PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS A VENUE FOR CULTURAL PARTICIPATION IN THE EYES OF THE VISITORS

Mai PÕLDAAS
Lecturer and PhD student
University of Tartu, Estonia
E-mail: mai.poldaas@ut.ee

ABSTRACT: The results of the study about the understandings of public library visitors as audience of one cultural institution are presented. 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. Interview schedule followed the main missions of the public library by IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994), which were adjusted for the current study: free and equal access to information and knowledge; availability of and access to various media; community engagement and activities; learning and lifelong learning possibilities. The data was analysed and interpreted, using the constructivist grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006). Four distinguishable characteristics are found, in which the visitors' understandings seem to be grounded: library as a cultured place; library as place to socialize; library as place; library – service in transition. The visitors' expectations for public library roles are most associated with books, reading and providing access to literature. The idea of the public library as a venue for everyone in the community seems to be in its early stage.

KEYWORDS: Audiences and Publics of Cultural Institutions; Cultural Participation; Public Library's Role in the Society; Challenges for Libraries Today.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the library is changing. Changes in society, in the media and information landscape have consequences for the way in which people obtain information and interact with culture. Public libraries provide a number of services for local communities: be it book lending; a possibility to use a computer for information retrieval or play games with friends; a space for various cultural and social events, etc. Today, the users or, more traditionally, the public library visitors, are in the centre of attention – their engagement and participation.

From history and international experience we know that public libraries can be very useful for governments in building up a democratic society (Aabø, Audunson, 2012, Library Spirit in the Nordic and Baltic Countries, 2009; Buschman, 2003). Public libraries support their community in lifelong learning and libraries exist to help build a knowledge-based society. Among other things the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) states:

> "Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups."

The total number of public libraries in Estonia is 551 (Raamatukogude statistika, 2013), including 20 central libraries, 50 city libraries and 449 village libraries among others. The Estonian population is 1.3 million people and 47% of Estonian citizens, in the last twelve months, have visited a public library at least once, according to the Eurobarometer report (Cultural Access and Participation, 2013: 12). Nearly 384,000 people use public library services regularly. Main library services are free of charge in Estonia.

The aim of the study is to investigate the understandings of the roles of the public library and perceived usefulness of library services. This paper looks for the questions of how do visitors to Estonian public libraries see the role of a public library as a place for different cultural participation? What they know of the library's roles and how do they perceive the fulfilment of these roles?

CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Every day the world is becoming more digital. The way people communicate, look for information, consume culture, fulfil their duty as citizens – these are all different from the possibilities not long ago, before the time called the Information Society. With digital came globalisation – everything and everybody can be connected or approached. Globalisation brought multiculturalism – what used to be far, not reachable, unique, strange, different, may not be that anymore. The IFLA Trend Report (Riding the Waves or Caught in the Tide? 2013) identifies five high level trends in the global information environment, spanning access to information, education, privacy, civic engagement and technological transformation. While it sets out existing and likely future trends which characterize the new digital paradigm, it does not forecast the future of libraries.

Recent changes in society affect libraries, especially public libraries. "In the decades after 1945, public librarianship in most European countries developed within a context that, viewed through the lenses of today's rapid change, can be described as mono-cultural and as relatively stable" (Audunson 2005). The main task of the library was to provide people access to culture and knowledge contained in, first and foremost, printed information carriers, although audiovisual material started little by little, to supplement printed documents (Library Spirit in the Nordic and Baltic Countries, 2009). In western Europe it was the dominating, bourgeois culture that had to be promoted and in eastern Europe it was the Soviet ideology and culture, which had to be followed.

Buschman (2003) finds, while analysing the situation of public libraries in the United States of America, that Habermas' "work on the public sphere provides a brilliant and fundamentally important metaframework for librarianship". Both Audunson (2005) and Buschman (2003) show that the public library's traditional role as an agent for democracy is closely linked to Habermas' theories on the public sphere. Habermas (2001) explains the public sphere as an arena for undistorted communication. The public sphere is a secular, rational space, which is independent both from the state and the market. It is constituted by the public's communicative action and it is a precondition for democracy and democratic discourse in a society.

To describe the public place, Oldenburg (1999: 16) uses the concept of "the third place", which is "the core settings of informal public life". The third place hosts an anticipated social gathering of people away from the responsibilities of home or work. To hang out simply for the pleasures of good company and lively conversation – is the heart of a community's social vitality and the grassroots

of democracy. The characteristics of the third place, like an anticipated social gathering or affiliation of people, including neutral territory and a place that treats all members of society as equals are the basis for libraries being considered as third place and an important part of community. Because of these reasons, the concept has found a following and adaptation into librarianship (Aabø, Audunson, 2012), even so, Oldenburg (1999) originally does not mention libraries.

Audunson (2005) takes the idea of public sphere further and explains, how the concept of low-intensive arena as a meeting place is very suitable for contemporary public libraries. Roots for the approach lie beside Habermas and Oldenburg, in Goffmann's (1959) dichotomy of front-stage versus back-stage, where front-stage represents a highly structured arena, like a class-room, a meeting in a formal organization, a rehearsal in the local choir, etc., whereas back-stage is a more informal arena to reflect about what takes place front-stage. Communities need venues, meeting places where people can meet, communicate and be active together across generations, social and ethnic belongings, as much as they need arenas for debate and discussion on social and political issues. Audunson (2005) describes a front-stage arena as a high-intensive one and a back-stage meeting place as low-intensive, bringing in some difference: "A back-stage arena might be an arena where you meet the same people as front-stage, e.g. classmates or colleagues, whereas it is a central point with low-intensive arenas that they will facilitate meetings between people who are not exposed to one another in other arenas". Today's society needs meeting places with a potential of making citizens visible to one another across social, ethnic, generational and value-based boundaries. The public library is one of the few remaining cross-cultural meeting places. Audunson (2005) offers to "replace bureaucratic thinking on the role and structure of public libraries with deep and profound reflections on the role of public libraries as a democratic instrument in a multi-cultural and digital context".

By Audunson (2005) public libraries can be seen "as a bridge between the virtual and the physical" places. There is a growing danger that people do not pay attention enough to local life, do not attend elections or take part in activities in their physical communities and neighbourhoods. They live a virtual life, participate in the contexts and arenas they find most suitable to their personal interests and needs. To help in this situation, public libraries can be seen as an institution with some unique characteristics, because it is an institution embedded in the local community. Geographically, it means the same context in which political institutions are embedded, while using the public library it means being

engaged in the local community. Libraries are embedded to the digital world, from libraries it is possible to connect to virtual reality. In the library people are citizens of the geographically defined local community and the digital world simultaneously.

An important role of the public library is to provide a focus for cultural and artistic development in the community and help to shape and support the cultural identity of the community (IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines, 2010: 8). To engage community and make participation possible, Maker spaces in libraries are the latest step in the evolving debate over what public libraries' core mission is or should be nowadays (Britton, 2012). From collecting in an era of rare resources to curation in an era of overabundant ones, libraries and other public knowledge institutions are moving to incorporate co-creation: providing the tools to help patrons produce their own works of art or information and sometimes also collecting the results to share with other members of the community (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel, 2014; Britton, 2012).

Maker spaces offer learning through play; have the potential to demystify science, math, technology and engineering. They tie in to the growing trend of indie artists in every medium, who bypass traditional gatekeepers, take advantage of new tools to produce professionally polished products, and go directly to the web to seek an audience. Maker spaces promote green concerns by reconnecting consumers to the labour involved in producing what they use. While 3D printers are considered the signature offering of Maker spaces, in libraries low-tech and low-cost opportunities are just as much in use.

The recent research and statistics show that the consumption of culture and media have changed in Estonia (Vihalemm, 2014, Cultural Access and Participation, 2013). The habits to read, buy books, go to the cinema or concerts have all declined compared to a few decades ago. Many of the reasons for this phenomenon are explained by the fact that during the Soviet time the cultural public sphere had to compensate for the lack of the political public sphere. In independent Estonia, these things have changed. Compared to other cultural institutions, the activity in use of library services has not much changed during the times, the society has went through in past decades. To keep library services up to date, be still relevant to the patrons expectations – for this, their understandings and expectations need to be investigated.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods were used to carry out the study. For the data collection, 15 face-to-face semi-structured interviews, on a one-to-one basis, were conducted with public library visitors. For a wide variety of understandings, interview participants were from different age groups (14-84 years old) and type and region of public libraries (Viljandi city and parish libraries in Southern Estonia and Kohila town library in Northern Estonia). The data was gathered from September to October in 2014. Interview schedules followed the main missions of the public library by IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994), which were adjusted for the current study needs: free and equal access to information and knowledge; availability of and access to various media; community engagement and activities; learning and lifelong learning possibilities.

The constructivist grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006) was applied to analyse the interview data. Following the approach, the stress was placed on a participant's definitions of terms, situations and events, while focusing on his or her assumptions, implicit meanings and tacit rules. For this, initial codes were generated by using the technique of line-by-line coding, in order to remain open to the data and to see nuances in it. The phase of searching for themes followed, to organize the initial codes generated and group like with like, so that any initial codes which appeared similar to or related to others could be grouped together. The ways in which library roles are identified give points of departure and bring out differences and similarities that help to position the identity of library visitors' understandings. Next, various differences and similarities were used in the process of axial coding, as conditions, the circumstances or situations that form the structure of the studied phenomena. These conditions influence potential ways of participation in the library that can be seen as actions/interactions, participants' routine or strategic responses to issues, events or problems. Which eventually can lead to certain consequences, outcomes of actions/interactions – be it some kind of material or mental result.

During the coding process, the codenames were given to interview participants, whose opinions were gathered through interviewing: VL1-VL5 from Viljandi city library, VV1-VV5 from Viljandi parish libraries and K1-K5 from Kohila town library.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Gathered interviews were analysed and interpreted to find visitors' understandings and expectations of the public library roles and services. For an overview of indicative results, see table 1, where the core roles of public libraries are listed in the left most column: free and equal access to information and knowledge; availability of and access to various media; community engagement and activities; learning and lifelong learning possibilities. In the first row of the table, the four distinguishable characteristics are listed in which the understandings seem to be grounded: library as a cultured place; a place where to socialize; library as place**;** a service in transition.

Table 1.

Characteristics of public libraries according to library visitors

	as a cultured place	as a place to socialize	as a place	as a service in transition
free and equal access	enlightenment; spiritual needs and interests	suitable place for various kinds of activities	*like a ritual*; to be on my own; silent areas; WiFi	various media and alternatives
various media	classics and educational materials	access to e-services; games	read, watch, play, listen	printed versus electronic
community engagement	meetings with writers; exhibitions; decent place	club-like activities; community meetings	community meetings	workshops; decent place
lifelong learning	learning through reading; self-education	refresher trainings	self-education	new idea; training courses; workshops

LIBRARY AS A CULTURED PLACE

The classical idea of a public library as a place for enlightenment is well and alive in Estonia. The library is seen as a cultured place, where one can satisfy spiritual needs and interests. Libraries "bring people closer to literature" (VV3). Public libraries make different types of documents available. Visitors point out that it is especially important to offer access to classics and educational materials. Beside books, libraries could offer access to films, music and other media. Meetings with writers and other interesting people of public life take place in a library. Various kinds of exhibitions are presented regularly, events related to literature and culture are organized.

"In a small place, it is the centre of culture" (K3, VV1) and people are more open to various types of activities finding their venue in library premises. "Library

should not change to the centre of culture or club" (VL1, VL2) think people in a city where there are special places for concerts, theatre, etc., and in their opinion, events like these should not take place in a library. If there are no special places (or not enough venues), then it is accepted to have plays, concerts, etc., in the library. It gets mentioned that if there are a library and village house in a village, it is a good idea to co-operate – the number of active people is small and possible synergy can be bigger.

Free access to information and knowledge is valued highly. People come to read, browse and borrow books, newspapers and magazines, because it is impossible to order or buy home everything in which one is interested. People are well informed about local cultural activities and the local library network – if it is not possible to receive a desired book from your home library, there is always a possibility to get it from some other library in the neighbourhood. The need to be in a queue and brief deadlines for the reading of popular books in big libraries get mentioned as downsides. Whenever possible, smaller libraries are preferred for borrowing, due to the better availability of popular books and longer deadlines for reading. Also, to extend the deadline is easier in a small library than in a big one. Web-based Public Access Catalogues are also well liked, giving the user the ability to look for document availability, etc., in a certain library or neighbourhood.

Elderly people bring up that library service has improved over time. By that they mean contemporary buildings and possibilities, as well as more light and space in a library. Public libraries are considered as decent places and not places for homeless people and the like. There is an opinion shared by regular visitors, that for an opportunity to be in a warm place, the homeless should not go to the library, but there should be some other places for these people.

A PLACE TO SOCIALIZE

Public library is a venue to go and meet people, do something together, communicate, learn, and have a good time. Library space is considered a suitable place for various kinds of activities. What exactly, however, is up to local conditions (e.g. how many interested people and other similar institutions or services are in a neighbourhood). When there are studios for band rehearsals and the like in local schools or centres of culture available, these need not to be in the library. But if there is no other place for band rehearsals, for example, and there are suitable rooms for this in a library – then this is accepted in a library. Some interviewees find that "silent events" are more suitable to a library – noise

would be annoying and that is part of the reason libraries are liked – to escape the noise.

Community engagement is important. As an example, an exhibition gets mentioned in a village library, where local people brought showpieces for the display. In villages, where often only women remained on a daily basis, a local Ladies Club is active, where the librarian is the initiator of the gatherings of the club and its activities. Different events for children and with children are important; reading and book introductions included. Unusual events are remembered, like spending a night in the library with classmates and getting introduced to and having a discussion about literature and books.

Not everybody goes to the library to communicate, but no one is against the possibility. People in their middle-ages bring up that currently there is a period in their life where most of their time is spent on family and work and not much free time is left for club-like activities. But if there happens to be a topic of importance, they will take part of the event.

Discussions on issues about local life, developments and politics are mentioned as the ones which bring local people together and that the library is a very suitable place for these meetings. For refresher training, People's University courses and the like, the public library gets mentioned as a place to consider. Services, like lending of skis or tools, are not accepted because these are too different from the original function and image of the library. But free exchange services, like used children clothes in villages – could be a needed service.

The possibility to use computers and Internet in public libraries is valued highly. As a citizen, there is a need to use e-government services, read and write e-mails, and have access to social media in order to keep contact and be informed about life elsewhere (relatives and friends in bigger cities, abroad, etc.).

LIBRARY AS PLACE

"It is like a ritual, if I go to the library" (VL1) expresses one visitor, but the idea is shared by many. To visit a library means to leave your everyday doings aside: "I come to the library, browse materials and choose based on my current mood" (VV3, K5).

It is important to have a physical place like a library, gets pointed out by everybody: "one kind or the other, there the physical place must be". To support the position, first and foremost, economic reasons are offered: books are expensive

and it is not possible to buy all the books one would like to read. If you buy a book and do not like it – you can return it to the library and there are no resources lost. The possibility to touch printed books physically; browse books and journals to choose for reading and learning – these reasons are mentioned often, as well.

The silence in a library is essential – that gets mentioned especially by young library visitors, as there are not many places remaining in today's society where one can be on his/her own and "listen to my own thoughts". It is a place where one can calmly concentrate on reading, learning, playing and not be disturbed by parents, siblings, friends, etc. This does not mean that it needs to be silent everywhere in the library, but there should be silent areas for those who seek silence and peace.

"The place for self-education – where else can a grown-up go?" (K4). There is no other venue, where one can be undisturbed, study and concentrate on materials of personal interest. It is a place open and free to all, there is no need to pay, if you wish to use the services and space.

Access to free WiFi is valued highly. Public libraries are known as places from where one can have always access to Internet free of charge. Be it by using your own device or public access computers available for library visitors. There are some possibilities for watching movies and listening to music, but there could be more. If there will be more eBooks available in Estonian – offer local access to them.

A SERVICE IN TRANSITION

The public library service is most associated with books, reading and providing access to literature. Few know that public libraries lend movies, music and audiobooks, or offer the possibility to watch and/or listen to these in the library. Most admit that they have not thought about the possibility of borrowing a film or music from the library. Movies and music are available from the Internet (often illegal downloading), but if public libraries could offer free access to them, they would consider borrowing them from the library. More free services mean higher taxes – that gets added, as well.

People have experience with eBooks and other electronic materials, some use them more regularly than others. EBooks are considered useful while traveling or reading in a public transport. An opinion that for guidebooks, dictionaries, learning materials and the like, the electronic form is justified. In case they

should choose between printed or electronic book, all prefer printed books. Elderly people suggest that young people probably prefer eBooks and wish to point out they are not against progress – simply that they will not change their habits any more. None of the interviewed young admit that they prefer eBooks. The printed book is a real object, what can be sensed with all senses; there is a "stronger connection with a book or story, than in the Net" (VL1).

People in their middle-ages know that the selection of eBooks to choose from, available in Estonian, is small. Also eBooks are too expensive in Estonia. To make acquaintance with eBooks, read them while traveling, etc. – people use and buy eBooks from abroad in some foreign language. "EBooks will replace printed books, if there's plenty of them to choose from, but they will not replace all of them" (VL3) is an opinion shared. It is not agreed that eBooks in their current form will replace printed books. Different kind of books of art, photo albums, wonderfully illustrated children books, for example, will remain in printed form.

Printed books are more liked because they are more familiar; their design is better understood; the way they smell is liked. Printed books are easy to find from bookshelves in a library. Electronic publications are not familiar to some library users and they may be difficult to find and use. One may find oneself lost in the virtual space somewhere and not at all where there was the intention to go in the first place. It appears that electronic publications and environments are often used because there are no alternatives to use or access materials any other way (or communicate, as well): "from the Internet I follow the materials I do not have access in printed form" (VL5, VV4, K2). There are opinions that public libraries could offer access to eBooks (like the web based service ELLU in Tallinn Central Library, for example), but it also gets mentioned that as there are not many eBooks in Estonian yet, it probably is not that important for a village library to lend eBook readers and devices like that.

Public libraries in Estonia are associated with learning through reading and self-education. The idea of a library as an educational institution, teaching and offering different kind of training courses – that is something new; people have not thought about the library like that. The interviewees do not know if there are courses available at their libraries to attend (except the cases of individual consultations in computer usage or information retrieval, when they have needed help and have been assisted). Few find that yes, this is the context and function in accordance with the library's role. As the idea is new, few doubt and think instead that training is for schools, not a library's function. Most think

that libraries may offer training courses and workshops, but they do not think that they themselves need training. It becomes evident that "people are not used to come out of home" (VV2). There could be computer literacy courses for elderly people, courses for different kinds of application software, or information evaluation courses for young, for example. The question is raised about who pays for the courses – are they free or is there a need to pay. It gets mentioned that if the course is interesting and useful, people would agree to pay for the course (different kinds of handicraft courses, like felting, ceramics, etc.).

DISCUSSION

As seen in the findings, *library as place* is well-valued by the visitors. Be it a venue, where you can be on your own and use many kinds of services; or an arena for different kinds of activities and meetings. Through using the public library, it means people are engaged in the local community. Attending various kinds of meetings and taking part in discussions about local politics and developments helps to build a civic society and gives people a feeling about belonging somewhere. In rural areas in Estonia, public libraries are often the only public institution remaining to the village. It is a venue where citizens become visible to one another across social, generational and value-based boundaries, also, in some regions, ethnic boundaries. Discussions about local life attracts people to meetings, people who may not be readers or users of other library services. They are coming to a meeting and may find the place interesting and discover the library's potential. The same works for other kind of events, too.

For those wishing to be on their own and connect to virtual reality (e.g. study, play) – libraries are attached to the digital world as well. Being on your own, with a book or study material, one is still part of the physical surroundings. It needs to be remembered that while in the process of changing your services and image, like paying more attention on active participation and communication – those visitors, who wish to use library services the old, traditional way, are not driven away.

A service in transition is the characteristics found to discuss further, as this is the context, where changes are located.

> "The need for an agency available to all, which provides access to knowledge in printed and other formats such as multimedia and Internet sources, to support formal and informal education, has been the reason for the foundation and maintenance of most public libraries

and remains a core purpose for the public library" (IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines, 2010: 2).

To promote and support reading and literacy, especially to children, is counted as essential. But the concept of teaching sounds strange. There, obviously, a smooth transition time is needed to get used to the idea. Different kind of cultural and social participation experiences, from informal learning to more formal ones, seems to be the way to carry out the change. Maker spaces can be a suitable solution, as they offer learning through play and various kinds of hands-on activities and workshops. After introducing the idea to interviewees, different proposals were made (computer and information literacy related courses, handicraft techniques, language learning and many other).

Commercial services have been in favour, while providing access to films and music in Estonia. Restrictions have been in use for public libraries and made the acquisition difficult. There, no public discussions have occurred as to whether public libraries should make all media forms accessible or not. If the library community does not bring these problems to the public, it easily may go the same way with eBooks. The resources are limited and various lobby groups of interested parties involved do their work actively. In their battle to make information and knowledge available on CD, VHS or DVD – public libraries have lost. It does not need to go the same way in the stage of streaming media and others in the future. While being proud over developments at the context of e-government solutions in Estonia, one would expect to be proud about legal consumption of culture and media, as well.

The public library is thought about as a place to socialize, but being considered as a decent, cultured place, it shows that not all are equally awaited or accepted. The idea of the public library as a venue for everyone in the community and not only for those who are interested in books and reading seems to be in its early stages. Various community meetings and events not directly related to literature are finding their way into library premises and changing the image. It is wise to use the potential of a public library network in existence, to be useful in building up more a democratic, civic society in Estonia.

CONCLUSION

Four distinguishable characteristics are found in the study, in which the visitors' understandings are grounded: library as a cultured place; a place to socialize; library as place; as a service in transition.

Findings show that visitors' expectations to public library services and roles are in accordance with the classical traditions: associated with books, reading and providing access to literature – the way it has always been in Estonia and is most promoted still.

It may be debatable whether the public library services in Estonia need to be in exact accordance with international standards, but they probably should, as the Estonian librarians community has agreed to follow them and also both, *The Public Libraries Act* (Rahvaraamatukogu seadus, 2014) and *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020* (Kultuuripoliitika põhialused aastani, 2014) state, among other things, that public libraries in Estonia function as flexible and multifunctional centres to boost local life and culture and offer opportunities for lifelong learning. The time to act is now: carry out the changed roles and new services and be active in engaging potential new audiences.

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Mai PÕLDAAS

VIEŠOSIOS BIBLIOTEKOS KAIP KULTŪRINIO DALYVAVIMO ERDVĖS LANKYTOJŲ AKIMIS

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje pristatomi tyrimo apie viešųjų bibliotekų lankytojų kaip kultūros įstaigų auditorijos perspektyvos rezultatai. Tyrimo metu atlikti 15 pusiau struktūruotų interviu. Interviu turinys parengtas remiantis viešosios bibliotekos misijos principais, suformuluotais IFLA / UNESCO viešųjų bibliotekų manifeste (1994) ir adaptuotais šiam tyrimui: laisva prieiga prie informacijos, žinių, įvairių medijų; bendruomenės dalyvavimas ir veikla; mokymo ir mokymo(si) visą gyvenimą galimybės. Duomenys buvo analizuojami ir interpretuojami, naudojant konstruktyvistinės grindžiamosios teorijos prieigą pagal Charmaz (2006). Tyrimas atskleidė keturis ryškiausius lankytojų požiūrių tipus: biblioteka kaip kultūros erdvė; biblioteka kaip socializacijos erdvė; biblioteka kaip vieta; biblioteka kaip kintančios paslaugos. Viešųjų bibliotekų lankytojų lūkesčiai dažniausiai susiję su knygomis, skaitymu ir prieiga prie literatūros. Atrodo, kad viešosios bibliotekos, kaip visiems prieinamos vietos bendruomenėje, idėja vis dar yra ankstyvojoje stadijoje.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kultūros institucijų auditorijos ir publikos, dalyvavimas kultūroje, viešųjų bibliotekų vaidmuo visuomenėje, šiuolaikiniai iššūkiai bibliotekoms.