifunctional building with a concert hall for 2,000 people. The space has also a sufficient number of rehearsal rooms which can be used simultaneously for different productions as well as several small stages for concurrent performances; a music café; a recording studio; a video-clip studio; an information desk; and, a small music shop, inter alia. Networking opportunities amongst education institutions like the Rock Academy, the Conservatory, a music Summer school, a Pop Factory, local youth communities, underground groups and a professional inner city stage company have also been established. The idea behind these initiatives is to acknowledge ‘difference’ and to accommodate diversity in all possible dimensions: education; production; and, consumption. All spectra of genres, highbrow and underground cultures, their publics and experiences are accommodated in this space. The outcome has been recognition of diversity, the constant mixing of big-scale and small-scale specific musical products and experiences as well as the formation of a creative space in which all can meet.

How can the above reflections be transferred to the library discourse? At first glance, the two concepts – ‘diversity’ and ‘politics of difference’ – may seem to overlap, but in fact they concern two separate issues. The first centers on scope and the second deals with the necessity of specific approaches to specific publics and products. With reference to public libraries it means an awareness of the differentiation and permanent redefinition of society into
fluid groups with unique tastes and needs with regard to such things as learning strategies, information, knowledge, culture, entertainment and communication. This new role of libraries can also be seen in the creation of less general and more small-scale library products such as collections, materials, services, events and experiences. Such developments require that libraries have a proactive approach towards their local adjacent communities and the fashioning of library work into a creative industry. Partnerships with similar organizations and grass roots groups, marketing, developing needs assessment skills, investing in the creation of user-friendly products, using advanced technological devices and applying proper promotional activities will make such a policy work.

The Regional Library of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria: a Case Study

Veliko Tarnovo is situated in north central Bulgaria at the foot of the Balkan Mountain along the twisting Yantra River. It is famous for having been the capital of Bulgaria between the 12th and 14th centuries. The city was known as center of culture, Christianity, literacy and book production in the Middle Ages. Now it attracts tourists from all over the world with its unique symbiosis of beautiful surroundings and old Bulgarian architecture (Veliko Tarnovo city 2010).

Figure 1: Bulgaria indicating the location of Veliko Tarnovo

The city is located at the crossroads where east and west Bulgaria meet, placed between Central Europe and Asia Minor, positioned on the European Transport Corridor 9 and built on and amongst three hills in the Balkan Mountain. It
is a ‘radiant’ place. A good city transport system connects the city centre with each point of the periphery. The city itself has a population of 72,111 whereas the metropolitan area has around 273,000 persons. Today, Veliko Tarnovo is a hub of culture, creative industries, university education and tourism.

The “P. R. Slaveikov” Regional Public Library: Introduction

This library is known as a ‘people’s’ or ‘deposit library’, meaning that the library is one of the few in Bulgaria that receives items under the Law of Deposit. The collection of the “P. R. Slaveikov” Regional Library is based partly on a public library, created by patriotic Bulgarians in 1869 during the Ottoman Empire and the national revolutionary movement. As a consequence, it has one of the largest library collections in Bulgaria.

The main building of the Regional library is about a ten minutes walk from the city centre. The Archaeological Museum and two other famous historical museums – The State Archive Department and The Veliko Tarnovo Patriarchy – are located nearby. The design of the main library building, although from the beginning of the 40’s, stylistically matches the surrounding 19th century environment. The purpose-built library was meant to accommodate the library, the Archaeological Museum and a Gallery. Of course, the space soon became too small; as a consequence, the Gallery was relocated. Over time, four branch libraries in the four areas of the city were opened to provide additional accommodation for the growing collections. Now the Children’s Department, the Deposit Literature and the Special Media Collections are found in the biggest branch library. The Arts Department is in another branch library and the foreign language section is in yet another one. In practice this requires that transportation arrangements are put in place to bring material from one library to the other to meet users’ needs. The construction of a new modern building in a complex with a shopping center is anticipated, once the economic situation improves.

Meanwhile there is a competition for users with the University Library (which is not far away from the main library of the Regional Library) and five other traditional cultural centers with libraries, including the oldest one in the city. The latter neighbors the main building of the Regional library and in the last years purposely focused on a children’s collection in order to attract children and their families from that part of the city.

Library Profile

As one of the biggest libraries in Bulgaria, gaining from the symbolic value of its city, the “P. R. Slaveikov” Library is keen to be seen as the premier information and cultural institution in the country. The library seeks to provide ‘access for all’ through an intensive digitization program, the availability of e-resources
for diverse audiences, international activities, networking and the library’s involvement with the Eurostory 20th Century project which is a digital cultural history of 20th century Europe. With respect to acknowledging diversity the library has made big investments in providing access to information for people with disabilities. The library holds an annual scientific national conference in cooperation with the Library Department of Veliko Tarnovo University. It also sponsors regular open discussions about local and national cultural policies with Ambassadors and Directors of Foreign Cultural Centers. These are quite popular. Further, the library participates in most inclusive city events like cultural festivals (Ivanova 2009). All of these initiatives indicate that the library networks with a wide range of partners at diverse levels and in a number of fields.

This case study examines the library’s policy with regard to serving diversity and difference, mainly through its creation and application of library products for specific deprived groups even if the number of persons in these groups may be relatively small. Developed in the last ten years, such efforts to embrace diversity and ‘difference’ are a part of the library’s ‘politics of difference’ initiatives. These activities have been also connected with Bulgaria’s efforts to join the European Union (EU) and to acknowledge the right to information and expression for all (Alexandrov 2010). Such policies presume a new proactive approach towards non-user communities.

The next section will present some library projects with four groups that are isolated and physically distant from all other communities in the city, namely, inhabitants of the prison; girls and ladies at the Safety Home for Victims of Trafficking; inhabitants of the Home for People with Mental Disabilities; and, residents of the Old People’s House. As the first three communities are under closed regimes because of specific reasons (to be explained later) and the fourth one – because of the physical conditions of the most of the inhabitants, the library has developed a ‘radiant’ strategy of taking resources, guidance and instruction to the relevant communities, and in one of the cases also the opposite – that of bringing groups together with their available resources to the library space.

Library services to inmates of the near-by prison

The prison is situated not far from the main library building. In an interview with the Regional Library Director, the Director of the Prison indicated that the prison population consists mainly of ordinary people. Sometimes they are persons who have fallen into a life of crime by accident (Alexandrov 2010). Since 2001, the library initiated a contract with the prison to employ prisoners for carriage, repair the building, gardening and other activities. There is a clause in the contract which requires the prison to select inmates who are liter-

---

2 As in transporting items.
ate and diligent to work in the Library. In the beginning of the business partnership, the Director of the Prison indicated that the inmates who were chosen had expressed an interest in the library and that they wished to have access to books and periodicals (Alexandrov 2010). As they had no ID’s, they could not become members of the library or access library services. Consequently, the library management decided to build a small library within the prison. In a partnership with the prison’s management team, two library experts developed a collection of Bulgarian and world classic titles to help with the inmate’s re-education process. The collection would also enhance their horizons and make their incarceration more bearable. The publishing house Slovo, a traditional library partner, joined the team and assisted the Regional Library with stocking the prison’s library. Feedback from the prison’s staff showed that access to books and knowledge had positively influenced the prisoner’s patterns of behavior and how they spent their time. This encouraged the Library to expand the project and five librarians were appointed to develop a ‘winter’ strategy, a schedule which will cover the long winter hours inside the prison. The project was aimed at increasing reading and developing reading habits. The first steps included holding writers meetings and discussions in the prison; launching creative writing workshops conducted by volunteers; and, literary evenings which were devoted to the writing of poetry by prisoners, competitions, painting workshops and exhibitions. These events became regular library activities and were seen as being good practice. In 2007, when the probation scheme was launched in Bulgaria, the Regional Library was the first institution to sign a contract with the relevant office for convicted persons to arrange for them to work off their appointed hours in the library. Up to this point in time, about 10 probationers have worked between 100 and 200 hours each in the Library in the evenings and on weekends as a condition of their probation. A librarian has been appointed to be in charge of working with these persons. Among the tasks of this librarian is to organize discussions on books and to provide the probationers with instruction on how to use the e-catalogue and Internet.

Library services for persons at the ‘Protected House for Victims of Trafficking’

The House was opened in 2008 in the village of Balvan, a few kilometers from Veliko Tarnovo. Ten victims of trafficking, women and under-aged girls, are housed at this institution. The occupants participate in a rehabilitation program. Four social workers and a psychologist are in charge of their recovery program. For safety reasons, the women are closely supervised. They are not allowed to have contact with persons in the surrounding community. Soon after its opening, the Director of the House approached the Regional Library for assistance. The Regional Library, an NGO and representatives of a small local library joined forces to develop a library strategy which sought to address the
victim’s needs. The two libraries proposed to supply a mini library in the Protected House and the NGO was permitted to appoint staff to regularly visit and discuss with the women which books they preferred. A collection of 50 new books – fiction and classics – was donated by the two libraries. The well-known publishing house, Zahary Stoianov, a partner of the Regional Library, responded positively to an invitation to provide for the mini library a periodical of modern literature known as ‘Vezni’. The entire initiative, including discussions and the new literary experience, was very well received by the women. The psychologist referred to this initiative as a bibliotherapy.

‘Access to knowledge’ for the ‘Home for People with Mental Disabilities’

The Regional Library has a well established policy to supply and service people with disabilities. It has long standing partnerships with the National Union of Blind People, the agency within the Ministry of Labor and Social Politics responsible for people with disabilities; the British Council; the local club for people with disabilities; and, the Municipality of Veliko Tarnovo. Several projects have been completed over the last 10 years. The library owns about 5,000 talking books; a significant collection of Braille books; a specially equipped and designed learning room at the biggest branch library in the suburb of Buzludza; regular information literacy courses for blind people; and, an external elevator and a bathroom for people in wheel chairs or others with mobility issues. This facility was made possible through a public-private partnership with several local companies.

The Home for People with Mental Disabilities dates from Communist times. It is situated in a mountain environment far from the city and villages (in order for it to be hidden from society). There are about 100 residents at this institution. In addition to the mentally disabled there are also some blind persons who have no one to care for them. As some of the inhabitants get aggressive and become dangerous to themselves and others, the Home follows a strong closed regime.

Six years ago the Director of the Home approached the Regional Library and asked for help in managing the inhabitant’s time, stay and health care. Together with the library management team, they created a complex product of innovative services, which allowed the Home to borrow books from the Library for its residents. In addition, librarians lead reading activities in the best equipped space for that purpose in the Buzludza Branch Library; Braille literacy courses for the blind were also offered. This was accompanied by instruction in the use of the talking books. On their part, the Home decided to donate its collection of Braille books to the Library so that they could be accessible for regular use by disabled library patrons. This also ensured that these books would serve a larger population. Buzludza Branch Library rescheduled its program, so that on each Tuesday at 2.00 p.m. about 15 people from the Home,
escorted by a social worker, would come to the library by their minibus. Some take Braille courses, some listen to talking books, others take information literacy classes, while those with major medical issues sit, listen to explanations and enjoy a completely different experience. This makes them all look forward to the session in the following week (Alexandrov 2010). What has really made the librarians happy is that they succeeded in stimulating some of the mentally handicapped to use talking books which “helps them to refresh their lives, to improve their concentration and to get some calm in their souls” (Alexandrov 2010).

The ‘Old People’s House’ Library Experience

This project started in 1994 soon after the opening of the new branch library in the largest area of Veliko Tarnovo, the suburb of Buzludja. The opening of this branch library was welcomed by the city dwellers. It is an area where people know each other. The librarians are also from the same area, so they know their neighborhood and their customers know them. This they say “eases their job”.

The branch library is about 500 meters from the Old People’s House, which hosts about 100 people. The Old People’s House has been in existence since 1980. It has a small library, a hall for cultural and social events and its own cultural traditions. Immediately after the opening of the branch library about 30 people from the Old People’s House became the first library members. Residents of the House have become regular patrons and participants of library events like poetry readings, meetings with writers and library celebrations. Encouraged by library staff some of the residents of the House joined the City Literary Club and started consulting with librarians about their attempts at writing poetry. Not long after its establishment, the branch library acknowledged this group of people as an important segment of the local library community. Through visits and focus groups librarians studied their needs in order to create library products pertinent to the needs of these persons. Librarians also facilitated access to information for inhabitants who are not capable of leaving the House. In a partnership with the House Manager and a few publishing houses, the House’s book collection was refurbished and enlarged with titles covering the classics and history. Also added were copies of periodicals about poetry, health issues, cooking, gardening and life styles. Then, as an important part of the library specific product librarians arranged regular lectures and talks about local, national and world history. These were accompanied by small relevant exhibitions in the House’s auditorium as well as literary evenings with children from the closest school. Through a partnership with the local school, instruction in using computers is available to interested residents at the branch library computer room by some volunteer students.
Several important outcomes of these specialized library services deserve to be mentioned. Two years ago, inhabitants of the House decided to publish a poetry book. Librarians were the first to lend with ideas, make connections to facilitate publishing and assist with the execution of the entire project. In 2009, a family from the House gave a poetry evening in the library which was attended by about 30 people from the neighborhood. In April 2010, a House Committee, encouraged by the Buzludga Branch Library, created an e-newspaper *Our Home*. Since then they have produced nine issues. There is always an article about the Library in each issue. The inhabitants of the House refer to the Library as their ‘second home’ and they say that the “library staff has changed their lives” (Our Home 2010).

The Gothenburg City Library, Sweden: a Case Study

Gothenburg is situated in South-western Sweden at the mouth of the Göta River, which flows into the North Sea. It is the second largest city in Sweden and it has the largest harbor in the Nordic community. Traditional activities were trade, shipping, fishing and manufacturing. Modern Gothenburg is associated with SKF (a manufacturing company), Volvo (motor cars) and Ericsson (electronics). The city is also known for its water, canals, fashion and design, forests and parks, and its carefully arranged urban green spaces (Gothenburg 2010). There is a good blend between old 19th century architecture and post modern structures.

Located in the centre of Scandinavia, Gothenburg is a maritime city, easily accessible to the world. The Gothia Fortress, built on the Göta River to protect
Gothenburg is proud to proclaim that it has eighteen members in the Swedish Parliament and that it is a leading city in transparency and democracy through its implementation of a diversity of projects. The city has about 509,847 people out of a total of 922,938 inhabitants in the metropolitan area. Immigrants constitute about 25% of the city’s population. A cosmopolitan city, focused on international education, culture, events industry and tourism, Gothenburg is home to the Gothia Towers and the famous World Congress Centre, a site of many discussions and debates of a global nature (Gothenburg 2010).

Gothenburg City Library: Introduction

The City Library is the main actor in a network of 24 neighborhood and two mobile libraries which serve the Gothenburg metropolitan area. The Library is favorably positioned on a canal-crossing boulevard known as Avenyn (The Avenue). This road leads to the old city centre, an open market and a small park. The City Library, located in building which dates from the end of the 1960’s, is in a cluster which houses the Gothenburg Museum of Art, two theatres, a concert hall and an open-air stage in the lively Götaplatsen square.

The Gothenburg library collection was launched in 1861 in a flat in Haga. It was donated by mill owner, James Dickson, whose aim was to attract the working class to literacy and reading. There was no charge for this service. The building eventually became too small and in 1897 the library moved to South Avenue into one of the first purpose-built public libraries in Scandinavia. Sixty years later, the Library moved into the building on Götaplatsen in which it is still located.

The City Library’s Exhibition Hall, located on the ground floor, is one of the city’s most attractive art spaces. It hosts exhibitions, other library activities or events organized by diverse associations, NGOs and clubs. An auditorium on the lower floor, used for public lectures and debates, accommodates 187 persons and four wheelchairs. There are several nicely arranged cozy spaces for a variety of uses throughout the library; a library-café; as well as book and newspaper areas. A collection of items in more than 60 languages attracts people with diverse tastes, needs, practices and backgrounds to spend more time in the library. The building is to be renovated and expanded soon. This project is scheduled to begin sometime in 2011 and finish in 2013. The building glass walls will fuse library life with what is happening in the city.

Library Profile

Gothenburg City Library is one of the biggest libraries in Sweden. It is a well-known and often visited place. The library aims to be a leading information and cultural institution in a country that is highly digitized. Its book and e-coll-
lections, events and activities provide information, cultural and leisure services and products that cater to the needs of the city’s diverse population. Automation has ensured that each library member can choose the branch library that best suits them to return a loan. A huge area with significant accessible media collections for people with various disabilities – visual, physical, reading and writing, developmental, hearing and aphasia, including relevant children’s collections – supplements Sweden’s famous welfare state policy (A Day at the City Library 2010). Two mobile libraries, equipped with new books and periodicals serve suburban communities.

As already implied, the library has developed a ‘politics of difference’ to serve its diverse urban community. The origin of this practice is the creation of a number of library ‘corners’, designed, furnished and devoted to specific collections, services and users. These corners include a Poetry Corner; an Information Literacy Corner; a Humanities and Social Science Corner; an International Corner with a language café and multilingual programs; a Dynamo Corner for youth; a Parliamentary Corner; a Europe Direct Corner; and an Entrepreneurial Corner (A Day at the City Library 2010). All of these create the ‘mosaic’ of the library. A quite remarkable event in these corners is the holding of debates on issues which impact on people’s lives. For example, debates in the Poetry Corner on selected new books consider topics such as immigration, exclusion, trafficking, underground life, secret cities, sexuality, modern physics and the transformation of scientific language (Gothenburg City Library 2010).

This case study will focus on three unusual library products: namely, the Parliamentary Corner, the Europe Direct Corner; and, the Entrepreneurial Corner. They deal with major national, regional, European and world issues. In addition, there will be a short examination of the interesting Dynamo Corner which encourages youth self-reflection and free expression.

The Parliamentary Corner

This facility was opened in the fall of 2004. It was an initiative of the Swedish Parliament to enhance democracy, transparency and direct participation in governance. The Parliament contacted four Swedish public libraries in the four parts of the country with a view to establishing Parliamentary Corners in these libraries. The libraries they contacted were located in:

1. Malmo (south);
2. Gothenburg (east);
3. Sundsvall (central); and
4. Umea (north).

In practical terms the project was to make it possible for the most active citizens to have contact with the MPs for each region in order to increase access
to Parliamentary information and to enhance the influence of the public on the development of the bills due to go before Parliament. Daniel Backman, Librarian-in-charge of the Europe Direct Corner, shared that until 2004 the ordinary citizen was only able to communicate with politicians from Parliament during political campaigns on the streets and in the squares. The project created opportunities for regular meetings with MPs, where one could sit with them and talk openly about real life issues in library surroundings (Backman 2010).

Gothenburg City Library was the second institution to be invited to join this project. The library responded positively to the proposal as, at the time of the invitation, there were eighteen sitting Swedish MPs who grew up and lived in Gothenburg. The project was sponsored by the Parliament and managed by librarians assigned to the Corner. This library product consists of relevant book and magazine collections; a database; an access to a variety of electronic sites, including a link to the Parliament’s Web site, where one can obtain information in Swedish, English and French; and, the organization and facilitation of discussions and debates with MPs. A pleasing and cozy Parliamentary Corner on the first floor of the library was created to attract interest in this initiative. A TV set in the Corner facilitates the viewing of Parliamentary debates, question sessions and committee cross-examinations.

Two librarians have been appointed to run this Corner. They are in charge of providing information on the work of Parliament; marketing events; researching relevant information; preparing information materials; contacting and inviting representatives from relevant professional organizations to participate in Corner-sponsored events; and, arranging presentations and debates with MPs from different parties on topics that are of importance to the residents of the Gothenburg region. Such events are held every Monday. NGOs, university departments, scientific institutions, unions and grass root organizations have also been involved in the development of this product. Promotion through the media and coverage in the Parliament are also features of this product.

The debates schedule includes topics which are under consideration in Parliament. Several examples from the last two years were mentioned as being well done and well attended. These include reflections on the job crisis, demographic issues, immigration policy, fishing and ecology, homosexuality and human rights, the tax policy of the country as well as cars and green politics (Backman 2010). For example, the debate on the job crisis had about 70 attendees; the immigration policy debate, currently a burning issue in Sweden and particularly in Gothenburg was attended by around 100 people; and, the one on the fishing industry and ecology had between 60 to 70 participants. The ‘Job situation and Youth Prosperity’, a classical election debate opened the new session of the Parliamentary Corner on 6 Sept. 2010. Representatives from seven political parties were involved in this event.
Europe Direct Gothenburg Region Corner

This initiative was launched in 2009 and it has been a part of the European Commission’s (EC) information network of about 500 offices in Europe of which twenty are in Sweden. Europe Direct Corners provide information on and answers questions about the EU and issues discussed at the EC. The project is based on the understanding that over 60% of the decisions which affect people’s everyday lives are taken at the EU and that it is both a right and a duty of citizens to take part in that process. Europe Direct is aimed at promoting local and regional awareness as well as opening debates about EU and Swedish participation and interests in that body. The library product consists of a relevant library collection; a database to provide information about the EU institutions and their work; research on current issues; preparation of information materials; contacting relevant institutions; organizing and facilitating meetings and debates with European MPs from different parties; uploading relevant slide shows to the library’s Web site; arranging temporary exhibitions on topical subjects; and, promotional activities.

Through a partnership between the Library, Gothenburg City and two regional consortiums, Europe Direct has been trying to identify and to address topics which matter to citizens of the Gothenburg region (Europe Direct 2010). Although a new library product, Europe Direct has already attracted the participation of diverse publics through the examination of a variety of topics: e.g. ‘How the economic crisis affects people’s daily life’; ‘The free movement of people and companies to and from Sweden”; ‘Jobs in Europe”; and, ‘How to build a strategy to succeed in Europe’. The EU designated 2010 as the European Year to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion. As a consequence, Emily von Sydow, a journalist and writer working in Brussels, was invited to give a talk on the causes of increased poverty and EU measures to improve the living conditions in the new member states and areas of need. Debates about EU actions in the environmental field as well as global environmental policies and issues which are of vital interest to Sweden are also included in the calendar of events.

The Entrepreneur Corner

It is also known as the Faretagarinfo or the business corner. It is promoted on the Municipality’s web site as offering information and inspiration for entrepreneurs (City of Gothenburg 2010). This Corner also supports the Municipality’s efforts to raise knowledge about business; to encourage a culture of entrepreneurship; and, to give practical tips in marketing research and successful business strategies. Started in 2007 it targets both new and established entrepreneurs (The Entrepreneur Corner 2010).
This library product is comprised of a specialized collection of books and journals in economics, company information, management, business strategies, international companies, laws, taxes and accounting. Internet access, MS Office package, software for web and graphic design, including Dreamweaver 8, InDesign, Photoshop and Illustrator CS2, are also available free of charge. Database information about companies, markets and industries in Sweden and worldwide have been developed and are regularly updated. Consultation about access and use of information is also part of the product. A free newsletter dealing with all aspects of entrepreneurship, produced by specialized librarians, is also available for subscription. Discussions with successful business managers and company owners serve as opportunities for sharing experiences and practical tips. Librarians arrange these events on a regular basis (The Entrepreneur Corner 2010).

The Entrepreneur Corner is a comfortable place and its activities attract not only people from business but also the unemployed who are interested in meeting managers from the region. Some of the most interesting debates have been “Win Time – Do It Right From The Beginning” on how to start a company in the cultural industries with an introduction on taxes, trade, and accounting; a presentation by Gustaf Oscarson, an entrepreneur and author who discussed his new book “Mind Your Own Business” with tips from fifty of the country’s most successful businessman; and, inspiration and advice on “How to start business together” from representatives of the Ingrid Bexell Hultén Company (The Entrepreneur Corner 2010).

Dynamo Corner

This Corner was created for young people between the ages of 13 and 25. It is situated on the lower floor of the library and leads to a garden. It is one of the most vibrant places in the library. During IFLA’s 2010 Congress, when the lower floor attached to the garden was needed for the IFLA ‘night spots’, or the friendly meetings and discussions amongst the delegates, the Dynamo Corner was moved to the ground floor hall which has transparent glass walls. The Corner always attracted the attention of passers-by with its lively events and performances. The Dynamo Corner seeks to bring young people into the library through modern urban arts and culture. In this Corner one can listen to music; play video games; take part in book promotion discussions; borrow movies; practice diverse crafts; dance; view exhibitions; initiate and hold a debate; and, paint before a live audience. Everyone is welcomed, and it is always full of people (Dynamo 2010).

A closer look at the library product for youth reveals an interesting aspect: all the events are accompanied by discussions and debates. For example, the 2009 course for games from ancient Greek to the X-Box, lead by a game developer, was promoted to be discussed and tested. Another event, the ‘Hip-hop
spoken workshop’ not only stimulated youth to create music and texts but also to analyse and discuss other authors’ texts and to reflect on hip-hop poetry. Creative writing and how to promote and publish your book have also been debated by the youth. These sessions are moderated by professionals. The library books which are promoted are chosen for their ability to provoke discussions and make the youth reflect on life issues.

Discussion

Public libraries or ‘libraries for all’, originated in the Anglo-American world. Early models were quite different from today’s libraries. In England the oldest public libraries appeared even before the Enlightenment: Bristol (1464), London (1425) and, Manchester in the middle of the 16th century (Makinen 2001). The establishment of several of these libraries was inspired by the ‘access for all’ philosophy. They were usually founded by the new rich, who were often merchants. One of the oldest and most important of them is Manchester’s Chetham Library which is still functioning today, although on a limited scale. In 1653, Humphrey Chetham, a prosperous textile merchant who had no family, left in his will a large sum of money for charity. Almost half of his bequest was used to endow Chetham’s Hospital; to maintain and educate forty poor boys; and, 200 pounds was left to establish small religious libraries in five local churches and chapels. The largest sum, 1000 pounds, together with the remainder of his estate was allocated for the establishment of a ‘public library within the town of Manchester’ (Powell 1988). In his will Chetham articulated what he wished the policy to be in terms of collection development in parochial libraries. Chetham stated that they were expected to provide “goodly English books such as Calvin’s, Preson’s and Perkin’s works, comments and annotations of the Bible or some parts thereof, for the edification of the common people” (Powell 1988). The “Public library within the town of Manchester”, although based on religious literature, was encouraged to supply any available scientific literature for the use of all citizens (Powell 1988). In practice, however, the library could only be used by that small percentage of people who were familiar with Latin.

In the 19th century, libraries came to the fore at a time when there were growing interests and advances in social issues such as free public education, public health, urbanization and the development of public spaces. These developments had their pure enthusiasts across England. However in Parliament these issues were promoted as being ‘cheaper than police’. Libraries were free of charge, warm and safe places that could attract the growing working class and distract workers and their families from the pubs while giving them the knowledge that they needed to be better workers (Kelly 1973). Some of the most famous figures of the time were involved in the cause. Dickens himself
was invited to give a speech at the opening of the new Manchester City Library in 1849. In his presentation he mentioned that “in this institution, special provision has been made for the working classes, by means of a free lending library, this meeting cherishes the earnest hope that the books thus made available will prove a source of pleasure and improvement in the cottages, the garrets, and the cellars of the poorest of our people” (Kelly 1973). At the same time two separate ceremonies were held at the opening of that library, one for the working class and one for the nobs3 (Allred 1972).

What is ‘access for all’ today and how do libraries manage diversity and difference? Three major characteristics of the concept of the ‘new library’ have been outlined in a recent collection of articles, devoted to Nordic libraries. These are:

1. Focusing on concrete users needs;
2. Providing new and appealing services; and
3. Taking library resources to where people are (Thorhauge 2010).

These characteristics refer closely the topics of the current research which is why the discussion on the current situation can start from here.

First: As mentioned before in the last decade public libraries in the developed world were forced into mapping and addressing the needs of their local communities. The democratic character of Internet and similar technologies, the development of automation services and also the changing values towards a heterogeneous society and taking care of its diverse communities are some of the reasons that have created such opportunities;

Second: Libraries have been researching user discourses to create library products in order to attract diverse publics. For example, since the beginning of the economic crisis (2008) the Seattle Public Library has been offering information, instruction and discussions about successful job strategies (Seattle Public Library 2010); the Manchester City Library, the city where the industrial revolution began, continues to develop its long-running product for starting companies, including patent application instruction by a specialized librarian (Manchester City Library 2010); and, the Arhus Public Libraries have developed a database for their immigrant population in 13 languages as well as a computer area for ‘job searches only’ (Jackson 2005); and

Third: The trend to move libraries products towards communities e.g. the tendency of combining libraries with community centers in deprived areas, of building new libraries within trade centers; a growth in mobile

---

3 This is a term that is used to describe persons who belong to the upper-class.
libraries; the emergence of popular café-libraries; the establishment of library-kiosks in distant areas; and, projects to launch small libraries in public and private spaces where people often get together (Noorani and Mokhtari 2009).

The case studies that have been discussed could be related to the concept of the new library. The findings highlight two opposing models of functioning, which consciously reflect policies determined by culture, context and communities. These two European libraries, one in an old democracy and one in a new democracy, represent two diverse strategies with respect to ‘access for all’ and the ‘politics of difference’. The Bulgarian library in a city, which traces its origins to medieval times, is also a public entity in the poorest European country. The library faces several problems associated with transitioning from a Communist to a liberal economy. The previously hidden, isolated from cities and villages, neglected communities of the social homes, old people houses and the disabled, are nowadays visible within society. These groups cannot be ignored by Veliko Tarnovo’s library, even if the investment of time, human and information resources to serve them could distract the library from major projects, such as the Eurostory 20th Century international project, which positions the library amongst the several European institutions that are engaged in documenting the cultural history of Europe. Being a ‘social library’ in that sense, it has invented a ‘radiant’ strategy towards deprived communities, which reflects to some extent the ‘radiant’ disposition of the city as well as the new mentality of the library of taking its resources to its users. Such developments of the library expands the scope of ‘access for all’ in general and gives opportunities for further research in the anthropology of today’s public libraries in terms of serving the hidden human groups that exist everywhere in the world. The library products that have been discussed are good examples of deliberate and thoughtful approaches to ‘difference’. The research demonstrates the complex and fluid structure of library products and their ability to expand endlessly based on user needs and circumstances. For example, the library products for deprived communities that were reported on have made equal efforts on the supplying of literature as well as on the quality of place, experience, communication, discussions, instruction, leisure, sense of belonging to the community. The concept of information provided by libraries exceeds the paper and digital discourses and turns to knowledge acquisition for life, for human values, for survival strategies, for human dignity and the extension of human rights to people without legal rights (Alexandrov 2010).

In a context of one of the best-developed democracies, which ranks first in the Index of Democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy 2008), and seventh in the United Nations’ Human Development Index (Human Development Report 2009), the City Library of Gothenburg has a clear policy towards supporting all kinds of open discussions and debates
within its walls. A library in a country with a Freedom of the Press Act from 1766 (Fridell and KL-skribenten 2008) its entire approach is about transparency, freedom of thought and expression, civic activity and control over Government institutions. It is worth noting that the City of Gothenburg is one of several European pilot cities taking part in the Euro Petition Project which open the opportunities of each European citizen to propose an idea or a project and to launch an e-petition. The outcome of such acts will directly influence the process of decision-making in Europe. The ‘mosaic’ strategy or the ‘corner’ structure of the library, as described in the case study, make it possible for a variety of publics to find their place in the library – the ‘microcosm of the city’. The chosen library products widen the scope of library’s ‘access for all’ policy and ‘politics of difference’ approach. As a result the library reaches the most active and alert sectors of society, including scientists, university professors and business people. The anthropological profile of the public library thus stretches and incorporates previously ignored public library user groups. The advanced library products invented and offered by the library go beyond paper and electronic information and include a proper environment, direct participation in public matters through debates, experiences, events, communication and a sense of belonging.

It could be advanced that the ‘politics of difference’ is a new and most important nuance of the traditional ‘access for all’ policy. The ‘politics of difference’ as mentioned before requires a new mentality and skills, a proactive approach and a willingness to constantly create new diverse products. It is obviously a big change for libraries, which is why it is necessary to reflect on the ways libraries could meet the new challenges.

As public spaces in a context of neo-liberal regimes and economic crisis libraries often experience financial difficulties. The ongoing debate about the disappearance of the book and the future of the libraries contributes to the insecurity of the library sector. The reactions of the libraries are quite diverse. Some fight for a new place in the society, others are still sentimentally attached to their traditional role, as discussed during the IFLA Congress in 2009.

The chosen case studies are examples of a demand-oriented managerial approach which have succeeded in getting additional funds through a combination of alternative sources. These include funding for national, European and international projects and partnerships with other cultural, information and public bodies, as well as with science institutions and universities, NGOs and private companies. The Regional Library of Veliko Tarnovo is managed by an experienced business manager who shared that “he runs it like a company” (Alexandrov 2010). Another example, the successful Aarhus Public Libraries have about 200 partners. Through such an attitude libraries are able to improve and refresh their collections, buildings, amenities and facilities and to raise their performance indicators while broadening their agendas, products, user communities, experiences offered and communication opportunities. Through
their increasing A2K activities, both of the libraries studied in this research have turned themselves into milieus of knowledge, life-long learning, courage and inspiration in a complicated world.

At the same time the two libraries brand themselves as institutions that are in synchrony with their municipality and national agendas, as multitaskers and spaces where ‘there is always something going on’ (Gothenburg 2010). They also serve as ‘third place’ in people’s lives or as a ‘second home’ for isolated communities (Alexandrov 2010). Both libraries’ participate in most inclusive cultural events like local and international festivals making them appealing to tourists and visitors. This way such libraries strengthen their symbolic capital on the maps of their cities and their position as hubs of vitality on their urban landscape. The added value from the flexibility of these libraries is increased public trust and support. Both libraries have succeeded in convincing their fellow-citizens and relevant municipalities of the crucial role that they play in their cities. As a consequence of this heightened visibility, both are in the process of being rebuilt and/or extended.

Conclusions/Results

‘Access for all’ through ‘politics of difference’ could be considered as an important strategy for public libraries today. These issues have implications with regard to:

1. Human capital;
2. Social capital and social cohesion;
3. Inclusion and direct democracy;
4. Spreading of culture of knowledge;
5. Accumulation and circulation of information, knowledge and ideas;
6. Re-imaging of the libraries;
7. Gaining of public support for the libraries; and
8. Libraries taking part in the redistribution of money within a society.

Two innovative strategies, developed in completely different environments, in response to different urgencies and priorities have been presented in this case study. New dimensions of library products have been discussed in detail. The transformation of library profession has also been reflected on as well as the advanced libraries management styles. This study has examined two diverse situations with respect to how they provide ‘access for all’ while recognizing and responding to the ‘politics of difference’. Ultimately, the studies provide information that could be useful for other libraries wishing to tackle the issues of ‘access for all’ within a philosophy of the ‘politics of difference’.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the librarians at both libraries who provided information to support this research, especially to:
Ivan Alexandrov, Director, Kalina Ivanova, Deputy Director, and Valentina Petrova, Chief Librarian, Buzludga Branch of the Regional Public Library “P. R. Slaveikov”; and
Maria Nilson, Events Programs, Daniel Backman, Librarian-in-charge, Europe Direct and Tina Hedegard, Children’s Librarian of Gothenburg City Library:

Credits

Figure 1. Bulgaria adapted from
www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/europe/bulgaria/ by Paul Gibbs, Educational media Services, UWI, Cave Hill.
Figure 2. Sweden adapted from
www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/europe/sweden/ by Paul Gibbs, Educational media Services, UWI, Cave Hill.

References

Alexandrov, I. Personal interview. 2010.
Backman, D. Personal interview. 2010.