

Editorial

When I grow up, I want to be ... a librarian in the service of my community!

Guest Editor: Camelia CRIȘAN

I started working with public libraries in 2009 when I joined the national program Biblionet, an initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with 26.9 million dollars, part of their Global Libraries Initiative. The project aimed to connect Romanian libraries to the world by improving the digital skills of librarians, putting computers with free access to the internet in villages across the country and thus enhancing the digital literacy of the nation. My role was to oversee the professional development of librarians. Within 2009 and 2014, in my capacity as Training Manager, leading a team of young professionals, we changed the competencies of more than 5,000 people from the public libraries' ecosystem.

Until 2009, my only contact with a library was during my study years, and, like most Romanian citizens, I perceived public libraries as dusty spaces where, from time to time, an old lady would come to ask young people to keep silent, while other readers would consult old books. I was a novice in the library field, but apparently, I was just what the doctor prescribed, as our program director, Paul Baran, later told me.

The Biblionet program aimed, among others, to inject a new attitude of public librarians in their work with communities. As a result of our efforts, we have seen a decrease from 60% to 40% of Romanians who have never used computers for their everyday life, particularly in rural areas (Vrabie, 2013). One would think that such a fabulous investment, with a robust methodology and impressive results, would create a long-lasting effect and significant impact on the attitudes and behaviors of libraries. And indeed, that has happened. Romanian public libraries have embraced innovation (Sinziuanu, 2021), set out new services (Niculet, 2014; Costiuc, 2013), and started working with new groups in their communities (Popescu, 2013).

Public libraries across the globe have too embarked on a significant process of redefining their role. As a Pew Research Center report suggests (Horriggan, 2016), such a shift involved community engagement, acting as a community center where early education, as well as lifelong learning activities, happen, bridging the digital divide, setting out new services in line with the sustainability initiatives and striving to balance traditional and digital services. Newer reports (State of America's Libraries Report, 2023) highlight the following aspects as key themes of concern for public libraries: COVID-19 impact, book bans and censorship, diversity and inclusion, digital services and expansion, as well as more traditional, already, services in the areas of community engagement, funding, and budget cuts, staff issues, innovative programs, and community partnership. The latter ones are more focused on the organizational development of libraries.

While, particularly in the Western hemisphere, we see societal and political debates (cancel culture, ban on books, censorship) that impose on and demand from public

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libraries a certain behavior, such issues are not something of concern yet in the Eastern part of Europe, particularly in Romania. I have found no mention in the last four years of any article in the most prominent Romanian library journal, "Biblioteca," on the above-mentioned societal topics that divide Western societies. This may be the symptom of a time gap (such topics will reach us eventually) or that Romanian libraries are answering to more pressing societal and political needs like the war in Ukraine and the influx of refugees (Moga, 2023), digital literacy, expanding services, education for vulnerable groups.

It seems that, for some parts of the world, the new and current affairs in the public library field are subjects that may be deemed old news in others. The common ground, the connecting thread, is still, in my view, the role libraries design for themselves and play in their communities. Such actions impact, first and foremost, the competencies librarians must have. No matter the challenges, the librarian is forced to become a community leader, address the most pressing needs of her community, and keep up with technological developments. It is forced to serve communities beyond the boundaries of a certain geographical community and reach out to family members working abroad. Digital literacy is not anymore connected with setting out an email account but with educating community members about the dangers and perils of AI, misinformation, and deep fakes. Librarians are still needed to engage local communities and excluded members into a coherent narrative of belonging and wellbeing. And all these are possible while maintaining high service delivery standards for the users.

The articles and study cases from this journal's issue will cover several of the topics exposed above. It looks like being a public librarian is not only a profession that has dramatically shifted in the last years; it has expanded in scope, depth, intriguency, communication, interculturalism, and leadership style. It used to be that the librarian was the universal wo/man, modern wo/man, post-modern wo/man. But with the current developments, I believe that, to keep pace with the community shifts and current state of affairs, the librarian must become the providential wo/man of the hour.

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Guest editor biography

Camelia Crișan is the CEO of Progress Foundation. She has an extensive experience in development, both organizational and at community level. Within 2009 and 2014, she managed the training component of the Biblionet program in Romania, overseeing the development of more than 5,000 trainers, directors, heads of departments, rural librarians, and community members. Biblionet was a 26.9 million USD program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. She has been a consultant in training and development for several multinational and Romanian corporations and in many EU-funded projects, dealing with local and central public administration and social responsibility think tanks. Camelia is a Senior Lecturer at SNSPA. She holds a PhD in Sociology, a BA in Communication Science, and a BA in Psychology.

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