Type of Contribution: PAPER

**Social inequality and the public library management**

**Antonela Bokan,** Archeological Museum Split, Croatia

**Ljiljana Poljak,** University Library Split, Croatia

**Keywords: library management, public libraries, social inequality**

**Introduction**

At a time when many citizens of the civil society are still shrinking from the library as the main place where they can access information, develop themselves personally and access to lifelong learning, social inequality is recognized like a problem. Public libraries patrons are mostly citizens with a high level of education, children and young people in primary and secondary schools as well as students. Those, with a lower level of education, as well as people who did not meet with the library from the earliest age, may feel excluded and uncomfortable when they about becoming part of library community like they did not belong to a community of educated and reading. That feeling at the same time leaves a big impression on self-esteem and questions the opportunity for self-realization, two of most important human needs according to Maslow. However, the main principles of librarianship state that public libraries carry out their management through the principle of openness to all social communities. For decades, public library services are based on equality of access to all, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language or social status. Libraries stand as organizations of civil society having a significant impact on its development that is a personal intellectual improvement of its members. But, the impact is being made mainly on those members who are already being „intellectually improved“, and those who are socially excluded are feeling even more ruled out. In order to follow the theory of library principles in practice, it is necessary to think about the issues of social inequality.

**Theoretical framework**

Library patrons are members of society for whom contemporary democracy is the fundamental feature, and it is being achieved in open dialogue, partnerships with citizens, civil society organizations and public interest with public and state institutions. (Kodeks savjetovanja sa zainteresiranom javnošću u postupcima donošenja zakona, drugih propisa i akata, NN 140/2009.) The most important feature of library outcomes in this context is the social impact, where its important role in developing social inclusion and cohesion is revealed.

The library outcome is being made on the individual regarding its personal development, as well as the whole community. Promoting equality and social inclusion are attractive topics in librarianship community and are being broadly encouraged. They present one of the fundamental purposes of the library and its role in society. Undoubtedly, libraries put a lot of effort to ensure and advance access to information to all groups of society, but there are some areas in that field that needs to be taken with more concern. In the utopia of the librarian world, the ideal image would represent such a library in which there is no membership, whose doors are open to all, with no difference between the scientist and the one who has never thought about science, where people are gathered in great community and there the discrimination as the word does not exist. This is being discussed for years in the library community, but it is hard to realize theoretical knowledge in practice. It's not about librarians and library system awareness of inequalities in society, it is about all the potential library users and non-users who should follow the principle of openness to all, whose right to the library should be gained by birth, with full freedom of speech, right to learn, access and use of information. Social exclusion can be defined as a result of an individual not being able to engage in the life of a community, and it is important to understand that social exclusion and poverty have a significant bond. (Aabø 2005, 207) In order for the library to respond to utopian demands, it is necessary to focus the library management towards the needs of the local community, and first, they have to be detected. Selected issues regarding social inclusion that have to be reflected by public libraries include urgency to ensure social inclusion and to be aware of the complexity of that term, identifying the spectrum of socially excluded people and selecting target groups and exploring reasons for non-use of library services. (Fourie 2007, 3) The major factor enabling public libraries to work on social inclusion is the proportion of services that are provided without charge, which enables them to reach sections of the community who otherwise could not afford the use this type of service. (Kerslake and Kinnell 1998, 11). On the other hand, it is very often that those who have the greatest needs use the library the least and vice versa. It is stated that libraries provide services to all members of the community without discrimination, but the question arises whether libraries are enough concerned about attracting non-users, or they are predominantly focused on existing ones. (Pateman and Williment 2016, 2) In fact, the whole concept of social inclusion is primarily related to social exclusion or those members who are less visible. To make the impact on social inclusion, public library will need to become a far more proactive and interventionist public institution, with a commitment to equality, education and social justice at its core (Muddiman et al. 2000, 59) It is necessary to identify new areas or ways of action by which libraries are going to try to revive the underlying principles of librarianship.

The term access implies the physical ability to access and use the library, as well as just the information that is contained there. The objective of the public library, among others, is to ensure the population has equal opportunity to access education and culture, availability and use of information (Public Libraries Act, 2016) Libraries must be able to detect the exact information that user needs, regardless of the physical fund which they have. This implies the use of publicly available information also from other sources, not just referring to what we have in the library, which is enabled mostly by the Internet. While it enables equal access to and participation in the online environment a necessity for education, employment, finance, and civic engagement, the population traditionally excluded from the Internet network cause large inclusion problem. (Jaeger et al. 2012, 3) Although the era of censorship has passed, guidelines and procurement policies in some cases may not have sufficient breadth despite the fact that they provide the best possible solution for meeting opportunities and needs.

When it comes to the right of access to information, the person requesting the information should not have a legal interest and should not state the reason why he is seeking it. The information should be broadly defined so that it covers the documents in different media and in various forms, regardless of the creator. (Horvat and Živković 2012, 17) Libraries, guided by the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are certainly working to improve access to information on various media, but there are some concerns whether this approach involves all civil society members. Unequal personal access has been debated since mid ‘90s in political, social, economic and educational forums as well. (Jaeger et al. 2014, 3) This issue is worth analyzing the current state of affairs and reflecting on future steps that would really allow access to information for all citizens.

Digital inequality is a certain, very important issue with which libraries are facing today and it is equally important both globally and locally, within the micro and macro universe. In that area, terms digital divide, digital literacy, and digital inclusion are very important. While the digital divide implies the gap and digital literacy encompasses the skills and abilities necessary for access once the technology is available, digital inclusion is developed to close the digital divide and promote digital literacy, but it is still in its infancy. (Jaeger et al. 2014, 3) The ability to access, adapt and create knowledge using information and communication technologies is critical to social inclusion. (Warschauer 2004, 6) Informatization and ever-shifting information and communication technologies, on the one hand, allows greater access and use, and on the other hand, contributes to the growing digital divide.

The great problem is the excessive dependence of the founders of the local authorities, who are also the main financiers of the public libraries. In addition to dependence and instability, inequality in available funds among different libraries is also very important. Only the factor of excessive dependence can be considered as potential inequality, which can be demonstrated by the situation among public libraries in Great Britan. The lack of funds for the acquisition, modernization, and improvement of the business may not be such a stumbling block as it is today, unfortunately. It is well known that libraries contribute to economic productivity by providing access to a range of cultural products, appropriate information, open learning services and promoting literacy. (Kerslake and Kinnell 1998, 10) The library in society, its instrumental, democratic and cultural value has to be estimated. At a time where the economic pressure is continuing and increasing, the need to demonstrate the economic importance of public libraries is urgent (Aabø 2005, 210). The value of the public library to the society should be the main argument in library advocacy. It is a precisely civil society that is struggling to change the direction of the end product. Social engagement, co-operation and the sharing of public resources enable the generation and consumption of a new one. By looking at the practice, in today's world tolerance, creativity and co-operation are the main skills that librarians need while trying to keep the library in ensuring access to all or to eliminate inequalities.

Libraries are there for their users, but who actually are those users or members as commonly referred to? Who can actually be called a library user, a library member or a member of society? In order to overcome the principle of complete openness and use of library services, users of the library should be everybody, regardless of possession of a membership card. Maybe the term user card could be more appropriate, because of the context of free use.

Undoubtedly, libraries play a key role in overcoming the inequalities and encouraging social inclusion, but these roles require some change in their management.

**Research questions**

Research questions of this paper are:

1. In which segments of public library management system social inequality can be identified?

2. Which are the ways to prevent the future development of social inequality that is found in the segments of public library management?

**Methodology**

The methodology of the paper critically approaches the problem of social inequalities in the public libraries. In the beginning, there is a theoretical review of the influence of public libraries on civil society followed by possible threats that could affect the development of social inequity within the library management. Research method of the paper is an analysis of documentation of national librarianship strategies. Research sample includes following countries: Croatia, Finland, and Great Britain. Finland and Great Britain are countries in whose library practice, implementing of fundamental librarian principles has been strongly recognized. Croatia still has not adopted the strategy of librarianship, but with analysis of the available *Draft strategy of Croatian librarianship*, will be also possible to identify segments of the library management which can be identified as potential for the development of social inequality.

The analysis of mentioned documentation will explore in which segments of the library management is possible to recognize existence of social inequality. After analysis of the documentation, conducted SWOT analysis shows what weaknesses, strengths, threats, and opportunities public library needs to identify in general, in order to find ways to prevent the future development of social inequalities found in segments of the library management.

**Sample**

Croatia, Finland and Great Britain *National strategies for librarianship*.

**Expectations**

The expectations of this work are focused in the recognition of the main factors of social inequality in the public libraries, which is why basic principles of librarianship as the principle of openness to all social communities, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language or social status can be completely transferred from theory to practice. This has shown that libraries still face the many challenges they should deal with if they want to commit, just and equally serve the civil society of the local community in which they operate. Answers to do questions *Why is the library open to all, but not everybody comes to the library*? and *What public libraries can do to prevent future development of inequalities?* present the general expectations of this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Aabø, Svanhild. 2005. „The role and value of public libraries in the age of digital technologies.“ *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 37 (4): 205-211.

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Svanhild_Aabo/publication/249749901_The_role_and_value_of_public_libraries_in_the_age_of_digital_technologies/links/56b1b92b08ae5ec4ed4910b4.pdf>

2. Fourie, Ina. 2007. Public libraries addressing social inclusion: how we may think… Paper presented at *World library and information congress:* 73rd IFLA general conference and council, Durban South Africa, 2007. <http://origin-archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/papers/128-Fourie-en.pdf>

3. Horvat, Aleksandra, and Daniela Živković. 2012. *Između javnosti i privatnosti: knjižnice u vremenu e-knjige*. Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada.

4. *IFLA/ UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*. 1994. Translated by Aleksandra Horvat. <http://dzs.ffzg.unizg.hr/text/UNESCOv_manifest_za_narodne_knjiznice.htm> (2018-01-11)

5. Kerslake, Evelyn, and Kinnell, Margaret. 1998. „Reviewing the Literature on Public Libraries and Social Inclusion.“ *Libri* 48 (1): 1-12.

6*. Kodeks savjetovanja sa zainteresiranom javnošću u postupcima donošenja zakona, drugih propisa i akata*. <https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2009_11_140_3402.html> (2018-01-11)

7. Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland. Public Libraries Act (1492/2016). <http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/2016/en20161492.pdf>

8. Muddiman, Dave, Shiraz Durrani, Martin Dutch, Rebecca Linley, John Pateman, and John Vincent. 2000. *Open to all? The public library and social exclusion*. Vol. 1. London: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. http://eprints.rclis.org/6283/1/lic084.pdf

9. Pateman, John, and Ken Williment. 2016. *Developing community-led public libraries: Evidence from the UK and Canada*. New York: Routledge.

10. Pateman, John, and John Vincent. 2016. *Public libraries and social justice*. New York: Routledge.

11. Warschauer, Mark. 2004. *Technology and social inclusion: rethinking the digital divide.* Cambridge : MIT Press.