

## Information-Library-Knowledge

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**Abstract:** Library of Alexandria was the most modern library in the ancient times. However the abundance of books could not acquire a considerable significance, commensurate with its true merits, since the books were not systematically arranged, as a result of which finding the right information was too time consuming. Realizing a problem, Kalimah initiated the process of systematization and finding appropriate location for each type of written literature material. Nowadays we are facing an important question: can we confer Kalimah's role on the Internet or web browsers, or is that role exactly the one which the library cannot afford to lose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Trying to respond to this dilemma, Belgrade City Library has launched the portal „*Šta da čitam?*“ (*What shall I read?*), in cooperation with the majority of public libraries in Serbia. The goal of the portal, designed in the new era and with new tools, is to assume the role libraries have always had – namely, to bring quality books/knowledge closer to their users/readers. However, this task is becoming increasingly difficult for both readers and libraries, as literary production is seeing a marked and constant rise.

Information and knowledge are two distinctly separate terms; the future role of the library should not only be to select items of information and extract only the relevant ones from the ocean of data, but also to perform an adequate analysis based on the information available. The latest research has shown that, despite an enormous inflow and ever-greater accessibility of data over the past 50 years, the citizens are not better informed than before. In fact, more information leads to more confusion and knowledge fragmentation. Inundated with more and more information, we are facing a real threat of becoming overwhelmed with trivia, unable to reach important and essential information.

**Keywords:** Library, Internet, Belgrade City Library, web portal, information and knowledge

### **1. Introduction**

In Serbia, around 300 publishers bid in the Republic library book purchase; the books that finally arrive at the libraries shelves are procured from around 200 of them. Around 7,000-8,000 publications are catalogued yearly. Usually 3,000 - 4,000 books altogether are offered for purchase in the Republic library book purchase, out of which number around 1,500-2,000 new titles end up in the libraries' collections. It could be approximately estimated that some EUR 5 million is needed for the publication of new books at an annual level. Compared with other cultural segments, publication of books belongs to the cheaper activity. In actual fact, books constitute the cheapest cultural products and the cheapest means to get in touch with culture.

Apart from a couple of bigger Serbian towns with bookshops (depending also which number of titles can be taken as a measure to proclaim something a bookshop), majority of other Serbian cities gain access to new titles only via their libraries.

Factors such as unclear distribution of structural funds on the book publishing market in Serbia, financing through state budget, as well as through Belgrade Book Fair and bookshop sale, the lack of cultural strategy in the field of book publishing make it possible for the strongest commercial publishers to establish a monopoly and control over the greatest part of the market. Often promoting publications that do not satisfy even the lowest standards required for something to be called a book, commercial publishers are still creating reading culture. Reading culture should be formed by schools and libraries. However, things have changed and we are now touching on the very essence of the social problem which is actually being mirrored in the way abovementioned organizations function.

The vacuum created by the disappearance of the ideologies and values promoted by those ideologies, whether belonging to the left or right orientation, has been filled by populism. Needless to say, those outdated ideologies also favoured populism, as was evident in Serbia when it was a constituting part of former Socialist Federal Republic of Serbia; but from a modern perspective, the old left-wing populism now appears to have cared more for the book and a clear cultural policy than it is the case in Serbia today. Populism is not only a trend in Serbia, it is also a trend in the greatest part of the world and, similarly, being deeply ingrained in all other social segments, it is not only a cultural trend. It is the product of neoliberal economy.

In this respect, libraries and all other cultural and educational institutions have been ranked as subordinate, because their operation comes down to the statistics, dependence on the projects and adjustment to the market, while their primary function of preservation and setting values and standards for the functioning of a society is often being overlooked.

Due to the economic instability in the world and a constant economic and social crisis of Serbian society, the middle social class, whose members used to have the greatest desire for cultural contents and the maintenance of social stability, has almost completely disappeared, having just a little social visibility. This can be clearly seen by the structure of the library users in Serbia.

In the modern society, the book is similar to other “products”, ever more subject to rules governing the market which is primarily trying to satisfy the need for entertainment. Consequently the book is preconditioned by the profit and economy of scale, and most commonly at the expense of quality. In the nineties of the last century, the market logic entered Serbian publishing arena. Under such circumstances, good books get easily “lost” in the flood of the literature coming in all shapes and sizes. Nowadays readers choose only that which is a bestseller and, based only on that, form an opinion what literature is.

One of the hidden problems of a speedy hyper production are bad translations, in as much as the book, which is at the reader’s disposal, considerably reduces the quality of the original, which in turn degrades an excellent writer to a fairly good one, and a good writer to a mediocre one.

The publishers who are primarily devoted to the cultural mission which they have undertaken as well as to publishing quality books, have difficulty in winning their clear position on the market, due to the pressure coming from the big commercial publishers striving towards monopoly, and deprived of a definite state and cultural institutors’ support. The state and society constituting that state have to define cultural policy and the position and role culture can have in that very society. Failure to define a cultural attitude of the state\ society means that we do not care whether the books which are being published are quality books or not, whether and how we are forming readers’ culture.

## **2. Attitude towards the book, its value and reading culture**

Perhaps the most important piece of data for us is how readers get the information about the books in the first place. They are mostly informed via television, while the friends’ recommendations and informing through the

Internet take second place (Opačić & Subašić, 2016). However, after these data are divided according to the age groups, a striking difference among them becomes evident. While younger generations obtain the information through the Internet, people at the age of 50 and over mostly find it via television, and are generally reluctant to use the Internet for that purposes.

When comparing the data collected from the survey participants stating that they bought a book, what can be observed is a marked decrease in buying books in the population between 18 and 24 years.

Only 54% of the survey participants enter a book shop really knowing what book they want to buy do, while 46% of them do not make that decision until after they actually come into the bookstore. (NLS, 2011) Although this information date back to 2010, it can be considered totally relevant as such a trend has continued up until now.

Fiction literature is being bought more and more, in the year 2006 it constituted 41% of the total amount of the books sold, while it was 53% in 2011; the situation is similar with the children books being on a slight increase, as well as religious literature, while there is a constantly decreasing demand for professional literature (NLS, 2011).

When people buy books in foreign languages, there is a marked trend in buying those in English (78%) which seems logical considering the status the English language has worldwide; however, there is a clear indication of a significant rise when it comes to the literature in the German language, related to the social atmosphere in Serbia and ever stronger emigration tendency of young people and their perception of Germany as a promised land.

There is an interesting piece of data which could be a good starting point for a discussion- 80% of the survey participants, while buying the book, do not pay any attention to who the publisher is. Does it actually mean that the publishers have done something wrong or does this data indicate a rather low standard of reading culture? We feel the latter is probably more the case, and furthermore- that this data may well be taken as a warning and suggestion that a lot of work should be done in the future to cultivate and improve Serbian citizens' reading culture. The data supplementing and supporting the just mentioned attitude is that, apart from the book contents, readers attach more importance to the cover and paper quality, than the translation and printing and spelling errors.

A really alarming data that should make everyone who is professionally dealing with the books is that a fifth of all readers stopped reading books at high school. If we are lucky so they possibly continue reading, there is not much chance of this lasting long, because again- they start reading less upon the graduation from the university or starting the careers.

### **3. Attitude towards the Internet and new technologies**

Recent research on the use of the Internet and new technologies related to the situation in the year 2016 has been published by Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. (SORS, 2017.)

The number of the personal computers in the households has been constantly on the rise; in 2006 26,5% households in Serbia possessed personal computers, while in 2011 that figure rose to 52.1%, and in 2016 to 65,8% (SORS, 2017). However, there is a significant gap among the groups of computer owners, depending on their monthly salaries. Almost all citizens earning over EUR 600 have a PC, while only 47% with a monthly income of EUR 300 can afford it.

The number of households having the Internet access is 64,7% (SORS, 2017). Again, there is difference between the accessibility of the Internet for those with higher salaries and those with lower ones, as well as between urban and rural environments.

What is a global trend, it is also a trend in Serbia- most users use the Internet via their mobile devices in the first place and only then via their PCs, in the second place. In accordance with this, Google has adjusted its algorithm in favor of the sites adjusted to be accessed via mobile phone. In line with this, the minimum marketing requirement every site has to fulfill is to be adjustable to a mobile device. Apart from a different design, such adjustment enables each user to communicate in a much more personalized way.

Two thirds of the citizens in Serbia use a PC on a regular basis, while one quarter has never used it.

Looking into the structure of the population reading less and less, and library users, namely students and employed people, whose numbers are also falling, what we are witnessing is a steadily growing number of the Internet and computer users. In fact, all the students interviewed reported using the Internet. The percentage of the citizens at the age between 24 and 54 years using the Internet is as high as 82% (SORS, 2017).

When we compare these data with the data on how people get informed about the books, we see them complementing each other.

The libraries maintain regular contacts with their users using electronic communication through their websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well as through their electronic catalogues. There are only 18 libraries in Serbia using all four above mentioned communication channels (Stokić & Paunović, 2017). There has been a noticeable increase in the number of libraries having their web presentation; in 2012 there was 43.75% of them, while in 2016 that figure rose to 61.25%. The commonest kind of communication between a library and users is through Facebook. Altogether 126 public libraries in Serbia have their own Facebook profile (Stokić & Paunović, 2017). The total number of the libraries in Serbia is 160.

What can be inferred from all these data is that the citizens have switched and adapted to the Internet much faster than the libraries. In this respect, there is still much space for improvements and fine tuning of the communication between the library and the users; however it remains to be seen whether that chance is going to be recognized and taken.

#### **4. Library vs. populism**

A small number of the published books ever see their critical reviews. In Serbia, almost no relevant, objective recommendations for reading can be found anywhere, either in usual media or in the Internet. Customarily, though, some commercial books get recommended, those recommendations being written or commissioned by the publishers themselves.

Judging by the lists of the most borrowed books from the libraries, popular, usually low-brow literature prevail over more aspiring, artistic or quality genre literature. Based on this, readers' interests are clearly diverting from the public libraries' developmental goals, such as to help cultivate reading culture.

What titles are most borrowed from Serbian public libraries indicates the problem these libraries are facing: how to harmonize the demand coming from the users and their own mission and tasks. The problem is not new, but it is certainly more complex because the offer of low quality literature on the literary market used to be much smaller earlier than it is today.

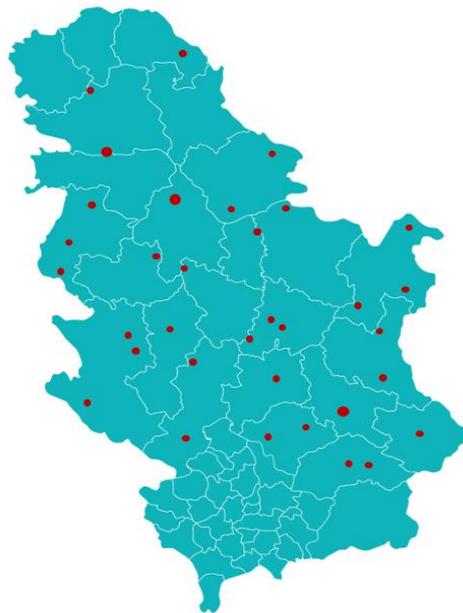
No Serbian library has a specialized online service providing recommendations what books to read. Therefore the service *What shall I read?* is a unique project that was prepared based on comprehensive research, interviews and analyses of

the existing sites. The portal is a unique cyber place visited by everyone wanting to receive a recommendation for reading books in the Serbian language, aspiring to strengthen the love of reading and create a good reading culture.

By introducing a service like this, apart from already mentioned problems, another two problems are also being tackled, namely:

- 1) The absence of a relevant infrastructure (service, portal) where readers can obtain quality recommendations for reading;
- 2) The absence of the space for readers to publicly voice their opinions on the books they read and share it with others.

The service has been envisaged to be on the national level as it involves more than 30 Serbian public libraries. It has received the Ministry for Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia's support.

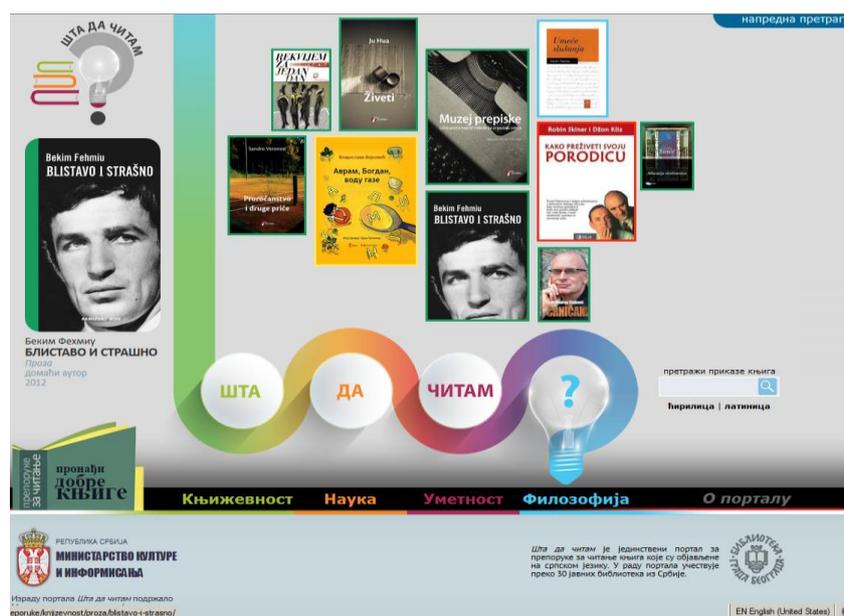


*Project coverage*

The users involved in the project:

- Adults and the young (13+) fiction readers in Serbia using the Internet;
- Writers, literature critics, literature researchers and book publishers from Serbia;

- Readers, writers, literature critics, literature researchers and book publishers outside Serbia understanding Serbian language and showing interest in Serbian literature and Serbian publishing production;
- Public libraries in Serbia which can/should take part in the project;
- Librarians, (young) literary critics and the Faculty of Philology's final year students who can/should write recommendations for reading



### The portal main page

The users of this service can find the best books from all literature types and genres, to choose books by themselves, and to contribute their opinions on the books they have read through comments and grades. Recommendations are written by the trained librarians, young literary critics, prominent writers and other thinkers and intellectuals. The readers can choose from the following fields: literature, science, art and philosophy. Apart from a short recommendation, it is also possible to read a short excerpt from the work as well as a short biography of the person recommending a given book.

The main value of this project is that it is a joint project undertaken by the public libraries in Serbia. Every library- participant in the project is being recognized at the local as well as national level, as the institution actively

promoting reading culture. Since the recommendations are written by the literature connoisseurs, the portal offers an opportunity to hear about a new writer, find out how to approach a new work, find out why it is important to read it. Librarians who usually know local community’s reading habits have a chance to offer a better selection to the readers and to get more information on the quality of the literature they have at their disposal. Thus the portal provides Serbian libraries with the opportunity to reinforce their mutual ties, to improve inter-library exchange and offer a multitude of cooperation forms.

Belgrade City Library has a specialized marketing and PR department which has developed a plan how to promote the project, i.e. service. Promotional activities were started by organizing an impressive press conference last year. The portal has been constantly promoted via media, web advertising, sites and libraries’ social networks as well as through print materials (posters and flyers). Media coverage of the project is being monitored by a specialized *press clipping* agency.

Via Google analytics, we are monitoring the site visits: the number of users, the number of sessions, demographic structure, categories of interest, locations from which the site is accessed and other parameters. Based on these results, a new version is going to be made, with improved functions and greater possibilities.



**The number of users and sessions, April 2018.**

## 5. Conclusions

Libraries and public institutions should not shy away from elitism. Elitism, all its weak points included, still advocates a definitely positive set of values, contrary to populism which tries to negate all differences until everything is subsumed under one big and loud- “it doesn’t matter”.

There have always been good and bad books, but it is known for a fact that good books are outnumbered by mediocre or low quality books as a result of the present book production. At the same time, media are devoting less and less time to culture and book promotions, so the library remains one of the rare strongholds in the field of the protection and promotion of the good books. The reading culture development is becoming an ever important challenge for contemporary libraries, which, being the centres where local community’s cultural life is shaped, cannot afford to stop seeking for the new, innovative and efficient ways to raise reading culture and bridge the existing gaps in the market mechanisms. Carefully forming public library stocks is not enough to create positive trends in the population’s reading culture. What is equally important is well-thought-out, clearly targeted permanent promotion of the library holdings.

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