

Libraries in transition. Changes? - Crisis? - Chances!

EBLIDA/NAPLE Conference, Athens, May 2014

Opening the conference, Giorgos Glossiotis (President of the Association of Greek Librarians and Information Scientists (EEBEP)) quoted Heraclitus – “no-one can cross the same river twice”, likening books/information to a flowing river. He also quoted Bob Dylan’s famous lyrics “the times they are a-changing”, noting that the transition to a digital world is difficult, particularly for public libraries. Attended by 120+ delegates, the conference was held at the Technological Educational Institute of Athens.

Topics covered included:

The literacy role of libraries in Europe

H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands spoke about the link between literacy and libraries and initiatives with which she is involved. Libraries need to be attractive and relevant to deliver the services required. We need to “build the bridge as we walk on it” and position ourselves in the midst of political debate. As Einstein said “those with the privilege to know have the duty to act”. There are opportunities to co-operate at European level rather than re-inventing

the wheel. The Princess is the founder of a reading and writing foundation¹² and is a member of the EU High Level Expert Group on Literacy. Anyone interested in collaborating is invited to contact the office in Brussels.

Strong libraries, strong societies

IFLA President Sinikka Sipilä gave an overview of IFLA's role and activities. A legal framework is needed for strong libraries, both constitutionally and through legislation, as legal and policy support provides justification. IFLA provides a comprehensive programme offering a strategic and co-ordinated approach to capacity building and sustainability of library associations. A recent survey found that 80% of Finns are regular library users and 73% of respondents said libraries have improved their quality of life. Decision makers must be made aware of the benefits and needs of libraries. "A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life" (Henry Ward Beecher). Strong societies have informed citizens who participate actively in society, and are open, equal and democratic. New technologies will transform the global information economy and expand access but also present barriers. Hyper-connected societies and online learning will transform data protection. IFLA are working on an advocacy document for a post-2015 development framework, the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development.¹³

Libraries in transitions and beyond

Panel discussion participants were asked to comment on their vision for the future. Sinikka Sipilä said the future is unclear and change is taking place too quickly for regulations to follow. It is important to promote reading and understanding of information and life on a deeper level, rather than in scattered forms as with social media. Mobile devices will become more predominant, and equal access to information is increasingly important, e.g. for a larger elderly and visually impaired user base.

¹² <http://readingandwriting.eu/>

¹³ <http://www.lyondeclaration.org/>

Interim NAPLE President Jan Braeckman noted that the impact of new technology has led to a power struggle that is financially motivated and has an economic impact. Policy makers are questioning the playground of the state versus the private sector, and technology/media companies e.g. Google are looking at context as well as players in the information game. People have a different way of dealing with information – they no longer search for in-depth knowledge, and are interacting with other people as well as books. It was predicted that information is changing the way we think, and in future, there will be a direct connection between the brain and the internet.

EBLIDA President Klaus-Peter Böttger said that industry is creating a digital divide between those who can pay and those who cannot. Developing the library as place and an independent learning centre will be a factor in resolving this divide.

Parallel Sessions: 1. Changes? 2. Crisis? 3. Chances!

I attended the first session on changes which included three presentations and a brief opportunity for interactive discussion. There are similar themes across the parallel sessions. It is worth noting the presentations of two Greek colleagues.

Eva Semertzaki (Bank of Greece) detailed the socio-economic aspects of changes in Greek libraries:

- Libraries continue to transform to meet society's changing needs
- Public libraries are important because they promote literacy and a love of reading, and also provide technical resources
- School libraries, in particular, are under financial pressure
- There are some signs of economic recovery in Greece. There are 46 public libraries, and a new National Library is scheduled for completion in 2016 as part of a project to develop a cultural centre at a cost of €600 million
- Changes in library staff competencies are required
- Libraries need to be user centric and serve as a one-stop-shop.

EBLIDA delegates at the National Library of Greece, Athens



Ioannis Tsakonas (University of Patras) described the technological state of Greek libraries:

- Change is not to be feared but embraced
- Technology is not an isolated concept – it involves a different type of interaction with our audience
- Reusability and device agnosticism (compatibility across different systems) are the keys, and being on the move means being in the cloud
- Low penetration of e-books in the Greek market, with few shops, elementary formats and no sophisticated models
- The Kallipose-book project and HEAL consortium of academic libraries are innovators in the area of open data
- Opportunities for public/private sector co-operation and centralised technological solutions as a response to scarcity of resources
- Academic libraries are transforming into information hubs, and public libraries into community hubs
- The Media Lab Future Library project (<http://medialab.futurelibrary.gr>) is an initiative which aims to provide a blueprint for creativity, collaboration, innovation and learning in public libraries. It uses virtual worlds and digital storytelling to transform information literacy programmes. Information literacy is a public good, regardless of technology or format.

Recurring themes from other sessions include:

- Economic crisis has led to public library closures and significant budget cuts
- Need to demonstrate the social value of libraries
- Need greater awareness that libraries are an investment
- Need to promote professionalism of librarians/information professionals
- Need for core skills regardless of technological environment
- Libraries are operating as shelters, and people are citizens, not consumers
- Need for innovative engagement with publishers, universities and

foundations

- Libraries can operate with cuts by redefining the role of librarians, retraining and being prepared
- Public libraries are incorporating new technologies and taking exciting new routes
- More engagement with the community and giving more control to users, which allows time for librarians to be more creative
- There is increased demand on services due to the recession
- Digital trends are on a collision course
- Boundaries of data protection and privacy will be redefined
- Librarians can become part of the political agenda, by supporting job seeking and an ageing population in Europe and worldwide. Appropriate services need to be provided to contribute to enhancement of basic skills and lifelong learning abilities.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Klaus-Peter Böttger concluded by posing the question: what can be resolved? He remarked that society is not aware of the importance of libraries, and the responsibility lies with us. We have to change, and as with running a marathon, this begins by taking one step at a time to get to the finish, while avoiding the fate of Pheidippides! EBLIDA will host an advocacy workshop in November for delegates from national associations and new MEPs and Commissioners.

As is customary, the EBLIDA Council meeting was held on 13th May. The EBLIDA Annual Report for 2013 is available at: http://www.eblida.org/Documents/EBLIDA_Annual_Report_2013-2014-approved.pdf

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