**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**The curious case of travel-related events in public libraries**

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**Keywords: public libraries, events, adults, travel-related events, lifelong learning**

# Introduction

Public libraries have many roles: they have to provide for cultural development, support lifelong learning, have a social role etc. An important role of the public library is providing a focus for cultural and artistic development in the community and helping to shape and support the cultural identity of the community (Koontz and Gubbin 2010, 8). Libraries, especially public libraries, create a diverse cultural context, freedom without stereotypes and lifelong learning for different users. Use of the library for research, education, and leisure interests brings people into informal contact, providing a positive social experience. Library facilities should foster social and cultural activities which support community interests (Koontz and Gubbin 2010, 9). One of the ways to do this is by providing space and organizing diverse cultural programmes and special events, including travel-related events. This paper is a part of a broader study of user experience of events for adults at MKL (Ljubljana City Library – Mestna knjižnica Ljubljana). MKL is the largest public library in Slovenia and consists of 37 branch libraries. This paper aims to present the results pertaining to travel-related events as well as discuss the place of travel-related events in the broader field of library services.

# Theoretical framework

Events in a public library are a targeted and time-limited activity. The main purposes are to motivate specific target groups to visit the library and use its services and materials, develop reading culture and promote lifelong learning. Carefully planned programmes and events bring people into the library.

Public library events are usually open to general public, which means libraries should offer events for a wide variety of audiences: children, young adults, parents, senior citizens, small business owners, corporate executives, homemakers, college students … But the audience is only one element. For the right topic, librarians may want to let their library collection be their guide: they know which items are always checked out; what questions patrons are asking at the information desk; they can analyse and generate data that show circulation trends. Books on computers and technology, travel, and cooking always seem to be in demand. This shows the areas of interest to library patrons (Lear 2013, 80).

This paper focuses on travel-related events which we define as any event having to do with travel. Many of these events can be described as travelogues (i.e. they describe a particular journey undertaken by an individual or a group or present a certain place) and can take different forms including film projections and travel lectures. Other travel-related events may be associated with travel tips or acquiring skills, useful for travelling. For example, Rothstein and Schull (2010, 121-23) suggest some Library 2.0 oriented programmes that should help older adults find and share travel-related information online. In fact, Vavrek (1995, 24) suggested retired persons/seniors to be the most appropriate audience for travel-related events.

There is no single categorization of library events. For example, MKL sorts its events into: professional and popular lectures, literary events, travelogues, concerts, films, theatre performances, craft workshops, classes and exhibitions. Of these, travelogues are obvious outliers, when comparing this categorization to those of other similarly sized public libraries. In fact, many libraries around the world do not hold travel-related events, or if they do, these are one-off events that are promoted simply as lectures / presentations.

It is therefore not surprising that travel-related events are not a popular topic in literature. If they are discussed at all, they are mentioned very briefly (Lear 2013; Walton 2001). Sometimes, the focus is on the skills, needed to travel, rather than travelogues or travel lectures (i.e. storytelling with photographs, videos and artefacts), which account for the vast majority of travel-related events in MKL.

Of course, travel related events are not unique to libraries. The lack of travel-related events in libraries may be a result of similar events being held by or in other types of profit (e.g. travel agencies) and non-profit (e.g. community centres) institutions. However, it has to be stressed that Ljubljana also has other venues (e.g. geographical society, youth centres, bookstores …) where travel-related events take place outside of libraries, although this appears to be more or less ad-hoc and is not a result of carefully planned system.

Travel-related events offer a strong dimension of engagement. The choice of event usually depends on library’s resources, presenters’ availability, location and patron demographics. These events reinforce the idea of the library as a centre of community and lifelong learning. Travel-related events offer the participants an opportunity to gain new knowledge or expand their knowledge in different areas, e.g. geography, history, cultural anthropology and ethnology. Education is often combined with entertainment through amusing anecdotes and the atmosphere is usually relaxed. Not only is there a contact between the lecturer and the audience, travel-related events can involve all of human sensory systems, including tactile, olfactory and gustatory systems.

# Research questions

While our research focused on events for adults in MKL in general, this paper presents results pertaining to the state of travel-related events in particular. The main motivation for our research was to gain insight into the user experience of the participants. We also aimed to find out, what the characteristics of the people attending travel-related events in MKL are and if they differed from those attending other types of events. Based on the distinct lack of literature on the subject of travel-related events, a more general question arises: Should there be a place for travel-related events in public libraries?

# Methodology

We used several methods and techniques (surveys, in-depth interviews, reaction cards, content analysis, and observation) to obtain information about events for adults from participants, librarians and written sources. We conducted personal interviews with four participants of travel-related events and ten librarians responsible for organizing events, 120 participants were involved in questionnaire survey at MKL in November 2016. The analysis of a three-month period of events in MKL (March-May 2016) gave additional insight into events.

# Research Results

In 2015 MKL had 1063 events for adults, 97 of them were travel-related, which attracted 3288 participants. With an average of 34 participants per event, travel-related events ranked as the most visited type of event in MKL, which is in line with the results of November 2016 survey as well as reports from elsewhere (Lear 2013, 198). Travelogues were among the less frequent types of events at MKL, far behind professional and popular lectures and literary events (including reading groups). The same pattern was also observed in our analysis of the period from April to May 2016 and again in November 2016, when we carried out our survey. While the varied nature of events makes it difficult to compare data, it is estimated that about 10-15 percent of events in MKL are travel-related. The only comparable percentage found in literature is that by Sapir (1994, 16-7), where 15 percent of events for seniors that took place in Western Pennsylvania were travelogues. A quick look at the web sites of some major public libraries around the world suggests this percentage to be considerably lower.

While library events are often based on programmes that cater to the needs of specific groups of users, MKL is often not as proactive. In fact, there are no true programmes. Many events of different types, including travel-related events, are a result of offers that came from outside the library rather than a product of careful planning. This does not imply, however, that there is no control, as all of the events have to be approved. On the other hand, as we found in our analysis of the web site and brochure information, it does mean that the declared user groups are generic (mostly youth, adults and seniors or youths and adults).

Generally, our survey found that participants were highly satisfied with the events they attended in general and travel-related events in particular. Further, in-depth interviews showed that the participants especially enjoyed picturesque photography, as well as inspiring, interesting, witty and well-prepared lectures. In both survey and interviews there were only a few isolated cases, where participants expressed minor dissatisfaction with a particular component of an event, e.g. the extensive length.

While this feedback is certainly positive, this may be a result of events being free-of-charge. Also, there is a significant group of (especially older) people that attend various events and is therefore less likely to criticize any particular event. Also, it is possible that those who did not enjoy the events as much, declined to take part in the survey and interviews.

Interviews with librarians showed that librarians are sure that this type of event is the best opportunity to attract young and male population, i.e. two of the least frequent groups of visitors in the library. However, the survey does not confirm this, as the majority of participants are over 45, just like with all other kinds of events.

At the end of an event, librarians prepare a leaflet advertising planned travel-related events. While, this helps retain regular visitors, it does not attract new ones. In the survey 28 percent of participants were non-users.

We also compared librarian-given tags used in promoting events on library's website. We found that tags were used inconsistently. For example, the same event was described differently in various branches of the library. Also, there were inconsistencies in the geographical granularity of the applied tags (e.g. some events were tagged with city names, countries and continents, while others left out some of the information).

Evidently, there is room for improvement in terms of promotion, but also in terms of selection of events that will cater to and attract various user groups.

# Discussion & Conclusion

In the end, the question any library needs to ask itself is: why do we organize (travel-related) events? The answer lies in the tasks, goals, mission and vision of each library. The next step is to organize events that are intended for specific user groups. However, library programming just like any other library service is a two-way affair. Public libraries have various roles in order for everybody to benefit. However, particularly, the cultural and educational aspects of public libraries may not be to everybody's taste. Travel-related events are a good example of events that combine the more »boring« cultural and educational aspects with the more »fun« leisure activities. Even more importantly they are relatively popular (at least in MKL) and can be therefore seen as a way of promoting the library to those that are not its users or are infrequent users. For this to work, MKL - and potentially other libraries - must ensure that the events provide enough motivation for people to start using libraries more frequently. However, if these requirements are not met, the impact of travel-related events in libraries is severely limited.

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