



Tapping into technology

East European countries assess digital impact

Overview

This review is based on “Impact planning and assessment – making it happen. Romania” by Marcel Chiranov, “Impact planning and assessment – making it happen. Bulgaria” by Luba Devetakova, and “Impact planning and assessment – making it happen. Poland” by Maciej Kochanowicz.

Libraries are old-fashioned, unpopular and boring places in which to spend your time. So said approximately two thirds of the 11-18 year olds in a survey of library use in Bulgaria (a third of them had never visited a public library). However, despite such negativity, visiting the library was still considered prestigious – a fact that can transform visitors into real users if particular conditions are met. Moreover, librarians enjoy a positive image among the population and the more often the contact between users and staff, the more favourable the image of the librarian. Those who had not visited libraries also had a positive attitude.

Describing the developments and results of the Global Libraries initiative in Bulgaria, Luba Devetakova notes some striking facts: The high level of computer and Internet usage from different age groups and types of settlement; and that the majority of computer and Internet users are not able to create content using software and the low level of information literacy associated with finding trusted information on the Internet.

These, she says, suggest the niche for the modern public library in Bulgaria is a center not just for providing books but more intensive training and consultation for different target groups of users. A goal was to make the libraries innovative and popular as well as to gain broader support from the users and local communities.

In a similar assessment of GL in Poland, 84 per cent of libraries saw a positive change in the way they operate. This includes higher team integration and motivation, new partners acquired, budget increases, venue upgrades, and web pages launched.

In Romania, Biblionet – a partnership including IREX (an international non-profit organization), the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians (ANBPR), the Ministry of Culture, local and national governments, and libraries – is helping to develop a modern public library system. An assessment noted that around 8 per cent of Internet service users said that they came to the library only to use computers, and around a third of Internet users said they had been using the computer only since the service became available in the public library. The latter finding prompted the question: “Do we want to provide different types of services and assistance to this group (i.e. standardized training/materials focused on PCs, the Internet and Internet searching, and assessing the quality of information found on the Internet)?”

In Bulgaria, it was found that, in people's minds “library” is synonymous with “book” and “reading”. An alarming tendency is appearing – the younger the person, the more negative is their attitude towards the library. A high 47 per cent of the 7-10 year olds and 30 per cent of the 11-18 year olds had never visited a public library.

In Poland evolving patterns of using a library service library have emerged, especially a sharp increase in the participation in various activities and classes (from 12 per cent to 27 per cent in communities participating in the program), while at the same time the proportion of people using the library as a place to access computers remains more or less constant.

It may be inferred, therefore, that in an era when computers and the Internet are becoming increasingly available at homes (and also in mobile form), especially in EU countries, it is not the Internet that is the main attractor to libraries. Similarly, books – with the anticipated growth in popularity of e-books available online.

Developments in Romania include helping develop the capacity of The National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians to advocate on behalf of libraries and librarians; and fostering government support for the recognition of the essential role of libraries in a society.

Comment

Each writer reported on activities undertaken, results so far, and observations drawn from an assessment of library initiatives within those countries.

For example, in Romania more than 2,000 public libraries are now equipped with public access technology and more than 3,000 librarians are being trained in how to use it to provide better services to library visitors.

In Bulgaria where computer use among the adult population is 57.2 per cent, children aged 7-10 the share is 74.4 per cent and for the 11-18 age group it is 92 per cent.

In Poland where it has been realized that classes and events for all ages, linked to education or social integration, may be the force that will allow libraries to retain their social role.

References

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Potential quotations

Librarians enjoy a positive image among the population.

It was felt unrealistic to expect all librarians to be permanently enthusiastic about ALL the activities.

The biggest increase is in job seeking – 10 per cent of users sought or found a job through computers available in the library.

Keywords: Global Libraries initiative, Public libraries, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania