



**Oases of innovation: Uncovering innovation in even the most unlikely places**

**Colin Guard**

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**Abstract:**

*Ukraine's libraries have long been neglected: their operating model is based on outdated Soviet assumptions, their budgets are last in line for funding, and young people rarely choose the library profession. In this environment averse to customer service and innovation, it is rare to find libraries innovating to better serve their communities; yet isolated examples exist. This paper examines three examples of libraries responding to users in new ways, and extracts from them a concept of what drives innovation in Ukraine. How can a culture of innovation be fostered in library systems where stagnation is the norm?*

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**Paper text**

Since the Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine gained independence, most of its libraries have fallen out of the general public eye and as an institution, have entered into steady decline. During the Soviet period, libraries served an important public education

function – both supplementing resources available for students at schools and meeting the informational needs (as defined by the government) of the general public. With information strictly controlled, approved sources were available and promoted through the library, and there were limited alternatives. Throughout Ukraine, there are 18,000 libraries – nearly one for every 2600 residents - testament to the importance of a state vehicle for dissemination of official information.

After independence, public priorities shifted elsewhere. When government budgets were cut, funds for purchasing new books were reduced or suspended. As new information became available from sources beyond Ukraine's borders, libraries were increasingly seen as old-fashioned and irrelevant institutions. Salaries for librarians remained stagnant<sup>1</sup>, and fewer young people were choosing the profession. Libraries remained open – but largely cut off from exposure to external innovations on libraries in the information age. Visitation declined, collections aged, procedures and rules were not updated, and the public became uncertain of how libraries fit into modern Ukraine.

To a large extent, the response of libraries and librarians to this new environment and their new challenges has been subdued. During the Soviet era, customer service was not considered an important element of the library experience — so librarians often lack the skills or initiative to engage with visitors to explore their needs. Even with a better grasp of community needs, the library system does not reward innovation, so new ideas on expanding library services or reorienting collections cannot get through the bureaucracy. As a result, most libraries continue to offer an increasingly outdated collection of books to their patrons and little else. As an example, while children under 13 represent only 15% of the general population, they are 38% of the library population because they check out books for school assignments, demonstrating the value of services in supporting the educational system, but their declining relevance for the majority of adults.

But exceptions to this norm do exist. Not all libraries in the country simply allowed their relevance to slip away as society changed. Throughout the country, one finds examples of librarians who assessed the new place of libraries in Ukraine, reevaluated their institutions' purpose, and took action to develop in concert with new community needs and demands. These libraries innovated while their counterparts languished. For this reason, they provide a model to the rest of Ukraine's libraries – not only of the specific

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<sup>1</sup> According to the State Statistics Committee, the average monthly salary of a cultural worker (a category that includes librarians) was UAH 1907 in the first quarter of Ukraine, or approximately \$240. While this salary is 90.4% of the average salary across all professions, official salaries significantly understate real incomes due to a large gray economy. Unlike workers in the private sector, librarians do not generally have significant income opportunities beyond their official salaries.

activities libraries can undertake in order to carve out a newly relevant role in their communities, but of how one spurs new ideas in an environment in which incentives for innovation are few.

This paper examines three of these libraries and their directors, aiming to find similarities between the three that can indicate what prompts some libraries to excel while most continue existing as if nothing has changed.

This theme is of particular importance at this time as the Bibliomist program has recently begun in Ukraine. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Bibliomist is a 5-year program that invests in equipment, training and advocacy as part of a joint effort with government to rejuvenate the public library system and increase its relevance. The program will equip the first 200 of its over 1100 libraries with computers for internet access this summer and fall, and has already begun training librarians in how to use this equipment to better serve community needs. The program is based in part on lessons learned from the librarians described in this paper.

### **Mykolaiv City Library**

In changing conditions, Mykolaiv's library director Tetyana Tverda was among the few to recognize the potential role for libraries as a community information source and to begin to generate corresponding services. While most libraries remained narrowly focused on books, Mykolaiv, located in the south of the country, was an early adopter of the Internet, establishing public computing and connectivity in 1995. It began providing wi-fi to patrons in 2008. While over 400 public libraries in the country now have public internet available, they are a small minority of the country's 18,000 libraries, and roughly half of them provide it as a result of participation in foreign-funded assistance programs.

In a country where basic services for the majority of the population are often inefficient, the needs of those with disabilities are frequently completely neglected. Mykolaiv's library, however, has made extensive efforts to make the collection accessible to patrons with special needs, including production of audio books and adaptation of the library website for visually impaired visitors.

Throughout Ukraine, numerous non-governmental organizations have sprouted up in response to a breakdown in social services. In Mykolaiv, there was a need for common space where these local nonprofits could connect with the community. Many groups were offering necessary services to the public, but were limited in ways they could reach beneficiaries. The Mykolaiv City Library established a Center for Social Activism and Partnership, which serves as a hub and materials depository for nonprofit information. The result is a rare space where community members can become

informed on issues of social importance in a welcoming environment. A formal mechanism for cooperation with NGOs is a nontraditional use of library space and resources in the Ukrainian context.

### **Moloda Gvardiya City Youth Library**

The decline in library visitation over the past two decades has been severe, and even libraries that do their best to keep up with changing needs are victim to changing public perceptions about the utility of libraries in general. Few libraries are accustomed to targeted outreach, and branding and marketing efforts are almost unheard of. The Moloda Gvardiya City Youth Library in the capital Kyiv, however, saw a difficult situation, and responded to it creatively. The library worked with an advertising agency to develop professional-looking posters, and negotiated for free advertising in the Kyiv subway system, getting the word out in an engaging manner to a broad audience. The initiative led to a significant increase in visitation, changing perceptions about what tools can be employed to raise awareness about library services.

When she developed the advertising campaign, library director Halyna Konashko was not aware of any other libraries in Ukraine that had advertised their services through commercial channels. To her, advertising was the natural next step after the library had established new services that she knew were needed by the community based on surveys of patrons and of the competition, including other libraries and commercial entities such as Internet cafes. This businesslike approach is unusual for libraries in Ukraine, but it a logical mode of operation for institutions that have increasing visitation as one of their stated goals.

Aside from advertising, Konashko and her team have introduced a number of other innovations as a result of surveying their patrons. Very early on, staff understood that their young patrons were very interested in finding employment. Over a number of years the library's support of this goal evolved from simply providing career-related books to a comprehensive set of services, including Internet job searches, resume-writing workshops, lecture series and workshops led by practitioners in a wide variety of fields to help patrons select the career paths best for them.

### **Desnyansky Raion Library**

As funds for new books have declined along with government budgets, collections have become less interesting to potential patrons, leading to a spiral of disuse. The Desnyansky Raion Library, in a residential district of Kyiv, reached out to the community in order to refresh its stock. The library established a public book exchange near the library's entrance where books can be borrowed by anyone, without a card. Patrons are only asked to leave one book for each they take. In a system where property is closely

monitored and guarded, this initiative established a level of trust between institution and community that is uncommon, and gave residents a compelling reason to return to their library.

The book exchange has been popular among patrons. Director Tetyana Kurylo has introduced a number of other innovations that have been well-received, including a printed information sheet on online employment resources that is posted next to public access computers, and a service of home delivery to elderly patrons of books and information printed from the Internet.

### **Identifying commonalities**

Innovation remains rare within the Ukrainian library system; at the same time, it is clear that given the right conditions, changes are possible. As Ukraine enters a period of great potential for the library system, it is important to understand why libraries such as these three have devised novel ways to provide services demanded by patrons while the vast majority of libraries in the country have continued to carry out their traditional functions without change. By identifying some of the ingredients of their success, it becomes more realistic to establish the conditions for replication at other libraries across the country.

In surveying the experiences of these three libraries, it may be helpful to start by eliminating as possibilities a few of the potential explanations for the uniqueness of these libraries. First, it becomes clear that access to funding is not the reason for the innovation. While all three of the libraries reviewed above are in major cities, and therefore have the potential for accessing larger and more diverse sources of funding, most libraries sharing these attributes have not introduced significant innovations to serve patrons. All three library directors, while acknowledging the importance of resources, assert that funding is the result of, rather than the cause of, their successes.

Halyna Konashko recounted conversations with other librarians in which they stated, “of course you’re able to provide these services; you have the money to buy computers and new books,” but the services were provided before the resources were obtained. Tetyana Kurylo notes that the Desnyansky district, as a bedroom community lacking significant numbers of businesses, has a smaller tax base but a larger number of residents than urban areas of comparable size, making her funding situation more challenging than average. She also notes that many of her library’s innovations cost little or nothing to implement, and that the financial crisis cannot be an excuse, because “we are always in a crisis.” Tetyana Tverda has led workshops in which she has asked librarians to imagine that they have been given \$1 million to do anything they want, and

has found that very few are able to get past the first \$100,000 before running out of ideas, indicating that the main obstacle is vision, not funding.

#### *A different vision*

What the librarians described above do share is a different vision of the purpose a library can serve in its community. Traditionally, the Ukrainian library is seen as a preserver of "culture". Its primary role is not seen as meeting the information demands of local residents, or helping fill gaps between government services and public need. Instead, librarians consider the institution mainly as a repository of cultural inheritance, where patrons can gain fulfillment by having access to appropriate literature. This role was appropriate under a system where access to information was limited and pride in national heritage was paramount, but today it is outdated. What the librarians described above have done - and their counterparts have not - is realize the changing nature of their institution, and reassess its purpose. Without a renewed and modern understanding of the library, it is impossible to direct reform in any targeted way. Tetyana Tverda of the Mykolaiv City Library is able to articulate the evolution of her library's mission in a way that others cannot:

***A library has its own mission in society. It hasn't changed, but now we understand it more broadly. During Soviet times, libraries used to be Communist Party organizations serving readers' needs. Libraries were responsible for an ideological function – promotion of the Soviet ideology among the population. In addition to giving out books to users, libraries were responsible for suggesting the decisions of the Party and government to them (e.g., decisions of the Party Congresses, various ideological publications). They were also responsible for ideological cultivation of the minds of Soviet citizens. Now – and for the first time starting in the 1990s – libraries began formulating their current mission – specifically, my library's mission is to promote the individual's social mobility through providing information and cultural values to improve one's life. Reasons to change the mission included fast-paced transformations in the society, social life, and economy. For example, a former engineer had to become an entrepreneur to make a living. Our library had to respond to his changed requests. Our new mission was informed by society's needs.***

Konashko and Kurylo are also able to explain why and how their libraries changed the work that they do in order to adapt to the different needs of a democracy and free-market economy. While nearly all their peers recognize that society has changed since the fall of the Soviet Union, they have not changed their libraries' management systems to a degree that would be proportionate to the major changes in society. While most

librarians recognize that the environment has changed, their vision stops short of reconstructing the library to adapt to the new environment.

### *The importance of data*

One way that librarians can better respond to their patrons needs is to make an effort to understand what those needs are. Yet the data that most Ukrainian libraries collect is not used to inform new services or make decisions about allocation of funding. Instead, figures are recorded of registered library card users and books in circulation, and reports are passed up the administrative chain to the Ministry of Culture. The ministry stores thick books of these numbers and publishes some of them online, on the website of the National Parliamentary Library. But with questionable accuracy and an unclear relationship to decision-making, the data mostly remains unused by library management teams, and librarians generally consider the collection of data another bureaucratic task.

All three libraries above have taken a different approach. They regularly and systematically survey their patrons to understand their needs and provide services to address them. Konashko describes a simple decision-making process: “If our patrons want us to do something, we do it.”

The Mykolaiv City Library carried out its first large-scale survey of patron’s perceptions of the library and its services in 2002-2003, and since then has repeated the exercise once every three years. In recent years, there was declining visitation among young people, and through the surveys, the library’s leadership discovered why: young people demand the latest IT services, and the library was not keeping up with technological change. As a result, the library installed Skype and other instant messaging services on computers and saw youth visitation increase. Library staff also carry out smaller-scale surveys every three months on narrower topics. One recent finding was that one hour was not enough time to complete most of the tasks for which patrons wanted to use the public access computers, so the standard unit of time allotted for public access was increased to 1 ½ hours.

### *Making connections with partners*

Institutions in Ukraine have a tendency to operate within narrow silos. The legacy of vertical hierarchies does not promote horizontal relationships, and in an environment of scarcity, institutions are reluctant to share resources. As a result, community partnerships are rare. All three libraries above have made an effort to break out of these institutional restraints and engage with community organizations, both to learn more about what is happening in the community and to leverage the library’s resources. Tverda says “the library can’t do everything,” explaining why partners are essential. To

name one example, when the Mykolaiv City Library was preparing an application for the Community Participation Contest (an initiative of the Bibliomist program), library staff brainstormed together with the staff of Dialog, a local NGO. The result of the brainstorming session was a project idea—an art therapy project—that library staff believe they would not have come up with on their own. The library's proposal was one of four chosen by the contest's selection committee for support.

When staff of the Moloda Gvardiya library discovered through surveys that career development was the top priority of their young patrons, they quickly realized that they could meet their needs most effectively in partnership with organizations that specialize in this field. The library has been working closely for a number of years with the Kyiv City Employment Center and with the Institute of Social and Political Psychology of the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, as well as with the city's schools. The Institute's teachers frequently lecture and lead seminars and workshops at the library on career development, and the employment center provides job placement services in close coordination with the library. Library staff coordinate with school principals to arrange for groups of students to visit the library for career development days. By working together, each of the partnering institutions is able to achieve its own goals, reaching more people at lower cost.

#### *Openness and exposure to new ideas*

While libraries have been rapidly adapting elsewhere, language, geography and resources have precluded most Ukrainian libraries from learning about these changes. Without examples from which to spark their creativity, most librarians move forward assuming that their libraries are working adequately.

All three library directors are familiar with international experience to a degree unusual among their peers, and Kurylo and Tverda have actually visited libraries abroad. Konashko and Kurylo believe that learning from foreign practices was a transformative experience that opened their eyes. Tverda cites her visits to libraries abroad as an important part of the learning process, but adds that the process was evolutionary over a number of years without a single moment of epiphany. Tverda notes the importance of quality interpretation; on a trip to Israel organized by the Ukrainian Library Association, she had the benefit of excellent interpretation by emigrants whose native language was Russian. During the trip, she saw the theft-prevention procedures and equipment that make it possible to have open stacks and gained a clear understanding of how they work. When she returned to Ukraine, she and staff installed a security gate and bar-coded books in order to establish an open collection of 30,000 volumes. She was also very impressed by the large windows and open layout of libraries she saw in Israel and

the United States, and continues to seek the funding to change her library's architecture.

While Konashko has not visited libraries abroad, she has made a conscious effort to gain from every opportunity to meet with colleagues from other countries who visit Kyiv. From German colleagues she learned about the practice of organizing books on shelves according to categories that are easy for patrons to understand, such as a dedicated shelf for science fiction books. From U.S. colleagues she learned about summer reading programs for schoolchildren to occupy their time productively during vacations, and began implementing them in her own library. She was also inspired by active outreach programs carried out by libraries in a number of countries. She and library staff now frequently walk through a nearby botanical garden and approach mothers with young children to let them know about the library and its services.

### *Maximizing talent*

In the current environment, the population has low expectations for libraries. Most believe that libraries are there to help them find books, and surveys show they are largely satisfied with the service they receive in this regard, even though most of the adult population rarely visits. It is not surprising, therefore, that with low expectations of the profession, salaries are correspondingly low. In the post-Soviet period, this has meant that the profession has failed to attract the more dynamic, ambitious and motivated young graduates. The profession is aging, and current staff were mainly trained under the Soviet system and continue to approach their work as if the same conditions applied now as then.

A thread between these three directors is that they do not fit the Soviet mold. All three are energetic, competitive and eager to share their ideas. They exhibit more conspicuous professional curiosity and have made the effort to find opportunities to learn more. Perhaps more than in any other area, it is this type of librarian whom the Ukrainian library system must attempt to attract to the profession. As libraries have declined in relevance, the draw of the librarian profession to the most dynamic young individuals has weakened. Yet without bringing in librarians who have vision and are able to think beyond the traditional models, there is little potential for change.

A different mentality is key to whether librarians commit to the new model of serving the identified needs of patrons rather than merely fulfilling the state plan.

## **Conclusions**

While the Ukrainian library system has been neglected and isolated, the accomplishments within that system of the three librarians profiled in this paper demonstrate that potential does exist and excellence is possible. Some may depend on individual personality, but within a system that stifles innovation, opportunities to allow innovation to surface are rare. Library system overhaul may take years or decades, but by drawing on the experience of the three libraries cited here and their directors' perspective, it is possible to identify several small steps that would result in bringing out the ideas and initiatives currently hidden.

### *Friendly competition*

Like professionals anywhere, Ukrainian librarians respond to competition. But until now, Ukrainian libraries have lacked a tool to measure their effectiveness, reducing the incentives for librarians to innovate and decreasing their potential to be recognized by the public or government.

One possibility might be a system of ratings and awards, with winners being identified as the libraries that are most responsive to the needs of the community. When librarians see that other libraries are implementing new services that they lack, there is a natural motivation to catch up and demonstrate that their library has not fallen behind. Konashko emphasizes the importance of motivation: "not financial but recognition." She believes that librarians will introduce new services if they see that their efforts will be appreciated.

In fact, there is reason to believe that competitions may be one of the most promising ways forward. When Bibliomist began its first stage of including new libraries, it did so as a contest between raions and cities within each oblast. Under this pressure, numerous librarians discovered new capacity in government outreach, and convinced their local council to fund repairs and renovation in order to ensure the library was in appropriate condition to join the program. 182 raions and cities across the country ended up applying for the competition, a larger number than might be expected during a recession, since each application had to be accompanied by funding support from local government in the form of renovations, where necessary, and covering the ongoing cost of internet service.

The Bilozerkha Raion Library in Kherson Oblast was a typical example of a library that was able to find new resources as a result of the competition, securing 100,000 hryvnas (approximately \$12,000) for renovation of the library. According to a letter from the library director:

*Village authorities started paying greater attention to libraries and improved the conditions for their activity (and they found the needed resources!!!), even though until now they could find no additional funds. In the villages all people talk about is the libraries and their participation in the competition, which is quite strange, considering that the economic and political crisis in Ukraine does not stimulate development in the sphere of culture.*

### *Learning by doing*

The Ukrainian library system's scheme for professional development and training is outdated and unresponsive to current needs. Though some training is available, adult learning methods are antiquated - dependent largely on lecturers' recitation of texts without time for discussion or interactivity - and as a result, once inside the system, librarians develop little new or relevant knowledge. A new approach to training and the establishment of a new training infrastructure is part of the Bibliomist program, but this is only part of the solution. Concurrently, librarians need experience in taking action to change their libraries.

The experience of the librarians referenced in this paper suggests that practical work or learning by doing is an effective method for changing minds and encouraging initiative. Rather than explain to staff why surveying patrons is important, Tverda asked staff to work with her in carrying out surveys and designing new services. In the course of doing this work, staff came to a much better understanding of the utility of surveys than they could have gained from a lecture. Although the idea of advertising the services of the Moloda Gvardiya library in the subway system was conceived by Konashko herself, its implementation was a collaborative process, with staff participating in a friendly competition to generate and choose specific slogans and poster designs.

Through a similar process, staff of the Desnyansky Raion Library learned about a need that patrons did not know they had: the deputy director discovered that patrons were familiar with only a few of the most famous Ukrainian writers, but were not able to name any less well-known or modern authors who write in the Ukrainian language. One of the library's staff members responded to this finding by initiating a series of readings, exhibits and other events called "Inauguration of the Ukrainian Word" to draw attention to little-known Ukrainian writers. As a result of the series, circulation of Ukrainian-language materials increased threefold.

### *Breaking through isolation*

What the above examples demonstrate is that when presented with a window to new thinking, Ukrainian librarians can respond successfully. But these windows have been rare and difficult to find. A few hundred librarians have had the opportunity to visit other

libraries abroad, and many more have met with visiting lecturers. But often when they return to their libraries, they return to the reality that innovation is not rewarded and new ideas are suppressed. If the root cause of the problems facing Ukraine's library system is its long isolation from the rest of the world's library community, then any tool that breaks through that isolation and connects Ukraine's librarians to their colleagues will be a helpful contribution to a solution.

Paradoxically, only by increasing general awareness of what other, more effective library systems offer can the resistance begin to slip away. Starting at the top is one possibility. Bibliomist has attempted this approach, bringing more than 20 oblast library directors to the United States to witness how libraries are administered and specifically, how modern libraries manage staff. Some of these library directors had been abroad before, and most were generally aware of recent developments in the library community, but this trip was their first opportunity to observe international practice together and discuss innovations as a group. One positive result was that the library directors created a new group within the Ukrainian Library Association, after a meeting with their counterparts at the American Library Association. Each of the participants also developed a plan to introduce innovations into their own libraries after their return to Ukraine, and to spread their ideas to other libraries. Once innovation is welcomed, and librarians become more valued community institutions and gain recognition as an exciting place to work, the profession can begin to attract more qualified talent.

There is no question that the Ukrainian library system has a long way to go to catch up to its more progressive counterparts, but it is also clear that the journey has begun and there are concrete steps that will help make it a faster trip.