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Final Essay

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The New Generation of Czech Citizens:
Their perception of libraries in a Democratic nation

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Introduction

From the time of King Charles, to the modern day, public and academic libraries have undergone enormous changes, with the public perception and utilization of the library changing as well. This essay will focus on how this perception has developed, and the path that led the library to where it is today. The inclusion of the Czech Republic in the European Union will be examined, with how it will affect libraries in the 21st century. Finally, recommendations will be made on how the library can still be relevant in today's Czech Republic.

A Modern History

To fully understand the importance of library services today, the path that led them here will be explored, beginning in the early 20th century. The former Czechoslovakia was independent from the period of 1918 until the German occupation of 1939, at the start of World War II. The first library law was established in 1919, which placed libraries in each town, and set budgets and personal requirements for each library (Vasova 1995). The Communists centralized the library system in 1959 (Vasova 1995). The power of a book was considered "as a guarantee of the continuity of national and cultural identity loaded with a "capital" of enormous symbolic and moral power" (Richter & Millerová 2014). An author of a Czech book was considered a hero. The Nazis denigrated that book culture by destroying over six hundred thousand volumes during their occupancy. Once the war ended in 1945, Czechoslovakia lived in a time of democracy, until 1948, when the Communists performed a coup d'etat. They would not experience it again for over forty years.

From 1948–1989, libraries were part of a centrally controlled state system, with a harsh censorship regime applied to all published materials. In the Soviet Union, libraries that had to deal with censorship found that 80% of all published material was published by the state, with foreign material censored during pre-publication (Stelmakh). The restricted collection, known as “spetskhran,” included publications that were deemed hostile to the regime. In 1985, one million items were included in this collection, with thirty to thirty thousand volumes added every year (Stelmakh). Overall, there was a reduction in the range of published titles and in the production of journals (Stelmakh). Ivan Klima, in his autobiography *My Crazy Century*, experienced being silenced while working as an editor at Tvar, a left-leaning journal. Tvar attracted writers who did not accept the Communist regime. Klima describes the writers within Tvar as ignoring “the guidelines that the weary dictatorship kept demanding” (Klima p. 190). This journal, despite a vote by its members to keep it running, was closed because “Socialist literature” did not receive the “utmost support, both material and ideological,” as per President Novotny’s wishes. (Klima 193).

In 1968, an attempt was made to ease the Communist stronghold, referred to as “The Prague Spring.” Alexander Dubcek, the new Communist leader, wanted to make amendments to the constitution that would reduce the totalitarian aspect of the party. The changes he made prompted the Soviets to invade Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968, to reassert their authority. It would remain that way until 1991 (Cejpek, 2002).

1989 The “Velvet Revolution”

Up to now, censored Czech writers such as Ivan Klima had their books removed from library shelves, were forced to work menial jobs, and would be followed by party

members. That came to an end as a result of the Velvet Revolution. From November 17th to December 29th, 1989, a student protest began that would become a transition from Communist rule to a return to democracy for Czechoslovakia. Czech citizens showed their love of the written word by electing playwright Vaclav Havel as their President.

Most of the populace today who experienced the change to democracy value their freedom, and being part of the global community. They do not take for granted the freedom to read and write without being censored. But for many of the young people who were born in the time of democratic freedom, life in the new Czech Republic feels very different. As a result of this new perspective, libraries have had to change their philosophy to keep up with this new demographic.

The State of the Library after the Velvet Revolution

From the time of state-ruled libraries, to the transition of libraries run by municipalities, universities and other institutions, libraries dealt with changes in management, funding, and organization. Libraries were no longer affected by censorship and had the freedom to purchase, but budget allowances were too small to allow it (Stoklasova, 2007). There was also a sharp decline in library activity, such as the number of registered users, and material loans (Stoklasova, 2007). With the new democratic society came new activities for people. Some started their own businesses, plus there was more to offer on television. People suddenly had many other things to do rather than reading and going to the library (Stoklasova, 2007).

Czech Library Services in the 21st Century

Public Libraries, unlike academic libraries, have struggled due to the economic condition in the Czech Republic. Salaries are significantly lower than the national average, so many graduates of library science have to work in jobs outside the library. As a result, many libraries employ people from other careers, so training and additional education is needed. The economic situation also makes it difficult to purchase foreign literature.

Literacy is still strong, with 84% of the population reading one book per year on average, compared to 39% in Poland. Education statistics from UNESCO states that in 2013, the lower secondary completion rate in the Czech Republic was 97%, and ranked at number 40 out of 176 countries compared in the United Nations. To compare, Switzerland is ranked number 47, Austria is number 42, and Poland is ranked at 52 (IndexMundi). For post-secondary education, they rank at number 36, out of 185 countries (IndexMundi). To be relevant to students and schools, libraries have extended their functions by transforming themselves into information, education and cultural centers. They also provide neutral spaces for the meetings of various informal groups and others working in their municipalities (Richter & Millerová 2014).

Initiatives such as the “Libraries = Education” Approach, and funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have contributed to the new role of the library as an education source.

The “Libraries = Education” Approach

BiblioEduca, a library-oriented organization in the Czech Republic, provides education for library professionals, within the 6000 libraries in the Czech Republic and

library students (Gross 2014). The aim of BiblioEduca was to “strengthen the role of libraries as community centers for continuing education” (Strnadova & Navratilova 2014). They were inspired by an article in *Library Journal* that described a new model of library service in the Howard County Library System in Maryland (Gross 2014). This new vision positioned libraries as part of the “education enterprise.” Librarians were now considered educators, and libraries as providers of education. Libraries in the United States experienced higher levels of funding and renewed respect if they adopted this strategy (Gross 2014). This model was built on three “pillars” of service, as seen in Figure 1:

The 21st Century Library Model - The Three Pillars

1. **Self-Directed Education**, which uses the library’s collection and computers to learn on one’s own;
2. **Research Assistance and Instructions** which placed librarians as instructors through classes and workshops; and
3. **Instructive and Enlightening Experiences** through cultural centres and community partnerships.

Figure 1.



Valerie Gross, who was invited to Brno to speak about this plan, opined that the Czech Republic was far ahead the United States and Canada in using strategic language. Rather than using terms such as “circulation” they describe this department as the “loan” department. The term “customer service” replaced “reference.” By doing this, libraries were swaying their customers away from the library stereotype (Gross 2014).

Gross describes this perception for libraries in her book *Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand*, using the analogy of Evian water vs, generic bottled water, essentially the same thing but people are more willing to pay more for Evian (Garczynski 2014). She maintains that by implementing the three pillars of service, the library will be seen as indispensable and not just associated with the printed book (Garczynski 2014).

The Value of the Library

One method of evaluating the value of library services is to poll library users. In a survey of the Municipal Library of Prague, users were asked the hypothetical questions of

- WTP - how much one would be willing to pay for library services, and
- WTA - how much one is willing to accept compensation if library services were denied (Hájek & Stejskal 2015)

Two thousand of the eleven thousand readers responded to the survey (Hájek & Stejskal 2015). The results give a strong indication of where libraries are needed, and where they are not. Individuals gave more value to library services than families with children. There was also more value given to distance loans - transactions done without the help of library staff, than with the use of search services, with the assistance of library staff. These results give some clues as to where library services are headed, and indicate that action must be taken to engage families with young children in libraries.

One important aspect of Czech libraries is to protect their national digital heritage. While it is the responsibility of the National Library of the Czech Republic to protect printed documents, many digital documents were at risk of disappearing. A collaboration between the National Library, The Moravian Library and the Institute of Computer Science at Masarik University, Webarchiv was established in 2000. It has two main objectives:

- To catalog online publications developed in the Czech Republic, and integrate them into the Czech National Bibliography database
- Store them in a system that will ensure long-term access (Richter).

The website provides the following statement, translated from Czech:

We are Webarchiv
the digital library, which preserves web sites
for future generations.
Without continuous web content preserving,
the significant part of national heritage
would be lost. (WebArchiv)

With the Czech Republic becoming “Westernized” in the 21st Century, their national heritage will be protected and accessible with digitization projects like this. It does not go without saying that to continue to preserve important documents and websites, funding must be continuous, a challenge that the Czech Republic constantly faces.

The New Library Customer

After twenty-five years of Communism, residents of the Czech Republic have discovered a new sense of liberalism. During the oppressive political regimes, independent thinking was stifled, with liberal thinkers such as Karel Englis expelled from their positions, and in Englis’ case, suffered financially and personally for the rest of his life. Liberalism, once an idealistic dream has now evolved into a predominantly pragmatic entity. The Liberal Institute, the first free-market think-tank has founded the “Party of Free Citizens,” to the country’s political structure, and it is active amongst university students.

Figure 2, below, shows the social changes among youth in the years 1992 to 2011. The values of youth living in the Communist state showed a focus on family and social responsibility, and less on social pleasure and the importance of career. The youth surveyed in 2011, who did not experience the controlling regime, give more value to success and social pleasure, than on family. Experiences such as travelling, increased television access, and free Internet were not available to youth in the previous two time periods. For today’s youth, all these things are considered normal, and may even be taken for granted. One other interesting observance is the reduced value to family, and that may also include adult authority figures. Their feeling of

personal competence differs greatly from the youth of 1991; when there was considerably more reliance on authority figures (Macek, et al).

Libraries globally often lose touch with this important demographic group. It is not limited to the youth of the Czech Republic. Toronto Public Library have focused their programming on youth by starting youth advisory groups, maker programs, open mic nights and other programs that appeal to them (Toronto Public Library). Changing the perception of librarians as authority figures may also enhance teens' view of the library.

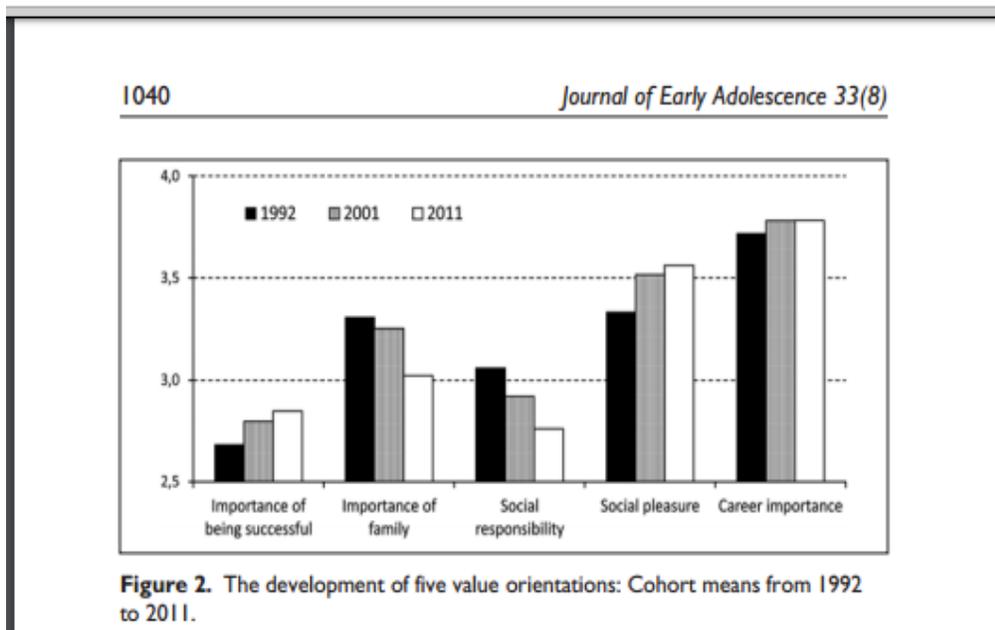


Figure 2

Libraries and the European Union (EU)

In 2010, the European Commission, the main body of the EU, set forth the Europe 2020 Growth Strategy (EU2020), with the focus on how people can access information. A group of libraries within Europe, the Czech Republic included, presented the commission with strategies to help fill some of these objectives:

- non-formal and informal learning: new skills and knowledge gained through learning experiences such as organized group trainings and one-on-one consultations with librarians;
- social inclusion: access to use public services like resources for employment, training, housing, and health among disadvantaged and socially excluded members of society;
- digital inclusion: access and skills to take advantage of the benefits of digital technology. (Cottrill, et al.)

In 2014, *Global Libraries* drew upon each country's needs and created a grant that identified them as one unit, named the *Public Libraries 2020 (PL 2020)* initiative. The main goals of PL 2020 are:

(1) By 2020 there will be an increase of EU policies supporting the work of public libraries; and

(2) By 2016 there will be an increase in the capacity (knowledge and attitudes) of national and regional coalitions/associations to advocate for public libraries at the EU level. (Cottrill, et al.)

The coalition of libraries within the EU will allow the Czech Republic to be in contact with other libraries and will provide a platform to learn and share.

Recommendations

Based on the research conducted for this paper, and other sources of scholarly literature, there shows many strategies to keep the Czech public library relevant for its people. To encourage the use of libraries as a family activity, some recommendations are as follows:

- Create a reading program for families with children comparable with the U.S. “Every Child Ready To Read” incentive
- Begin a campaign on the joys of reading, with advertising on public transportation systems, lines of beautiful poetry on billboards, etc

To address the country’s youth, who may see the library as primarily a tool for education, it is recommended to:

- Organize open mic nights, so writers and musicians can perform their work
- Create a volunteer system where teens must perform 40 hours of community service in order to graduate from high school. The library would be an ideal place to do that.
- Expand their digital collection so it can be accessed easily.

Since the Velvet Revolution, many Czech citizens have started their own business. The library could be a valuable resource, by implementing the following practices:

- For staff with experience in other careers, take advantage of their skills by organizing programs that allow them to teach their skills.
- Perform outreach to community groups and schools, and offer programs that will give advice for anyone interested in starting their own business.
- Allow library space to be utilized by people for business purposes
- Implement the “Three Pillars” library model. This will earn respect by the community and may result in increased funding.

Conclusion

The Czech Republic is known globally for their beautiful libraries. From the time of King Charles, literacy and reading have been important parts of their culture. From

the time of World War II to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the Czech Republic has endured extreme levels of censorship and a lack of freedom to read what one wants.

Now that they are totally a democracy, libraries in the Czech Republic must adapt to global expectations and become useful to its citizens. Through the integration of the Three Pillars of Service and the revival of programs outside of what the public expects, libraries can be an integral part of one's life, whether it be a student needing study skills, an individual wanting to start his/her own business, or someone interested in a yoga class, this new library can accommodate all these services.

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