The Impact of Public Libraries on Small Rural Communities: Challenges to Conducting Research

Martina Dragija Ivanović
Department of Information Science, University of Zadar, Croatia. Email: mdragija@unizd.hr

Abstract
In small rural communities public libraries play a special role. They are often the only information and cultural centres, and one of the rare community meeting places. Therefore, they have to respond to diverse needs of their patrons which vary from homework help to information about weather and new agricultural products to adults. Obviously, public libraries have a great potential in such communities and it is necessary to make their (actual and potential) contributions explicit to local government (i.e. library funders) and the general public.

This paper is based on data and experiences collected in the study of public library impact in two Croatian insular rural communities, Sali (Dugi Otok) and Kolan (Pag). While the central interest of this study was to understand the relationship between the community and the library and to investigate what impact does a public library have on such a small and isolated community, author also tested research models, methods and techniques. Research strategy used in this study was a case study, while the research tools used were document analysis, interviews, focus groups and a survey (triangulation). The study was conducted in 2012 with three large groups of respondents: local residents, decision-makers and library experts. In this paper the author will discuss research challenges relating to the employed qualitative methods such as changes in research steps, use and interpretation of “unexpected” information (e.g. casual conversation), changes of respondents, research objectivity etc.

Keywords: rural community, public libraries, impact, qualitative methods, research challenges

Introduction
Since their inception, the importance and influence of public libraries has been a matter of debate, first in professional, and later, in scientific circles. There are several reasons for this, all originating from different points of vantage: the necessity of their existence is something that requires justification, as well as the possibilities of their influence on an individual and/or particular group. Contemporary research primarily investigates the influence that libraries have on the various aspects of the individual or a community: these include how an individual is to spend his or her free time, constant improvement in a profession, personal development, personal advantage (Goulding, 2006), as well as questions concerning what might influence an increase in the economic strength of a community and its development as a democracy. In the 21st century, public libraries are a sociological and cultural phenomenon which deserves systematic research and consideration. The majority of the research on the importance of public libraries in rural communities has been conducted by the American scholar Bernard Vavrek (1995). His key propositions concern the particularities of library services in communities with a very specific way of life, and the means their further exclusion is to be avoided. Yet the works of research concerning island libraries show that most of them have researched pacific, African and similar communities (Jackson, 1989, Evan, 1992). The focus of this paper will be on the evaluation of the influence of libraries on island communities, especially on their influence on the community of which these libraries form a part, their influence on skills and their influence on the local economy.

About of the study
In our work we have attempted to delve further into the conclusions of those studies whose method is based upon a sound approach, and also attract enough curiosity for further research. One of the studies most often cited was that undertaken by Rebecca Linley and Bob Usherwood (1998): ‘New Measures for the New Library: a Social Audit of Public Libraries’. This research is important due to its systematic method which formed the template for much later research. The authors here had also elaborated some of the tools which are of use when measuring societal influences on library services as pertaining to the aims of the library itself. They also investigated the role of societal and economic influences on public libraries.

When taking some of the problems concerning public libraries in rural communities into consideration, we must also take note that the journal Library Trends in 1995 focused on this particular topic (Rural libraries and information services). There were papers about social and economic changes that have a particular impact on American
rural communities. These include: the need for information in the rural community, how libraries are financed, services for children and youth, the possibilities of cooperation between institutions, the availability of telecommunications and development trends.

Croatia has been lacking the research which could provide an analysis of impact of public libraries on the wider community. Throughout the years there have been have various studies into the opinions of patrons concerning the library in general, but there have been no research of wider scope. Because of this, an idea had arisen about a research, that would focus on island communities in the county of Zadar as an example, and which might prove useful in understanding the role of the library on the wider community.

We expected that the questions would offer us answers concerning the role of libraries for the rural island population, and particularly what makes island life specific, their working methods and management. What also interested us was to see if this specific situation had any effect on library services on these islands, and the ways in which these libraries participate in the cultural life of these communities. We were also interested in investigating the tasks decision makers recognize when considering libraries in rural and island communities, have the statistical methods that have been used thus far been of any assistance to decision makers in maintaining the library, as well as the role of the library in such communities and the way they are financed, as well as which methods are appropriate when evaluating the influence of the library on a community.

What was expected of the proposed model for the evaluation of the influence of the library on the community was that it will answer questions as to how the library influences a community and the role of the library in a community. Our method of research was based on that of Rebecca Linley and Bob Usherwood (1998), both of whom we mentioned earlier. Anči Leburić (2001) assisted us in or choice of method, as she insists that for research into island communities an integration of qualitative and quantitative methods is best.

Another aim of our research was to contribute to the valorization of a critical theoretical and methodical approach to the research of the influence of the library on a community (especially as how this relates to rural and island communities) and to the consideration and formation of a suitable theoretical and methodical approach to the research of the influence of the library on rural and island communities. This should also lead to the systematization of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of Croatian public libraries, especially in rural communities.

The questions that this research proposed were the following:

- What is the role of the library in the life of a rural island community?
- Do the particularities of an island community influence the specifics of libraries work methods the management of the library and how it offers its services?
- How do libraries participate in the cultural life of the community?
- Have the methods until now of collecting data on the management of libraries been of any assistance to the decision makers (at the local and national level) when confirming the role of the library in these communities and how they are financed?
- What are the suitable methods and models for the evaluation of the influence of the library on a community?

The method of research

What is most often found in qualitative research of a deliberate sample because one wants to gain insight into a particular situation, context and period of time (Gray, 2009, p.180). The relevance to a research is the main criteria for one’s choice of samples, and not a selection based on chance. The majority of samples were determined by the questions of this research. When discussing samples in qualitative research, Powell and Connaway (2004, p.190) emphasize the 'first sample' which does not exist in quantitative research. The characteristic of the first proposed sample is that this sample can, in time, add to, change and adjust the aims of research. For the requirements of our research our method of sampling was the ‘snowball’ method.

For the requirements of our research our selection of examinees was based on those singled out by Usherwood and Linely (1998) as the most important for our research on influence. Although Usherwood and Linely did not use a questionnaire, we did as we believed that it would allow us to compare the extent and value of the data for a research into the influence of the library on a community.

These were the methods chosen for our research: the research of documents, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. The basis of the strategy of our research was formed on the model proposed by Roberta K. Yin (2007), and we thus selected the following public libraries – the library in Sali on the island of Dugi Otok and the library in Kolan on the island of Pag. Geographical characteristics (rural) formed the basis of our selection, socio-economic characteristics and a similarity in work methods (librarians working alone), with a plan to carry out our research on two levels: an analysis of the community and on the level of the examination of the key interest groups.

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to investigate groups of decision makers and the representatives of the more important local cultural, social and spiritual institutions (headmasters of schools, representatives of the clergy, representatives of non-profit organizations etc). It is for certain that the samples in our
qualitative research were selected deliberately and with a definite goal as they would allow us to gain greater insight and knowledge, and not a mere empirical generalization. The following stakeholders were encompassed by our research: decision makers at both the local and national levels - representatives on county and municipal government, representatives of the Ministry of Culture, representatives of the Library Institution, library chairmen, and representatives of the more important local cultural, social and spiritual institutions and bodies.

There were two methods implemented for those who used library services: focus groups and questionnaires. IFLA formed the basis of our questionnaire in order to investigate the effect of the library on the community.

In this paper, we would like to single out several methods of research and the reasons and aims of our research.

The aim of our interviews with decision makers at the local, county and national level was to gain insight into the relationship between decision makers and public libraries as well as to gain and understanding of the importance and evaluation for the assessment of the working methods of the library in order to make strategic decisions.

The aim of our interviews with the local population was to gain greater insight into the opinions of the local population on the importance of the role of the library in the community. These interviews different groups of the population – from ‘everyday people’ to people that have a specific role (people who are connected to culture, education, and representatives of the clergy, and others in important positions)

Focus groups in the local population were directed towards parents and the young, and our aim was to gather the opinion of examinees on the role, influence and potential of the public library for the local community.

Questionnaires for those who used library services provided us with insight into the habits of library users and the position of the library in the community (this only encompassed examinees in Sali; there were definite reasons why a questionnaire could not be carried out in Kolan).

This research was carried out in May, June, July and September of 2011 as well as in March and April of 2012.

We would draw your attention to the fact that in Kolan we didn’t conduct a survey for objective reasons. During the implementation of the research, library suddenly - closed because the librarian went to another job! From the position of researcher that situation was more than inspiring and interesting. We had the opportunity to talk with residents about the existing library program and about the position that library has in the community, as well as to hear their thoughts about the current situation when they were confronted with the loss of the library.

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<td>focus groups</td>
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Conclusion of the research

On the basis of this data we can single out several important conclusions:

1. Decision makers recognize the library as a part of the community
2. Decision makers recognize the library as a vital part of the island community
3. Decision makers recognize the library as the cultural centre of the local community
4. Decision makers recognize the library as an aid to development
5. Decision makers do not use the results of research in order to access funds and make decisions
6. There is no consensus between decision makers and experts in the field of library studies regarding the institution responsible for the development of libraries in smaller communities (like islands), nether as regarding the means (documents, strategy, concrete action) by which development is to be encouraged
7. Research into the influence of libraries is recognized by experts as important and necessary
8. Something has been lacking in the way in which data on public libraries has been gathered, on the basis of this data it is not possible to make a justified premise on the success of a libraries work methods
9. Island and rural libraries do not have a coherent development strategy
10. Adequate space, educated staff, funding and the number of staff are some of the key problems of the strategic development of island libraries
11. The work methods of island libraries are specific due to their immediate environment and some of the things that determine this is their isolation, social distance, specific networks of communication, and a particular sense of dependence (one needs to lower one’s expectations on an island as some things are lacking, and, as research has shown, some of these things add to the quality of life)
12. The role of a library in a rural community is manifold – a meeting place, a place to learn, a place of leisure and one in which one can use leisure one’s time constructively, a place for information: these roles cannot be separated as services intertwine here, and the means of service also differ from those in an urban environment (an immediate availability of services, an available librarian etc.)

13. The library is the only cultural institution in smaller communities

14. The library is the only public space open to the entire population

15. The most numerous and steadfast users of island libraries are children

16. The library participates as the motivator and promoter of cultural activities in the cultural life of the community

17. Applicable methods of the evaluation of the influence of the library on a community are mixed methods.

The primary interest of this study was to recognize the relationship between the library and the community in which it is active and to investigate the kind of influence it has on the community. The contribution of the library to the community manifests itself as a place of togetherness, a place in which social interaction can occur. The work methods of an island library are specific due to their immediate environment. On the basis of the responses of our examinees, we can conclude that the existence of libraries is important for the following reasons: libraries ensure that one can use one’s leisure time usefully, they aid the process of learning and they ensure public interaction among people. The habits of those who use the library are of importance should one establish a library in a smaller community or if a library attempts to change its work methods.

In order to understand the importance of the library for a rural island community it is important to have knowledge of the problems, advantages and disadvantages of life in such an environment. The answers provided by our examinees affirm the theoretical premises we proposed earlier that life on an island is ultimately bound by its geographical location and that the rhythms of island life are specific. As far as rural life is concerned, our examinees were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of rural life. Having taken the plans for the strategic development of islands into consideration (and we gained information on this during the course of our research), we became interested in the role that culture played in island life, the main priorities for island life and the institutions which were important. Our examinees were aware that culture is one of the segments of life, but cited that economic development was of greater importance. Culture must be seen as one of the resources that should add to the quality of life, so that, besides the purely material, the quality of education and personal and cultural expression should also be taken into account (Cassier, 1981, p. 58).

Islands are specific locations that have difficult access to quality and diverse cultural content and entertainment (Babić, Lajić, Pogorelec, 2004, p.122), and this was also stated by our respondents.

The library is also a place that encourages the development of the identity of the community, and for those who do not use it for its services in Sali and Kolan the library has a symbolic value and this is something that Usherwood noted in his research (Usherwood, 2002, p.8). The librarians in both places and a portion of the local population influenced the long term influence of the library on the community and on those who use its services. Seeing that the majority of those who use the library’s services are children and the young, use of the library becomes a habit which also forms the base for its continuous use at a later age.

The data collected in interviews and focus groups from the local population in Sali indicates that its library is in a stable position. From the Mayor of Sali to the young people who use its services, all agree that the library form a major part of the community without which Sali would not be what it is today. The respondents all use the library space and its services differently, most often to borrow books for reading assignments, computer services to write seminar papers and essays, the use of the internet and to participate in the cultural and other activities offered by the library. The library is, foremost, perceived as a space, and not as a service. The library is a meeting place for various social groups, a place for informal socializing and an institution that one enters „in passing“. This is all an indication of the high degree of the library’s involvement in the community. The use of other library services like borrowing books and reading newspapers and other periodicals is what naturally follows after socializing and other activities. On the basis of the analysis of this data that the library in Sali has a great influence on the cultural activities of the community seeing that it is the only cultural institution that exists there, an institution that promotes various activities, but also that the activities that it organizes are of equal value to those of other local institutions, like those of the local tourist board and others. Its influence can be seen not only in Sali: it has spread over the entire island (the non-institution service of the library bus). Its librarian has noted the following groups of people as important – youth for whom it must be ensured that activities are organized which will keep them occupied and provide them with direction, children for whom it must be ensured that activities will meet their needs and age, and the older population for whom, according to the librarian, services can be provided such as reading at home. All respondents emphasized the importance of the library in the lives of children and the young.

In discussion and focus groups, children and youth pointed out the lack of quality content for leisure time on islands and smaller communities. Seeing that we paid attention to certain documents for the requirements of our dissertation which paid to the strategic development of islands and rural communities in Croatia, it must be noted that there was a
lack of understanding of the importance of culture for such communities. When mentioning culture, it is not just the preservation of heritage that we have in mind, but also the creation of ‘new cultures’. This was one of the problems we encountered in our conversations with decision makers. All agree that the library can contribute to the cultural identity of a community and its cultural program, yet we did not have the opportunity to elaborate the concept of ‘culture’ during our interviews with them. Culture is a concept of wide scope, as mentioned in the introduction to our dissertation, and what is meant by it is often under dispute. Automatically equating the library with culture within an island context evokes a sense of caution in us as we are unsure whether or not we can explain the wide range of meanings of the term ‘culture’ to all parties. Much engagement in the cultural life of the community is what is expected of libraries on islands and smaller communities: this means that whoever works in library here must have certain prerequisites such as an understanding of the communities cultural roots, knowledge of cultural events on other parts of the island, knowledge of cultural events on the local and national level, the skill required to organize events and present them to the general public etc.

The participants in the focus group in Kolan expected that the library organize extra events for children and parents, and what was expected in Sali was more space and social games. We believe that it is a good thing that the local population can express what it expects of the library, which means that their understanding of the concept of the library includes more than what the traditional library had to offer. Our opinion is that, based on the documents pertaining to both libraries, it is necessary to put extra activities into effect who expect extra cultural events like poetry readings, services for those with special needs, as well as computer services. The librarian in Sali is on this path as he mentioned that he would like to establish a local periodical.

Concerning the relationship between decision makers and experts, our analysis showed that there was no consensus on the potential development of island and rural libraries. Founders of libraries are those responsible for a libraries work methods, yet lack the funds to evaluate this and improve it. What we have in mind here is an increase in staff, and in the case of Sali, renovating and enlarging its space. It is difficult to finance cultural and other programs due to the small budgets allotted to the cultural sector. It is not our intention to put all the responsibility on municipal and national institutions, yet it is evident that there must be change in how certain local institutions are funded. We must also note that all respondents affirmatively expressed the possibility of applying for an EU project. Yet on the basis of our field work that a large number of small libraries would apply, as they have neither the knowledge nor the time to learn the process of applying for projects as there is much bureaucratic wrangling involved.

As mentioned earlier, work methods of libraries in smaller rural communities are specific. The information gathered by experts, especially that gathered by the head of the General registry of public libraries in the Library institute, led us to the conclusion that it is necessary to revise the existing Standards for public libraries as soon as possible and direct these changes to the particularities of libraries in rural communities. Besides this, there is also the need to elaborate the Strategy of development particularly sensitive to the specifics of Croatian regions (number of counties, villages, the situation in rural communities, and the library network in rural parts of Croatia) and the polyvalent tasks of public libraries in such communities.

The results of our research corresponded to the questions proposed in the abstract at the beginning of our research. Seeing that one of the aims of our research was to explore the applicability of a model for the evaluation of the influence of the library on a community, we will now turn to the model which was applied to our research. In their research Usherwood and Linely emphasized that it was not possible to make generalizations on the basis of qualitative data and that these results were only applicable to the locations in which research was carried out, yet that it is possible to use the same research tools when investigating the influence of the library on a community using their methods. The intention of our research was to show procedures and methods of research which could be applied to libraries in Croatia. We tested this model on libraries in a specific environment, an island environment, as we concluded that this research unit was a good choice which would point toward the possibilities and problems of investigating the influence of the library on a community.

This research has confirmed our thesis that when investigating the influence of libraries it is best to use a combination of research methods, although qualitative methods should be primary, such as interviews and close observation. Interviews were one of the key tools for our research of the influence of the library on a community. Case studies are the most appropriate method for the research of the library in a community. The questionnaire which we used in our research, based on the IFLA template for studies of the influence of libraries (this questionnaire was developed within the project “Global Statistics” which was carried out by IFLA, ISO and UNESCO and is used in agreement with its original author R. Poll, although it has never been put into practice) confirmed the statements we made earlier that quantitative methods cannot provide answers to questions concerning the influence of the library on a community. In order to understand this complex question it is necessary to form a well-rounded picture that the results of a purely quantitative method cannot provide.

We believe that our research has shown that there should be more emphasis on both qualitative and quantitative methods in the field of library studies. As Crawford states, qualitative methods are compatible to the social nature of
libraries as they provide us with the answers for „how“ and „why“.

The protocol of our research could not foresee some of the information we gathered and several of the occurrences which we encountered. A situation in the immediate environment will certainly affect the progress of a research, which is also a characteristic of qualitative research. Changes in the choice of respondents, interviews turning out differently, unplanned observations and information gathered from informal conversations are just some of the situations we encountered. When we began our research we were acquainted with the techniques of field work and the problems that might arise during the course of our research. Yet it was also important that we control our relationship with the local population or the theme of an interview and focus group. After analyzing the data, after a day of field work, it appeared that we did not keep sufficient distance during several interviews and lost sight of the main theme during interviews. An example of this when a discussion began on raising children in small communities and the role of the institutions responsible for an islands development; such discussions led our investigators to empathize with the local population. As our research continued, we took heed of this in order that it does not influence the answers of our respondents.

It is also useful to add, that while we were conducting our research and conducting interviews decision makers and the local population, that we noticed there were respondents who had not given much consideration to the importance of the library for themselves, their families and their community. After this, we continued this discussion with them. Because of this our research also helped to promote an awareness of the importance of the library in the community.

The scope of our research was a problem, seeing that there was only one person to work on it. A research of this kind requires a team, stable finances and much time, i.e working hours to conduct the research.

An understanding of the context in which the library operates was the most important instance when taking the rather complex problem of the influence of the library into consideration. We can safely conclude that a holistic approach to this problem demands an analysis of the community.

**Conclusion**

The affirmative stance towards public libraries, which can be noticed in this research, is based on the premise that libraries are important for the individual and for the communities in which they operate as well. Yet the value and importance of libraries is not entirely recognized; it may be recognized but this knowledge is not represented adequately neither to those who make the decisions concerning public libraries nor to the general public. The importance of the public library for a community cannot be denied, and the works of several authors, who in their theoretical or investigative work try to answer why a library is of importance to a community, are a witness to this; they also showed the positive influence that a library can have on a community.

The theory proposed by three Scandinavian authors, Jochumsen, Hvenegaarda and Skot-Hansen (2012), described the public library as a place where the individual fulfills four needs – to experience, investigate, participate and elaborate. According to this theory the library covers four branches of human activity: they are places for inspiration, education, socializing and performing. Furthermore, the library is a place which promotes the following aims: to gain experience, to make active participation possible, to strengthen the personality and encourage innovation. On the basis of sociological discussions of theoreticians in the field of library studies, and the model proposed by Jochumsen, Hvenegaard i Skot-Hansen (ibid), we began our research of the premise that this model is paramount when positioning the library in society. Should libraries fulfill their social mission, communities will surely notice them and seek them. This formed the basis of our research questions which we attempted to answer during the course of our research in order to demonstrate how a library influences the community in which it operates.

Research into the problems of rural libraries in Croatia is rare. In the Draft of the Strategic development of public libraries in Croatia until 2010 rural libraries are counted as one of the priorities, yet there are also other aims directly tied to rural libraries (access to ICT etc.). Among the measures in the national strategy for development of public libraries rural libraries have a special place. Yet, the Strategy has failed to acknowledge that some libraries are different and that this is important. Taking into consideration that there is a large percentage of libraries in the Republic of Croatia, it is clear that the Strategy for public libraries, as well as the Strategy for island development, does pay sufficient attention to what sociology has to say; how to approach rural and island communities with an awareness of what makes them special.

Having proposed our research and having read documents on public libraries in Croatia, we came to the conclusion that there are great problems for public libraries at the local level, as well as in the county of Zadar; there is no clear social strategy nor understanding of the concept of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural politics’ as one of the prerequisites of their development. The interviews conducted during our research in Sali (Dugi otok) and Kolan (Pag) confirm Holt’s opinion that „a library is exactly what the local community wants it to be“. Sali and Kolan are examples in which the local government recognized the importance of the library for the community and in which cooperation with the librarian contributes to the services of the library. Skraćić (p. 499), in 1994, wrote of the need to establish an Office (agency) in
Zadar which would take care of the cultural programs on the islands of the Zadar archipelago. A future research should keep track of how (when Croatia becomes part of the European Union), islands in the Zadar archipelago access the possibilities of applying for projects and the extent to which cultural institutions on these islands (including libraries) will use these resources for their development.

This research confirmed our opinion that a combination of research is best in order to investigate the influence of the library, with an emphasis on qualitative methods, such as interviews and close observation, being primary. Interviews were one of our key tools here. Case studies are also a particularly apt method. The questionnaire which we used only confirmed what we had expected; that quantitative methods are not enough for an research of this topic. One needed to gain a well-rounded picture in order to understand what was at hand so that quantitative methods are simply not enough.

An understanding of the context in which a library operates showed itself as the most important instance when investigating the influence of the library on a community. For an analysis of this, one must understand the characteristics of a community, a libraries work methods, the relationship between founder and librarian, between founder and decision makers.

The contribution of the library to the community is made manifest in the perception of it as a meeting place, a place for social interaction. The answers provided by our respondents confirmed our premises on the specifics of island life. The respondents showed an awareness of culture as being a segment of island life, yet singled out those institutions and development plans of an economic nature: they did not fail to mention that, besides this economic side, education and the potential for individual cultural expression were also important for the quality of life (Cassirer, 1981, p. 55). Our respondents also noted that it was difficult for them to gain access to a greater wealth of quality cultural content.

The public library has a strong influence on the cultural life of the community and this is seen in a greater awareness of culture and the greater possibilities of quality content for leisure time. The library is recognized as a place which encourages the identity of the community, and for those who use the library in Sali and Kolan, the library has a symbolic value and this was also noted by Usherwood (ibid) in his research. The librarians in both places expressed the opinion that the library will have a long term influence on those who use it and the community as a whole.

The results of our research proved to be of value. Seeing that one part of our research was to demonstrate the applicability of a certain model, we have concluded that this model is certainly applicable. As Usherwood and Linely emphasized in their research, qualitative data does not allow a generalizations and the results only apply to those place under research. In our research we demonstrated that there research model can be applied to libraries in Croatia. We tested this model on libraries in a specific environment: an island environment and the results confirmed our opening premise that a combination of research methods is best, but with an emphasis on qualitative methods. Interviews were a key, with case studies being particularly applicable.

The scope of our research posed a problem, as this research was conducted by one person. This requires teamwork, stable finances and more time, i.e. working hours to conduct the research.

In conclusion, this research confirmed that the very often library is the only cultural institution in small communities, the only public space open to its entire population, and that children are the most numerous and steadfast among those who use an island’s library.

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Curriculum Vitae

Martina Dragija Ivanović is Assistant Professor at University of Zadar. She teaching courses in the Library and Information Science Program at the Department of Information Sciences. Her research interests are in the field of evaluation of information services and institutions, public libraries (management, history, current position and changes), information society and cultural policy.