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Irene Lopatovska,
*Ph. D., Associate Professor, School of Information
and Library Science, Pratt Institute*

Reflections on the state of Ukrainian libraries and information institutions

Стаття містить неофіційні спостереження запрошеного вченого зі США про стан українських бібліотек та інформаційних установ. Представлені спостереження і рекомендації згруповано з використанням методу SWOT-аналіз, який є поширеним у бізнесі та управлінні.

Ключові слова: *українські бібліотеки, інформаційні установи, SWOT-аналіз, організаційна культура.*

Introduction

In May 2015 I visited Kyiv as part of a Fulbright Specialist program co-sponsored by the U. S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the Kyiv National University of Culture and Art (KNUKIM). As a part of the two-week program, I gave a series of lectures to Library and Information Science students at KNUKIM, met with teaching faculty, administration and information specialists from KNUKIM, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NUKMA), Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Book Chamber of Ukraine (Knyzhkova Palata) and other organizations. In this essay, I summarize some of my impressions from the visit and thoughts about the state of library and information institutions in Ukraine.

Aim: the article aims to introduce Ukrainian and international reader to the state of Ukrainian libraries and information institutions from the perspective of an outsider.

Methods

This essay is a departure from the traditional approach of reporting results of a social science study. No formal study was conducted during my visit: no qualitative or quantitative data about Ukrainian information institutions were collected and formally analyzed. However, immersion into a different culture allowed me to: a) observe cultural developments from an outsider's perspective; b) compare professional trends in the U. S. and Ukraine; c) summarize observational data that is usually associated with ethnographic methods (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999; Токарев, С. А., 1978). I chose to summarize my thoughts and impressions using a management technique used when evaluating products, services, projects or organizations — the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) (Pickton & Wright, 1998).This technique is widely used in business (Houben, Lenie & Vanhoof, 1999) and academia (Dyson, 2004) to identify areas of strategic development. More recently, it is being used for analysis of social media use (Fernandez, 2009) and e-book adoption (Peet, Nishimoto, Evans, Harwood & Lopatovska, 2014).

SWOT-analysis of information institutions in Ukraine
Strengths

In my opinion, one of the key strengths of Ukrainian libraries, archives and other information institutions (UII) is *Resources* represented in unique collections, developed infrastructure, and talented information professionals.

In the past decades, UII have developed world-class *collections* of cultural heritage and scientific materials[1], creating a unique value proposition for internal and external information markets. Bringing these collections closer to Ukrainian and international readers would benefit information user communities and strengthen the reputation of UII.

Many U. S. libraries would be envious of Ukrainian institutions well-developed brick-and-mortar *infrastructure* of main libraries, archives, branches and storage facilities. Taking advantage of this infrastructure, investing in its maintenance and enhancement, will ensure proper management and access to information resources for decades to come.

A strength that was particularly evident within the KNUKIM organization was *public relations (PR) and marketing*. As a participant of many events at my parent U. S. institution, as well as other organizations and conferences, I rarely see the level of event coverage that I witnessed at KNUKIM, including the presence of a dedicated photographer and immediate social media coverage of departmental events. Strong PR and marketing is a valuable asset in creating and promoting a UII brand and public image.

Related to PR and marketing is another asset of UII: its *reputation*. During my visit, I asked my Ukrainian students to poll their friends and family about their perceived image of a librarian. I give my American students a similar assignment, so student findings allowed me to informally compare the image of a librarian in the U. S. and in Ukraine. Not surprisingly, the findings were similar, suggesting that the general public perceives a librarian as an older lady who is well-educated and loves reading. While we all can strategies about ways to change the public's perception of librarians as "old ladies," the fact that the general Ukrainian population has a positive perception of librarians and libraries can foster public support and be used to further strengthen the reputation of UII (Опитування про підтримку бібліотек з боку населення, 2011).

Another important strength that I was able to observe is the presence of *talented people* at all levels of UII, from library and information science undergraduate students to library directors.

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[1] Some of the world renowned Ukrainian collections are curated by Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (http://www.nbuv.gov.ua/), The Lviv National Vasyl Stefanyk Scientific Library of Ukraine (http://www.lsl.lviv.ua/en/) and National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy Library(http://www.library.ukma.edu.ua/) to name a few.

Presence of the innovative, energetic, knowledgeable information professional is vital for ensuring sustainability and positive changes in the UII systems. In my opinion, organization leadership should invest in recruitment, retention and proper development of this human capital in order to ensure success of their UII.

All of these strengths can serve as a solid foundation for the future developments of UII.

Weaknesses

One of the supporting factors of organizational development is the environment, which comprises of people, culture, and physical space (Sayiner, 2015). I observed several weaknesses related to the *people* and *culture elements* of the environment that might hinder innovation in UII.

For long-term organization development, fostering, attracting and retaining *talented professionals* at all levels of UII organizations would require innovative approaches and a shift of organizational culture. While I met many talented and dedicated professionals, I also heard stories about unmotivated staff members who still follow their decades-old routines, complain, and do not have a will to change the status quo. Personnel resistance to change is not uncommon and requires the use of specific management techniques, such as trying to bring an employer on board with change or terminate him/her (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 1994). A particular problem that might make the second option unavailable to UII management is the lack of knowledgeable and enthusiastic senior staff that could replace difficult employees (Baker, 1987), which necessitates the use of innovative approaches for managing hidebound staff.

At the core of all organizational cultures are organizational values (Hofstede, 1997), and while I was able to observe manifestations of positive values, such as commitment to quality and innovation, consensus-building, and respect for tradition, I also observed manifestations of implicit cultural values that might impede the modernization of UII systems. In my opinion, the areas of potential improvements include:

— Market orientation. Information professionals across the globe are realizing that the value of information institutions should be measured not only by their collections, but also the services they provide to their users (Deane, 2003; Kantor & Saracevic, 1999). It is no longer sufficient to produce a monograph, teach a course or have a world-class collection without understanding a particular user need that the product or service is fulfilling (Duinker & Kasper, 2015; The Future of Libraries Adopting a Market Orientation, 2014). UII offerings should be driven by market analysis and client orientation. Relevant concepts, including principles of usability (a term that does not have an equivalent in Ukrainian language), should be incorporated into academic curriculums. The needs of the stakeholders i. e., current and potential UII clients and information users, employers and students in information science programs, should be considered and appropriate solutions should be tailored for their needs.

— Culture of accountability. In order to foster talent and innovation, UII leadership needs to implement clear performance standards and reinforce mechanisms for rewarding good and penalizing inadequate performance, encourage professional development, creativity and initiative at all career stages. For example, in an academic setting, accountability can be ensured by a holistic system of professor's assessment that would include her/his research activities (number/quality of publications), teaching (measured through anonymous student evaluations), and service to an institution and a larger professional community. In a library setting, professionals can be evaluated by clients and colleagues in addition to their supervisors (Hallowell, et al., 2001).

— Network instead of hierarchical orientation. In the traditional organizational structure of bureaucracy, decision-making is usually the prerogative of top management (Beetham, 1996). During the Soviet era, the culture of delegating decision making to the highest authority was also supported by the political climate and fear of penalty for taking initiative (Leites, 1984). Even now, I have noticed a high degree of open leader-worshiping and hierarchical subordination. In a healthy culture that supports innovation, respect for leadership should be balanced with equal respect for employees and organization clients. Adopting a flexible network structure, characterized by self-directed teams and flexibility to adopt to external environments (Jones, 2010), would help to support healthy progression and innovation in UII.

— Value of time. One of the most noticeable differences between the U. S. and Ukrainian professionals is their attitudes to ward time. While the idiom "time is money" captures the essence of Americans' value of time, Ukrainians have a more "flexible" relationship with time. For example, very few Ukrainian professionals I met had digital calendars and were surprised to learn that my professional calendar usually fills several months in advance. During my trip, some prospective meetings were planned or changed to different times/dates on very short notice. It was not uncommon to see people being late for meetings or leaving meetings early. While the need for better planning and adherence to time commitments might be less critical than other values (such as those stated above), it can encourage efficiency, productivity, and respect for individual and group time.

The final major weakness of UII that became obvious from multiple conversations with UII professionals is funding. In recent years, funding to UII decreased dramatically (ПАН БІБЛІОТЕКАР, 2015), which is hardly a surprise considering the troubling financial health of the nation. In the current political and economic climate, it becomes critical for UII leaders to connect and clearly communicate the value of UII, its integral role in creating and maintaining a national identity (Haigh, 2009). Financial hardships also create pressure to innovate and seek alternative funding sources through grants and collaborations (Drake & Olsen, 1979).

Opportunities

The unique position of UII determined by its strengths, weaknesses, and history presents several opportunities for its future development. One of the opportunities available to UII is to adopt modern practices and standards, less efficient, and more expensive developmental stages (a process called "leapfrogging," (Steinmueller, 2001).UII have the opportunity to learn and adopt the best international practices in information management[2], information science education[3], and other related areas.

Another major opportunity for UII-taking into account the world's current focus on Ukraine — is to enter international information systems. A recent search of the Europeana.eu portal retrieved only 88 items from Ukrainian libraries, including the Research Library of the National Pedagogical University after M. P. Dragomanov, the Maksymovych Scientific Library of the Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, National Technical University of Ukraine "Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", Central Scientific Library of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University

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[2] Some examples of the techniques that took years to develop, and are ready for adoption by UII include the Resource Description and Access (RDA) cataloging standard on formulating bibliographic data (http://www.rdatoolkit.org/), Linked Data method of publishing structure data to enable interlinking of documents (http://linkeddata.org/) and other techniques.

[3] During my visit, I met educators from various institutions who work towards re-branding their departments, diversifying their academic offerings and preparing students for a wider range of career opportunities. Following an international iSchool movement (http://ischools.org/) could offer valuable lessons for restructuring, curriculum planning, and degree diversification in UII education system.

and a few other libraries. Active collaboration with international partners, metadata compatibility (e. g., use of world standards and languages for content description) and similar initiatives can make Ukrainian collections accessible worldwide, ensure more active involvement in international information communities.

Scarcity of information products that were traditionally imported[4], creates opportunities for UII to become dominant players in many information markets, ranging from publishing to information technologies and education. Once political and economic situations in Ukraine stabilize, one should expect an influx of international companies, creating more competition for local enterprises. Current instability presents an opportunity for UII to mobilize and start capturing local information market share now.

Threats

Within the SWOT framework, threats refer to external factors that can jeopardize the future of organization or its offerings. In my opinion, the most serious threats to UII are coming from political and economic uncertainty. The future of UII is largely determined by the political climate: lack of political and public support, which in turn can lead to decreased funding, can be disastrous for the already fragile UII system. UII can mitigate this threat by actively lobbying on behalf of their clients and educating the public and politicians on the importance of information institutions in creating a national identity and competitive advantage (Ferguson, 2007; The Competitive Advantage, 1990), building strong connections to a broad network of national and international cultural heritage institutions, and seeking alternative funding sources.

UII integration into international information systems and financial support from international founders can be threatened by misunderstanding and/or misuse of intellectual property rights laws. It is important for UII to adhere to national and international copyright laws as well as educate a broader public about the benefits of copyright and other intellectual property laws (Maskus, 2000).

Conclusions

Throughout history, UII have developed excellent collections and information infrastructures, and fostered a new generation of knowledgeable and passionate information professionals and leaders. While some remnants of the old Soviet system and current political and economic instability inhibit the improvement of UII, they also create opportunities to innovate, reach out to new partners and funding sources, strengthen marketing, and value proposition to UII and international stakeholders.

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В статье описаны неофициальные наблюдения приглашенного ученого из США о состоянии украинских библиотек и информационних учереждений. Представленные наблюдения и рекомендаци сгрупованы с использованием метода SWOT-анализ, который распространен в бизнеси и управлении.

The article contains informal observations about the state of Ukrainian libraries and information institutions conducted by a visiting Fulbright scholar from the U. S. Presented observations and recommendations are grouped using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) method that is common in business and management.

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[4] Especially in light of Ukraine's tenuous relationship with Russia.