Insights of DIGITAL WORKSHOP
9 November @ Brussels – PL2030 - Lead: Ghent

SUMMARY

The world is becoming increasingly digital. The EU provides funding for digital projects and also outlines a relevant regulatory framework. Digitalization has and will have an enormous impact on the management of libraries and even shakes up their raison d'être. The results of the Digimeter that showed that - in addition to the 19% who are completely behind on the digital highway - ca. 65% of Flemish population struggle with issues of dependency, truth and data were a starting point of our discussion. During the workshop we focussed on how libraries can deal with the impact of a 4th industrial revolution in a positive way and we focussed on the following insights, foresights and questions:

- We presume that local libraries will remain an analogue place with its specific advantages (e.g. digital detox, meeting place etc). Still digital trends will more and more influence the work and priorities of libraries. A digital library with digital collections can be organized on a larger, EU scale.
- In a market-driven society how can libraries remain non-commercial places with free offerings? Or is funding by the private sector necessary?
- Libraries are no longer the source for information. How can we be of added value by quality control? What is good / bad info and who / what determines that?
- How can libraries be places for open debate and different opinions? How can we offer our users skills and diverse insights in the digital evolutions and dangers? How can we organize our digital / ICT offerings in the library to facilitate these diverse opinions?
- Can libraries facilitate the dialogue with and participation of citizens in digital policymaking of various government levels, including the EU?

The common thread throughout the conversation was that libraries are increasingly facilitating and less directing. Over the next two years, we want to explore within this context how libraries are navigators that empower citizens for the digital future.

INTRO

The world is becoming increasingly digital, and the pandemic accelerated this.

Digitalization is one of the EU's priorities. Funding for digital projects is provided in various European programs. In addition, Europe is playing a pioneering role in outlining a regulatory framework for example in terms of platforms accountability, data protection and privacy, AI, etc.

Digitization will also have a huge impact on libraries in the near and further future. The [IFLA trends report](#) touches upon many elements and evolutions (e.g automation of library jobs, virtual visits to the library, semantic web, knowledge commons). However the impact of digitization goes beyond the current work (e.g. digitization of collections or offering basic digital skills training) or soon expected digital innovations (e.g. the European eID, internet of things and META).

Digitization shakes up the raison d'être of libraries and ensures that we have to position ourselves differently in a rapidly changing world. If we choose smartly and also involve other local, national international players such as the EU, digitization is an opportunity that we as a library sector can work on together and add great social value to.

During the workshop on 9th November we discussed for the 1st time what role libraries can play at this intersection of societal challenges and digitization. Among other things, we took into account the three technology paradoxes that professor Lieven Demarez had introduced in the morning: a growing concern about (1) dependency (2) truth and (3) data mean that a large group of people (in Flanders about 65% of the population) is not fully embracing digital technology despite all the developments and innovations.

FOCUSPOINTS DURING WORKSHOP

Clustered under a number of headings, we formulate here the insights, questions and reflections that came up during the workshop.

Analogue or digital?

A recent survey by the Helsinki library found that visitors do not associate the library with anything digital. We can expect similar results elsewhere in Europe. Can libraries actually position themselves in a digital world or are they better off staying analogue given their physical location?

⇨ People still like to meet in real life. That way they can discuss issues better. Therefore, isn't it better post-covid to organize only physical or blended activities? Or should we diversify according to offerings, target audience and objective?

⇨ Given the changing economic situation with certain jobs disappearing and new systems to be introduced (e.g. universal basic income), certain groups of people will work less and have more leisure time in the coming years. Can a library play a role in filling in their time and their lives? If so, will this only happen on site in a library building? Or online? Or both?

⇨ Being online too much entails dangers of dependency. Could libraries offer a soafe haven for people who want a digital detox? At Frysk Lab they already developed the Data Detox Kit.

⇨ Today, we increasingly translate what happens offline in a library digitally (e.g., e-books in addition to regular collection). In the future, will this movement increasingly happen in reverse and will digital trends and innovations impact a library's analogue

operations. A small recent example is BookTok: influencers post on the social media channel TikTok about their favourite reads. These so-called BookToks are having a huge impact on the sales and lending of specific young adult books.

⇨ If libraries are digitizing their offerings en masse, isn't this better done on a larger scale than locally? Online, location is of no or less importance. Can we join forces and work towards a European digital library?

Market- or value-driven?

Society is becoming increasingly market-driven. Digitization accelerates this commercial interest. This shift can also be observed in other sectors, e.g. in healthcare which is increasingly driven by digital data and robotization. Building on a decades-long tradition of emancipation, libraries are one of the few institutions with (largely) free offerings.

⇨ Can libraries remain a non-commercial place?
⇨ How do we become or remain a space driven by values?
⇨ Are forms of sponsorship and collaboration with the private sector possible or necessary to ensure that libraries continue to receive adequate funding? When commercial players contribute is this merely a form of social corporate responsibility or do these players expect more in return and thus have an impact on the management of libraries?

The source of information?

In an analogue era, libraries were seen as one of the places to find THE truth, THE information.

Tip by Ghent: check out Mundaneum in the Belgian city Mons: it started in the early 20th century. The Mundaneum was an institution which aimed to gather together all the world's knowledge. It is also called the 'Paper Google'.

Today a lot of online channels (google, wikipedia, …) also offer much more comprehensive and faster info.

⇨ Is it still a priority of libraries to offer mere information? Can a library as an information source compete in speed and quantity with online info?
⇨ If not in quantity, can libraries make a difference in the quality of information? Do the personal knowledge and service of library staff make the difference?
⇨ Can we assume that libraries, unlike many online sources, do quality control and provide good and accurate information? Who determines what is good and accurate? Isn't that dictated by culture, politics or other values? On the other hand, if we assume that there is no more correct info, doesn't everything become relative?

Open for debate

Being THE source of information may be a difficult task for libraries. In a rapidly changing world of fake news, polarization and clickbait, among other things, libraries can be places where there is room for more depth, debate and diversity.

⇨ How as a library can we organize creative events, meetings and discussions (and not just lectures which might not appeal in form) where there is room for diverse opinions?

⇨ Can we offer library visitors insight into the risks and mechanisms of certain digital evolutions, e.g. how algorithms steer? Is it possible to provide skills about this so that they can e.g. consult alternative and diverse sources?

⇨ Can we program the algorithms and search engines in libraries differently so that they offer a more diverse range of resources and information?

The gateway to citizens

Various levels of government are working on digitization: local, regional, national and European. What is decided at the policy level has an impact on the lives of a lot of people. By letting people participate beforehand and informing/sensitizing them afterwards about these digital policies, politicians can ensure that their decisions are stronger and more supported.

⇨ Can libraries be the place that facilitates dialogue between policymakers and citizens about a digital future?

CONCLUSION

We have touched on many societal challenges and paradoxes. THE truth no longer exists (although it certainly never did), neither does THE source of information. The world will become increasingly digital. Yet an analogue offer and a physical place can also have added value. And as the world becomes more digital there are other issues like poverty, ethics, sustainability etc. to be taken into consideration. As a library we want to be an relevant, agile player and we want to make citizens more aware of the benefits and arm them for the dangers of digitalization. We do this less and less by directing and more and more by facilitating.

In the Erasmus+ project over the next 2 years we will further develop the insights as formulated here. This will hopefully lead to extra knowledge exchange and capacity building among library staff, a shared advocacy language, policy recommendations for the EU and a proposal of SMART actions. This way we all contribute to the ultimate goal: **libraries are navigators that empower citizens for the digital future.**