# How libraries create value and help diminishing the digital divide

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**Abstract** The paper addresses the issue of library value through two aspects: first, how libraries add value to societies and communities in a very general way; second, how libraries help to create equal and inclusive communities and societies. Five functions of library system and libraries are identified in the library literature, all of which help to create a more equal and just society in one way or another. The more concrete ways, in which libraries address the issues of social inequalities, are illustrated by examples of Lithuanian library activities.

## Introduction

There is a variety of publications about the value of libraries to communities and societies, about the ways libraries create value for their users and the methods of measuring this value. There is a mantra saying that libraries, especially public libraries, need to justify their existence in monetary terms and prove their usefulness to society and community in other ways. This is surely a legitimate requirement as public libraries are supported by tax-payers' money and should provide high quality services to the same extent as any other public institution. The ways of justifying this value and usefulness are many and different: from calculating exchange values of library services to measuring the social impact on citizens.

In this paper I would like to address the issue of library value through two aspects: first, how libraries add value to societies and communities in a very general way; second, I would like to explore more concretely, how libraries help to create equal and inclusive communities and societies.

The first issue will be explored through a selective review of some library literature and the second through presenting the case of Lithuanian libraries and the methods they use in supporting social inclusion in served communities.

**Added value of library work**

In his book "Merchants of culture" Thompson (2010) created a chart on how publishers add value on the level of one particular company and on the wider institutional level. According to him, each "function in the publishing chain exists largely by the virtue of the fact that it makes some contribution, of varying degrees of significance, to the overall objective of producing and selling books" (Thompson, 2010, p. 18). The chart itself includes five value-adding functions: content acquisition and list building; financial investment and risk-taking; content development; quality control; management and coordination; sales and marketing (p. 19).

The literature about library functions and value is quite extensive. These functions and the created value depend very much on the type of a library, its situation in the library network, the community it serves, the country in which it is situated, or the historical period. Despite this, we recognize a library as a specific institution with characteristic features in any context. Drawing on some of the library literature, I have tried to produce a chart of library functions on the same level of generality as Thompson has done – that is, not taking into account the variety of library types, and the concrete cultural and societal context, but merging the functions of an individual organization and at a more general institutional level.

Reviewing the fundamental general texts on library work and librarianship and library history written by library researchers and educators from different countries, such as Ranganathan (1931), Rubin (2016), Brophy (2007), Lankes (2011), Sokolov (2016), Campbell (2013), Plassmann (2006), Calenge (2015), one can identify several common topical lines running through each of these works: preservation of archival record and library materials, selection and acquisition of those according to certain criteria, organizing these materials and making them available to the owners or users. The early subscription or membership libraries (Forster and Bell, 2006) highlighted the feature of effective use of common resources that has become a distinguishing feature of tax-paid public libraries and is as important for academic libraries serving researchers and students. The value of the libraries and their impact on user communities has become increasingly important during recent decades, when

public institutions have had to defend their value in the diminishing public sphere on the same principles as commercial institutions (Aabø, 2009). During this period, all libraries emphasize their role in maintaining social equilibrium, diminishing social inequality, ensuring the right to know for everyone that is the foundation of any democratic society (D'Angelo, 2006). These main functions do not change with the arrival of new information and communication technologies in libraries. The ICTs are used to enhance and strengthen the value created by libraries (Paley et al., 2015).

Summarizing of these recurring topics and following the chart provided by Thompson, I have developed the following five value adding functions of libraries (Fig. 1).

Content filtering and acquisition based on the needs of served community

Increasing the quality by processing acquisitions from the point of view of served users (metadata, classification, tagging, etc.)

Using efficiently citizens' resources and saving their expenditure on intellectual, cultural, information products

Management, coordination and preservation of information and cultural resources on community, regional, national, and international level

Provision and promotion of free of charge access to quality information and culture for all community members needed for job, education, leisure
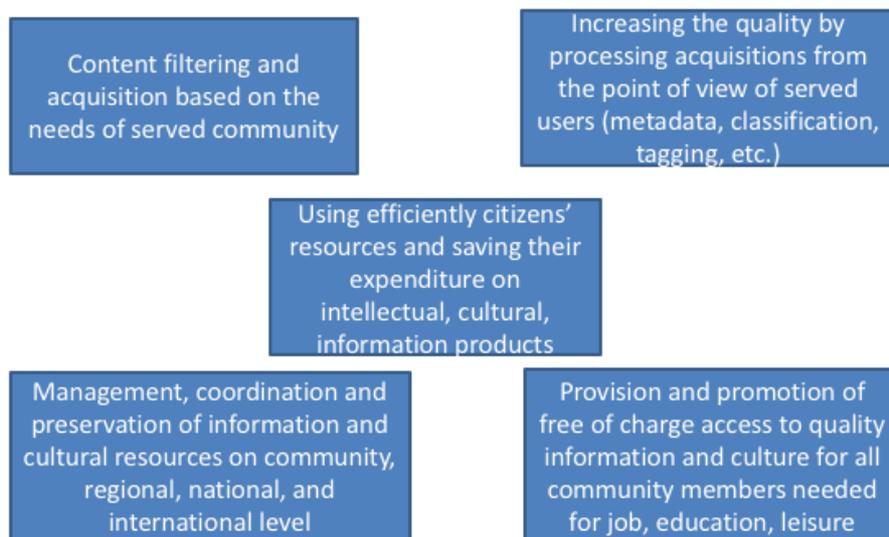
Figure 1. How libraries create value

This chart depicts how libraries function as value adding actors in the media world or, more narrowly, in the world of publications.

Libraries filter the existing supply of various media content according to the needs of the served community. While publishers add value to the acquired content through editorial processes, libraries add value to the published content through organizing information resources, adding metadata, tagging and providing the means of discovery. Libraries do not take risks, but ensure that financial and other resources provided to them are used efficiently and

optimize expenditure on cultural and intellectual products of their users and founders. Just as different publishers coordinate their publishing activities in relation to different market sectors, the total system of libraries integrates various library types, with different functions, to manage, use, and preserve cultural and information resources in coordinating effort on all societal levels. While publishers distribute their products through commercial channels and marketing effort, libraries promote unpaid access to quality information and culture for everyone and for any purpose that may arise. Within the digital society these value-adding functions also include an expenditure on and access to digital resources.

**Library role in diminishing digital inequality**

Working with information and communication technologies and digital resources, libraries of all types create benefits for all members of society regardless of their social and economic status. However, investigations on digital inequality show that those who need the digital resources most, acquire lowest benefits from them (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2013). On the other hand, library statistics show that the library users are far more diverse than they used to be. Public access to the internet is especially popular with the more vulnerable groups in society. According to Horrigan, in the USA "library users who take advantage of libraries' computers and internet connections are more likely to be young, black, female, and lower income" (Horrigan, 2016). The study in Great Britain has stated that public libraries:

- "Engage proportionately more of the black and minority ethnic adult population than white adults.
- Show no difference in engagement between those with a long standing illness or disability and those with no disability.
- Show the smallest difference in engagement between lower and higher socio-economic groups of any part of the sector.
- Engaged more people on lower than higher incomes, unlike any other part of the sector." (CILIP, 2017, p. 3).

Thus, academic, public and school libraries look for the ways not only to attract the members of the served communities to the libraries, but also help them to increase motivation, information skills and benefits from the use of digital resources. This is characteristic of any type of library. They perform a number of activities affecting different types of users. The examples below are taken from recent activities of Lithuanian libraries.

Academic libraries, world-wide, conduct projects of digitisation of cultural heritage and provide access to digitized objects. Researchers, scholars and interested persons can access and use historical documents, such as court books or old prints from Vilnius University Library, either through the digital collections on the Library website or through Europeana and World Digital Library portals or the digital manuscript library Manuscriptorium without any restrictions or travelling expense (http://www.atmintis.mb.vu.lt/ en/projects). Academic libraries of Lithuania maintain an open access repository eLaba that enables access to the published research of Lithuanian scholars (https://www.elaba.lt/elaba-portal/talpykla). These means help to increase information supply to the researchers and students from different universities and to achieve more equal distribution of cultural and information resources regardless of the university's and scholar's status or financial situation.

The Ministry of Culture and the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation have conducted two projects *Libraries for Innovation* in 2008-2017 to provide free access to information and communication technologies through all public libraries in Lithuania. The assessment has shown that the biggest impact was achieved in training citizens to use ICTs and in attracting new users to the libraries. It was also shown that public access to computers "is reducing social disjunction and discrimination by ensuring equal opportunities for information access and free availability of services whatever the type of settlement (rural/urban), income or age. Libraries also provide equal opportunities to actively participate in community life and to improve the quality of life of individuals." (Lipeikaite and Sadunishvili, 2012). These projects have continued the initiatives of such projects as A Window to the Future, the online game "The Challenge" in library provision of

- Training in information skills and consultancy service in use of digital resources and services;
- Means of increasing motivation to use digital technologies for studies, work, and leisure;
- Creating motivation to learn and participate in society through digital technologies.

Many county and municipality public libraries carry out projects and activities directed towards integration into the community of the members of disadvantaged groups. The municipal libraries of Radviliškis, Utena, Kalvarija, Kuršėnai, and Ignalina collaborate with the Third Age Universities

by providing learning materials, organizing teaching process or sharing the facilities.

The county and municipal libraries in Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Panevėžys, Druskininkai, Alytus and Šiauliai organize the events and courses adapted to people with physical and mental impairments. The librarians receive training and participate in discussions with the associations of disabled people about their needs and suitable library service. The Ministry of Culture has formulated strategic directions for 2016-2022 and dedicated financing for the four county libraries to increase this activity (Kultūros ministerija, 2016).

Branch libraries in the Vilnius district Naujoji Vilnia, in the villages of Panevėžys region, and Tauragė and Klaipėda municipal libraries pay special attention to children from low-income families and their parents. They organize events for children, family activities, and provide support to parents.

Since 2013 the Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library started consultancy with different interest groups about library services for homeless people. Their integration in society can be helped by friendly library and information services (http://www.aidas.lt/lt/visuomene/article/7933-05-03-ar-juos-suprantame-ar-jiems-padesime). Lithuanian librarians work with Latvian colleagues who have opened service points for homeless people in Riga.

**Conclusion**

The publishers of content and libraries work in symbiosis ensuring that all members of society have enough opportunities to participate in the networked media society regardless of their social or economic status.

The initiatives of libraries that help social inclusion and diminishing digital divide, promote reading for all social groups in societies and increase motivation of different people not only for using libraries and reading, but also for learning and finding opportunities beneficial for their lives are varied. They span over the social, cultural and ethnic boundaries. Statistics show that a typical library user is a middle class, young, Lithuanian woman with higher education working in the cultural sphere. However, it also shows that books were borrowed from libraries by 44% of users from the poorest families, 25% from other ethnic groups than Lithuanians, 23% of people over 70 years of age, and 19% of "blue-collar" workers (Verikienė et al., 2014). The homogeneity of library users is rather mythical. There are many aims to be reached and problems to be solved by Lithuanian libraries as anywhere else in

the world, but the functions they perform and the methods, which they use for reaching inhabitants and involving them in various activities, helps Lithuania to solve some of its acute problems in creating a democratic and more equal society.

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