**TYPE OF CONTRIBUTION: PAPER**

**The Role of Public Libraries in Democratization**

**of Society on the Example of Right to Free Access to Public Information[[1]](#footnote-0)**

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**Keywords: public library, democratization, right to free access to information, transparency.**

The development of democracy and its core values in modern society has created a new environment in which public libraries receive a significant and active role, and thus a special social responsibility. This responsibility is more than ever in the long history of libraries lies in creating conditions for free access to sources of knowledge and information, regardless of the differences (ethnic, political, religious, ethical,). Library - by nature democratic institution - serves society by serving the individual -citizen that finds a place from which he/she can achieve freedom of expression and free access to information. Respect democratic values in the current information age is a historic moment in which the public library needs to redefine its role from traditional to contemporary.

Simultaneously, a public library is a democratic place in the broadest meaning of the word, which implies the trust it has to gain with the people, like an institution with integrity. The citizens must trust their library in the context of privacy protection, too, which becomes the imperative of the digital era. The misuse of personal data, as well as of other data on the users of the library is a threat which has never before happened in the history.

The importance of a well and in-good-time informed citizen as a key factor of a democratic society makes a starting point of the idea of a modern library as "an approaching point for local services". In such a way the library creates its own identity in the 21st century as a socially responsible institution in which social justice is implemented.

In the first chapter of this paper a short account of the concept of a public library, human rights, as well as the place of public libraries in the legal library systems of the Republic of Serbia are given. From the legal aspect, the institute of "free access to the information of public importance" (public information) is shown in detail, its short history and a momentary situation of the so called "FOI legislation" (*Freedom of information laws)* in the world and the connection between the civil rights in regulations and public libraries.

The central part of the paper deals with the results of a survey carried out in co-ordinating public libraries in Serbia. It examines the readiness of these libraries to meet the new demands of their communities in domain of rights of the citizens to have free access to information, how high the level of transparency of particular information in the very libraries is and also the readiness of the librarians to meet the new role of the libraries in keeping with the systematic solutions on the state level. It also examines the level of being well-informed among the very librarians on the rights and obligations, as well as the capabilities of public libraries as public institutions which come out of current regulations and which refer to civil rights to free access to information of public interest, that is, to public documents.

Starting with European Charter of Local Self-Government which recommends *immediate participation of citizens in public life on the local level* – like a way of implementing their right to take part in the process of governing and with the goal of creating a better life for common wealth – the public library grows into the place in which citizens can ask for most different pieces of information. On the other hand, the right to free access to information like the claims of a democratic society for active and responsible cooperation of a citizen in governing the local community – represents a specific chance for a public library to find and preserve its place in a society in which the libraries should not be necessarily present, since they finance themselves from public revenues. The following conclusion is drawn that the public libraries should not ignore the difficult social reality which is caused by transitional processes, nor the reform of the whole society which is marked as "painful" by both politicians and citizens.

Accepting their new role public libraries become transparent institutions so their place will be more visible and their support to democracy unambiguous. The importance of the principles of free access to information is for a long time recognized by worldwide library public gathered round IFLA, which accepted the fact that the library workers are responsible for giving and securing the flow of information in a society.

In this paper the strong consciousness of international association IFLA is emphasized, as well as its permanent paying attention to a new information era, new digital laws, privacy, a transparency at work, multiculturalism and also respect of human rights in the libraries. Through a large number of comprehensive IFLA documents, the libraries and governments are called on the local and the state level to respect the values for which the international librarianship is standing for and which are democratic values, too.

On the other hand, in the context of those societies in which the government still does not respect the principles of openness at work it is pointed to the corruption which appears as a very harmful phenomenon just in such societies. Librarians should realize the importance of providing active support in their communities and promote the principles of transparency at the work of public authorities as alphabets in the fight against corruption

The results of survey confirm the aim of this paper that a public library can be transformed *into the approaching station* for the citizens for gaining advice, inquiries, instructions and other help in the process of realizing their right to free information as well and make much easier their right to be justly and in due time informed.

Systematic elaboration of models that public libraries can apply to the responsible and relevant engagements in the everyday life of their community - is the objective of this paper.

The libraries in Serbia currently cannot play a committed role in democratization of the society, but if they accept the fact that their role should be restructured, i.e. redefined – they could. By changing their tasks and their social function, so the libraries in a modern democratic society become strong local community centres for which they were founded with an aim to improve the quality of informing the citizens and to help with their immediate participation in ruling their community – which presents the purpose of this survey.

At the same time the importance of the new roles of librarians as an active representative of the broad range of citizens. Public Library as a ''access point'' for citizens in the area of freedom of information helps to achieve transparency and implicitly could affect the exercise of that right of free access to information of public importance. Finally, the corruption in the libraries, as well as the risks which lead to it in some segments of the library work, are mentioned here.

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1. The paper presented here is an abridged and adapted version of author's doctoral dissertation (defended at University of Zagreb, Faculty of humanities and social sciences, Department of information and communication sciences, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)