



Library helps Russian minority preserve traditions online

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Abstract

Today, one of the great challenges for libraries is how to best bring their communities into attention, and reflect them as a whole, with all their attributes: historical background and every-day life, language and arts, traditions and customs.

This paper documents the efforts of a small public library in the village of Jurilovca, in Tulcea county, Romania to preserve their local heritage. This library accepted the challenge and later succeeded in promoting its rich local cultural heritage by making use of new technologies in information and communications, as the first winner of the Community Participation Contest organized by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) within the Global Libraries - Romania planning grant.

Introduction

Computers and the Internet connect people to crucial information that can improve health, education, and employment opportunities. Incredibly, the vast majority of the world's population - more than 87 percent, or 5.5 billion people - lack access to these

powerful, modern tools. To address this disparity, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiated the Global Libraries, within the context of the Global Development program.

Global Libraries initiative

Global Libraries initiative has its origins in a program which was initially designed for the US public libraries, with the general purpose to equip these important community hubs with computers and Internet access, and the necessary skills for librarians to assist patrons. The U.S. Libraries initiative goal was "ensuring that if you can get to a public library, you can reach the Internet". As the success of this program was tremendous, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation decided to open this opportunity to others, and form partnerships with select developing countries that demonstrate the need and the readiness to help public libraries provide free access to computers and the Internet, and training on how to make full use of these tools. Global Libraries is committed to help public libraries in their process of evolving into vital tools that can advance the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. *"The vision of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is to bring about effective, sustainable public access to information and communication technology in libraries for people in developing and transitioning countries who would not otherwise have access, and to ensure it is useful and used in ways that improve people's lives and spread the benefits."* Since then, Global Libraries became a large community; at present Global Libraries programs are implemented in 10 countries: Chile and Mexico, Botswana, Vietnam, Lithuania and Latvia, Poland, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Romania.

Global Libraries in Romania

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation selected the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) to plan for a program to provide public access computers with Internet access in Romania's public libraries. IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of

education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development. Founded in 1968, IREX works in more than 50 countries with a staff of over 500 professionals worldwide. IREX's history with public access computing goes back more than 15 years and has provided services to more than 3 million registered users. IREX currently administers several community technology programs, including the Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) in 10 Eurasian countries, the Global Connections and Exchange program in Central Asia.

From fall 2007 through fall 2008, IREX engaged in a variety of Global Libraries planning activities, including developing 12 pilot Public Access Computing (PAC) sites, assessing the capacity of the national library association, and testing training modules that will prepare librarians to use technology to meet community needs. IREX is now in the early stages of implementing the five-year Global Libraries national program in Romania, "Biblionet – The World in My Library!"

Biblionet aims to provide increased access to information for Romanians by helping libraries better serve their communities. Over the next five years, Biblionet will equip up to 1,600 out of 2,933 public libraries in Romania with public access computers; provide training to librarians on IT skills, center management, service delivery and advocacy; strengthen the ANBPR to support librarians and library development over the long-term; and work with government at all levels to implement policies that recognize the value of modern libraries in 21st century Romanian society.

Community Participation Contest

As part of the planning grant, the Global Libraries Romania team implemented a Community Participation Contest; this monthly contest funded technology-based projects designed by librarians in collaboration with community members.

The Community Participation Contest project had three main priorities:

- to encourage innovation and community outreach among Romanian librarians;
- to extend the reach of the planning grant beyond pilot site libraries;

- to reach out other types of libraries (academic, school, special, etc.) that are not primary beneficiaries of Global Libraries activities.

Launched in November 2007, the goal of the Community Participation Contest was to encourage the development of creative community outreach ideas which use new I&C technologies, while expanding the program's reach beyond the 12 pilot sites of the Global Libraries Romania planning grant. The projects were to identify and address community specific needs with innovative and creative approaches, in order to provide other libraries with inspiration for implementing new services in the own communities.

Fourteen projects were funded, many of which created new online content by documenting and digitizing local culture and traditions. Funding ranged from \$1,500-\$2,500, depending on the scope of the project, and many librarians have found ways to extend work beyond the award, either through local cost-share or external funding.

Every month, starting with the half of November 2007 until November 2008, the Community Participation Contest was announced and applications were received. Each edition of the Community Participation Contest allowed application requests starting with the first day of the month, and ending the submission period in the last day of the month. All eligible proposals received were archived and uploaded in the E-library section of biblioteca.ro, available for viewing and download for all registered users of the forum. For selecting the winner, a two-steps mechanism was used. Every edition, a new Community Participation Contest panel was created. The review panel was heterogeneous (NGO and librarian specialists), to ensure different perspectives on projects. First step in evaluation was reviewing the project proposals, and evaluate them using predefined selection criteria, like originality, community participation, innovative uses of technology, and ease of replication. All projects were scored by panel members, and the first three best-scored ones were declared finalists. The second phase of evaluation consisted in online meetings of Community Participation Contest panel on biblioteca.ro forum (for each edition an online discussion). Each panel member voted one project, arguing for the choice. The two-steps mechanism allowed the possibility of in-depth analysis on the projects with good features, and also the possibility of over-all vision on the finalist project proposals. After voting from Community Participation Contest panel, winners were announced on the forum, and procedures for awarding began.

During the past year twelve editions of the Community Participation Contest took place, and 114 projects entered the competition, proposals coming from all types of libraries all around Romania. From the 114 proposals IREX selected fourteen projects as winners, awarding a total of 30,358 \$, most of which was used for acquisition of equipment. At present, twelve of the fourteen projects finished the implementation, and two are in advanced stages of implementation. Nevertheless, results have started to be visible for quite some time.

Throughout the twelve editions of the contest, librarians came up with many creative ideas for new services and new products for their specific communities. Though only fourteen projects got the award many of the 114 proposals received by IREX have inside great ideas which can be put into practice, ideas that are stored in the E-library section of the program website and are available for other libraries to replicate. As the overall objective of the Community Participation Contest was to encourage librarians to reach out to their communities, to think and take action to better serve their patrons, it was no surprise to see that the image of the libraries in the community improved considerably after implementation of these projects.

This is how, after one year and a half since the launch of the contest, IREX can already present a variety of projects can be used as models for implementing new IT based services in communities. The projects can be grouped in categories, giving the activities and the results: projects for or with minority communities; projects which resulted in web content creation; projects for educating and informing the community on different specific issues; projects for entertainment; projects for local development and projects related to labor market. Most of the projects are a mixture of more of the above.

As stated before, some projects were tailored for special communities as is the case for CLIO - Center for Promoting Local Culture and Traditions of Jurilovca project.

CLIO - Center for Promoting Local Culture and Traditions of Jurilovca

Located on the border of the Razim-Sinoe Lagoon in Romania's Danube Delta, the village of Jurilovca was established at the end of the 18th century by Russians fleeing persecution for opposing Russian Orthodox Church reforms. Today 2,800 of Jurilovca's 3,200 residents are Russian-speaking Lipoveni, descendants of the Staroveri or "Old Believers". The secret to their community's survival, throughout the centuries, lies in their ability to preserve their "roots": in times of sorrow, war and persecutions they stood together as a strong family, protecting their religious and cultural traditions, passing them along with pride to the new generations. The small fisherman community in Jurilovca has kept its treasures locked in hidden chests, and protected it through years. But now the time has come to take them out, and proudly show them to the world.

Aware of the opportunities that new technologies proffer, the public library in Jurilovca took the initiative and brought the community together once again, to fructify the past and build their future.

Responding to the Global Libraries Romania invitation, the Jurilovca public library submitted a proposal in the first edition of the Community Participation Contest and won.

United under the proposal title **CLIO - Center for Promoting Local Culture and Traditions**, the project team consisted of formal and informal leaders of the local community, teachers and students, under the coordination of history professor Paul Condrat and librarian Gheorghiuța Cuțopal.

The projects' objective was to help Jurilovca find a balance between promoting economic and community development, and preserving a vibrant, but deteriorating Russian cultural heritage. In order to address this concern, the CLIO project engaged elder members of the Russian-speaking community in an effort to share local folklore by retelling folktales to groups of school children in Russian, digitally recording them, and uploading the recordings to the newly created website, www.bibliotecajurilovca.ro. Thus, the coupling of both the older and younger generations through modern technologies created a unique "cultural bridge", by

gathering old traditions and documents from community members, and making them accessible to the general public through the newly established website.

In reaction to this unifying idea, community members searched for their hidden treasures - books and family pictures - brought them to the library to be digitized and posted on the webpage. This was followed by the work of community volunteers who conducted research and organized the materials.

CLIO used the 2461 \$ received through the Community Participation Contest to purchase equipment and create a digital archive of local heritage materials, including scanning books and photographs and recording folklore (stories and songs) performed by community members. As a result of this project the community made available old religious books written in the Cyrillic alphabet, folk stories, poems and local legends were recorded, and old customs were photographed and presented in digital format through the library website and some of them actually joined the CLIO team.

CLIO brought new friends for both the library and the Lipoveni community: researchers from Romania and from abroad showed their interest in the results of CLIO, students from outside the community are documenting their research papers on Jurilovca community, and new partnerships were formed, and an Italian movie producer realized a movie about the Danube's Delta and Lipoveni, and will present it in Jurilovca in the summer of 2009.

CLIO succeeded in providing new generations with a mirror to Jurilovca's past and present: www.bibliotecajurilovca.ro promotes the Russian speaking Lipoveni community's culture and values, aiding them with the preservation of their language and religious customs, arts and rituals. It also brought together a dynamic, young team, ready to better shape the future of the community by preserving and promoting old traditions.

The digitization of materials and collection of representative materials continues, and new content is archived. At present time, technical limitations of the hosting provider don't allow more information to be uploaded on the website. As the ISP will soon be changed, new digital content will be uploaded (it's already prepared for this). Efforts are now dedicated to identifying possible local artisanal products to be presented

over the website, to help local manufacturers promote and commercialize their works.

“In the beginning there was the idea – the need for gathering and preservation of local cultural heritage and the opportunity of promoting it.... and the people: teachers, librarians, church representatives, community members, all with a big heart and a big interest in the idea, aware of this being a chance of rising, of consolidating the community spirit through tradition. Then, the chance came: the Community Participation Contest, the catalyst to better structure the idea and increase the interest of the community towards traditions. Though the implementation period and the three months when the project was supposed to take place are long gone, CLIO continues: we rediscover our traditions; we find documents with historical value which have to be conserved and fructified. CLIO is now part of our lives!” said Paul Condrat, coordinator of **CLIO - Center for Promoting Local Culture and Traditions of Jurilovca**