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The Internet in island communities in Croatia: between government strategies and reality

Abstract:

The question of integrating Internet into the every day life of people living in isolated areas (e.g. islands and remote rural areas) has been of particular interest to the Croatian Government. It has addressed this issue in its basic strategic and action-plan documents which aimed to improve state economy and living conditions of Croatia's citizens. Also, adopted LIS professional statements have been aiming to increase library awareness, as one of the focal points to the equal access to information for all citizens regardless of their educational, social or economic background.

The paper will discuss Government initiatives related to the e-community building issues on islands and in other rural areas in Croatia. Related awareness raising initiatives of LIS professionals, aimed at professionals, governing bodies and citizens, will also be discussed.

Agenda

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Introduction

Access to information is of vital importance to the inclusion of various groups of people into communities on the one hand, and providing a link with and nurturing traditions on the other. Internet undoubtedly affects community building in many ways: increasing the level of understanding the importance of information in a democratic society, strengthening educational system, stimulating entrepreneurship, etc. Thus, every attempt to improve conditions for a free access to the Internet facilitates citizen involvement in various aspects of the development of a democratic society and raises questions related to their equal opportunities to being informed citizens and experiencing the life in chosen places.

In isolated areas access to information is often aggravated by the insufficient infrastructure (schools, libraries, information and communication technology, qualified staff, etc). The attempts have been made lately in many countries to assure that equal access to information is made possible thorough a network of library services since libraries as places of learning, communication and exchange of ideas, can present, explain and support the complexity of modern societies. However, librarians face a real challenge when finding adequate methods in developing services for those members of society who live in isolated places, with different literacy and knowledge levels and have different needs for information and books. One of the most important tasks of the public library in the digital age is not only to provide access to various sources of information but also to educate information illiterate citizens on the grounds that this will make them equally capable to take part in different aspects of the development of a democratic society. The question of success of public libraries in accomplishing this task, while faced with a problem of the digital divide just as any other participant of the networked society, makes for a starting point of this paper: why and how to provide the Internet for the libraries in remote, rural and isolated areas in Croatia.

Although many public libraries in Croatia have been encompassed by the projects of the digital cooperation there are some substantial differences among them, mostly leading to the situation where urban libraries have the advantage over the small and rural libraries.

It is evident that new Information and Telecommunication Technology (ICT) has been improving almost every part of human life enabling communication worldwide, but also extending digital divide between developed and undeveloped countries or regions within the same country, rich and poor citizens as well as between educated and illiterate people. Castell's (2000, p. 141) statement that the global information economy is deeply asymmetric and regional, leads us to the issue of uneven access to information that is not only typical for the underdeveloped countries or regions but exists in developed parts of the world as well. Digital divide exsists in the world of libraries as well.

To follow up widely accepted and legally protected rights for the equal opportunities to the free access of information, and of the desire to live in the knowledge based modern society, many European countries have recognized the potentials of public and school libraries as corner-stones to education, information literacy and solution to digital divide problems. Although governments in transitional countries, for example, have been aware of the importance of the implementation and use of ICT, the development of public libraries as one of the focal points for equal and free access to information has not always been of high priority to them. It is more than true that by reaching nearly all communities, library computers have been an effective way to reach the digital divide. (Towards equality of access, p. 4)

In Croatia, although some of the libraries in larger cities are well equipped and have trained personnel, this can not be said for libraries in rural and isolated places that lack premises, basic equipment and staff. Among traditionally disadvantaged groups (e.g. lower income families, disabled people, illiterate people) island inhabitants form a special group. It has to be pointed out that Croatian sociologists did not explore in depth the small island communities as the traditional rural communities, nor did they explain the notion of insularity as determinant of islandity[i]. However, several general observations can be made: the insularity is a specific phenomenon, marked with noticeable differences between islands that are better connected to the mainland and those more remote; etno-cultural tradition is strong (the village organized as fraternity, the Cumune, and the State, identifying the mechanism of social integration and the Catholic Church as the basic integration structure) although some of the traditional values are disapearing (cf Zupanov, 2001, p. 170). Morever, potentials in these areas for the development of the modern

information society are getting higher and more important every day (tourism, work from home, research parks etc.), but the government policy measures are needed to improve economy, the way of living and return of people to deserted islands.

A number of initiatives started in the European Union to overcome obstacles to the idea of free Internet access for less privileged members of society stimulated Croatian Government to introduce National ICT Strategy (Croatia in 21st Century, 2002), several projects and financial support for innovative ideas and cooperative programs. At the same time, legal framework has been gradually established and professional communities have taken over the responsibilities relevant to their particular role in the information society.

Croatian islands and the idea of an equal access to information

Croatian islands differ from each other geographically by the insularity degree (distance to the next island or to the nearest mainland) and economically by the economic vulnerability i.e. by the quality of their own resources and degree of the recognized advantages. Recent research counted 1,246 islands, 79 of them recognized as island, 526 as islets and 641 as rocks and rocks awash. (Starc, 2001, p. 16)

By 1981, one fifth of the population left large size islands, more than a third left medium size islands and, disastrously, three fourths left small islands (Starc, 2001, p. 19). During the war period from 1991 to 1995 islands were a place of refuge for a number of refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina increasing the number of islanders. According to the 2001 census the population on islands grew to over 120,000. An average island settlement had 417 inhabitants, and the largest town, Mali Losinj on the island of Losinj, had 6,566 inhabitants. (Drzavni zavod za statistiku, 1992)

The development of islands has been considered as one of the biggest problem in Croatia since 1995 due to the fact that the island economy was not improving, the whole areas of economic activity non existant and people tending to leave for the mainland and foreign countries. The newly formed Ministry of Development and Reconstruction put island issue on its agenda and prepared Island Development Programme (IDP) in 1997. The Parliament passed it as the first development document of the Republic of Croatia that dealt with

a particular region. IDP scoped comparative advantages, detected limitations and deducted that the islands arrived at the development crossroads from which the path of sustainable development should be taken, based upon 'from the bottom' development management. The Island Act was produced and passed as a *lex specialis* in 1999 and several development measures were proposed – 22 island sustainable development programmes and 19 state infrastructure and superstructure programmes (cf Starc, 2001, pp. 28-33).

For the topic of this paper of particular interest are educational and cultural programmes that were proposed. Related to the education it was recognized that "deficient primary education on small island is an insurmountable short-term limitation. Newly started families of island inhabitants or newcomers are directly threatened when children reach school age and the island school, if any, does not provide a minimum of educational quality." (Starc, 2001, p. 26) Increase in the cultural level of islanders and presentation of cultural heritage connected with the development of tourism were seen also among important tasks.

It is obvious that the information age has brought new approaches to the problem of isolated areas. Since the information is seen today as a key factor for the successful economic development, the falling behind of some rural areas (decline in number of inhabitants, lower-paid workers, lower educational level, high number of retired people), nowadays is often explained by the lack or inadequate access to information. Intersection of the importance of information and difficulties of the living conditions on islands as well as specifics of mentality and culture in these areas, are seen as the biggest challenge for rural areas in the information age. Bearing in mind the fact that all rural regions have at least one public or school library, or are connected to the nearest urban library, the Croatian LIS professionals interpret the Government's strategic documents in such a way that public and school libraries can serve as access points to introduction and development of the concept of the Internet for all inhabitants. However, libraries require ongoing investments and support in several areas (e.g. hardware and software provision and upgrades, Internet connectivity, staff training, longer working hours) and current funding in library services, if not upgraded, might jeopardize the access and opportunities to the concept of 'information for all'.

Legal context

The Island Act (Zakon o otocima, 1999), derived from the IDP rephrases most of its provision and requirements and assigns tasks to a number of ministries, government agencies, public enterprises and bodies of local administration and self-government in the six island/mainland counties and their 44 island municipalities/towns. The superstructure programmes deal with health care, social care, pre-school, primary and secondary education, scientific research, education of island entrepreneurs, culture, environmental protection and protection of cultural heritage to name just a few that are directly related to the subject of this paper.

Government Strategic Documents, especially those adressing ICT and education, also underline the importance of the special measures or government development policy to assure that islands get a chance to develop according to their potentials as well as fulfilment of basic rights of their inhabitants.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (2001) all citizens are guaranteed the freedom of expression and access to information. Although libraries are not mentioned in the Constitution, other documents endorse their role in supporting the idea of the freedom of expression and free access to information, especially the ones accepted by professional bodies and governmental agencies, such as Croatian Library Association, Croatian Chapter of the IEEE, Croatian Journalist Association, Office for the Information Society, etc.

It is also important to mention that the Croatian Library Association's Code of Ethics (Eticki kodeks, 1992) affirms that librarians have to resist all forms of censorship, and that the Article 6 of the Library Act (Zakon o knjiznicama, 1997) states that library materials and information have to be provided to users according to their needs and requirements.

In Croatia, as elsewhere in the world, there is a number of obstacles to free access to information in libraries and they are related to inadequate funding, equipment and library premises, undefined criteria of state subsidies in library materials, buildings and ICT infrastructure, lack of the staffing policy as well as to the lack of the collection building guidelines.

A recent research (Nebesny, 2000) showed that smaller libraries in the country depend almost entirely on the state purchase of new titles, often lack qualified staff and have to employ non-professionals.[ii] These libraries often are not equipped with ICT and Internet connections either. Thus, all initiatives toward e-society had to take into account these facts.

The role of the Professional Association

At the beginning of 1990s the Croatian Library Association (CLA) adopted the first ever Code of Ethics. Following professional guidelines and responding to the incidents reported in the media that were connected to the unprofessional management of library collections, CLA established its Committee on the Freedom of Expression and Free Access to Information in 1998.

The IFLA/FAIFE Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom has been translated and published in the CLA Newsletter in 1999. By doing so CLA emphasized the right to free access to information as a constitutional right of every Croatian citizen regardless of his/hers gender, age, nationality, religion or personal beliefs expressed in the Article 38 of the Croatian Constitution Act. The goal of the Commission is to seek any possible obstacle to the free usage of information in Croatian libraries and discover the best modes to wave them off.

In September 2000 the CLA Assembly adopted a Declaration on Free Access to Information prepared by the Committee on Free Access to Information. The Declaration has been modelled after the IFLA/FAIFE Libraries and Intellectual Freedom Statement. Its purpose has been twofold: to emphasize the responsibility of the profession to provide free access to information for their users and to provide a set of principles the profession can rely on. Professionalism is emphasised throughout the text as a main principle that regulates the behaviour of the CLA members. It is expected that the Declaration would help the Library Association and the profession in general in communication with the media and the public, as well as with the authorities (cf Horvat, 2002, pp 52-53).

In October 2000 the CLA published a new issue of its journal, Croatian Librarians' Herald (Vjesnik bibliotekara Hrvatske), dedicated to the topic of freedom of expression and free access to information, and in 2002 the proceedings from the Roundtable on Freedom of Access to Information in Service of Cultural Development were published (Slobodan pristup informacijama, 2002). The main purpose of these publications is to make the concept of free access to information more familiar to the Croatian librarians and other interested professionals such as members of Croatian Information and

Documentation Society, Croatian Chapter of IEEE, as well as to the members of the government and local bodies involved in policy making, students and teachers of LIS and citizens in general.

Government strategies and initiatives

As already mentioned, Croatian Government accepted several strategic documents, one of them being the Information and Telecommunication Strategy, so called e-Croatia. In this document some of the recommendations are related to the topics of this paper and deserve further explanation.

To overcome falling behind and isolation of islands, in the Development Guidelines of the Republic of Croatia[iii] (that followed e-Croatia document) it is recommended that the regional policy should be gradually decentralized, at a pace which must be adjusted to the level of development and the ability of a particular region to ensure its own growth.

A substantial government investment in infrastructure, together with the direct intervention in the social sphere is provided for the development of island economy through improving traffic links with the mainland starting from 2002.

Having in mind the European experience with the development of ICT infrastructure in the geographically dispersed and isolated places, areas with a small population, bad traffic connections and bad economic situation that lead to the inequality of citizens, e-Croatia document recommended that priorities have to be chosen and they are expressed through the concept of the 'Internet in movement' – it is recommended that all citizens have right to participate in an information society and that ICT infrastructure should be built taking into account primarily the needs of children and young people, citizens with special needs, older citizens and those with lower income (Cf Croatia in the 21st Century, p. 41-42).

ICT has to be available to local communities through Internet centres that will enable the usage for local governing and personal needs of inhabitants when they are not able to use ITC from home or workplace. It is said that these Internet centres might be located in schools, libraries, or other local institutions. To be functional these centres have to be equipped, connected to the telecommunication networks and given appropriate technical support. Internet centres are of special value in rural and less

inhabited places where its main task is to support general education, facilitate opening of new working places based on the use of ICT and providing links to medical help and consultancy (Croatia in the 21st Century , p. 53).

Following these recommendations the Contract between Croatian Ministry of Education (today Ministry of Science, Education and Sport) and Croatian Telecom Company was signed in 2001 with a main goal to provide Internet access to all schools in Croatia at least with one access point per school. The computers and connections as well as certain number of free access hours were donated and in no time the technical prerequisites were set up to enable the use of the Internet sources in educational process. The idea behind the project was that the development of Croatia as the knowledge based society has to rely on the forthcoming generations, their ability to use different sources of information and knowledge and to be open to the idea of the lifelong learning.

Croatian Telecom donated schools with free hours to Internet (10 hours every working day to each school), 100 millions of free minutes for the Internet access of pupils from their homes. Croatia Telecom offered also to organize workshops for pupils and their teachers to improve their information literacy and develop info-portals for pupils and their teachers as central points of information and cooperation of all parties involved in educational system. In this way schools in rural and isolated areas received initial equipment and connections as well as the stimulation for access to modern technology and start of new programs such as distance learning for elementary and secondary school children or medical provision.

Furthermore, the pilot project was introduced in 2001 to connect six pupils from the island of Drvenik with their teachers in Split via Internet. From 2004 two more pupils will join in. The new ICT infrastructure on islands enables hotels to accommodate professional conferences, one of them being LIDA on the island of Mljet. The project of Telemedicine was introduced for the GP's on islands to get professional consultation when needed from larger centres such as Zagreb, Split or Rijeka.

In July 2004 the Government accepted new program 'The development of the communal and social infrastructure at Croatian islands' that will allow further development of these programs (based on the experience from pilot projects) and some new ones, such as access to government and local administration information.

With the support from the Open Society Institute's Network Library Program (http://www.osi.hu/nlp) some project have been undertaken in regional libraries such Library as a Local Community Centre in City Library Zadar. (http://www.gkzd.hr). One of the goals of Croatian public libraries is to provide free access to all citizens. However, each Croatian public library requires its members to pay annual fee (between 8 and 10 euro). In many cases, though, the non-users are welcome to use Internet free of charge. Library members' access to Internet is covered by the annual fee without any additional payment. As one of the traditional services for inhabitants of the remote rural areas the mobile libraries are delivering services to many isolated places, but the islands lack such library services (e.g. libraries on boats). With the development of ICT infrastructure the idea of delivering professional services to islands' inhabitants through Internet (such as Ask a Librarian or ordering books via main library) has been accepted by some librarians and first projects are put into working in Zadar and Dubrovnik. Having in mind that rural and small-town libraries are especially at risk because their funding is less reliable, their staff tend to be older and less comfortable with technology and they have trouble getting technical support (Toward Equality of Access, p. 5) it was planned to include students of LIS to volunteer during summer to help develop necessary skills of local staff and deliver special workshops for children and young adults aimed to improve their ICT skills.

The other step is networking of all libraries inside one region. Such a project has been developing by the Zadar City Library that aims to connect all libraries, including ones on nearby islands, in a way that the City Library is responsible for the bibliographic control and access to databases, document delivery, consultations, professional permanent education of all librarians, as well as those ones who work on small islands as volunteers or part-time workers.

There is also a potential in developing rural libraries as centres for life long learning. There are many reasons why citizens in rural areas did not get proper formal education (such as poverty, isolation from the centres for learning). Using the advantages of ICT the rural libraries can evolve into centres for distance learning (DE). Having this in mind the LIS department in Osijek has been developing DE programs for the students in Dalmatian region that will enable students to lead such educational programs once they start working in libraries. There are already several such librarians who work at

islands (Hvar, Korcula, Dugi Otok) and who are trained to use DE techniques.

The other emphasis is on the work with children by facilitating provision of the so called traditional services to children (e.g. storytelling, summer reading programmes) as well as introducing new services such as consultancy for parents, help with home assignments etc. The inclusion of volunteers, and especially students of LIS in these programs, has been one of the strategic issues of the LIS Department in Osijek and the newly established one in Zadar.

Conclusion

In the last decade European Union has been supporting a number of projects (such as PUBLICA, PULMAN Networks of excellence and PULMAN XT as well as the new project CALIMERA started in 2004) related to the plan of the *eEurope* (Europe 2002) that include public libraries and their potentials in cooperating with other relevant institutions (such as local museums, archives). One of the main goals of such projects is the creation of Public Internet Access Points –PIAPs and opening of multimedia centres in all European countries. Croatia has been actively involved in these project although not a member of the EU yet.

Public libraries in Croatia in general have been challenged by the need to maintain and further develop their role in providing free access to Internet to all citizens regardless of their social, economic and cultural background, although this important public service is not always understood by the policy makers and local groups of library advocates hardly exist.

Although the Croatian Government, particularly through the Ministry of Culture or Ministry of Science, Education and Sport support public and school libraries (e.g. annual financial support for collection building, investments for buildings maintenance and protection of rare and valuable material), the main source of financing is the responsibility of local governments. As mentioned earlier, the Library Act requires that every municipality in the country establish a library a public service (Zakon o knjiznicama, 1997). However, many local government units are not in position to do so due to the weak economy. The economic emigration from Croatian islands or from some regions that were destroyed during the war at the beginning of 1990s is not stopped yet. The

structure of economy and citizens' age in these places has been a huge obstacle for the introduction of innovative ideas and programs for the rebuilding of the life. The conservatism of the islands' population and their unwillingness to cooperate even on the same island (e.g. when there are two or three towns they tend to cooperate rather with another town on the mainland then with their neighbouring islanders) are further problems that public libraries in Croatia face. Small towns and villages are often closed to newcomers and to new ideas, have their habits and beliefs and hardly accept any change at all. This is also true for the librarians working in such environments as well as to library committees that are not willing to change every day's routine.

To be connected through Internet in such circumstances might become a starting point for networking island libraries and introducing necessary changes more easily. Undoubtedly, ICT offers to islands new opportunity to get out of the isolation and yet leaving them the feeling that they stick to their habits and the way of living.

Since the infrastructure building has been supported by the Government, the first steps are much easier. Thus, the projects of the national ICT infrastructure building are of the highest importance for the introduction and usage of Internet in rural and isolated areas of Croatia.

And last but not least, the new service that is of particular importance to the inhabitants in rural and isolated places is the provision of business information. Many local politicians do not understand the value of such a service, but might appreciate professional help that will improve their leadership position and development plans for the local community as whole.

However, legal framework, ICT infrastructure and financial support from the Government are only partially contributing toward the solution of problems that Croatia facees on its way to becoming a modern society. The importance of the governmental support for the stimulation of the development of new cultural values, moral and ethical principles, that will form a base for further development of the responsibility and conciousness about general and personal advantages and disadvantages caused by the use of ITC, is also stressed in strategic documents approved by the Croatian Parliament. In this respect the contribution of public libraries could be of high value.

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[i] One of the exceptions is surely the special thematic number of the journal Sociologija sela (Rural Sociology) that is completely devoted to the life and development of Croatian islands. 39, 1/4(2001).

[ii] According to the present Library Act non-professionals employed in libraries should earn a professional degree but libraries on islands and small-town libraries often can not find a person to run the library at all.

[iii] This document was published by the Strategic Planning Office of the Croatian Government in 2004. URL http://www.hrvatska21.hr