

What is a ‘normal’ library?

Over the past two years, during the Covid crisis, librarians have longed for normality. They experienced an intense desire to shake hands, to meet in person, to be in the library. They nurtured an equally intense longing to get back to ‘business as usual’: the pleasure of walking among open shelves, circulating information among users and creating connections with the local area. After two years, restrictions were eventually lifted and there was light at the end of the tunnel. The pandemic is now (almost) over and, suddenly, another emergency is looming at the horizon: the war in Ukraine.

What is normality in a library? Is it the everyday business of acquiring, selecting, processing and circulating information? Or does it also consist in reflecting on who spreads information, how that information is channelled, who is receiving it and why? Is it the ordinary task of providing services to people, as with any other public service, or is it also the duty of contributing to social happiness, by satisfying individual information needs and encouraging individual development? Normality has many faces; its nature fully emerges when libraries confront themselves with unpredictable events. What is alien suddenly rushes into daily life and history, both with a little and a capital ‘H’, it becomes part of ordinary library duties - ushering in a new era for libraries and library profession.

Let us start from the little ‘h’. According to the online paper BB-CNTV (which quotes the Russian website *Fontanka*, 7 April)¹ Ms Olga Kaganovskaya, head of the cultural department at the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, was sanctioned, and eventually resigned, for having exhibited a poster including a picture of Russian philologist and semiologist Yuri Lotman during the “Happy Day of Cultural Workers!”.

Yuri Lotman is a well-known Russian professor and one of the founders of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiology. He died in 1993, after having published several outstanding works, translated into many languages. His academic record is as remarkable as his reputation, according to the library staff. Unfortunately, a zealous library’s security agent recognised in Lotman’s hatchet-face, moustache and unkempt grey hair no less than Mark Twain, an American writer, and he was right: Lotman’s resemblance with Mark Twain is incredibly striking. Moved by patriotic ardour, the security agent tore off the picture; supported by the advisor to the general director of the National Library of Russia, he accused Ms Kanagovskaya of «propaganda for extremism and terrorism». Ms Olga Kaganovskaya, who had worked at the National Library of Russia for 24 years, resigned from the job on March 28 at her own request.

In a free world, an episode of this kind would have ended up in embarrassed apologies or in a brilliant exercise of serendipity. But normality looks different under dictatorship, where enthusiasm is met with suspicion and every Faust may hide a Mephistopheles. In democracies, libraries are vibrant institutions providing unhindered access to

¹ *There is a scandal at the National Library of Russia because of a poster with Yuri Lotman, «bb-cntv»*, 8 April 2022, <<https://bb-cntv.com/news/there-is-a-scandal-at-the-national-library-of-russia-because-of-a-poster-with-yuri-lotman-paper-18216>>.

information and contributing to the development of intellectual freedom and universal civil rights. Under autocratic, paranoid regimes, libraries may turn into transmission belts of the ruling ideology and become themselves instruments of propaganda.

There is also history with a capital 'H' - a narrative of exodus, peoples on the run from war and war crimes. On 24 February, EBLIDA, NAPLE and PL2030 released a European Declaration condemning the barbaric attack of the Russian Federation against Ukraine - an attack at odds with any basic principle of sustainable, democratic and equitable society². In the ensuing days, other library associations of national and international nature joined to deprecate the Russian invasion and stood in solidarity with the Ukrainian people³.

Why should libraries pay so much attention to a political issue, apparently having no relevance to the librarian's job? Because democracy and sustainable development in libraries are not empty words, but they form pillars of peace and prosperity; because libraries are open spaces of dialogue and reconciliation; and because equal access to information can only foster in a world where each citizen is given equal opportunities and his/her chance for personal development.

This is what normality means for a library in difficult times - it is, for instance, to implement a long-established tradition of giving a warm welcome to refugees, of providing them with whatever support, books and other media they may need, as well as access to information and education. Libraries should also ensure refugees' education, especially that of children and young people, and organise courses to teach the basics of the language of the hosting countries.

During the pandemic, librarians were able to drop old practices and to boldly embrace the new 'normal' of the digital library and of library work, reaching out to users well beyond library precincts. Librarians did this with passion, flexibility and creativity. As long as new roles and services were defined and devised, librarians found new ways to help the communities they serve.

It will not be easy to let the last two years slip from memory. They have shown, however, what 'true' normality means for libraries. Beyond the old and the new, besides what is ordinary and what is considered extra-ordinary business, true normality means, first and foremost, to stay close to people in dismal and disarray, to align with real life and the reasons of those who cannot, and should not, be left behind.

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2 European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations; National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe Forum; Public Libraries 2030, *Press release: The Russian Federation barbaric attack against Ukraine - Joint European declaration*, 24 February 2022, <<http://www.eblida.org/news/the-russian-federation-barbaric-attack-against-ukraine.html>>.

3 Most statements are collected in *Special issue: European libraries response to the war in Ukraine*, «EBLIDA newsletter», 2022, n. 3, <[https://mailchi.mp/290b6cod617e/eblida-newsletter-5192138?e=\[UNIQID\]](https://mailchi.mp/290b6cod617e/eblida-newsletter-5192138?e=[UNIQID])>.