QQML 2009
International Conference on
Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries
26 - 29 of May 2009 Chania Crete Greece   www.isast.org

Towards an assessment of public library value: statistics on the policy makers' agenda

Kristine Paberza

Department of Information and Library Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Latvia

Public Library Development Project "Third Father's Son", State Agency "Culture Information Systems"

kristine.paberza@kis.gov.lv

Data and evidence on library value is a powerful tool for changing attitudes and actions towards libraries as well as can serve as a tool for advocacy and fundraising. Since all public libraries in Latvia receive government funding, librarians must advocate for support to provide and sustain services to their changing communities by demonstrating the value of libraries within their communities to their government bodies, funders and decision makers. The paper presents methodology, early findings, possible applications of results and lessons learnt from the research study "Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction".

The study has been conducted in Latvia as the part of the impact assessment plan within the public library development project "Third Father's Son". The project is co-financed by the government of Latvia and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation within the Global Libraries program. All local government authorities with their 874 public libraries are participating in the project the main goal of which is to improve people's quality of life by strengthening and using the capacities of public libraries to facilitate better and proactive use of resources offered by free access to IT and the Internet. It is expected that the project "Third Father's Son" will raise the prestige and image of public libraries in society in general and value of public libraries in local communities. The project is beneficial to many people in Latvia, especially the rural population, in self-education, boosting the effectiveness of their working lives, developing social communication and getting better access to variety of services. The project also aims to motivate existing and to attract new library users that could benefit socially and economically from the new technologies and free Internet access in public libraries.

The study is looking on the magnitude of social value that library can have by using context oriented research approach (Durrance, 2002) that includes research of information ecology of local community as the system to find out what is the role of library and librarian within it. The theoretical background of the study is based on the theory of use-oriented value of information and information services (Saracevic and Kantor, 1997). To research information ecology of local communities the ecological theory of human information behaviour (Williamson, 2005) has been used that contains model of information search and use ecology that helps to identify information sources available at the community as well as helps to understand user information needs, information search habits as well as factors that influence the local information ecology. In order to look on social and cultural factors that influence information processes the model of everyday life information seeking has been used (Savolainen, 2005).

The study is answering several research questions:
- How do inhabitants rank public library service against other services provided by local government/municipality? How important is the public library service for inhabitants compared with other services provided by local government/municipality?
- What is the peoples' level of trust in public libraries in comparison with other social and cultural institutions and other institutions in local government/municipality?
- What is people's level of trust in public librarians in comparison with other professions?

- What is the trust level in information received in/through public library (or by using e-services and content, provided by public library) in comparison with information received through other information channels and resources?
- What is the level of user satisfaction with public library services?

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used for the data collection purposes that include representative survey of inhabitants in Latvia as well as focused discussion groups in all regions of Latvia covering urban as well as rural areas. The information ecology mapping method that allows illustration of networks of trust that exist in a geographical community has been applied in FGDs. The research sample includes both library users as well as non-users.

The paper introduces library community with practical results from the measurement of use-oriented value of public libraries by using information ecology approach that allows to look at the value of services from outside of the library within information ecology that exists in the community around the library and allows identifying the role of public library within a context of other information sources used by the public.

Durrance, J. C. and Fisher-Pettigrew, K. E., (2002). Toward Developing Measures of the Impact of Library and Information Services. *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 43 – 53.

Saracevic, T. and Kantor, P. B., (1997). Studying the Value of Library and Information Services. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, No. 48, Issue 6, 527 – 563.

Savolainen, R. (2005). *Everyday Life Information Seeking*. In: In: *Theories of Information Behavior* (2005). Medford, New Jersey.

Williamson, K. (2005). *Ecological Theory of Human Information Behavior*. In: *Theories of Information Behavior* (2005). Medford, New Jersey.