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The Optimization of Service Quality in Romanian Research Libraries: An Ethnographic Approach

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Abstract

The necessity of better process-related activities, due to the contemporary dynamic and complex information environment, determines libraries to analyze and understand the relevance of library services and the information practices of their users. This study adopts an ethnographic research method to observe the users' perceptions, experiences and information habits, combining field observations with interviews and questionnaires, with the aim to propose a series of measures to optimize the library services and to better meet the information requests. The results indicate that Romanian research libraries must constantly reconfigure their services and redefine the librarians' tasks, in line with changes in users' information behavior and with the development of science communication and digital technology. In general, librarians are envisioned and must act as consultants, if they want to offer perceived value and effective support to the community they serve, both in traditional and digital space of the library.

Keywords: library service quality, research library, users, information practices.

Introduction and conceptual framework

Service quality, in general, and the identification of optimal solutions for the development of collections and access to scientific information in Romanian research libraries, in particular, require good knowledge of both these institutions and users and their requirements.

One of the main issues regarding quality optimization of library services concerns the relationships between library services, users, published research, and access to scientific information, which can be studied by adopting research methods from sociology.

According to Drisko and Maschi (2016, p. 73-74), ethnography, similarly to grounded theory, represents an inductive approach to qualitative research methods, which requires researcher's interpretation and do not involve quantification. It involves connotative coding challenges and does not follow a series of preplanned, deductively generated coding rules. Sangasubana (2009, p. 567) argues in favor of this method, as ethnography collects data in multiple ways for triangulation over an extended period of time. The

process is inductive, holistic and requires a long-term commitment. Also, ethnography is dialogic, as comments or feedback from those who are under study can be given to the conclusions and interpretations formulated by researchers.

A series of scholars in library and information sciences (LIS) mention that ethnography must be used in specialized research, due to the fact that ethnographers use descriptive approaches like narratives and observation to describe participants and their actions, along with other different methods of data collection, e.g. interviews, focus-groups, surveys, field works (Stupore and Fitzgibbons, 2014; Khoo, Rozaklis and Hall, 2012). Stupore and Fitzgibbons (2014) studied different methods and tools of assessing and assuring quality in Australian academic libraries, and the most important are as follows: ISO standards for libraries, quality assurance frameworks adopted from business and corporate systems, balanced scorecard, value scorecards, users surveys, learning and data analytics and ethnographic methods, which include focus groups, observations, field works, interviews, etc.

In a research paper, Khoo, Rozaklis and Hall (2012, p. 85-86) observe that there is a growing interest in qualitative analysis of the “social lives of libraries” and, also, in “the roles that libraries play in the lives of their users”. A survey conducted by these authors, in 2012, regarding the use of ethnographic methods in published studies concerning libraries and library users, identified a total of 81 papers. In their research, the authors observe that, for LIS, five main types of ethnographic research methods were used: observation, interviews, fieldwork, focus groups, and cultural probes. Their survey reveals a recent increase in the use of ethnographic methods in libraries and identifies an emerging genre of studies associated with library planning, which uses rapid ethnographic methods to investigate libraries and their users as part of planning processes.

For Romanian sociological landscape, the work of Chelcea (2007) stresses the importance of this methods, due to the time span dedicated to collect data, the diversification of the methods used and triangulation. On the same research line, a paper of Borman, LeCompte and Goetz (1986, p. 44) reveals that each piece of information gained and each conclusion formulated must be corroborated with information collected by other means or from other sources. Also, information gathered must be tested against potential negative instances.

Shagrir (2017, p. 12) suggests that interviews represent means of collecting rich and detailed information directly from respondents, as presented in their words. The purpose of interviews is to obtain basic information, opinions and perceptions fluently and openly and to ask questions and request for clarifications, in order to get a broader picture of information, opinions, thoughts and emotions.

Tacking into consideration the conceptual framework mentioned above, this research will use an ethnographic approach to collect information and balanced scorecard as a tool of communicating and optimizing quality in and outside the library.

Reasons for using the balanced scorecard in LIS

The Balanced Scorecard, created and published by Kaplan and Norton (1992) in an article of Harvard Business Journal, represents one of the most successful tools of strategic management used extensively in several types of organizations, including libraries worldwide.

According to Kim and Hatcher (2008, p.7), the balanced scorecard can contribute to the regulating of corporate identities as a tool of management control. The authors consider that the corporate identity of an organization is interfaced with its corporate image and reputation, as one of the customer value propositions in the balanced scorecard. The regulatory role of the use of the balanced scorecard on corporate identities occurs through five dimensions: vision, structure, symbol, communication and behavior (Kim and Hatcher 2008, p. 8-9).

There are numerous examples and articles advocating for implementation of balanced scorecard in libraries, for example:

1. Balanced Scorecard Management System represents „a tried and true method of managing for today and the future, which was developed at Harvard University” (Pierce County Library – Balanced Scorecard, p. 1);
2. The main reason for libraries to use the BSC is to improve their management (Düren, 2010; Self, 2004, apud de la Mano and Creaser, 2017, p. 195);
3. Balanced Scorecard in libraries is very useful when communicating with those outside organization (Self and Tolson, 2007).
4. Encourages library to think like a business, while librarians’ interest in it is growing (Self and Tolson, 2007).
5. The key driver for libraries to adopt Balanced Scorecard is represented by the possibility to improve library management and to evaluate if a library is moving to its strategic goal (de la Mano and Creaser, 2017, p. 196).

According to Matthews (ALA, 2007), the five perspectives of balanced scorecard for libraries are the following:

1. Customer Perspective – Services attributes and satisfaction;
2. Information resource perspective – Collection, in physical and digital format;
3. Internal processes – Efficiency and productivity
4. Learning and growth – Staff skills, technology, climate for action;
5. Finance – Accountability and value.

As Matthews (2007) stressed, for libraries a balanced scorecard represents a strategic management tool that assists a library in aligning all of its activities towards meeting the needs of its customers.

Concerning the Romanian academic landscape, the topic of library balanced scorecard is currently less approached.

Case Study : Access to information in Romanian research libraries through the lens of users

The experience of working with users and, also, my field observations regarding information practices at IMAR Library proved me that, although we are in the digital age, the users – researchers and scholars in general – will continue to come to the physical space of libraries for varying reasons, e.g. reading, documentation, questions regarding publishing facilities or to meet the need for communication with colleagues, but also with specialized librarians; and the printed book continues to be at the heart of the library users' desire.

Objectives and methods of data collection

The principal objective of the study was to analyze the interaction between users, libraries services and technology adopted for scientific information transfer, with the scope to identify the main interests of users and their information behavior and, thus, to find some solutions to optimize libraries quality management system.

The study aims to answer three research questions, adopting the above mentioned perspectives of the balanced scorecard for libraries.

- 1) What is the relevance of research libraries for the Romanian academic environment in the digital age, from the perspective of their users?
- 2) What new strategies for the development and communication of library collections should be adopted?
- 3) What specialized skills and knowledge should the librarians have in the digital age?

In general, the specialized libraries in Romanian research institutes do not have their own budgets, and the publications in the libraries have been obtained through donations or bought through research grants by the researchers themselves and then integrated into the library. Also, the library of IMAR, similarly to all Romanian academic research libraries, has journals exchange partnerships with more than 100 renowned institutes and universities worldwide (from Europe, North America, South America, Asia, Australia). Along with their own electronic subscriptions, the research libraries in Romania benefit from institutional and mobile access to renowned international databases through a national consortium *ANELIS Plus* and membership fees. Regarding special libraries incorporated in Romanian research and development institutes, for example industrial ecology, they, also, generally obtain the needed books, journals, conferences proceedings or published technical standards for their laboratories through researchers' grants or through donations and international exchange partnerships.

Taking into considerations the above mentioned lack of own budget and the fact that the rational of a Romanian research library is to better serve its users, the study presents results regarding non-financial measures, in order to evaluate performance through the

lens of users and to propose some measure to optimize the access to scientific information in Romanian research libraries.

In the second phase of data collection, following filed observation and specific questioning about information needs – during two years 2017 and 2018 –, users from different fields of activity or research groups were invited, during the period the 1st of August 2018- the 10th of December 2018, to accord interviews or respond to a survey, but only fifty of them responded affirmative.

Concerning the data collection, only fifteen accepted to be audio registered, the rest of thirty-five completed questionnaires. The questions in questionnaires were open-ended and similar with the previous questions in the interview. The table 1 presents the percentage of respondents:

Table 1: The percentage of the respondents

Field of activity	Number of participants	Code of participants
Simion Stoilow Institute of Mathematics of the Romanian Academy - IMAR -	38=76%	Researcher IMAR 1-38
Research in industrial ecology	6=12%	Researcher in industrial ecology 1-6
PhD Students and researchers from other institute visiting IMAR	6=12%	PhD students 1-3 Researchers visiting IMAR 1-3

Findings and discussions

The first question aimed to shed light on the relevance of research libraries in the Romanian academic environment in the digital age, from the user's point of view.

The answers to the first question reveal that Romanian research libraries are very high appreciated for their trusted collections, both in traditional and digital form.

In order to stay relevant, the Romanian research libraries must fulfill a fundamental constant function, namely to sustain research, documentation and learning by offering high quality publications for scientific problems studied by their users. Also, some categories of readers prefer to use libraries mainly for reference and may not borrow publications for home, but rather for consulting them in the reading rooms. Some of the answers to the first question are very evocative in this sense, for example:

Researcher IMAR 10 - who is currently visiting Professor in Germany - stresses: “Although we live in this digital age, access to printed books and printed journals is very important, because when you look for something, you are looking for what you know you are interested in. If you're in the library you can browse and see new journals, you can see old, 100-year-old books or more-, however, access to the printed books is still very important”.

Researcher IMAR 2 considers that library space can be more than just functional, it can have objective meanings, inviting to learn about new developments and advancements in science. Also, ergonomic aspects of reading are very important for the users of research libraries: "As a physical space, the library is extremely important for research. In addition to providing the materials needed for research at hand, it, also, represents an optimal environment for research and work. Sometimes, you only need to consult books or articles, and this is done much better by taking the item or book out of the shelf than reading them directly from your computer. "

Researcher in industrial ecology 1 affirms: "It depends on the user. Certainly, a series of young researchers can give less importance to traditional libraries in our digital age, but it is not a rule".

Researcher in industrial ecology 2 points out the importance of library collections: "Although computerization and the Internet have revolutionized access to scientific information, the research library remains an important source of information and documentation due to the collections held".

Researcher in industrial ecology 3 and researcher in industrial ecology 6 stressed the advantages offered by libraries through economical aspects and the importance for the next generations: "The research library has always played an important role in the Romanian academic landscape, but its role is slightly diminished, as today we have also lots of online documentary variants. But, financially, these variants represent a more expensive alternative" and, respectively: "The research library in the academic environment, either in digital or traditional form, is a necessary tool for a researcher. The libraries of universities and research institutes should include, along with other studies, also books, monographs, didactic materials and research papers conducted within the respective university or institute by their own researchers, as heritage resources for the future generations".

The second question concerned the abilities and knowledge that a librarian must possess in the near future. The answers denoted that the librarian must act as a consultant, proving, in principal, the abilities of a functional librarian, who knows very well all collections, as well as renowned databases and publishers. Also, a librarian must underpin research through complex and exhaustive research in all types of publications, regardless of the format. For example researcher IMAR 1 affirms: "I think it's utopian to think of a librarian who knows the topics in mathematics very well. So, the only realistic variant seems to me to be the functional librarian, who is able to find a publication better than we can".

Researcher in industrial ecology 2 argues that "the librarian is - or should be – consulted in the recorded information field, and, by analogy, for localization of resources by domain, and for recommendation of specialized papers". The keywords related to the librarian are: counselor, registered information, specialized recommendation, support in identifying the information resource by domains. Researcher in industrial ecology 4 considers that "the librarian must prove a good acquaintance of what the library possesses in terms of titles, but also the topics addressed in the bibliographic resources".

The third question concerned what determines users to come into the physical space of the library. The answers mentioned were: for research, documentation, information, borrowing of publications, reading rooms, ambient, for example, researcher IMAR 1 says: “for traditional documentation: journals for which we do not have bought online access, and also for older collections of scientific journals and books”. The respondents are, in general, very satisfied with the library site. They consider that the library site and the online catalog (OPAC) must be easily accessible and, also, it must provide complex functions of information.

Regarding the information behavior when working on a research project, a book, or journal article to be published, the respondents were asked to describe what type of bibliographic documentation they use, in general (e.g.: a. direct information: libraries, e-mail, Internet, archives, thesaurus of specialized terms, etc.; b. information through mediation: recommendations from colleagues or specialists in the field, coordinator, by referring to bibliographies and thematic indexes in the papers already studied etc).

In general, researchers prefer mainly direct consultation and information and occasional recommendations from colleagues. But, they also consider that the bibliographies of the works already studied represent an important element for direct information. Researcher in industrial ecology 2 affirms that “when writing a research paper, I use both direct information, through the intermediary of a librarian, and also take into account the advice of the peer colleagues”. Researcher in industrial ecology 1 specifies three main elements when doing research, namely online scientific databases, publications of colleagues – to see, afterwards, the proper contribution – and traditional classical collections, as printed treatises etc.

Further, the respondents were asked to mention whether they consider very important an inter-library loan with institutes in the country and abroad and how could these facilities improve their research. Regarding inter-library loan activity and international exchange partnerships with libraries, in general, researchers argue that, in the case of newer journals, there is digital access and, so, there is no question of loan. On the other side, researcher in industrial ecology 5 affirms that inter-library exchanges and loan can meet the needs for multidisciplinary documentation of researchers and that it is essential and vital for research libraries to maintain and improve partnerships with libraries of renowned international universities and institutes. Researcher in industrial ecology 2 considers that the easy access to foreign research documents can provide a quick update of national documentation bases.

As concerns the most prominent difficulty encountered in the library, the answers focuses on a possible lack of money for subscriptions and books. For example, Researcher IMAR 1 affirms: “Currently, due to *Anelis Plus* consortium, we do not have serious problems of this kind. However, it is possible that at some point in time, the issue of funding becomes critical”.

Finally, concerning the question of librarians' knowledge of scientific research ethics, the majority of answers reveal the importance of trusted research information offered by libraries. The librarian should not recommend predatory journals for publishing and must know very well the renowned publishers and platforms. A good librarian must prove

expertise and experience in assessing journals and publishers and, also, must prove bibliometrics knowledge.

In conclusion, the model of librarian proposed by the respondent users are represented by a combination between subject and functional librarian, but with a focus on functional qualities, to guide the users to find the necessary information. A combination of functional and subject librarians could be also of a great advantage for a future data management and open science. Although researchers in Romanian institute do not publish, in their majority, open access, they prefer to recommend their students OA resources, both in journals and in institutional repositories and e-preprints.

Researcher in industrial ecology 6 considers that: “A librarian should join the role of a consultant, who posses more detailed multidisciplinary information and know very well the collections of the library”.

Generally, researchers of the IMAR consider that the publications in mathematics never become obsolete, the old journals and books are still of high value and must be consulted; and a librarian must be very organized and a model of embedded librarian, who can communicate very well with senior and junior researchers and any time ready to find relevant scientific information in all types of publications: electronic journals, renowned publishers, very high appreciated series (e.g. Lecture Notes in Mathematics, Encyclopedia of Mathematics and its Applications, Encyclopedia of Mathematical Sciences etc.) and reference works.

Some proposals to optimize the access to information in Romanian libraries in the digital age through the lens of users, according to the perspectives of Balanced Scorecard for libraries

I. Customer Perspective – Services attributes and satisfaction

In our case, the question focuses on how well the Romanian research librarians are meeting their users' needs. The results reveal that Romanian research librarians meet their users' needs at a high level, but they need to improve their IT skills and to offer a greater interval of opening-hours.

II. Information resource perspective – Collection, in physical and digital format

The results indicate that Romanian research libraries are very high appreciated for their trusted collections of both printed and digital materials, but they have to actualize their collections and to offer integrated catalogs with all the special research libraries in the country. A facility of international library exchange and, also, a plan for development of journals exchange partnerships would be of a great advantage for the Romanian researchers.

Researcher IMAR 10 argues: “In all German libraries there are network catalogs and you can order in various forms journals, books or even chapters of books or articles, even if they are old, in physical form, photocopied or scanned and sent by email. So, books and journals can be ordered quickly as files or on paper. So, this interconnection of all libraries is a formidable thing. Probably in the case of Romania, the Institute of Mathematics of the Romanian Academy would not benefit much from it because, I

believe, we have the best math library in the country, but others could benefit from our library”.

III. Internal processes – This perspective sheds a light on efficiency and productivity of the libraries' processes.

As organizations, the Romanian research libraries must prove relevance to their stakeholders: institutes and research centers to which the research libraries are attached, managers of these institutes, researchers, universities, different types of users, scientific community in general, funding bodies etc). As an example, researcher in industrial ecology 6 stressed: “For more efficiency, a librarian must prove first and foremost a good knowledge of scientific documentation systems - platforms, mobile access, institutional repositories, publishers. Also, a librarian must provide the user with up-to-date information on the subjects of interest, for example the sources from which to obtain the necessary information, open access or paid access-based sources; Most important is the ability of librarians to find and provide researchers with useful tools to help him disseminate his results, such as: information about publications, open access journals, proofreading etc.”.

I subscribe to these remarks because many internationally renowned universities and institutes have libraries that offer this facility for electronic publishing, a good example being the service PubLIS Cologne (<https://publiscologne.th-koeln.de/auth/index/rmodule/publish/rcontroller/index/raction/index>) of the Institute Technology Arts Science TH Köln. Another good example is offered by the being represented by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with the development of the Virtual Electronic Resource Access (VERA) database (<https://libraries.mit.edu/multi/index-gadgets.html>). According to Henning (2002, p. 1), the *Vera* database was created to improve public access to a growing number of resources listed on Web pages, but also to support librarians in maintaining this page.

IV. Financial perspective – As the libraries incorporated in Romanian research institutes do not have their own budget, the growth of service quality could improve the access to information and the satisfaction of users.

V. Learning and growth – Staff skills, technology, climate for action

It is stressed by the respondents that librarians in Romanian research institutes need to make sure that the information and services offered to users are current, in a timely manner, and of the highest quality possible. So, to properly meet their users' needs, they have to permanent develop their abilities and skills and collaborate with all the departments of institutions.

In a research paper, Giesecke (2011, p. 64) shows that librarians have been looking for more than a century to find the right metaphor describing the importance of libraries and librarians. No one has found the perfect metaphor to adequately describe the complexity of the research library in terms of resonance with its exterior. The author argues that *biodiversity and ecology metaphors* may be useful for librarians and other library specialists, in describing the need for change and new skills of library staff to stay relevant in a changing information and educational environment.

Conclusions

The contemporary digital era offers many opportunities for digital knowledge development, fast access to high-level scientific publications any time a day and dissemination of research results worldwide. Thus, we can affirm that the Romanian research libraries need to be permanently interested in redefining the activities and services they offer. As stressed by a series of respondents, digital libraries cannot represent a panacea for all information needs. A number of ergonomic aspects still determine many users to prefer the traditional ways of information and documentation: facilities of reading rooms, browsing printed publications, consulting on physical shelf. For mathematicians, for example, specialized old books and journals are very valuable and irreplaceable. Librarians must pay attention to the specific needs of users.

The findings of the ethnographic observations, interviews and questionnaires may contribute to the contemporary researches in library and information sciences, due to the fact that, in general, libraries prove to have the abilities to change and adapt rapidly to the needs of their actual and potential users. On the other hand, a balanced scorecard is internationally recognized as a strategic tool to ensure the optimization of activities and services in research libraries worldwide. The limits of my study concern the number of respondents and institutes involved and the lack of using other ethnographic research tools, e.g. focus group.

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