How qualitative methods can show value of libraries: results from an unusual study

Marica Šapro-Ficović
Public Library Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik, Croatia  Email: marica.sapro-ficovic1@du.htnet.hr

Introduction
During the Homeland War in Croatia (1991-1995) numerous cities were attacked and their cultural institutions, including libraries were damaged or even destroyed. Some of these cities were under lengthy siege and constant shelling, but life in them went on. The part of that life were libraries; despite difficult conditions, they worked and were open to the public.

The purpose of this research is to apply a number of qualitative methods in order to explore the life and work of libraries, librarians and users in cities that were under siege during the Homeland war in Croatia. Among others, the objectives are to collect and organize recollections and reflections from librarians about their work in the cities under siege, describe the users and the use of libraries in conditions of war, and contribute evidence about the social role and value of libraries. Theoretical and practical framework incorporates a variety of qualitative methods and approaches: oral history for collection and study of historical information about events as recalled by participants; grounded theory for analysis of collected interviews; and the notion of social capital for a general valuation of libraries. Ten cities under siege throughout the country, involving 14 libraries, were included in this study. Some of these cities were under total siege for a long period of time, others were under partial siege but regularly attacked, shelled and bombarded; one city (Vukovar) was totally levelled, library included. In all these cities libraries functioned during the time of the siege; however, in some of them, libraries were closed for a short period of time. Altogether 50 librarians and 17 library users were interviewed – they provided records of oral history about their recollection of the events and library services and use under siege. All participants, librarians and library users, were presented with information about the topic of the interview and purpose and objectives of the study and signed a statement of informed consent. Interviews were semi structured, digitally recorded, and then transcribed for analysis. Altogether, there were some 54 hours of interviews, with some 435,000 words when transcribed. Following grounded theory, analysis consisted of developing codes about the content of utterances and then coding the utterances in each interview. Finally, codes were cumulated showing the results with comments and illustrative examples quoting directly from interviews. Ten main categories were derived, each with a number of subcategories. The main categories for results are: General context: war situation in the city; Work of libraries just before the attack; Work of libraries during attacks; Librarians: their work during attacks; Users during attacks; Use of the library; Suffering the consequences of attacks; Value of libraries; retrospectively: current thoughts and feelings about that time; and General thoughts. The presentation shows some of the main findings – all generalized from oral histories, with particular emphasis on findings that reflect on value of libraries.

Keywords: Homeland War in Croatia, libraries, qualitative study

REFERENCES

Curriculum Vitae
Position: Senior Librarian in Scientific and Public Libraries in Dubrovnik; Head of Department for Regional Public and School Libraries, 2001 to date.


Conferences, publications: Member of organizing committees of regional and international conferences 1999 till present. Among them annual international conference Libraries in the Digital Age (LIDA) (Dubrovnik and Zadar, Croatia); Conceptions of Library and Information Science 3 (COLIS 3) (Dubrovnik, 1999); 6th Roundtable on Free Access to Information of Croatian Library Association and FAIFE anti-corruption workshop (Zagreb, 2006). Participated in many other projects, conferences and seminars. Gave lectures and published articles related to special fields of interest: use and users of public libraries; free access to information; professional values and ethics; access and preservation of valuable library holdings; digital libraries and library networks. Among others, presented papers at Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries International Conference (QQML2013), Rome, Italy, June 2013 and the Oral History Association Annual Meeting, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA, October, 2013.