

From public library to social activity center : attitudes of the public and of the library directors about social activities in the libraries / Hanna Hetz

Abstract

Until recently, public libraries mostly served as public reading and learning environments, mainly centered on organizing local book collections for studying and lending. In addition to these traditional library services, public libraries today offer a variety of social activities aimed at providing entertainment, such as performances, lectures, storytime sessions, literary evenings, various courses, exhibitions and other leisure activities.

In the light of these developments, and of the goals set by the Department of Public Libraries in the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport, which was published as the vision for public libraries in 2009, it is necessary to redefine, analyze, and characterize the activities taking place in the public libraries, and the attitudes of the public and of public library directors towards them. Such an analysis will contribute to understanding the place, role, and relevance of the libraries in the new millennium, as well as their interrelationships with the public.

This study was therefore conducted on two different levels: on the practical level this study examined the types of activities on offer and the level of their acceptance by the public; and on the conceptual level it examined the attitudes and perceptions of both library directors and the public about the libraries' role and position in the community.

The study aimed to achieve four goals:

1. To find common characteristics of the adult public visiting the public libraries
2. To map and define the activities and services provided by the public libraries and their virtual working environments
3. To examine the perceptions of the general public (members and non-members of public libraries, public library directors) of the libraries' role and social position.

4. To examine to what degree the role of the library as is expressed in the public library social and cultural vision (Ben Naim, 2009), corresponds with the perceptions of both the library directors and the public, regarding the library's role and activities

The analysis of the findings was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The study is based on a sample of 52 library managers and 1156 adults (aged over 16), who answered identical questionnaires concerning their activities and their opinions on the subject. In addition, a content analysis of 13 public libraries sites was performed in order to gain a better understanding of the public libraries' activities of in the virtual sphere.

The analysis of the public visiting the libraries indicates that compared with official publications there is a rise in the number of public library members. Moreover, the study reveals that significant parts of the population, who are not library members, still come to the library and participate in its activities. However, a segmentation of the findings according to the age of the respondents shows that the percentage of young library members has declined compared with earlier studies.

Analysis of the activity questionnaires and content analysis of libraries' websites pointed to a wide variety of library activities in the following fields: book borrowing, reading, studying and promoting reading. Also there are cultural and leisure activities such as: book club meetings, lectures, courses, tours, shows, study support, internet surfing and searching for information.

In the analysis of variance of the attitudes and the activities in the library, a significant difference was found between the traditional activities that include reading and support for learning, and cultural-social activities.

This study shows that both the public and the library directors perceive book borrowing to be the most important activity in the libraries. With respect to activities in other fields there are considerable discrepancies between their great importance in the eyes of library directors, and the public's actual participation in them. The directors assessed that people surf the internet in the library as much as they borrow books, yet only a quarter of the people questioned said they actually surfed the internet much in the library. Libraries' websites, that are supposed to represent technological innovation, offer a very limited range of online interactive activities. Apart from online catalogues and access to some information databases, the libraries' websites mostly offer static information about past and future library activities.

Differences between the library directors' assessments of the level of activity in the library, as opposed to the actual levels of participation of the public, were also apparent. Differences in the public's search for information, in using the library for studying and in doing homework, in browsing newspapers and magazines, in joining courses, in participating in story telling hours, or in other cultural activities such as performances or exhibitions. However, regarding participation in practical activities such as sports and art, craft and home economics classes, the managers' assessments matched the actual participation of the public. Segmenting the respondents into groups according to their age, education and family status shows that there are differences in the participation of different groups in the various activities. For example, it has been found that a higher percentage of people included in the older age group exchange books, participate in lectures and classes, visit exhibitions, or meet friends in the library. Yet a higher percentage of people in the younger age group participate in activities related with studying or searching information for study or concerning their daily lives. It has also been found that a higher percentage of people with academic higher education participate in arts and crafts classes, while a higher percentage of people with a non-academic higher education participates in classes of a more scholarly nature. In addition, the results demonstrate that the majority of the people who participate in creative activities, tours, exercise classes, exhibitions and shows, are married, while the people in the group including the widowed, separated and divorced exchange more books and participate more in scholarly classes, story hours, and lectures.

Regarding the library roles, there are differences between freely expressed opinions in response to the question: "what is the library's role?" and the findings arising from the answers in the attitude questioners concerning the role of the library, even among the same group of people. For example, analysis of the attitude questioners shows that the majority of people perceive the libraries as institutions promoting social wellbeing and cultural and social values concerned with quality of life and community empowerment such as: encouraging visits of people with special needs to the library, creating interesting contents for older publics, providing quality data bases and free internet access, sharing local heritage, and promoting literacy. Analysis of the answers to the open questions strengthened this dimension of perceiving libraries as relating to values, especially what concerns the dissemination of knowledge, the free book lending, and the caring for the information-poor, yet only a low percentage of the respondents mentioned the role of the library as a social- cultural center for the community. This may be due to lack of awareness of this notion, since

according to the answers to the open question it seems that the majority of the public perceives the library as mostly concerning books and reading.

The public's attitudes concerning the library's role is shown to be linked to personal variables, especially age and education. For example a higher percentage of young people believe that libraries are not essential in the internet age. Also, the higher education people have, the more likely they are to appreciate the value and importance of libraries, and the less likely to consider them as unnecessary in the internet age. The family status was also shown to impact the respondents' standpoints: the group of single people was found to have little interest in the library, yet most respondents in this group did not see it solely as a place for reading, but rather as a place providing internet access, lending DVDs, and many believe that it would be a good idea to have a cafe in the library.

Out of the three groups: library members, people who never visit the library and random visitors without a membership but who are involved in its activities, the latter, have higher expectations when it comes to library's role, regarding the library as an open to all information and socio-cultural center.

The library members' positions varied only slightly from those of the non-members. However, the library directors' positions were considerably different from those of the public. The directors placed much importance on the aspect of social encounter in the public libraries and to its cultural activity. Unlike the majority of the public, they do not see the library's role as being confined solely to the promotion and encouragement of reading. These findings are further reinforced by the analysis of the verbal answers concerning the role of the libraries, which shows that most library managers see the library as a cultural and social center.

The segmentation of the attitude questionnaires according to types of settlement revealed differences in the positioning of the libraries in each type of settlement. In regional councils, their main role is lending books and assisting students. In small and medium towns the library is perceived as a meeting point and a center of community activities, and it reflects the tastes and inclinations of the local community. In large cities libraries are perceived as centers for reading and for searching information, urban post-modern influences also position them as a meeting place for all, comprising cafes, free internet, information center, as well as a meeting place for local interest groups and a center for leisure activities, lifelong education and cultural enrichment.



As for the question on whether a library is traditional or cultural-social, there was a marked difference between the results of the research on the practical level and its results regarding perceptions. On the practical level, the libraries were mostly focused on aspects generally considered as traditional such as: reading, study support and information search. Yet when asked about the role of the library, respondents leaned toward a more social view. However, a comparison of the two groups: library directors and the public, has revealed that directors hold a more positive view towards social activities in the libraries.

The view unfolding by this study is of transition. Libraries are currently undergoing a change from their entirely traditional role into adding a more social-communal orientation. As a result, libraries are now functioning on two different levels: on the one hand they continue their traditional activities such as reading encouragement and study support; and on the other hand they carry out innovative social activities, often closely connected with the traditional ones that are closely connected with literature and reading, such as book clubs and meetings with authors. In addition, the libraries offer other leisure activities compatible to the public's tastes and desires such as: various courses, exhibitions and performances in the libraries' space along with refreshments, music and singing. Such activities make the libraries appear friendlier and more open to the public. The library directors' attitudes, and to a lesser extent the public's positions, are compatible with the general goals outlined by the Department of Public Libraries. These goals position the libraries as social and cultural center oriented toward communal activities. Yet, an awareness of the importance of reading in Israel and of the obvious need for libraries as a place for study and reading, point toward the great importance of combining the two roles in order to position it as "a library for all citizens".

This study also shows that it is important to integrate up-to-date contents and new technologies in all library activities, whether traditional or social-cultural, so that the libraries will continue to be relevant in the changing reality, and be able to appeal to the younger public.

The attitudes of the public and the directors, who perceive the library as a place promoting certain values, prove that libraries should focus on advancement of the community and contribution to the communal capital. In the following years, it is also advisable to observe the development of social activities in the libraries, so as to learn from the field about changes that libraries are undergoing.

System No. 002357204