

Conception of Intellectual Freedom as the essential principle of Library and Information Science in the Democratic Society

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The Central Role of Intellectual Freedom for Libraries in a Democratic Society: Results of a Survey Conducted in the Regional Public Libraries of Ukraine.

Introduction

The library as a social institution plays an important role in the formation of the intellectual potential of a society, and therefore it must respond to all changes in a country. When democratization, and national rebirth are taking place, the rule of law is established and new library and information technologies begin to develop.

Providing free and equal rights of access to information is essential to the system of self-government. People must have access to all information, ideas and points of view. A precondition for a free society is an informed and enlightened citizenry. Freedom of expression is essential to a free society and provides a check against possible government corruption and excess.

Survey on access to information in public libraries

In order for Ukraine to join the world of information, we must study and take into account internationally recognized norms of cooperation with regard to information, and have knowledge of the specific character and features of functioning library and information systems.

At the end of 2002, the Department of Library Information Resources at the Kiev University of Culture and Arts initiated a survey to better understand and document the social, political, economic and technological aspects of access to information in public libraries in Ukraine. In the survey we wanted to present the concept of intellectual freedom as an essential principle of library information activity. We anticipated that the results of this research might be used to generalize the experience and to improve library information practice in Ukraine. We hope to offer recommendations concerning new policies and measures for improving and maintaining access to information for library users.

There have been few surveys of this sort in Ukraine, so we think it is very important to encourage librarians and to assist in the design of other research projects to increase knowledge about these issues.

Methodology

The written survey, consisting of 19 multiple-choice and true/false questions, was administered by mail in April 2001 to the Special and Regional Public Libraries of Ukraine. We asked library directors to respond personally.

Questions were derived from the list of basic competencies developed in the American Library Association, the Ukrainian Library Association, and IFLA. The summary of our findings is shown in the tables below. The survey was extremely well received: after two mailings, 98% of the questionnaires were returned, an extremely high rate for direct-mail solicitations. Clearly there is a high degree of interest in and understanding of the importance of this research. Ukrainian libraries are indeed thinking about intellectual freedom as they reconsider what libraries are all about, and the tasks of libraries as social institutions.

Results

Code of Ethics

A question-by-question review of the responses revealed that almost all the libraries have in their collections the "Code of Ethics" adopted in 1996 by the Ukrainian Library Association, and that all the librarians are familiar with this document.

Confidentiality

In reviewing the issue of privacy and confidentiality of information, we discovered that nearly 80% of the respondents note that there is no established system of confidentiality of information in their libraries. However, most libraries have various documents concerning issues of confidentiality of information in their book collections. Fewer than half of the respondents mention having received a request to examine or obtain information relating to circulation or other records identifying the names of library users. In those cases, they were asked about information received, and materials consulted or borrowed. A very small number mention inquiries by federal, state, or local authorities. A few had inquiries from parents, from professors or staff of universities and institutes, or about confidential scientific research. Other respondents just mention that such cases have occurred in their libraries, without specifics.

Table 1

Confidentiality	Yes responses	Yes (%)
Policy Statement/ established system in the library	9	20
Documents concerning confidentiality in the library collection	41	89
Cases of requests for information	23	50
<i>Federal state, or local authorities</i>	9	20
<i>Parents</i>	19	41
Research/library research	18	39

Public organizations

More than half of the responding libraries mentioned collaborating with nongovernmental organizations, radio, TV, and the press concerning issues of free access to information and intellectual freedom.

Table 2

Cooperation with Public organizations	Yes responses	Yes (%)
Established policy in the library	37	80
Cases of cooperation on topics related to intellectual freedom	28	60
Library-initiated programs	32	70

Most of the libraries surveyed inform their patrons about the information and material they can obtain in the library through the bulletin boards and periodic informational and bibliographic bulletins. Nearly half of the libraries provide library training for their users.

Table 3

Forms of information distribution about the Library Resources	Yes responses	Yes (%)
Bulletin boards	41	89
Bibliographic issues	37	80
Trainings for patrons	22	48
Internet	5	11

Access to legislative information

Almost all librarians surveyed mention that their patrons have access to the Constitution of Ukraine, legislative materials, and corresponding normative documents, international treaties, information about the activity of governmental bodies at the federal and local levels, sociological information, results of sociological surveys, etc.

Table 4

Access to legislative materials	Yes responses	Yes (%)
Corresponding normative documents, international treaties	45	98
Information about the activity of governmental bodies at the federal and local levels,	45	98
Sociological information, results of sociological surveys	45	98

Restricted access to the documents

We discovered that more than half the libraries have documents with restricted access in their book collections. All of these respondents explained that the books were restricted because of their poor condition or because the books were old or rare. Nearly half of these respondents mentioned confidentiality as the reason for restricting the books. Half mentioned economic reasons (shortage of funds for renovation, acquisition etc), a smaller number cited legal reasons (intellectual property), and a few referred to restrictions based on age (to protect children).

Table 5

Restricted access to library materials	Yes responses	Yes (%)
Confidentiality	23	50
Economic reasons (shortage of funds for acquisition, renovation, etc.)	41	89
Age / to protect children	9	20

Access to information for persons with disabilities

We received only one negative response concerning access to information for persons with disabilities. Almost every librarian responding to the survey claimed to provide such service to this category of patrons. However, not a single responding library has special facilities, equipment and accommodations for patrons in wheelchairs, blind and visually impaired patrons, etc. Doorways are too narrow for wheelchairs; doorways are accessible only by climbing stairs; telephones and light switches are out of reach; sanitary facilities are inaccessible for wheelchairs. The libraries must find solutions that are suited to their technological and economic conditions. The survey shows that nearly one-third of libraries provide their services for disabled patrons in the library, while the majority of libraries serve these patrons in their homes or by phone.

Table 6

Access to the information for persons with disabilities	<i>Yes responses</i>	Yes (%)
Providing access	45	98
<i>In the library</i>	15	33
<i>At home</i>	32	70
Availability of special facilities	0	0

These numbers (especially those in the first line of the table) look optimistic, however, it must be noted that these numbers do not reflect the number of patrons with disabilities who are served by the library and the total number of persons with disabilities in the community. As one can see from the last line of table 5, none of the libraries reported the availability of special facilities. This leads us to the conclusion that although libraries are willing to provide the services to disabled patrons, the number of such patrons is not very large.

Conference rooms and bulletin boards

Nearly two-thirds of the responding librarians mentioned that they have conference rooms and bulletin boards in their library buildings, and of these, most allow community organizations to use them.

The responses revealed that almost all the librarians understand that they are responsible for adapting their information so that it can reach everybody, including disabled persons, children, etc. They understand that this is an essential principle. However, sometimes they were not able to live up to this essential principle due to the lack of funds or for the legal or other reasons. It is of great importance for librarians to realize this situation and to be aware of the reasons why they fall short of the ideal, and to analyze honestly the reasons for the restrictions and the methods used (Table 7). Such a review will help them make progress toward the goal of providing information to everyone. It could be achieved more quickly, efficiently and economically if close cooperation is maintained at every level.

Table 7

Dealing with Concerns about Library service	Yes responses	Yes (%)
Cases	5	11
Dealing with concerns:		
<i>On-the-fly</i>	5	11
<i>Complaint book</i>	41	89
<i>Anonymous surveys</i>	5	11

Analysis

Reviewing the initial survey results, we can see that it is necessary to be familiar with research findings from various institutions, and to be aware of new research proposals, to pay increased attention to research results, and to stress the use and dissemination of these results.

Providing information and resources is necessary for strong, open, free and unrestricted dialogue on all issues of concern. The historical prerequisites in the former Soviet Republics, where censorship and restrictions were common and obvious, may explain the difference in interpreting the idea of intellectual freedom. Many people, including librarians, understand it only as a political freedom. In the Soviet past there was no freedom to express unpopular ideas, to criticize government or even to have access to the full range of views expressed without being persecuted. That's why other components of the whole concept of intellectual freedom seemed not as crucial and conclusive or important for the majority. Today, the issue of free access to information is superseded by new problems: access to information for patrons with disabilities; fear of the harm that could be caused to children through exposure to certain books and, associated with that fear, confidentiality issues; the possibility of Internet filtering; and many others. Considering the above, we can conclude that it is important for librarians to be prepared to respond sensitively to such issues.

The analysis of the data received in the survey shows that the questions in this survey were more

general. Future surveys would benefit from asking questions accompanied by more examples. It also would be useful to ask the interviewees to give their own examples and comments.

Future research

Following my presentation of the survey results, I would like to suggest a series of strategies for future research. Work is proceeding on these fronts, and a similar effort is planned for fall 2003.

1. One goal of a future survey may be to document how libraries are handling patrons' access to the Internet. Because the Internet is a relatively new addition to the resources offered by public libraries, it is important to find out what policies are evolving:
 - if libraries provide access to the Internet
 - which utilities are supported (i.e., WWW, e-mail, etc.)
 - if they use either filters or privacy screens
 - if they provide training to the public
 - if Internet use is regulated (sign-ups, time limits, ID requirements, etc.)
 - what comments have been received from the public

Most of the respondents from our first survey are from public libraries that participated in the Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP) of the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy. In the last two years, 45 Internet centers have been opened in the public libraries throughout Ukraine. The goal of the program is to provide public libraries with free public access to the Internet and to support the free and open exchange of information that is essential for the integration of Ukraine with the world community.

2. The second goal of a future survey may be to document how patrons evaluate service in public libraries, and the availability of the information:
 - Was the library staff successful in fulfilling their information needs?
 - Are the patrons interested in accessing electronic online services and, perhaps, other services?
 - Would they like more community programs in the library?
 - Do they have suggestions for improvement of library service?
3. A third goal of a future survey might be to find out if librarians are conducting research and analysis to measure the effectiveness of library and information service; to learn what research is provided by the libraries to support policymaking; and to describe networked services, resources, and activities.

Feedback

I would appreciate feedback from anyone who has questions or thoughts about the survey described here, and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the design of the new questionnaire and the conduct of the next survey.