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Socio-metamorphosis of the academic library

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to the debate on the reform of the library and the new roles it must embrace. Our point of view is that this reform process could be greatly facilitated by creating more means of communication, both epistemic and practical, between sociology and disciplines surrounding librarianship. The main thesis we sustain in the pages of this paper is that the reconfiguration of the library, starting from the user, considered as the first focal point, cannot be accomplished without a very rigorous use of sociological instruments.

Key words: *sociology, library science, surveys, users*

The metamorphosis of the library

“The book, in short, has been the effective antidote to mankind's tendency towards global amnesia.” (1)

The word's etymology precisely covers the main function of the library, “biblios” and “theke” being translated as “coffer” for “books”, meaning the role of preserving documents collections. Throughout history, these collections became more and more specialized, basically following the evolutionary path of the emergence and development of the sciences. Thus we speak of the birth of the academic libraries, whose purpose, besides that of a documentary archive, is to support research and learning activities. Yet today we are facing another transformation, leading to the questioning of the library's traditional purpose throughout the world, by the massive accumulation of information, the changes of its support (from physical to virtual) and the emergence of inedited reading practices.

The crisis of the library's inveterate purpose has incited debates concerning "the reinvention" of this institution's function. Following western libraries' course of action, we can distinguish certain subsidiary roles programmatically assumed. Firstly, aside from the function of "guarding" documents, the library can also be a space meant for the interaction of people belonging to the academia, these so-called "learning spaces" and "learning commons"(2) accurately describing this instance. It is common practice for these places to be housing courses, seminars, team-working students. Another frequent practice is organizing scientific events, such as book-releases, debates, open-doors conferences in the library, thus the two results: an increase in the institution's attractiveness and encouraging students to take part in activities beyond the traditional reading.

Still, changes exceed formal intellectual interactions, in some cases, the library designs spaces meant for informal socialization, like cafeterias (3). Also, the library can successfully house exhibitions, pertaining to its architectural patrimony (4) or to the documentary one (rare book exhibitions), either by organizing artistic events, such as art exhibitions, film projections, public lecture or concerts (5).

Synthesizing the emergence of these new roles, we can conclude that, aside from its traditional function of managing documentary heritage, the contemporary library increasingly assumes a socialization² role, meaning either encouraging a sense of belonging in certain social segments (i.e. students attaining a sense of belonging in the university environment), or in the case of the unspecialized public, socialization is understood as its generic meaning.

The tendencies mentioned and discussed above must not lead to the conclusion that the transformation of the libraries' function is linear and unproblematic. On the contrary, the present scenarios for its development are rather diffuse (6) and disputed by the specialists within this field. At this point, the only certainty is the global decrease of readers, thus generating a major decrease in the number of consulted documents. The case of "Carol I" University Library is a very good illustration of this phenomenon. Thus, the data from the institution's activity reports suggest that in the time frame 2012-2016 the library has lost a third of its users. The data concerning the frequency indicate an even more alarming decrease in the number of visits, by half, in that time frame. A similar dynamic is registered also regarding the number of consulted documents (7).

If the major foreign academic libraries have started to take action regarding the new context, similar institutions in Romania have barely begun taking steps in this direction. The decrease in the number of users bears the risk of turning libraries into obsolescent institutions, lacking its old relevance. The consequence is that the reformation or reinvention of the library must not be a random or short-term oriented process, but rather a controlled one, based on managerial decisions supported by well-documented studies, anchored in the empirical reality.

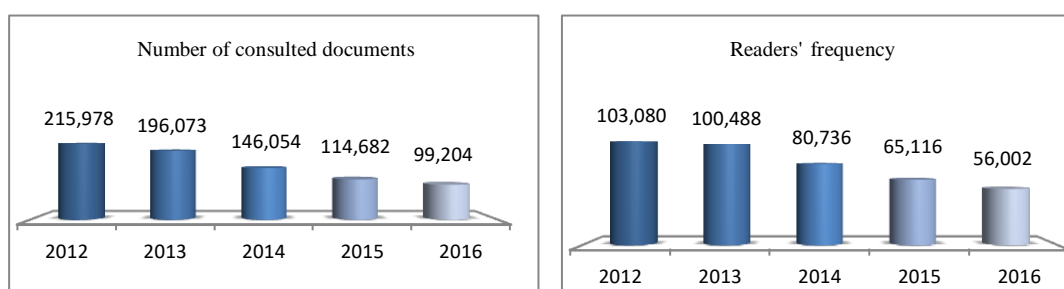
² By socialization we understand two notions simultaneously, namely the sociological understanding of a process of assimilating the norms, values and behavioural patterns appertaining to the reference group, in order to become an integrated part, the reference group being either the entire society or a particular group, and also the unsterstanding deriving from common knowledge of interaction.

Librarian and sociologist – border or bridge?

In the most general sense, sociology is the science studying the social environment. It is a humanistic discipline, whose development is situated at the beginning of the XXth century, the name “sociology” belonging to the French positivist philosopher, Auguste Comte, one of the founders of this science. In specialized dictionaries, this discipline is defined by presenting the different stages of development and succession of theoretic paradigms. Even without an extended definition, we identify one of the specific features of sociology, its “expanding” tendency, thus not limiting on certain specific aspects of the social, but permanently trying to extend its scope. Thus, the so-called branches of sociology are, depending on the case, the results of the complementarity or, on the contrary, of the tension arising in the relationship with certain disciplines, namely political science, economy, history, and sociological methods employed.

A proper example is the sociology of reading, a discipline which perhaps best illustrates the intersection of library science and sociology. In scientific literature, we encounter several directions of development of this discipline. It can investigate the relationship between demographic and socioeconomic factors (genre, age, occupational status, educational status, etc.) which influence certain reading patterns; it can focus on the social implications of reading, meaning how reading influences knowledge and belief, attitude and morals, public opinion, vote, antisocial and delinquent behaviors; it can study the economic implications regarding reading preferences among social groups. Still appertaining to the sociology of reading is the content analysis of mass media or various types of lecture practiced by culturally deprived people. One of the authors studying this subject gives us the following definition:

“how sociologically-diverse groups differ in what, when, how much and how well they read ; how various print media differ in terms of their appeal, interest, use, and effect to and upon these groups ; and how the reading process operates as it interacts with various sociological variables within these person-to-print-to person combinations.” (8)



“To anyone familiar with them both, the relevance of sociological theory and methodology in librarianship may seem self evident”(9) is the opening line of the paper “Sociology and Library Research”. Still, the author of the aforementioned phrase is compelled to shade his statement, since any relationship between two or more sciences is governed by tensions.

Thus, we can talk either about a sort of “territorial rivalry” when referring to the fact that each discipline involved is trying to keep its legacy untouched, or about the difficulties encountered when studying a new area outside the initial scope of one discipline (10).

Still, aside from the sociology of reading, the second testing chamber of the interaction between sociology and library science consists of the surveys and measurements concerning library readers’ profile, choices and satisfaction. Unlike the first orientation, which developed while the library was still regarded as traditional, maintaining its basic roles and functions, the second component discussed implies a radical transformation of the managerial principles governing the institution. Furthermore, these surveys and measurements were considered only when the library’s focal point shifted from the document and its administration to the user (11).

Without disregarding the relevance and importance of the field called “sociology of reading”, our major concern is the second type of crossing between sociology and library science, the surveys whose subject are the library user. These surveys serve two main purposes; firstly by investigating the ever-changing preferences of the users, the library can acquire those managerial instruments which support the optimal adapting process for the new social environment. Secondly, the same methods can serve for testing innovative products and services. For accuracy, it is necessary to distinguish between exploratory research, whose purpose is to present the facts as they are, and inferential research, which is aimed at testing hypotheses. In other words, the second type of research is focused on understanding why certain facts are the way they are, their relationship, more than just identifying and observing them.

The relationship between sociology and library science discussed in this case can be further explained in analogy with the new orientation in marketing. Since the ’70s, the largest consumer goods companies have embarked on a dual investigating process concerning clients’ satisfaction: both regarding products already in the market and testing new concepts. Likewise, the library managerial apparatus ought to frequently engage sociological research instruments in order to assess its services, thus adjusting them to meet users’ requests, but also to measure the potential usefulness and functionality of new services.

Lately, the academic libraries in Romania have begun to carry out a series of sociological studies, following a more or less rigorous methodology. Here is a list of examples of surveys conducted: “Studying user behavior. Shaping the user of a university library”(12), “Orienting library activities towards users’ information requirements: a survey conducted at The History Library – branch of the Central University Library “M. Eminescu””(13), “What are our readers’ reading preferences? – results of a survey – “(14), the survey conducted during the event Long Night of Museums in 2017 at “Carol I” Central University Library (15), “Teenagers and Social Media – pilot investigation – “(16) and the sociological survey conducted during the event “Strada de C’Arte” at “Carol I” Central University Library (17).

Instead of conclusions

An accurate knowledge of users' requirements and preferences, as well as the factors determining a person to become a user of the library, is a self-evident imperative. Still, as Reginald Carr argues, the image of the user must not be reified or artificially transformed into an immutable essence. Users' preferences do not represent a constant, but are permanently changing and evolving. Furthermore, in some circumstances, in order for them to become explicit, a long educating process is required. Thus, in the present conjuncture, library's role must not be passive, manifested through an uncritical and spontaneous adjustment to users' requirements, but rather a formative action in order to shape the mental horizon of the user. It is precisely this fundamental role that solicits the need for an epistemic mutation, which allows a better communication and a stronger relationship between sociology and library science.

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