REVIEW ESSAY

LIBRARIES: CREATING PUBLIC SERVICE AND PUBLIC SPACE FOR THE FUTURE

TOMAŽ KRPIČ

Anne Goulding: *Public Libraries in the 21st Century.* Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006, 396 pp., $ 114.95 (hardback) ISBN: 0 7546 4286 0.

Carl Gustav Johannsen and Leif Kajberg (eds.): *New Frontiers in Public Library Research.* Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005, 384 pp., $ 52.00 (paperback) ISBN: 0 8108 5039 7.

T. D. Webb (ed.): *Building Libraries for the 21st Century: The Shape of Information.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004, 286 pp., $ 49.95 (paperback) ISBN: 0 7864 2034 0.

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After years of library staff complaining about students eating at library tables, we saw the tables turned when Food Services put up signs on the tables in the food court asking students not to study at the tables during the lunch rush.

Charlene Hurt 2004, 101

Since they became widespread during the Victorian age, libraries have persisted stubbornly in modern society, despite numerous general difficulties with their organisation, their economic maintenance, and in particular with their ability to fulfil basic professional standards for librarians and to meet various needs that have been expressed by users. Divergent problems – such as insufficient space, constant deficiencies of highly qualified staff, poorly designed strategies designed to meet users' needs, difficulties in applying modern information technology, and many more – might even lead us to conclude that the modern library might be, if not obsolete, at least in crisis. Yet appearance is often deceptive. It seems that now a great deal is expected from the institution of the library, and that they are expected to perform functions ranging from supporting adult literacy and different educational programs (McLoughlinn and Morris 2004), a concern that is particularly prominent in the developing world (Adomi 2000; Heitzman and Asundi 2000), to enforcing democratic values after the great political shift in Eastern European countries (see, for example, the case of Baltic States in West and Lowe 1998).

Libraries may perform an even more crucial role in the distant future. Ellen Forsyth, astonished that the list of the Millennium Development Goals that was set up by the United Nations at the dawn of the new millennium does not mention public libraries at all, thoroughly describes what the future role of public libraries might be in achieving goals such as eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other lethal diseases, provision of environmental sustainability, and development of global partnership for development (Forsyth 2005). It seems that enlightened mission of the libraries has always been well recognised, and that this mission has never really been questioned. Instead, libraries are still credited with being relevant "repositories of public knowledge" (Usherwood *et al.* 2005), "symbolic librarianship" (Webb 1989, 222; 2004, 193-194), and are thought of as places where "all human knowledge might be found" (Carr in Webb 2004, 21). They are thought to participate in "creation of cognitive space in the environment" (Chepesiuk 1996, 51), and in "building the 'people's network'" (Yu *et al.* 1999, 71). Last but not least, the public library is thought of as an institution which "accommodate(s) the information rights of the citizen in the information society" (Kerslake and Kinnell 1998, 159), and as such, they function as an element of security in the form of an extensive social welfare programme (Ormes 1998, 123). Nevertheless, while education and information are the intended purposes of libraries and thus are highly priced, their leisure function, which is in fact a major reason for the use of (public) libraries, is generally missed or misunderstood (Hayes and Morris 2005). There is no doubt that libraries carry out many functions in modern, post-modern and less-modern societies. Kerslake and Kinnell (1998, 163) define three types of impact that public libraries have on society: their community impact, their educational impact, and their economic impact (see also Kerslake and Kinnell 1997). In addition, the pervasive social influence of libraries

in modern society is well illustrated in the study of the role of public libraries as disseminators of information regarding health promotion and illness prevention (Linnan *et al.* 2004).

In the past, libraries have played an extremely significant role and there is certainly some evidence indicating that libraries will continue to be central to society in the future. However, the question remains: how will libraries gain their future status during the 21st century? Will the future strengthen the position of libraries, or could their status decline? Are we witnessing an inevitable process that will lead to the end of the traditional conception of libraries, and if the process is not inevitable, what can prevent this? Such questions are certainly not easy to answer, though not impossible, and therefore they should be in the forefront of any investigation of the status of libraries. I chose to study three recently published books that present three different approaches to examining the issues currently surrounding libraries: *Building Libraries for the 21st Century*, edited by T. D. Webb, who is the director and dean of the library at California State University (Sacramento); *Public Libraries in the 21st Century*, by Anne Goulding, who is a Reader in Information Services Management at the Department of Information Science, Loughborough University; and *New Frontiers in Public Library Research*, edited by Carl Gustav Johannsen, who is Head of the Department of Library and Information Management at the Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, and Leif Kajberg, consultant for the International Relation and Research Administration at the same school. The first book foregrounds the process of the architectural construction of libraries, along with social, cultural, economic and political factors that have significant influences on this process. The second book takes into consideration the present situation and the further development of public libraries in Great Britain. The third book is essentially about advancements in the methodology used in public library research, though at the same time it presents many valuable findings regarding the more general field relating to public libraries. All three books represent serious and extensive attempts to gain insight into the future of (public) libraries. Due to limited space, unfortunately, I can only emphasise what I believe to be the most important elements of their discussions.

"User-Friendly" Libraries

Libraries are designed to be a public service. This means that everyone who wants to use the services provided by libraries – whether to borrow a book, access the Internet for amusement's sake, to conduct some "serious existential project in life" (studies, work, search for roots and identity, and so on) (Duvold in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 280), or simply to seek "shelter from the storm" – is entitled to do so. This belief is so strong that sometimes librarians, paradoxically, even exclude users from public discussion about library policy and practice (Talja in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 308); for it is considered a self-evident truth that librarians are capable of representing the people's will and thus exercising their rights. The right to use libraries freely stems mainly from the concept of citizenship. Certainly there are some exceptions to this rule (Karslake and Kinnell 1998, 160) – for example, in academic libraries, in which membership is limited to students and university staff; highly specialised libraries, where open access might endanger their unique and sensitive stock; or prison libraries, which in fact are not public libraries at all

– but to a common person it is self-evident that any limitations that libraries place on users' access need to be explicitly and logically justified. Another reason for free access is the fact that libraries are in large part funded by public money. Only a small portion of libraries' revenue comes from their "selling" their services. For all those reasons, users are essential, so it is amazing that from time to time library designers and staff nevertheless forget that libraries can be popular as a meeting place for public (Zapatos in Webb 2004). Similarly, Duvold (in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 270 and 276), when she mentions possible basic roles of public libraries in local communities, speaks about public libraries as meeting places for people. Lately public libraries' popularity as meeting places has been closely linked to their digital aspect (Audunson 2005; Chowdhury *et al.* 2006). At first, digitalisation of libraries was seen as a possible threat, as it was suspected that this might lead to a reduction in library visits or to negligence in printing books. However, while new developments in digitalisation have shown some effects in this direction, they have not occurred to the degree that was forecast (McKnight and Dearnley 2003; Coyle 2006).

The concept of public libraries is closely associated with the idea that the whole population should use their services (Jochumsen and Rasmussen in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 291). UK public libraries are a rather good illustration of public library consumerism (Goulding 2006). The UK has a high rate of registered users as compared with many other countries – a little more than half of the members of the population hold a library card, while 28 percent of people visit public libraries every week. Nevertheless, librarians care a lot about those people who rarely, if ever, visit public libraries. The high rate of people who do hold library cards provides scant consolation when the other part of population does not wish to exercise their right to use the library's services. The question is: why does this proportion of the population choose not to visit libraries habitually? Usually, their reasons can be traced to low education levels, which are associated with poor literacy skills and potential instinctive dislike of any academic activity, or simply the self-evident fact that some people simply are not interested in reading or using any other library services (McNicol 2004, 83). Goulding's answer to this question has multiple facets and as such shows the complexity of the problem. She stated that the strategy of individualistic consumer orientation does not fit well with the basic government idea that public libraries should function as community regenerators in terms of feelings and pride. An attempt to implement consumer values into the public sector may cause negative consequences. This goes well along with the fact that sometimes people may not know what kinds of services are available, for library staff does not put enough effort into tackling the issue of non-users. It looks like some libraries are prepared to take care of a few rather than seeking to cater to the many. They prefer to serve the literary elite than to worry about the people who may have less education and who may visit libraries to gain smaller, private pleasures. Small wonder, then, that there are people who believe that public libraries serve only a narrow section of population: white, middle-aged, middle-class people who have sufficient time, money and cultural capital to take advantage of public libraries (Greenhalgh *et al.* 1995, 29).

There are many ways in which libraries try to address non-users or simply to enlarge the satisfaction of their regular visitors. Sometimes their hours of operation are expanded, though this may lead to a lack of sufficiently educated staff or prob-

lems in gaining the additional funds that would cover the expense of these extra hours. Sometimes library management makes decision to allow patrons and other visitors to bring in limited amount of food and drinks. Usually there are specifically designated areas in which eating is allowed. This is a far better strategy than to forbid food and drinks entirely (Fischer in Webb 2004, 147). It is also interesting to examine the use of public libraries among ethnic minorities. The majority of members of ethnic minorities do not make habitual use of public libraries, especially among those ethnic minorities who are immigrants. The main reason is that they are usually poorly educated, as many of them have arrived from countries with badly developed educational systems. An additional factor is their lack of cultural competence. Immigrants might come from countries with underdeveloped library systems, and as a consequence they may not be accustomed to using library services. Nevertheless, public libraries, especially since they provide access to the World Wide Web, are an excellent opportunity for immigrants to establish and to maintain remote contacts with their homelands and their communities of origin. In addition, open access to public libraries means that immigrants can use public libraries as a place for social gatherings or as a sort of sanctuary from everyday life. The development of digital public library services thus seems to be a good "decoy" or mechanism for establishing social integration, not only within the immigrant community, but also between the immigrant community and the majority of the population (Berger in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005). The ultimate intention is to reduce uncertainty and unpredictability among immigrants (Elbeshausen and Werther in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005).

Another way to attract people, particularly youths, is to adapt the rules of behaviour inside of libraries to their habits and culture, at least partially. So, for example, the management of IUPUI University Library decided to allow food and drink in one study room. This resulted in improvements in their public relations with students (Fischler 2004, 146). Designers and architects have found that group study rooms are also very important elements of public libraries that intend to attract many students. Flexibility in interior design, meaning few solid walls and large amounts of open space, has also proven to be helpful.

There are several indicators of people's satisfaction with library services. People like to make judgments as to how much time (see for example Griffiths and King 1993) or money they are willing to spend on a certain service or certain thing. A. Morris, M. Hawkins and J. Sumsion, in their study about the value of book borrowing, come to the conclusion that users often estimate the value of borrowing books in monetary terms, and that readers tend to underestimate the monetary value of book-lending services (Morris *et al.* 2001). Similarly, S. Aabø, by using a contingent valuation method in her research, shows that people in Norway price public libraries with around € 50.00 and 250.00. The lower bound is close to the average library cost per household in Norway at the time the research was conducted (Aabø in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005). It is interesting that when people are asked to compare public library services with a certain car, they choose an old but reliable family car, rather than with some fancy sport car (Jochumsen and Rasmussen in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 298).

The incorporation of public libraries into local communities is of great importance. Sometimes the construction of a public library is supported by a group of enthusiastic individuals and library patrons, who share an interest in public librar-

ies and thus provide organised help with the preparation and building of a public library. One example would be the construction of a public library in San Antonio, during which two different groups contribute to its building: The Friends of the San Antonio Public Library, which was an organisation functioning as a network for different individual branch groups, an the San Antonio Public Library, which serves as a non-profit fund-raising and support organisation (Zapatos in Webb 2004, 43).

Library Staff

Librarians' professional identity plays a very important role in establishing a specific culture. Librarians' collective identity is maintained and expressed through a combination of self-portraits that are constantly developed and reproduced (Christensen Skøtt in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005). In the past, librarians were seen mostly as custodians of knowledge, whose primary task was to accumulate publicly relevant information. However, as the role of libraries has changed in the modern era, the role of librarians has changed as well. Although libraries always have been associated with education and literacy, the 21st-century library needs to go one step further. Librarians are now more and more directly involved with teaching, development of curriculum, and evaluation of student work (Hurt in Webb 2004); this has been further enabled by the placement of classrooms and places specially designed for learning in public libraries (Freeman in Webb 2004). In short, librarians are now taking a more personal and active part in education than they have in the past.

It is almost self-evident that librarians understand themselves as being always in the forefront, due to the social function that libraries perform in modern society. However, the social status of librarians is paradoxically low (Jochumsen and Rasmussen in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 301), even in the eyes of patrons (McNicol 2005, 85). One possible interpretation of this situation is that the unproblematic status of public libraries as relevant social institutions stems from its "mythical" mission as a key element of enlightenment, while today the "mission" of public libraries is to give everyone what they want without claiming anything really special in exchange. The low status library staff can be considered as a kind of "collateral damage." Especially concerning is the fact that along with the low social status comes a rather low salary. Arvidsson's research shows that librarians, as a professional collective, consider the high status of libraries to be a form of compensation for their low income. In addition, she thinks that the introduction of the new information technologies has provided more compensation to librarians, because ordinary people in this case once again perceive them as specialists (Arvidsson in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 16). But on the other hand, low income generates serious problems with recruitment and renewal of library staff. As a consequence, the staff in libraries has gradually become older, which may cause severe consequences in the near future. In the end, only those who find personal enjoyment in handling books and those who appreciate working with a wide range of people may decide to join the "consecrated" community of librarians (see Goulding 2005, 137).

However, it is not only the professional identity of librarians that is worth mentioning here. Cultural encounters – a term defined as interactions between people of different ethnic origins – have turned out to be important in the interpretation of the social, cultural and political processes in regions with mixed ethnic popula-

tion. Positive cultural encounters presuppose equality in the relationships among members of ethnic groups, yet the most elegant way to achieve this, paradoxically, is to ignore ethnic origins during conversations or in any other social contact. In the case of public libraries, interactions between a member of the library staff and a citizen represent relationships between a professional and a layman. Such a relationship can only seldom be symmetrical or informal, notably when the laymen are immigrants (Christensen Skøtt in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005). Goulding notes that in Great Britain, certain problems related to cultural encounters between ethnic minorities and librarians have stemmed from the fact that ethnic minorities are under-represented within the workforce of public libraries (Goulding 2006, 133).

Johannsen and Pors have noted that Danish library leaders prefer a soft leadership style. Those leaders whose working credo derives from their humanistic values find more satisfaction in his profession than do others (Johannsen and Pors in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005). Unfortunately, the research does not tell us much about how this softened version of managerial ethics affects the quality of libraries' service, although from the text it can be seen that the authors clearly believe that the effect is a positive one. Goulding indicates that small, local public libraries need to have a strong chief librarian with effective political skills in order to provide the financial means necessary for the operation of the library (Goulding 2005, 51). Another aspect of the problems with library staffing is that there are different forms of training that have been developed to promote various skills needed for the successful organisation of libraries. Our highly changeable modern society requires highly adaptable library system. But in reality, there are several skill gaps that still need be addressed (Goulding 2005, 155-163).

New Information Technology and Public Libraries

One true milestone was the introduction of new information technologies during the 1980s. As is often case, librarians were at first very enthusiastic about the numerous possibilities this technology afforded, which they thought might give more order to the complex world of information. Their faith in the Internet as a sophisticated tool for reference service for users was strong, yet they were soon disillusioned. There are two important questions about the consequences of the introduction of new information technologies and mass media into libraries. The first is the question of why people have been drawn back into libraries even though informational technology now allows them to use library services from a distance. The second question is that of how new informational technologies can be integrated positively into libraries without sacrificing libraries' their personal feel (Freeman in Webb 2004)? While the answer to the first question must obviously be that people are still interested in libraries because they are helpful in maintaining close relationships with other people, the answer to the second question is more difficult to find. It is not possible to avoid the dehumanising aspect of informational technology entirely, although librarians can do a lot, during their contact with users, to preserve a warm human touch. Implementation of new informational technologies opens up new approaches to users, such as virtual reference desks. Everyone who has a computer and access to some Internet provider may now send a question to the (local) public library, and librarians can likewise provide answers online. A virtual reference desk is cosier for the patron, and users are also becoming more self-reli-

ant. Sometimes the users are only directed towards the solution of their problem – for example, they may be given web-based resources, or they may find a suitable answer among archived answers (Høivik in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005).

Ulla Arvidsson (in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005) in her research on use of Internet in public libraries draws our attention to two unpredictable consequences of its implementation of new communication technologies. Firstly, librarians become technicians in the eyes of users and are expected to help patrons whenever they are confronted with any problem of using Internet. That makes the librarian feel degraded. Secondly, now some people expect that librarians will function as information supervisors – gatekeepers, so to speak – whose role is to prevent children's misuse of Internet. Although librarians must not and do not support children's inappropriate use of the World Wide Web, they do not feel comfortable stepping into parents' shoes in this regard. To some degree, the implementation of new information technologies goes hand in hand with D. Skot-Hansen's idea of culturally liberated libraries (Duvold in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 276). It refers to the historical shift from the perception of libraries as institutions of cultural mediation to the institutions that participate primarily in the transmission of information.

Speaking of new technologies and their possible future impacts on public libraries, I particularly enjoyed reading T. D. Webb's *Building Libraries for the 21st Century*. Contradicting the general notion that television has no place in public libraries and that any televisions in public libraries should be used strictly for educational purposes, the planning team of Kapiolani Library decided to accentuate electronic information delivery due to the fact that the library could never hold a collection large enough to meet students' needs. In apposition to this notion, Webb gives us an illustration of Kapiolani Library as an excellent example of the integration of mass communications and various traditional library resources. Library designers have made an architectural element called the NewsWere alcove. It is a special place that is equipped with a TV set where visitors to the public library can watch newscasts and other TV programs and thus be informed about the latest news. The argument for the introduction of TV sets into public libraries is simple: although almost everyone now has a television in his or her home, the main reason for providing them in libraries is not to provide people with TV news, but to instruct them in how to watch television. The viewers, says Webb, do not know how to watch television properly, and this is especially true of youngsters. So we should teach them how to separate grain from weeds, instead of preaching to them about what a damaging influence television programming can have on them (Webb in Webb, 2004).

The question of the degree to which new information technologies may change libraries' collection is inevitable. Whether one evaluates these possibilities pessimistically or optimistically will depend on the individual's values and social norms, but it is clear that in the near future, public libraries will hold mainly electronic versions of journals, magazines and books and that the Internet will prevail in the structure of the library service (Arvidsson in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 22) did not come true.

Between Local Needs and National Agenda

Despite the fact that the idea of the contemporary library is an "invention" of modern Western society, these days the idea has gained universal acceptance. One

indicator of the universal character of libraries is the fact that most modern nations have made an attempt to have a kind of a central national library system. National libraries are thus highly prized, whether in terms of their role as a central reference point for a particular national library system or as symbols of cultural values (Kessler in Webb 2004; Renoult in Webb 2004). Accordingly, expectations are high, if not unrealistic, as can be seen from the following statement of the French president François Mitterrand concerning the new French Bibliothèque:

> *This great library will cover all the fields of knowledge, will be at the disposition of all, will use the most modern technologies of the transmission of knowledge, and will be able to consulted at a distance, and to enter into relation with the other European Libraries* (Kessler in Webb 2004, 214).

One might say that only a politician could collect enough courage to express such an assertion. The same ambition can be seen in the case of Peking University Library, which should become, after its completion, the preeminent arts, science document and information centre among all the university libraries in China (Zhu in Webb 2004, 70). But on the other hand, there is no doubt that the notion of public libraries is embodied in a "local gateway to knowledge" principle (UNESCO Public Library Manifesto; see also Goulding 2005, 23-51). Public libraries must be deeply interwoven in local social and cultural structures, which allow them to carry out local demands for knowledge. But living in a more brittle and looser society within the global world social network offers less relevant information about the rights, duties and problems of everyday life than was available in pre-modern times (Duvold in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 270). Thus, public libraries' location in the heart of community and close to the people does not imply that public libraries can survive without demonstrating their relevance in a national context as well. On the one hand, public libraries can operate exclusively within a national context, which provides them with the necessary legal frame of reference, but on the other hand, this unavoidably affects their activities. The inevitability of the local character of public libraries is evident in the fact that they establish a public channel to provide the local community with relevant information on survival and citizens' action information. While the first type of information is essential for maintaining and solving individuals' problems, the second type of information enables the local political and democratic process, which can be severely obstructed when such information is not available (Hummelshøj in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005).

Of course, a relationship between the local and the national level is not merely a question of legal, financial or organisational matter. In countries where society's roots are deeply interwoven with culture, public libraries always play a significant part in the construction of their national identity. In Denmark, for instance, the Minister of Culture, at the beginning of the new millennium, accentuated the importance of returning to the long-lost feeling of being a part of community. Since nowadays public libraries are one of the few free and open public spaces left in modern society, she recognised the public library as a place where different people can meet freely, exchange knowledge and experiences, and in so doing actively build their sense of national identity. This is the crucial argument as to why public libraries should be and are obligated to actively promote democratic cultural values (Cranfield in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005).

Libraries in the 21st Century

One question that has bothered all of the authors of the three above-listed mono-graphs is rather simple: What are the prospects for libraries in the forthcoming century? Are libraries prepared for the challenges they will face in the future? Will they be ready for growing demands of their users? T. D. Webb rightly reminds us in his *Introduction to Building Libraries for the 21st Century* that there are some people, notably those who shout for the "libraries without walls" concept, who have argued that the traditional concept of libraries is dead. Yet the worst-case scenario has not come true, at least not yet. After all, all attempts to build completely virtual libraries have failed. As is demonstrated in the case of the library service at California State University, at the moment, as will likely continue to be true in the future as well, the libraries of the 21st century will be comprised of a certain combination of traditional services and new informational technologies (Ober in Webb 2004). In the future, libraries should focus more and more on how they can best make use of the huge amount of information they store, rather than simply on the amount of information and the quality of their storage. Emphasis should thus be placed on net facilitation and knowledge creation, not simply on guidance (Schreiber in Johannsen and Kaj-berg 2005, 78). Without proper implementation of new informational technologies, such achievements will certainly not be possible. The idea of a library without walls, which has been propelled by the high cost of constructing new library buildings, will continue to predominate, though it is less likely that it will prevail outright due to people's need to have a place for their community meetings.

Thus, another question deals with the degree to which the success of virtual reference desks in providing people with all sorts of information, which is in direct competition with other suppliers on the information market, will lead to further economisation of libraries (Høivik in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 58). There is some evidence that libraries are moving towards turning the field of symbolic capital into a market-oriented one. Two young Danish librarians suggested an argument in favour of a new kind of "lifestyle library" – an erotic library would be one example of this (Jochumsen and Rasmussen in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 295). Still and all, the move from competition to cooperation represents another step in development, and right now this step is still unthinkable. At the moment some research has shown that libraries as a self-evident equivalent partner in providing citizen information in local environment have not yet been fully recognised (Nowé in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 64-65).

A serious problem that public libraries will have to face is the question of meet-ing the needs of a multicultural and multiethnic society in a global world (Berger in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 141). Public libraries can certainly do a lot for the social integration of immigrants, and they can also serve as a platform for preserva-tion of these immigrants' original culture and to maintain their contact with their homeland. A lot has to be done also about libraries' marketing and promotion, which should be oriented towards people with a less developed and expressed need to use libraries' services. It is of great significance that libraries are not only an institution that is a part of a cultural institution and which spend public money. Investment in libraries also represents an investment in public welfare, and as a result of this outcome a new quality might arise (Jochumsen and Rasmussen in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005, 300).

As with any other complex social and cultural phenomenon, the future of libraries is uncertain. It is safe to assume that libraries will play a significant role in the future of society, yet what form this role will take is another question. In conclusion, I can only acknowledge and agree with final remarks made by A. Goulding:

> *Many of the discourses, which emerged both in the literature and in interview, were centred around the purpose and the clarity, or lack of clarity, of the role of the modern public library. … These examples of prominent discourses suggested that the social purpose and position of the contemporary public library service is still being negotiated* (Goulding 2005, 347).

Conclusions

At the end of my essay on libraries, their current condition, and their prospects in the 21st century, I can agree that libraries are in fact a sociologically and culturally complex phenomenon, and as such their nature is frequently unjustifiably neglected (Black and Crann 2002). In addition, offering a prognosis about something so complex is always difficult, problematic or even delicate. But one thing is clear. Although we do not know exactly what the future of libraries might be, the institution of a library, without any doubt, will play a significant role in the future of our globalised society. In this essay my intention was to illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon of libraries, as it was presented in the three recently published books. I believe I have managed to do this, though due to the complex nature of the phenomenon my presentation has been necessarily fragmentary.

All three books presented in this essay address the same questions from different perspectives. C. G. Johanssen and L. Kajberg's *New Frontiers in Public Libraries Research* is essentially about methodology, although not all of its articles focus specifically on this question. Some of the contributions only slightly mention methodological problem(s), and this might represent a "problem." I would also remark that as a consequence, the structure of the book is not very unified, most likely due to the process used in selecting the participants. Published texts were selected on the basis of a distributed call for papers, though in the process of selection papers were subject to a standard peer review. The good side of Johanssen and Kajberg's book is that it gives a sense of the problems of the ethnic population and emphasises the way these problems might be ameliorated with the help of public libraries and also that it provides insight into the history of Danish public libraries at the beginning of the 20th century (Dahlkild, Dyrbye, Skouvig in Johannsen and Kajberg 2005).

T. D. Webb's *Building Libraries for the 21st Century* gives us a fair insight into the problems of libraries' construction of space and walls, and the influence of the introduction of new media and information technology on libraries. Nowadays libraries are built to be as functional, flexible, durable, and technologically developed a modern public service as possible (Zapatos in Webb 2004, 44; Fischer in Webb 2004, 147). And, of course, the construction of libraries must not be too expensive, which is a criterion that is hard to fulfil, for a library is not only a useful space for keeping books and other material, but also should be constructed in a modern aesthetic way (Edwards in Webb 2004). But no matter how much effort a team of constructors, architects, library designers and others put into the process of their building libraries are always likely to be overcrowded with books and

enthusiastic patrons (Freeman in Webb 2004, 171). The implementation of new information technologies certainly helps a lot, but it is not a magic wand. Besides, as T. D. Webb's monograph pointed out, librarians many times understand the uses of new information technologies too narrowly – i.e., they conceive of them as new, more economical methods of preserving libraries' material, while new information technology actually allows for integration of mass communication, and this aspect largely waits to be explored in libraries' future.

Goulding's *Public Libraries in the 21st Century* is certainly the most valuable book in our collection. It gives us an excellent view of the current situation, and specifically problems and conditions of public libraries in England. However, we do not know exactly what the future of public libraries in England may be, and this is a sort of a paradox presented by this marvellous and magnificent study. It gave us a very detailed and comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the cultural policies on libraries. In the book, we can find an impressive, extensive review of literature covering the phenomenon of public libraries. Beside that, it is of great value that different professionals closely connected with libraries and policy makers were invited by the author to explain their opinions and views on the topic. Yet on the other hand, Goulding's book brings us a multi-levelled base, a sort of analytical tool enabling us to predict possible future trends in public libraries.

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