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Automation of Public Libraries in Ukraine

The article describes the current system of public libraries in Ukraine and the efforts driving library automation in the country. It depicts Ukraine’s first attempts at library automation in late 1980s, and progress made over the last five years in computerizing libraries all over the country. The authors describe national programs and document major projects in this field, notably the USG-supported Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP), Ukraine’s Regional Portals and other international cooperation.

Automatisierung der Öffentlichen Bibliotheken in der Ukraine


Automatisation des bibliothèques publiques en Ukraine

L'article décrit le système actuel des bibliothèques publiques en Ukraine et les efforts y entrepris pour l'automatisation de leurs services. On présente les premiers essais des années 80 et les progrès atteints pendant les dernières cinq ans dans tout le pays avec l'introduction de la numérisation. Les auteurs présentent les programmes de promotion et documentent les projets importants dans ce domaine, notamment le „Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP)“, supporté par le gouvernement américain, ainsi que d'autres coopérations internationales.

Public Libraries in Ukraine – an Overview

There are more than 18 000 public libraries in Ukraine1. The majority of them united into 600 local centralized library systems. There are networks of public libraries for the adult population, for young adults and for children. The National and State Libraries for adults, young adults and children are located in Kyiv. There are two other libraries of the State level – Kharkiv State Korolenko Library and Odesa state Gorky Library. The National Parliamenta-
Library of Ukraine oversees activities of public libraries in Ukraine and provides recommendations for their further development. Almost every regional capital and most large cities have a library for adults, children and for young adults. There is a separate network of libraries for the blind.

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism is the main executive body for public libraries in Ukraine. The Ministry’s Department of Library and Information Networks, Analysis and Forecasting provides guidance for their activities. It establishes the regulations with which all libraries must comply, and crafts and implements national programs for libraries. It also submits proposals for new or amended library laws to the Rada (parliament). The Ministry of Culture and Tourism provides funding for the National and State libraries. Other public libraries are supported by local administrations. Library automation falls under the responsibilities of the Information and Computerization Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Two national library associations deal with public library issues. They are the Ukrainian Library Association and Ukrainian Association of Children’s Libraries.

Library Computerization: First Attempts

The first attempts to automate library operations in Ukraine were made in the late 1980s. This relatively late start and the slow pace of progress were due not only to a lack of funds, but also because of the widespread perception that libraries existed to preserve and provide access only to „ideologically correct“ books. This perception existed not only within government and the general public, but also among librarians themselves until the end of the 20th century.

For many reasons – whether political priorities (providing access to information in libraries was not a Soviet goal), limitations of technology or infrastructure, or lack of funds – most Ukrainian citizens did not have access to electronic information until the late 1990s, an era of broad social and economic change. Public librarians had to make serious efforts to change their mentality and their perception of the role of libraries in society; to study information technology and how these new tools could be used in the library and information field; and to find funding for library automation and Internet access.

One of the first attempts to introduce automation in public libraries in Ukraine was made by Kherson Regional Library in early 1990s with the support of the Ministry of Culture. Although the Kherson librarians’ attempt to create their own automation system was ultimately unsuccessful, it had two positive results: it drew attention to the need to computerize Ukraine’s libraries and led to the first all-Ukrainian conference on library automation, held in 1993. In addition, several official documents paid lip service to the importance of library automation, but there were no funding, no specialists who could bring it to life. Most librarians waited for the central government to issue an order to computerize, as they always had during the command economy.

In 1997, there were just over than 1 000 PCs in all public libraries, and 80 % of them were outdated. „National Program on Library Automation“ was submitted by the Information and Computerization Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to the Agency for Information and Computerization under the Presidential Administration in 1998. But it was not a high a priority for the Administration. Even the word „library“ was mentioned only once in the text of the law „About the National Program of Informationization“, 1998.

An important role in introducing of new information technologies into library practice played the „Renaissance“ (Soros) Foundation. Its projects in 1990s helped librarians in Ukraine to obtain necessary skills and basic funding to start to implement new ideas. Another catalyst of change for Ukrainian librarians has been the Crimea International Library Conference, which since 1994 has paid a lot of attention to new information technology and enhanced the education of Ukrainian librarians in these issues.

Librarians around the world helped their Ukrainian colleagues to understand the need to introduce information technology into library practice, and shared their strategies and best practices. Foreign colleagues from the U.S., Germany, the UK and Finland shared their experience at conferences and workshops, during professional visits and through professional publications, which were translated into Ukrainian. Participation in the PUBLICA, PULMAN, and CALIMERA programs has broadened the vision of Ukrainian librarians on how to develop library automation and on current issues facing libraries.

Current Trends in Automation of Public Libraries

In 2002 there were 2 000 PCs in public libraries in Ukraine. By 2004, the number had risen to 4 450. In 2001, fewer than ten libraries provided Internet access as a public service. Many other public libraries were connected to the Internet, but did not provide Web access as a library service.

Regional public libraries are leading the automation effort. Great strides have been made, but it is too early to say that any Ukrainian public library has a fully integrated library system and has automated all its operations and services. Rural libraries are still far behind.
About 20% of public libraries have OPACs, for instance: Kirovohrad Chizhevsky Regional Library (<http://www.library.kr.ua/opacdb.html>); Kyiv Lesia Ukrainka Public Library (<http://sfas.lclu.kiev.ua:4505/ALEPH0//con-Ing/eng>). Very few libraries have automated their circulation, cataloging, or acquisitions. Some libraries, such as Kyiv’s State Library for Youth (<http://www.4uth.gov.ua/6.htm>) and Mykolayiv City Library (<http://www.niklib.com/vinf/question.ua>) have begun a virtual reference service. The first efforts are now being made to create a digital library – some public libraries are digitizing their collections and making them available on the Internet (Kirovohrad Chizhevsky Regional Library, <http://www.library.kr.ua/elmuseum/>). In 2002, electronic delivery was introduced by the National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine and Kharkiv State Korolenko Library. Regional libraries and some city libraries have compiled subject guides for the Internet and provide subscription-based services, such as access to specialized legal information, full text databases.

The majority of libraries which have started to automate use free or inexpensive integrated library systems. The most popular system is IRBIS, produced by the State Technical Library of Russia and adapted to Ukrainian. Some public libraries, including the Kyiv Lesia Ukrainka Public Library, use Ex-Libris’s ALEPH (Israel) integrated library software.

Attempts to introduce international standards are being made. New standards for Bibliographic Description, Terminology, and Formats are being introduced. Public libraries still use the Soviet Library and Bibliographic Classification System, in place since 1980. The National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine developed the first version of the National Subject Headings, which was published in 2005. Since 2001, the National Parliamentary Library, the National Vernadsky Library, and the Library of Kyiv’s National Shevchenko University have been working on the UkRMARC format, based on IFLA documents on INIMARC and ISBD. The first results of their work were discussed at library conferences in 2002.

In 1999, the Ukrainian Library Association implemented a pilot project to introduce public access to the Internet as a new library service. Under the project, funded by the grant, public access Internet terminals were set up in five regional public libraries. Their mission was to serve the public interest: Internet points at libraries offered free public access to electronic information resources that could provide social, economic, educational, cultural and civic benefits. The libraries were chosen after a competition open to any regional and city public library for adults. These libraries provided public access to the Internet as a means to enhance their existing collections with electronic resources from information networks around the world.

Abb. 1: In the Internet Center of the Mykolayiv City Library for Children

Under the project, the main criteria for selecting libraries to set up public Internet workstations were: the extent to which library staff understood the importance of free access to information and the mission of public libraries in a democratic society, specific written guidelines for Internet users, well-articulated plans for self-sustainability in the future, and a developed training and programming plan. In deciding how to offer access to electronic information in libraries, each library taking part in this project considered the mission, goals, objectives and needs of the entire community it served. An essential part of the project was introducing a program to promote Internet services and to encourage everyone to use them. Special training was organized for staff and for library patrons. This pilot project was used as a model for the highly successful Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP).

Since 2001, the U.S. government has spent almost 1.5 million dollars to open public-access Internet centers in public libraries all over Ukraine. The primary goal of this effort, the Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP) – administered by the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv with assistance from the Ukrainian Library Association – is to establish sites at Ukrainian public libraries equipped with computers, network equipment and Internet connectivity to provide public access to the Internet. A second important goal of this project is to help Ukraine’s libraries make the „leap“ into the modern world of information science, where libraries offer their clients a free access to a broad range of information products, leading the process of democratic development in their communities. By 2005, 92 Internet centers were in operation. Thirteen more centers will be opened in 2006, bringing the total to 105. A list of LEAP centers is available at <http://www.usembassy.kiev.ua/irc_leap_eng.html>.

Each center offers readers at least five workstations with Internet access, as well as training on using computers and searching for information on the Internet. The opening of Internet centers has not only provided thousands of Ukrainians with access to electronic information, but has also served as an impetus for transforming public libraries. Thanks to the opening of Internet centers, many libraries have been able to attract additional support from local government and businesses to renovate their libraries and purchase additional equipment. The Ukrainian Library Association introduced a Policy on Internet Access in Libraries in 2001, published several books on this issue and conducted a number of workshops and conferences to educate librarians. Public libraries strive not only to provide access to the Internet for Ukrainian citizens, but also to create and publish Ukrainian resources on the Web. As part of this effort, Ukrainian librarians started to study the Metadata project in late 1990. The main aim was to study how metadata and metadata standards could be implemented in Ukrainian libraries. The Ukrainian Library Association provided a Ukrainian translation of D.C. Metadata (<http://lucl.lucl.kiev.ua/win/metadata.html>). Some Ukrainian libraries have begun its implementation, for instance, since 2000, all the html-pages of Kirovohrad Chizhevsky Regional Library have been supplied with Dublin Core coding.

Abb. 2: Internet workstations at the Vinnytsia Regional Library

present, their website has more than 1,800 HTML-pages with Dublin Core coding. All regional libraries are participants of the "Regional Information Portals" Project. Implemented by the Renaissance (Soros) Foundation and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the project aims to develop and support portals of regional information on library websites in close cooperation with local governments and NGOs. It was also included into the current National Program of Ukraine on Informatization. You can visit Rivne Regional Library's portal at <http://irp.rv.ua/site/index.jsp> (Ukrainian).

Encouraging Access for the Disabled

For the past several years, applicants for the Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP) grants were required to make their Internet centers accessible for the disabled. Such access had never been required under Ukrainian law, so this element of the Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP) program helped to draw attention – of both the library community and local authorities – to the question of accessibility of library buildings before the law has been adopted. To date, more than 20 libraries have built ramps and rearranged entrances to give the physically challenged access to these new resources.

In 2004-2006, the Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP) turned to Internet access for the visually impaired. In 2004, the U.S. Embassy sponsored a workshop on modern technology for the blind in Dnipropetrovsk. Ten librarians and five NGO members received hands-on training from visiting American experts – one of them blind himself – on specialized software that enables the visually impaired to use the Internet. The visitors donated ten copies of this specialized software to libraries. In 2006, three Internet centers for the visually impaired will be opened – at the State Library for Blind in Kyiv, and at the Rivne and Kherson regional libraries, with funding from the U.S. government and the FORCE Foundation (The Netherlands). Specialized equipment, software, Internet connectivity, and training for library staff and patrons are included in the project. These Internet centers will be the first of their kind in Ukraine. They will be used not only by visually impaired patrons, but will also serve as training centers for librarians from all over the country who want to learn more about this technology and about how to serve this clientele more effectively.

By introducing access to the Internet as a library service, Ukraine's library community started to address important social issues, such as:
- Encouraging intellectual freedom and fighting censorship in the electronic environment;
- providing access to electronic resources, which was limited – especially outside the capital – by poor infrastructure and high cost;
- drawing attention to the needs of disabled;
- finding financial support;
- developing computer and Internet skills of librarians, politicians, scholars, students – all library users.

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9 <http://www.library.kr.ua/dc/dcproje.html>
Conclusion

Advances in technology were the driving force behind changes in libraries in the West in the late 20th century. In Ukraine, however, technological, political, social, and economic changes were occurring all at once. National revival also influenced these processes. There are still many issues to be addressed at the national and local levels – standards, bibliographic control, training of librarians, increasing demands on budgets from information technology and digitizing local content, to name just a few. The history of library automation in the world shows that libraries normally started this process by automating library operations, and then introduced Internet access as a library service. In Ukraine, due in large part to the Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP), automation of the majority of public libraries began with introducing access to the Internet. In some places, the LEAP Internet workstations were the library’s very first computers.

Library automation started in Ukraine later than in other developed countries. But Ukrainian librarians can benefit from this delay, because we can learn from other countries’ experience.

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