

SUPPORTING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND COMMON HISTORICAL NARRATIVES VIA DIGITAL LIBRARY TOOLS – A HUMBLE PROPOSAL

*“Us and them
And after all we’re only ordinary men”*
(Pink Floyd)

Szabolcs Dancs

Introduction

Three days after the terrorist attack in Manchester people gathered on St Ann’s Square and after a minute’s silence dedicated to those passed away during the attack they spontaneously started to sing Don’t Look Back in Anger, a song by Manchester band, Oasis. An action like this can be considered to be a “very European”, intellectual response to an event appealing to our darkest inclinations and aiming to divide our community, and in its background one might notice a stable identity based on common cultural references and consciousness of values. But how to build up a massive identity which could serve as the main source of keeping and protecting our humanity in an age such as the one we live in today? And how to assist others in constructing a more refined cultural identity of higher complexity instead of one based on simple ideas, stereotypes and prejudices? My intention is to provide the reader with a humble proposal on exploiting librarian skills and library tools in the field.

Identity – an issue of increasing relevance

The presentation on libraries as sources of cultural identity (Dancs 2017) I delivered at OCLC-s annual regional meeting in Berlin in February of 2017 unexpectedly aroused the interest of audience, and also gave birth to an article (Dancs 2018) about the topic. Since then the question of identity has become a more and more crucial issue. This assertion can be proved by several facts.

Amanda Taub analysed the social background of last German elections. Her article (Taub 2017), published in the New York Times International Edition, contains allegations such as the following:

“Anxiety over identity and social change, experts say, not economic distress, attracts voters to far-right politics.”

“Recent events have made national identity feel especially important, and threatened, for many Germans.”

“After the war, national identity, even national pride, were seen as too close to the aggressive nationalism that had led to Naziism. Instead, Germany defined its national identity negatively, by what it was not. Not fascist. Not nationalist. Not separate from Europe.”

So the article emphasizes the important role of national identity in the elections. In a short video broadcasted on BBC in October 2017 Salman Rushdie talks about “a deep identity crisis” going on in the US (Rushdie 2017). So we can briefly say that the problem is getting more and more importance not only over Europe but in the whole transatlantic area as well.

Cultural identity: a weapon or a shield?

As *Stuart Hall* states in one of his articles (Hall 1996): “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not [...] that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed”. In my former article (Dancs 2018) I applied a very similar, structuralist approach. As it is suggested by *Ferdinand de Saussure*, linguistic units (such as words) gain their value or meaning through binary oppositions. In the same way: people tend to define themselves against other individuals. So do communities.

One might suppose that all identities have an aggression element. It is far from being necessarily so. Cultural identity should be regarded as something complex, dynamical, a thing that changes over the time. It can also be seen as a set of attributes traditionally linked to a community, something that occurs in TV commercials built upon (quite simplified) stereotypes, but identity could be very sophisticated as well depending on the quantity and quality of information one happened to acquire through his or her socialisation.



Fig. 1

*According to the poor milkman, Teyve, tradition is needed for keeping our balance
(From the movie 1971)*

There is no doubt that complex individual identities have a collective part too, it consists of a set of values shared among the members of the society and considered to be the basis of cultural belonging. What we need is to define the golden means between two aspects: the one regarding cultural identity as something very typical and (mainly or exclusively) roots in tradition and history, and the other for which cultural identity does not bear any impor-

tance at all. (Beckers 2017). Our knowledge about our tradition, our historical and cultural heritage plays a significant role in constructing cultural identity. As it is worded by *Tevye*, the leading character in the musical comedy-drama *Fiddler on the Roof*: “And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: tradition!”¹ We need to use this knowledge in the proper way, as it was put by *Péter Esterházy*: “Heritage could be the mirror of self-knowledge ... my tradition is not equal with me, I am the work that I have made on this tradition, with this tradition” (Esterházy 2016). The question is how libraries could support people in that work?

Cultural identity in libraries

Constructing cultural identity is of high importance in libraries according to various IFLA and UNESCO declarations (IFLA 2009; UNESCO 2011), but how does it influence our daily activities? Similar question is raised by *Frida Olsson* and *Johanna Pettersson* (Olsson and Pettersson 2018) who study the relation between theory and practice in the field of integration and diversity in the library area. In my presentation in Berlin (Dancs 2017) I suggested other issues for reconsideration as well, such as:

- Should libraries play a role much more active than they have played so far in the area?
- How could a new approach focusing on self-knowledge and cultural identity influence our services and collections?
- Can we define a standard for creating group identity for instance by involving or integrating tools and experiences from the area of psychology or – more concretely – bibliotherapy?
- How can we support our patrons to work with their tradition/to work on their tradition, i. e. to create their own cultural identity?
- Should we contribute to the socialization of individuals?

At his point I cannot avoid to mention the role of library as a so called *third place*, – beyond home and workplace – libraries function as a location for socialization and integration. As for the latter, libraries react rapidly when there is a need. An example is a document by IFLA titled *Responding! Public libraries and refugees* (IFLA 2015), which actually is a collection of best practices concerned.

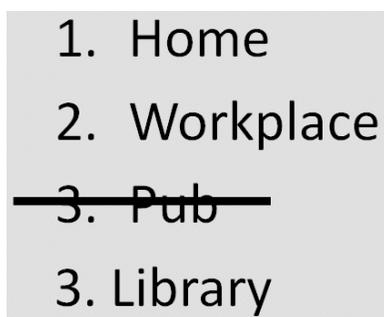


Fig. 2

We should not forget that it is not only the library that can function as a third place

Regarding socialization, the crucial role of libraries as community centres needs to be stressed here. Supporting cultural events and programs aiming at reinforcing identity has a double aspect and a double benefit in the sense of their meeting the requirements and expectations of conservative citizens as well as of those who tend to feel marginalized in their “home society”. Such programs might focus on a country or a region, and also on the cultural heritage of a minority and could have a definitely favourable influence on the socialization of the individuals involved. Barriers, however, many times occur – partly due to the reluctance of library staffs which can be explained by both the lack of resources and the sensitivity of the issue concerned.

If we pose the question, as we did it before: how to assist our patrons in constructing a more refined cultural identity of higher complexity instead of one based on simple ideas and stereotypes, we might come across a new dilemma which is the selection of proper resources that are both of high quality and supposed to support building a complex identity, both considered to be attractive and comprehensible for the average user. That is quite challenging, isn't it?

Nevertheless, it is a key issue if we can keep our humanity when meeting people of different background. Cultural identity plays here a role not to be underestimated. As we mentioned before, there are different statements by IFLA or UNESCO about the importance of supporting cultural identity in libraries. Let us cite one of them (IFLA 2009):

“The degree of multilingualism and retention of linguistic or cultural identity, and the level of social integration within a society, are all important in determining the level of service to multicultural communities.”

Also, there is a new international standard draft (ISO/DIS 21248:2018) about quality assessment for national libraries which also mentions national identity:

“6.1.3.4 Cultural and social impact

[...]

b) National culture and identity

- National libraries promote the culture and history of the country via exhibitions and other events and provide information about the country. Thus, they foster the national identity.

c) Cultural diversity

- In a culturally diverse society, the national library can enable the different groups to maintain their cultural heritage and thus foster diversity and support intercultural and intergenerational understanding.”

Bibliotherapy/Ethnobilotherapy

Identity is also a field for a special domain of library science: bibliotherapy. Through bibliotherapy we intervene in the interpretation of culture, find narratives assisting to solve personal problems. We could, in a sort of way, expand the scope of bibliotherapy in order to assist in solving social problems and international tensions. The question is if we can do so without losing our neutrality as information providers?

So called ethnobilotherapy (culturally-affirming bibliotherapy) aims at enhancing multicultural awareness and development of cultural identity. Implementations and experiences in the US are mainly known (Domiczek 2011, Holman 1996). Libraries could find their

responsibilities through contributing in the creation of *common historical narratives* with the help of digital technology.

V4 perspectives

We have a past which includes a lot of similarities and differences. Digital technology might be used to collect some of them and foster the meeting and reconciling of different approaches in order to create a common narrative. So by building a commonly accessible digital corpus and using common sources (namespaces, authority databases, multilingual thesauri) to process our cultural heritage we have the possibility to encounter new approaches, and refine our identity. Developing a complex methodology to create common historical narratives exploiting digital tools could be a field for collaboration.



Fig. 3

Pavol Országh-Hviezdoslav was a great Slovak poet who wrote poems in Hungarian as well and translated poems by Hungarian and Polish poets into Slovak – he can be regarded as a sort of symbol of our common historical identity (Portret [2006])

Conclusion – a humble proposal

Libraries, encouraged by IFLA, UNESCO, etc. documents, need to find ways and methods to implement in order to support constructing cultural identity and foster intercultural dialogue. As for V4 countries, projects could be designed and run to create a commonly accessible digital corpus processed via using cooperatively built metadata sources (namespaces, authority databases, multilingual thesauri).

When aiming to build common narratives we need to develop services with language-independent access points in order to bridge language gaps. We should consider running projects involving historians, culture experts and bibliotherapists to build a shared digital corpus and design specific tools for research. And last but not least we might establish a comprehensive methodology for developing international digital libraries supporting cultural identity.

To sum up I would say we should:

- encourage V4 to cooperate more actively in the field,
- encourage IFLA to provide clear assistance (e.g. guidelines, methodology) in order to support libraries to contribute to constructing cultural identity.

List of References

- BECKERS, B., 2017. *Building bridges between 'typically Limburgian' and 'Limburg does not exist'* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/events/2017/EMEARC2017/EMEARC-2017-Session-I-Libraries-Culture-and-Identity-Barbara-Beckers.pdf>
- DANCS Sz., 2017. *Information seeking and/or identity seeking: libraries as sources of cultural identity* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/events/2017/EMEARC2017/EMEARC-2017-Session-I-Libraries-Culture-and-Identity-Szabolcs-Dancs.pdf>
- DANCS Sz., 2018. Information seeking and/or identity seeking: libraries as sources of cultural identity. In: *Library Management*. Vol. 39, no. 1/2 pp. 12-20.
- DOMICZEK, A.M., 2011. *Employing Culture-Centered Bibliotherapy in ESL Curriculum Design* [online]. Post University [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: http://ibrarian.net/navon/paper/Culture_Centered_Bibliotherapy_1_Running_Head__CU.pdf?paperid=17641075
- ESTERHÁZY P., 2016. *A vereség* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: http://hvg.hu/itthon/201451_esterhazy_peter_urizalaszrol_hagyomanyokrol
- From the movie "Fiddler on the roof", 1971. Further information on the movie can be found at the site of *ISDb* [online]. [cit. 2019-06-05]. Available from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067093/>
- HALL, St., 1996. Introduction: Who needs 'Identity'. In: HALL, St., DU GAY, P., eds. *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage, pp. 1-17.
- HOLMAN, W.D., 1996. The power of poetry: Validating ethnic identity through a bibliotherapeutic intervention with Puerto Rican adolescents. In: *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. Vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 371-383.
- IFLA, 2009. *Multicultural Communities: Guidelines for Library Services* [online]. 3rd edition. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: <http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/library-services-to-multicultural-populations/publications/multicultural-communities-en.pdf>
- IFLA, 2015. *Responding! Public libraries and refugees* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/public-libraries/publications/library_service_to_refugees_0.pdf
- ISO/DS 21248:2018, *Information and documentation – Quality assessment for national libraries*.
- OLSSON, Fr. and J. PETTERSSON, 2018. *Bibliotekariers arbete med integration och mångfald* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1214782/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Portret of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav from the web, [2006]. *Wikimedia Commons* [online]. [cit. 2019-06-05]. Available from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hviezdoslav.jpg>

- RUSHDIE, S., 2017. *Salman Rushdie on 'US identity crisis'* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05j6n5g>
- TAUB, A., 2017. *What the Far Right's Rise May Mean for Germany's Future* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/europe/germany-far-right-election.htm>
- UNESCO, 2011. *Warsaw Declaration: 'Culture – Memory – Identities'* [online]. [cit. 2018-08-06]. Available from: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/Warsaw_declaration.pdf

Summary

SUPPORTING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND COMMON HISTORICAL NARRATIVES VIA DIGITAL LIBRARY TOOLS – A HUMBLE PROPOSAL

Szabolcs Dancs

One might suppose that all identities have an aggression element. It is far from being necessarily so. Cultural identity should be regarded as something complex, dynamical, a thing that changes in time. It can also be seen as a set of attributes traditionally linked to a community, but identity could be very sophisticated as well depending on the quantity and quality of information one happened to acquire through his or her socialisation. Cultural identity plays a role not to be underestimated. Constructing identity based on common cultural references and consciousness of values is not just crucial but it is the only intellectual, European response to the events (such as terror attacks) appealing to our darkest inclinations and aiming to divide our community. Libraries, encouraged by IFLA and UNESCO documents, need to find ways and methods to implement in order to support constructing cultural identity and foster intercultural dialogue. As for V4 countries, projects could be designed and run to create a commonly accessible digital corpus processed via using cooperatively built metadata sources (namespaces, authority databases, multilingual thesauri). Developing a complex methodology to create common historical narratives exploiting digital tools also could be a field for collaboration.