

# The social function of the public library in the world of social networks and of the crisis of the Welfare State

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**Abstract** Currently we discuss the model of the Welfare State. In its genesis, this model intended to create a sense of belonging and of a cohesive community, concerned with the construction of a more equitable society through the redistribution of richness and attention to the most vulnerable population. Europe has a past of developing economic policies which led to the building of a society with legal and constitutional recognition of social rights after the Second World War, emphasizing the concept of citizenship. The current economic crisis has installed the debate on the performance of the state organizations and their social role. The public library as a state organization has a social function linked. This study aims to review the theoretical perspectives of several authors on the social function of the public library and to identify a connection between the presence of public libraries in virtual social networks and their condition towards the weakening or strengthening of the social responsibility that they carry, taking as a set the current discussion of the model of the welfare state and the generalized economic crisis. This work is part of a wider research on the impact of Web 2.0 on the social role of the Portuguese public libraries observed in the social network Facebook.

**Keywords:** Social function of the public library, social networks, Welfare State, Economic Crisis, Portugal; Facebook

## 1. Introduction

In a time of economic crisis and social recession, public libraries can develop social and educational initiatives that aim to improve the state of well-being of people and reduce the social exclusion. So they adapt their services to unemployed users or those affected by the conditions that the crisis conveys. In these moments there is the need to train and to update people's knowledge, empowering them culturally and professionally to minimize the effects of the crisis. Libraries can provide specific information, instruct and support in free time (Gómez-Hernández, 2008).

Libraries have a wide field of work in the areas of citizenship, integration and social cohesion. Gómez-Hernández (2008) argues that libraries have to be much more than books, as they deal with many people, and these should be targeted for services where there are more and more users with more free time due to unemployment, with less resources, and more willing to learn and inform themselves.

Public libraries should demand their role of creating more citizenship to overcome the difficulties of access to information by creating new access opportunities, as well as demanding a role that can generate social capital through inclusive actions, using the human and training resources they have to improve the users' quality of life. These services can be online, taking advantage of open and free technologies and programs like social networks.

Different State models have been implemented in Europe, reflecting the social policies of each country and the economic situation they are experiencing. The application of neoliberal economies in recent years in the EU has reconfigured the European social policies in various countries, aggravated by the emergence of social groups with complicated economic situations and socially excluded.

Currently, EU countries, including Portugal, are in economic restructuring, and the concept of the welfare state is being questioned and challenged to new directions.

The interventions of the State in society since the legal and constitutional recognition of the citizens' social rights, became more marked to ensure social protection and basic well-being, with social services aware of the populations needs. The implementation of the welfare state since the 2nd World War has had distinct contours in different countries and continents, balancing between models of different degrees of intervention, from the more liberal model, with little state intervention and a more limited social protection, to the social democratic model, more active in the equality of social rights, and finally we have a conservative model, intermediate in its action, in which social rights are linked to social class. The Mediterranean model, in which the welfare state of Portugal fits, founded in the 70s and 80s of the last century, coexists with a public performance and with actions of the private sector, due to the failure of the existing public networks and to the creation of a contributory social security system (Pedreno Hernández, 2010).

The welfare state is in crisis in the EU as a result of economic, demographic and ideological factors. The economic recession has opened paths for structural unemployment and the state became more fragile regarding the social area, opening to the liberalization of the movement of capitals, the decrease in social

spending, the appearance of structural unemployment and of disadvantaged groups which need help from the state itself.

The end of a consensus on the role of the welfare state, defended by Keynes (1936) through economic policies opposed to neoliberal conceptions, devastates the political panorama of many European countries. Keynes (1936) intended to the state the control of the economy and the assignment of social benefits to the population that would guaranteed a minimum standard of living, such as the creation of the minimum wage, the unemployment subsidy, the reduction of the working hours and a free health service. In the following years, in Portugal it was set up a social contract in which the state is the public provider of education, health, housing, social services and cultural and sports services. (Gonçalves, Pato, & Santos, 2013). But the development of the neoliberal policies that promote private over the public, are not enabling the exemplary model of the welfare state, whose economic crisis consumes and carries out adjustment policies of public spending creating now a social malaise.

## **2. Situation of public libraries in Portugal**

The current austerity policies, implemented in Portugal and in some European countries restrict the economic and social functions of the welfare state, limiting their presence in the public sector in both economy and society. The consequences of austerity policies are already clearly visible in Portugal in the fall of the poverty line, the rising of unemployment and the reduction of policies to support families (Gonçalves, Pato, & Santos, 2013).

The survey on poverty, inequality and material deprivation in Portugal (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2010) conducted between 2003 and 2008, had already a little positive analysis of the country's reality, where it surpassed an annual average growth rate of only 3.2% in available cash income per equivalent adult. It was also observed that the annual growth rate of the average income for the same period was decreasing as the decyl yield increased. Regarding the risk of poverty it turned out that in 2008, 17.9% of the resident population was at risk of poverty. In 2008, the poverty risk of households without dependent children accounted for 14.9%, while the same risk for families with dependent children was 20.6%. This social picture has been deteriorating in present time.

Presently, the Portuguese government has taken measures to cut in the social functions of the state, from cuts in wages, subsidies, rights of employees in the public service, etc. In local administration, on which public libraries depend, the financial situation is not positive and it reflects in the economic investments made in libraries. In the summary table on the resources invested in the National Network of Public Libraries (RNBP), one realizes that the investments in acquisitions of documents are declining since 2001, from € 2,417,503 to €

1,187,404 in 2011. The average of the investment in documents per 1000 inhabitants in 2001 was € 817, and in 2011 the value was 237 € (Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, 2007).

The Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas (DGLAB) is the organism of the Ministry of Culture responsible for the Program of the National Network of Public Libraries (RNBP), which does the technical and financial monitoring of the municipal projects on the creation and installing of libraries. Following a study conducted by the DGLAB, Oleiro & Heitor (2010) presented a synthesis of the results and analyzed the degree of execution of the recommendations of IFLA and of the DGLAB, which confirms the perceptions that local government did not fulfill with information, human and technological resources required for the implementation and maintenance of libraries, noting that in some cases the initial financing of the government was the only investment.

In fact, in the values previously mentioned about purchasing documents in the decade from 2000 to 2011, there is a sharp decline in municipal disinvestment. The tendency to not decrease domiciliary lending in Portuguese libraries, unlike the European tendency, is a sign that the Portuguese population still needs much of this social service. In the summary table on investments in the year 2011 (Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, 2007), the numbers indicating the requests for loans were 881,210 in 2001 and 858,396 in 2011. The loaned documents (monographs) grew in 10 years from 1,256,706 to 1,586,332.

### **3. The social function of the public library in the reference documents**

The Manifesto of the IFLA/UNESCO for public libraries (IFLA, 1994) recommends that the public library should be a living force to improve the active role of citizens in society, allowing the access to more education, culture and information. The possibility of access to information is crucial to freedom and to the establishment of a democratic society. The Manifesto proposes that the library, in addition to allowing free access to information, provides services on equal access to all community groups, and it promotes social wellbeing.

When referring to all elements of society, it wants to include sets of individuals and situations that are somehow excluded and forgotten, as linguistic minorities, handicapped, prisoners and hospitalized people. Seeking this goal, it is demanding libraries and their political agents to assume a social function. By advising that the collections should reflect the society regardless of ideologies and policies, the document reiterates the willingness that the library becomes more sociable.

In the section of that document on the tasks of the public library, there are indicated those related to education, lifelong learning, activities which stimulate knowledge, intercultural dialogue and the supply of local information (IFLA, 1994), that we can consider principles of social expression. In fact, the entire Manifesto is an apology to social values: the conception of free services, attempting to be a primary element for access to information and education, cooperation with local, national and international partners, accessibility to buildings, creation of welfare conditions and the foundation of services for those who cannot visit the library.

Gill (2001) and a working group consisting of members of the committee of Public Libraries Section of IFLA, presented new guidelines that strengthen services turned towards the community, as centers of local information, centers of personal development, supporting education and self education. They emphasize the social role of the public library as a meeting place of communities, as places of informal contact between their members, which may be a positive social experience. The public library is assumed as an engine of social development and a positive agent in the change of the community bringing social benefits.

The guidelines for public libraries published by IFLA in 2010, reinforce the valences of the social mission (Koontz & Barbara Gubbin (ed.), 2010): the public library as a public space par excellence and a meeting place, a "room community", the library as an informal place where informal education, culture and research for information meet together and provide people with a positive social experience; public library producing social and cultural activities that support the community's interests.

Due to the size of this article, it will not be presented a detailed literature review concerning the different dimensions of the social function of the public library, including its work in promoting social inclusion, social and cultural activities aiming to improve the well-being of communities, the work to promote citizenship, etc. It was elected to the introduction to the problematic of the social function, some of these themes developed in item 4. This option does not mean relevance in relation to other dimensions of social function. The approach is unfinished and it is expected to be completed in a future work.

#### **4. A first approach of the social function of the public library**

In the diversity of the existing communities (urban, peripheral to the major centers, rural, etc.) it will always be necessary a space that promotes communication between individuals and interconnects the different norms, values and interests that they carry on. The library is a public space and so it can present itself as a meeting place, developing a dynamic of involving the

community. Overall the society is complex and fragmented, prospering multiculturalism and activities in digital environments. So, it is increasingly necessary aggregating places that promote social and digital inclusion (Aabo, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010).

By studying the potential of public libraries as meeting places and places capable of creating trust we apply for the concept of *social capital* (Audunson, Vårheim, Aabo, & Holm, 2007). Putman (2001) discussed the definition of social capital, the problems with its measurement and the evidences of its result on the daily lives of individuals in the United States. It calls attention to the existence of many dimensions of the social capital, from the networks of reciprocity derived from associations of any kind, the professionals, the parental, etc., to the groups of people who meet in a bar or at church. The Social capital refers to social networks and norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance and trust between social actors, giving them organization, ability to share and power of action. The community development requires the growth of social capital, that is the levels of trust, cooperation and mutual aid and social organization. The meeting of individuals around common interests facilitates social development. The web of relationships is the social capital, the more complex they are, the higher levels of trust they will get.

Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen (2003) conducted a research on American institutions and the community involvement (global levels of association and participation). They observed that the institutions are in decline in North American society since 1930. They developed a case study which demonstrated that, despite this fact, the formation of social capital has increased. For example, in the public libraries of Chicago the trust of the citizens in personal relationships in small groups increased. They found that a recurring factor in building capital came from the community members themselves as opposed to the leaders of the institutions. They are the personal and private initiatives that produce social capital not seeking in the state, for example, the resolution of the community problems.

The observation of these authors (Putnam et al., 2003) on the importance given to civil society to solve problems without help from the state, could put a pertinent question about whether civil society, potentiated with capital, solve public issues. Moreover, the authors argue that the creation of small intimate communities within larger communities solves problems of tension between groups and increases the social capital.

In 2006 Aabo, Audunson, & Vårheim (2010) did an investigation to determine, among other issues, how some libraries behaved as gathering places and spaces for meetings. They concluded that the library can be both a place of high or low intensity. The notion of a meeting place for low intensity is related to the

exposure of individuals to other values, cultures and interests different from their own, contributing to the establishment of multiculturalism. The locals of high intensity are related to the relations of individuals in the community with the same values and interests, which allow you to create an identity (Aabo et al., 2010). In the public library, the meetings can be arranged with neighbors and friends, with different people, with politicians and authors, colleagues, and they can also be set up virtually. In the conclusions of the study, Aabo et al. (2010) report that public libraries as meeting places play an important role, they are a safe and discreet place. They enable the citizen to know himself and learn from the collective.

## **5. The Portuguese public libraries and the social networks**

The concept of Library 2.0 will be reflected as a spin-off of Web 2.0. (Savastinuk & Casey, 2007) which proposes a new approach for libraries based on the participation and on the establishing of a relationship of equality with users. The model of Library 2.0, adopted from Web 2.0 Meme Map (O'Reilly, 2005), is based on several components to form a model library 2.0: participation in the use of social software, interactivity, conversation and communication between the institution and users. From these conversations new contents are born, enriched, organized and evaluated to be shared virtually. The adoption of these social elements, and the presence of libraries in social networks, generates different relationships with users, taking advantage of the collective intelligence that they represent (Margaix Arnal, 2007). The library starts to offer a new service to the community from the social capital created in the cooperation, in the relationship and in the interaction between all.

The keyword of the Library 2.0 is participation. Fichter (2006) proposed a formula for the definition of "Library 2.0 = (documents + people + radical trust) x participation." Libraries in Web 2.0 are participatory networks in which all interveners are co-creators of the system, and radical trust is the trust in the community. The talks produced in the participation through the use of software and social networks are the core of the knowledge.

Technology is a factor which plays a significant role in the changes of the library that is open to contribution, to new environments and opportunities for collaboration. Just as the human factor, because it is on the co-creator and participative user that the library 2.0. focus. The professionals of the libraries have to include users in their work in order to improve the online services (Nguyen, Partridge, & Edwards, 2012). Although the social impact of technology is huge, the technology itself does not cause social change, it shapes the community socially, which will obtain skills to generate social capital (Durrance & Williams, 2008).

Social networking represents free platforms to spread and share contents. So they could be platforms of intense use in times of economic crisis, because its use has no increased costs. Library users are the target of their services and also the co-creators of ideas, opinions, contributing to the improvement of online services. Therefore, how to face the social mission of the public library, currently enriched with the possibility of developing and sharing information, opinions, contents that Web 2.0 allows? How are the Portuguese public libraries working their presence on social networks, for example in Facebook, developing the social function? Are public libraries all over the world and in Portugal readjusting their services to the economic situation and valuing the social mission of libraries by using social platforms online? How can social networks help libraries to develop their social function? These are the starting questions of a wider research on the social function of Portuguese public libraries social networks, in the contemporary era.

To this research on social networks we have chosen Facebook because statistics show that in Portugal it has a penetration of 44.09% compared to the country's population and 86.28% in relation to the number of Internet users. The total number of Facebook users in Portugal reached 4,706,960 in March 2013, and grew more than 141,000 in the last six months (Socialbakers, 2013). The age range of 25-34 years old is the largest, with a total of 1.2208 million users, followed by users in the age group of 18-24 years old.

The statistical report of the National Network of Public Libraries in Portugal (RNBP) (Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, 2012) indicates that of the 194 libraries that are part of this network, 188 responded to the survey previous to the report, in 2011, and regarding the participation in social networks (Facebook and Twitter) 76 libraries (41%) participated in them. Regarding Facebook, in March 2013, 99 public libraries were listed up to this work, 99 municipal public libraries, in a research universe of 301 Portuguese municipal public libraries. The scope of the research was expanded to all the public libraries, including therefore the libraries from the national network.

## **6. Future work**

In March 2013 the Portuguese government announced a cut of over four billion euros in the public function and in the social functions of the state. The restrictive measures should go through the dismissal of 50,000 workers in the public administration, and in the last two years there has already been a structural reduction of 50,000 workers (Governo de Portugal, 2013). In the future, public services will be reduced and some will disappear. The reduction of staff in local authorities is already affecting their departments of Culture and we fear for the maintenance of public libraries, as they are not considered a first necessity for communities.



Calixto, Nunes, Freitas, & Dionísio (2012) concluded that the Portuguese socioeconomic circumstances throw threats to public libraries that are dependent on municipal policies. The crisis deprives the state of instruments to intervene in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The crisis also challenges the social role of the public library to be developed as a meeting place, which may also be on social networks, and to contribute to the social capital, to the well-being and confidence in the community.

The current scenario is not very warranting to the Portuguese public libraries to play a public service with social responsibilities because they are increasingly weakened socially. Their presence in social networks, particularly in Facebook, can be a challenge for a strengthening of the services to the community.

The responsibilities of the welfare state should be focused on public services that develop the economy and the social development, the education and the culture in the country. It is time to rethink the social missions of the public library. Despite the political and ideological constraints to which they are submitted, they may draw social procedures that help to preserve the rights of the citizens, to strengthen the concept of the common good, to increase the social capital (Audunson et al., 2007) regarding to improve the quality of life of communities (Koontz & Barbara Gubbin (ed.), 2010). The contribution of social networks, including Facebook, can be an asset to close the public library to the community.

Buschman (2003) defends a new philosophy for public libraries supported in the concept of *public sphere* developed by Habermass (1962). In the time of financial threat to the budgets of libraries, he refuses economic models which consider *customers* their users. He preserves the idea of public mission over the economic development model, looking for a way to organize the functions of the libraries based on the cultural production and in the optimization of the human being (Buschman, 2005). The position of this author can help to understand how to develop the social function in the social networks of the state institutions online. He argues that the financial crisis of the state institutions should not affect at any way the technological practices, and that the concept of public library-agent of *public sphere* it will likely be reactivated in online platforms. On the other hand, Webster (2002) stated that the work of libraries has many points of contact with the concept of the *public sphere* as the principle of universality, openness and easy access to all sections of the population, the gratuity in providing information etc. But when he says that the *public sphere* has weakened, he states that there are reasons to fear that public libraries lose importance and resources.

The future work will discuss these issues, analyze the opinions of various authors and investigate the attitudes and evidences of the Portuguese public

libraries towards the social function they perform, in a time of crisis of the welfare state and in full development of social networks. This work intended to be a first approach to the subject, which integrates a wider investigation of the impact of Web 2.0 on the social role of public libraries in Portugal, taking as case study libraries in the social network Facebook.

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