"A Personal Information Adviser".

A new librarian's role in the network society

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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss a new librarian's role (in particular public librarians) in a network society, regarding individualisation of other services offered to the public. There are several topics which have been described recently, and make a prerequisites for such a proposal, like: individualisation as a general trend of social life and economy, individualisation of electronic information services for selected users' groups, intensification of activities concerning information literacy. The proposal is based on a literature review (mostly referred to the new trends in library and information science), as well as discussion (including SWOT analysis) with the BA students during an "Information Users" course. The role of a Personal Information Adviser (PIA) arises from a need of information in all different fields of human activity. A PIA does not always have to answer any question, but he/she shall either indicate/ select adequate information sources, or teach a method of information searching, i.e. develop information literacy skills in a selected area. Proposed new role of public librarians can be perceived as a way of adapting professional tasks to changes being realized in a modern society, with positive influence in particular in regard of professional image, indispensability, competencies, and attitude.

KEYWORD

information assistant, information service, information user, professional identity, promotion, public librarian

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern society seems to be a society of the individuals, who have been enabled and used to be offered more and more personalized services. Walking along a street, anyone meets advertisements and invitations to try services of financial and legal advisers, body trainers, nutrition specialists, realtors, family doctors, etc. All of these professionals try to adapt their offer perfectly to individual needs of the clients, as only a satisfied client gives them a chance for next transaction (and having a job, at the very end). Individualisation belongs to general trends of social life and economy (for example individual marketing techniques and tools, loyalty programmes, etc.). People benefit from personalized electronic services, like banking, shopping, communication, which require excellent information literacy. However, these individuals are not simple hermits living in complete loneliness. They perceive themselves and want to be treated individually, but they also stay in numerous relations (with other individuals), both in real in virtual worlds.

We perceive these changes in social life as prerequisites for a new librarian's role in a network society – a Personal Information Adviser (PIA). In the following sections we try to present reasons for such an idea, referring to current LIS literature. Then we describe a perfect PIA, and try to analyse the idea using the SWOT analysis method, in discussion with the others. The effects are summarized in conclusions.

2. INDIVIDUALISATION OF INFORMATION SERVICES – LITERATURE REVIEW

The background of individualisation can be found even as far back in the history as S. Ranganathan's five laws of library science[1] (1931), which seem to be a fundamental assumptions for design and implementation of any personalized information service. Trend of individualisation can be found in LIS literature, described either directly (usually in relation to personalisation of e-information services (Bonnet, 2001) and libraries – see Cohen, 2000, Di Giacomo,

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[1] Recalling: 1) books are for use, 2) every reader his/her book, 3) every book its reader, 4) save the time of the user, 5) the library is a growing organism.

2002, Morgan, 2008) or indirectly (concerning specific factors influencing one's information seeking patterns). The authors observe and study individual information behaviours of the users in different environments, either everyday functioning or in particular at work. Common, everyday information behaviours include: newspapers reading, Internet services scanning, listening/watching news, using advertisements, reading manuals and catalogues, talks and conversations (Kaminska-Czubala, 2007). Results of surveys concerning work environment can be reflected in designing files structure in operating systems, developing personal information systems and workspaces, portals profiling, and organisation of digital repositories (Khoo et al., 2007).

Personalisation is often recalled as a factor influencing design and implementation of profiled searching information in electronic resources for selected groups of users. For example Jeevan (Jeevan, 2008), for the needs of profiling information services for the users of academic libraries, defines personalization as "a process of gathering and storing information about site visitors, analyzing the stored information and, based on the analysis, delivering the right information to each visitor at the right time. Personalization in the perspective of a library aims at dynamically selecting and delivering electronic content as per the expressed as well as observed needs of individual users". Although he assumes direct user involvement in the process, he also underlines lack of a "human factor" in digital services, working in a very "mechanistic" way: question – action (searching) – answer. The effect of searching could have been improved if realized not only by automat searching engines, but human (i.e. information professional) participation, regarding his/her creativity, potential of associating concepts, etc. Jeevan emphasizes intentions, circumstances, cultural backgrounds, interpersonal relations, being loosed in computer-only searching.

This human factor is a subject of surveys concerning information behaviours (for example: E. Chatman, B. Kaminska-Czubala, R. Savolainen, D.H. Sonnenwald, K. Williamson, T.D. Wilson), in particular the concept of "information horizon" as referred by D.H. Sonnenwald (Sonnenwald, 1999), including such important factors influencing information seeking, as situation, context, and social networks. This author suggests collaboration among an individual and information resources as a feature of human information behaviour, requiring continuous relations with these resources – or, as one can add, their representatives, i.e. information professionals (librarians). Patron – librarian interaction concerns not only a research question, but also its background, and planned application of the results. The longer interaction and the more positive results of cooperation – the more effective successive information searching accompanied by "an information intermediary". A librarian, as a professional with profound knowledge of information resources of different kinds, is the one who

can significantly "enlarge" patron's information horizon.

This necessary cooperation with a user is mentioned also by other authors (Próchnicka, 2007) as a condition of a digital library functioning as a virtual organization. M. Próchnicka indicates an element of dynamic network of librarians and users as a generator of new services and revision of resources. She underlines the librarians' responsibility for cooperation with the users, including personalized information searching. She concludes with enlargement of a library profession identity with (Próchnicka, 2007, p. 181):
- studying individual conditions and information behaviours,
- methods of information indexing and retrieval enabling individualized access to information,
- participation in e-personalisation,
- users training in individualized searching.

Also M. Nahotko (Nahotko, 2006), describing roles of digital librarians, influences the necessity of their sensitivity for information needs of different groups of users, which shall be included in LIS curricula, as well as ICT flexibility of the librarians who shall be better-oriented in new technologies than their users (especially e-generations). Nahotko emphasizes the potential of librarians:
- as intermediaries among the patrons and diversified information sources,
- in realizing "an information authentication service",
- in identifying effective, low-cost information-retrieval strategies,
- assisting the users in creation and publication of own information.

Individualisation of services, in particular access to information resources, is also a subject of research of the experts in metadata and controlled vocabularies (Ferran, 2005). This field of study includes implementation of tools enabling development of folksonomies in different information systems, according to users' needs and interests. Special attention is put on this aspect in museums (see for example Aroyo, 2007), offering virtual tours to their guests, as well as the possibility of individual planning of such tours, based on predefined interests and tags linked to particular artworks.

Trend of individualisation, developing one's uniqueness, talents and interests, is becoming more and more popular in the modern society. It enables focusing even on the most atypical or curious skills and interests, answering individual questions, mostly thanks to easy access to electronic information resources. Increasing users' movement in the Internet, as observed by information specialists, require special attention put on information literacy and information culture (Basili, 2008).

3. THE IDEA OF PIA

The role of a Personal Information Adviser can be proved if referred to the information behaviour model as proposed by B. Niedźwiedzka (Niedźwiedzka, 2003). This model divides information behaviours generally into those realized by a user individually, or those executed by an information intermediary. We assume, that the closer cooperation between a user and an information professional, the better results can be achieved in the effect of information seeking processes. The role of a PIA refers to a general trend of services' individualisation, and the need of humanisation of librarians' contact with the users (M. Próchnicka, 2007).

The PIA competencies would include:
- knowledge – degree in LIS; in specialist information centre also degree in other (adequate) discipline would be an advantage,
- skills – LIS practice and experience, in particular history of effective information searching, perfect interpersonal communication skills, identification of users' information needs and their cultural and psychological background (physiological, cognitive, affective needs),
- attitudes – positive attitude to other people, curiosity of the others and the world in general, cooperation, identification with LIS institutions and activity, proactivity,
- personality, talents, interests, and values – patience, preciseness, stress' resistance, high morale, engagement in interpersonal relations, wish of development and lifelong learning, critical analysis, open-mindeness (in particular to the people), innovativeness, flexibility.

Personal Information Advisers shall serve the individuals in need as intermediaries in joining or contacting the network society, as defined by M. Castells. Examples of their potential tasks include:
- competent intermediation in access to knowledge; increase of an information horizon (Sonnenwald, 1999),
- providing individual training and development of information literacy, either on general or advanced and specialist level (Basili, 2008),
- forecasting new information needs, (Nahotko, 2006),
- assistance in cultural adaptation,
- observing information-retrieval behaviours, in particular new patterns and resources used in information seeking – to develop own knowledge of the users and the sources,
- observing the effects of searching process, and in particular application of information retrieved and accepted,
- adapting own PIA role to a user's needs, for example from simple administration of individual profiles, to bibliotherapy, depending on their competencies[2],
- adaptation of information searching tools to the users' needs and competencies (for example offering possibility of linking tags or commentaries),
- service of information validation (Nahotko, 2006) – checking information retrieved individually by a user regarding adequate validity criteria, for example those established by the Health on the Net Foundation (Health, 2008) for websites offering health information for the non-professionals,
- identification of price-effective information searching strategies (Nahotko, 2006),
- assistance in management of own information resources – either electronic or in other formats, including for example home libraries, family history, etc.
- assistance in creation and publication of information (Nahotko, 2006),
- saving users' time by taking over their information obligations.

4. SWOT ANALYSIS

Discussion with BA students during an "Information Users" course revealed positive and negative aspects of the PIA idea. The participants assumed possibility of introducing a PIA role into public, as well as school and academic libraries. The special role of PIAs was mentioned in developing information literacy skills among pupils of primary and secondary schools, and specialist IL for students, depending on their studies' profile. A possibility of a career advising in schools was also suggested. The strength of the project comes from its potential effectiveness, i.e. the probability of finding relevant, valuable information, in cooperation with the PIA. This effectiveness is deeply related to: a) information resources available to the librarians, b) their searching competencies, c) time saving, d) individualisation of service, e) it's similarity to other (modern) services being offered to the public. The latter refers to a chance of managing successful promotion and PR of libraries.

The opponents indicated no need of creating a new "artificial" position in a library structure, lack of computer equipment or access to the Internet, or even no interest in information advising among the users, who (as it was suggested) come to library to borrow a book, not to find information. The possible important weaknesses of realizing the PIA idea can be also poor

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[2] For example W. Abramowicz (as cited in Próchnicka, 2007, p. 180) proposes four categories of citizens in the information society, depending on their information and communication competencies, including: informing citizens (passive receivers mostly), communicating citizens (exchanging information), learning citizens (acquiring new information), and creating citizens (developing new knowledge).

infrastructure (number and quality of PC equipment) and lacking access to the Internet. Other mentioned problem was the necessity of permanent surveying the patrons' interests in such a service (in cost and effort aspects), and finding methods of convincing them to making an effort of searching not only the Internet, but also other sources, and in particular – contacting an information professional.

However, surveying users' needs has also it's second face, which is – an opportunity of gathering new, sensitive, multidimensional, tacit knowledge of them. Such a knowledge can be further used for example in advising other entities of local community, in realization of their information tasks and services (like health promotion in local primary health care settings, promotion of local non-governmental organisations, etc.). The discussion concerned also differentiation of information needs, behaviours, and competencies of the users, and their communication skills, as well as either reasons (like cultural background, individual wellbeing, values, relations with other people) or effects (like daily challenges the librarians are facing while serving the users) of this differentiation. Are there any general methods of working with the patrons? Or the most important and universal method is to try to understand one's individual needs and competencies? How to do that?

Introducing PIAs was perceived as an opportunity in breaking poor stereotype of boring and dusty library, and sad librarian, emphasising the factual role of librarians as patrons' advocates and advisers, getting more public recognition and trust.

The most important threats found were: easy access to Internet searching engines, and "a temptation" of individual searching. However, the patrons' independence in fact belongs to the goals of LIS profession, and can be perceived as a threat only in conjunction with lacking information competencies, ending in misleading results of unqualified searching, lacking awareness of the value and difficulty in finding relevant information sources.

There is also a potential threat of information services being offered by other entities, perceived as competitive for libraries and information centres.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Proposed new role of public librarians can be perceived as a way of adapting professional tasks to changes being realized in a modern society, with positive influence in particular in regard of professional image, indispensability, competencies, and attitude. It offers a method of flexible reactions to the users' needs and competencies, to be recognized in particular by library managers, trainers, lecturers, and those working on a frontline, in direct contact with the users.

The role of a Personal Information Adviser (PIA) arises from a need of information in all different fields of human activity, including work, health, citizenship, local community life, family, finances, culture and entertainment, etc. A PIA does not always have to answer any question, but he/she shall either indicate/select adequate information sources, or indicate a method of information searching and train it with a user, i.e. develop information literacy skills in a selected area.

The following qualifications of a Personal Information Adviser have been found: information literacy skills, ICT skills, psychological and sociological competencies, including perfect communication skills, cultural and language competencies (ability to identify one's culture, and to adapt own behaviours to patron's values). He/she needs competencies and time to bind a relationship, to know a client better (his/her information needs and competencies), to learn his/her information behaviours. Indispensable are also: perfect orientation in public and private services, in particular in local community, to know where to direct a client for further survey.

As this analysis has just indicated a possible new role of the librarians, further research are indispensable. These would include: pilot projects, including observation and self-reporting, concerning psychological competencies of librarians, their skills in searching very differentiated, sometimes "atypical" information.

Practical implications can be discussed concerning LIS curricula, styles and culture of co-operation with the patrons in public libraries, adequate training for the librarians.

Changing the librarians' role would require effective promotion in both a professional LIS group and the public in general. Such an action should be coordinated by local organization gathering librarians and information professionals, with cooperation of other local institutions (for example information in local authorities, advertisements, leaflets, etc.). It could be assumed as a promotion of a new professional identity.

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