

LET'S TALK ABOUT READERS: READING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

In principle, the reader is the final destination of all written work. Authors would not exist without readers who wanted to read their work; the initial stage of the so-called *book chain*, that of creation, could exist, but not the subsequent stages such as the publication, diffusion, distribution and finally the reading of the work.

Said *book chain* is not a synonym for the *publishing industry*. Without doubt, the industry is its driving force, its heart, but the process that leads from the creation to the reading of the work – or in other words the writer/reader communication – does not encompass only the industrial or the commercial sphere.

If we attempt to limit this process of creation/reading to nothing more than the publishing industry, or if we believe that it should be governed solely by the laws of supply and demand, like any other commercial activity, we overlook the influence and impact this industry has on the shaping of the values, mentality and ethics of a society.

For this reason, all the cultural policies of the governments of developed countries influence this *book chain* in some way, because they are aware of the importance it has in shaping society. Some examples of this governmental influence include library policy, activities to encourage the habit of reading, financial support for the creation and commercialisation of books, etc.

1. From the printed galaxy to the multimedia galaxy

Nowadays, the book is no longer the only medium of information and culture. The construction of values and ethics is inspired by everything that *moves, interacts* and is *communicated* publicly. The prevailing values in a society are decreed by law, they are

configured like something that is ethereal yet real, often arising independently of existing laws, which often become outmoded.

Today's society is changing more than ever before and such changes arrive quickly. We are a world in continual transformation: an information, globalised, multicultural, digital society... Nothing is the same as yesterday and we assume that nothing will be as it is now tomorrow. And we are prepared for change.

Books and all that surrounds them are also changing and adapting to this continually transforming environment.

In the construction of the values of a society, as well as the family and school environment, the traditional communication media such as the cinema, books, magazines, newspapers and everything that forms part of the so-called *printed galaxy* are very important. Nowadays, and increasingly so, there is also the key influence of audio-visual media and new technologies: television, radio, audio-visual production, advertising, telephony, internet, etc., which form part of the *multimedia galaxy*, which is complemented by the *printed galaxy*, the centre of which is still the book.

And these two galaxies, the multimedia and printed galaxies, continually change the manner in which they interact. This leads us to two considerations:

1. The book has gradually stopped being the sole medium for communicating and transmitting values and ideas, as it was in past societies. Nowadays, it competes and interacts with all the other agents that make up the other *multimedia galaxy*.

2. In this creation/reading process two interests converge, which may at times be in contradiction with each other. On the one hand, the legitimate interests of financial gain of the publishing industry, and on the other

the social and civic interests of constructing the values of society.

It is absolutely necessary to maintain both values, the economic and the social, in equilibrium. Nowadays, the book has to compete with all the other elements in order to maintain its position in the market as an appealing commercial product. This need for *competition* has made it sensitive to various commercial influences and at the same time has had an impact on the remainder of the chain.

2. Public libraries and «La BELLA», the book chain

The book chain – «La BELLA» – is the Italian slogan adopted in the recent mobilisations of Italian and Spanish librarians against the introduction of a canon for borrowing items from public libraries.

«La BELLA» is made up of all the agents involved in the communicative process of creation/reading, and goes beyond the commercial circuit. They include librarians, publishers, readers, booksellers and authors (in Spanish, *bibliotecaris, editors, lectors, llibreters i autors*, or BELLA).

This Italian slogan explicitly states and gives special protagonism to one of the most important agents in this communication process between authors and their readers: the libraries.

The libraries – in particular public libraries – play an important and decisive role in placing the creator of a work in contact with his/her potential public. It is also true that, unfairly, in our country it is one of the most overlooked sectors when we speak of the diffusion and promotion of books.

Bookshops, in their commercial role, and public libraries, in their public service function, are the final location that places the book in contact with the reader. What is more, they reflect the two interests that interact within this creation/reading process: the economic and the social. Both are necessary and complementary, and interact synergically in their community.

For a long time, the role of public libraries in this intermediate function of diffusing and promoting books has been overlooked. People usually think of the communication media, advertising, publishing promotions, mediatic projections, book reviews and even word-of-mouth recommendations. On very few occasions has the role of the public service known as the «library» been explicitly acknowledged in this function.

During this stage of diffusing and promoting a book, all the agents involved interact with each other. Consequently, a person may first become aware of a book because it has been recommended by their

library, or users may come to the library asking for books they have found out about on TV or radio programmes, or from the lists of best-sellers published in the newspapers, or from a favourable review in a magazine or newspaper, etc. It goes without saying that media coverage of a book will guarantee it sufficient popularity for it to be requested at the library.

The interaction of the library with readers is vital and has a major impact on the book-reader connection: guiding the reading tastes of citizens, book clubs for adults, teenagers and children; guidance on authors and recommended themes; displays of new publications; book presentations; seminars with authors; programmes for diffusing books to the communication media; activities aimed at encouraging children to read, etc.

3. Public libraries and bookshops: two services aimed at the reader

Public libraries and bookshops are two community locations that permanently and continuously place authors in contact with their readers.

In principle, the reader-user of a public library is very similar to the reader-purchaser of a bookshop because both are locations open to the general public.

The use that citizens make of the public library is somewhat different to that of the bookshop as a consequence of the different functions that each one carries out respectively: providing a public and a commercial service. However, the most usual thing is for citizens to be users of the library and purchasers of bookshops, since they are consumers of books, or readers. In other words, the two locations complement each other, need each other and reinforce each other.

For example, sometimes a person discovers a book through the library and wishes to own it or give to someone as a gift, and goes to a bookshop to purchase it; in other situations, the bookshop – which increasingly operates on an order only basis without holding large stocks – sends a reader who requests a particular work which is now out of print to the library.

In some ways, as part of this process of adapting to the needs and expectations of citizens, public libraries have begun to incorporate a certain aspect of the commercial function of bookshops, since when readers arrive at the public library, they demand something obtained at bookshops: personal and individual service that is tailored to their specific needs.

Furthermore, they will request new publications at the same time as bookshops and for the librarian to advise them on

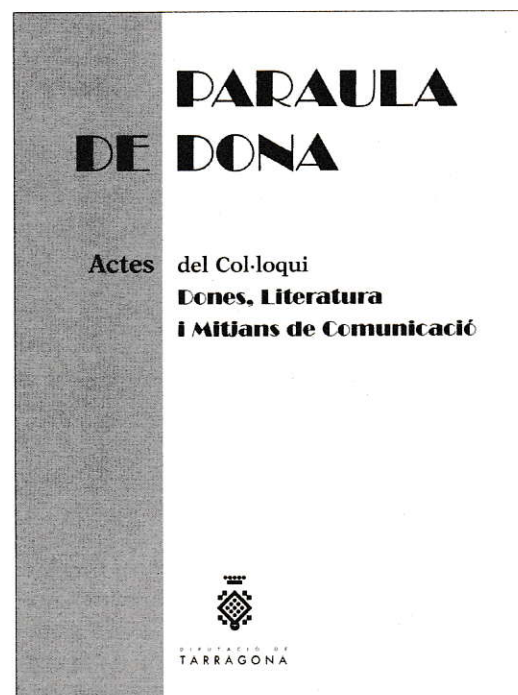
books adapted to their profile, and will trust in the credibility and professionalism of the librarian, who is not motivated by commercial interests but by providing a service to the public.

With regard to service quality, citizens place high value on not encountering queues when borrowing, flexibility in applying the rules and not being penalised for late returns.

Another commercial influence can be seen in the layout and organisation of the library collection. Public libraries are increasingly aware that everything visible «will go out on loan». Consequently, commercial style displays increasingly occupy more space in libraries. Many users enter the library and take whatever they find displayed in the new publications sections or from displays, as they do in bookshops.

Today's public libraries are convinced that their *raison d'être* and social influence lies in satisfying the reading and information needs of citizens, rather than the size of the collection they maintain. For this reason it is particularly interested to know what the user needs and in being able to add value to the search for what users want and helping them select books and reading material. The user, in other words the reader, justifies the existence of libraries, in the same way that a bookshop is maintained thanks to the fact that citizens continue to find it commercially useful.

This is why at public libraries we make an increasingly greater effort to know the users, to know what their needs and expectations are in order to adapt ourselves to them and be able to satisfy them. However, our aim is to go even further and be a public service with a clearly social projection.



The publishing industry is often criticised because in the process of adapting to new demands, it has given in too much to the dictates of the market and has reduced its role of promoting literary works of quality. Public libraries have also adapted considerably in recent years, however, being a public service with cultural and social aims clearly differentiated from those of the commercial circuit, it has followed certain guidelines and has not exceeded certain limits. The activity of libraries does not have to achieve financial results, it has to obtain social and cultural results for its community.

The financial, social and cultural impact that public libraries have in the community is one of the aspects that still has to be published by means of data and indicators. A well-equipped public library is always the centre of an essential cultural and social ecosystem around which thousands of citizens move, one that interacts with the bookshops in its community, promotes authors and the local industry, encourages the habit of reading and, consequently, creates opinion and reflection among citizens – whether actual or potential readers.

To a certain extent, public libraries influence the reading tastes and habits of citizens with aims that are totally different to commercial interests and therefore guarantee the continuance of this equilibrium between economic and social values.

4. Who are our readers? What do they read?

So... who are our readers? When we speak of «readers» at public libraries we are aware that they are not an amorphous or anonymous mass. Quite the opposite, readers are persons, each one with an emotional world, their own lives and personal tastes; and we know that approaching books responds to very diverse interests, as is the case with purchasers who enter a bookshop.

In the public library maintaining a daily balance implies accepting and working with simultaneous scenarios everyday, since we continue to attend to the traditional reader and also to the new typologies that have arisen from the successive social, financial and cultural transformations of our age.

We shall therefore talk about readers from the perspective of a public library. Who are they? What do they want to read? With what needs and expectations do they arrive at the public library?

The book reader has been and remains the most loyal public of a library that has now become a media centre visited by thousands of citizens who use this public location in various ways above and beyond reading.

The concept of «reader» is in itself multidimensional, since it can be defined from very different and dynamic perspectives, because it has evolved over time. For example, we are currently immersed in a multicultural and technologically globalised society that has given rise to two types of readers with specific needs that were unknown until recently:

Firstly, *readers who belong to other cultures*, with reading requirements in their own language, the presence of whom has dramatically increased the interest in learning languages and has increased the reading material relating to travel and different cultures.

Secondly, *virtual readers*, people who are accustomed to accessing information via the Internet: who demand quick information that has already been summarised and selected. They arrive at the library requesting and expecting to obtain information that is fully «encapsulated» and tailored to their needs.

Thus, when we talk about «readers», we are not talking about a theory or a generalisation. Readers are highly diversified, each one with specific needs and expectations, and, what is more, in continual transformation.

The day to day work of the library involves maintaining the balance between the different perceptions and demands of readers, as well as knowing how to advise each one according to their profile.

In order to obtain detailed knowledge of the readers of a country, region, city or neighbourhood, it is necessary to carry out a detailed study and a correct segmentation. Public libraries increasingly work with segmentation as a tool because it helps us

establish what the priorities really are for a specific sector of readers.

The segmentation of readers in public libraries is also an essential tool for planning and establishing the policy for creating and maintaining the collection. It also helps establish better librarian-reader interaction, since readers are increasingly appreciative of not being treated anonymously and for the message to be as personalised as possible. And, evidently, we do not communicate with a teenager and an elderly person in the same manner.

Each segment of the population uses the library in a very different way and with different expectations and has very different perceptions and demands, both in terms of reading habits and conduct. For example, silence and flexibility do not mean the same for a teenager and for an adult, or for a mother who uses the service with her small child or for a student.

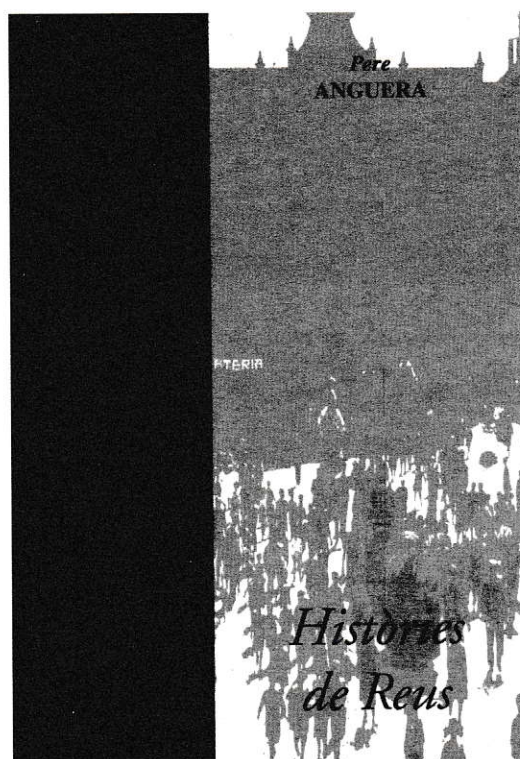
In the same way, reading tastes are highly varied and the result of many intersections and influences. At public libraries we respond to these reading requirements, which have usually been identified previously in the commercial circuit and satisfied by publishing production.

An example of a segment with specific needs is that of young mothers with small children who seek self-help books in relation to their everyday lives, relationships with their partner, the care and education of their children, etc. This segment is also a major consumer of magazines.

Another example is the segment of young people who read fantastic literature, which is also influenced by cinema. This segment of readers is also a major consumer of comics, computer books and new technologies.

Consequently, the commercial aspect of the *book chain* influences the type of reading material that is requested at the library. The prime example of this influence is the user that is basically and almost exclusively a consumer of best-sellers and mediatic books. On many occasions such users arrive at the library asking for a specific title or author because they have been told about the book, or it has been featured on TV, etc. If a good librarian-reader interaction is established, on many occasions such readers will not remain at this initial reading level and will accept recommendations and guidance adapted to their profile and tastes and diversify their demand. On other occasions, the reader will remain loyal to an author or a specific genre without wishing to change.

Reading is often employed as a synonym of narrative, but in truth another type of book is becoming highly sought-after: informative non-fiction. Its growth in demand is often due



to the fact that its authors are usually known and media personalities and because such books are strongly promoted commercially, which has led to them sharing centre stage with narratives or novels as essential reading material.

Another example of the commercial influence in reading material requested at public libraries is the *cinema-literature* interrelation. Major film releases give rise to huge demand at the library for *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* or *Eragon*. In general users want to read the book because they liked the film and they will read all the volumes in the collection, and even other books by the same author, but if they are not available they will rarely be guided towards borrowing another type of book.

Lifestyle habits also influence the type of reading material asked for. For example, the increase in regular travel has been accompanied by a need to discover different worlds and cultures: books about Rome, Egypt and exotic cultures and also the need and curiosity to learn other languages, apart from English, as a means of communication. There is also great demand for and constant growth in the travel and tourist guides section.

Another influence of lifestyle habits on reading can be seen in the difficult transition from adolescent reading to adult reading. When people become adults, work and family commitments lead to a tendency not to use the library as much. It seems that there is a point in somebody's life when they say that «they have no time to read». After a while, these people usually return to the library accompanied by their small children, and start using the library again and re-enter the world of books and introduce their children to it.

The public library not only responds to reading needs but also maintains a policy of diffusing and promoting books and reading, in accordance with its social aims of providing a public service. Such aims do not always coincide with the commercial reading trends of the moment. Therefore, for public libraries it is essential to promote the local publishing industry, the diffusion and projection of local authors, cooperation with bookshops and the promotion of shopping locally, collaborating in the cultural and social events of its region by providing information and preparing thematic guides, reading proposals and specific themes related to whatever is important in its community, the treatment of reading material that helps generate social harmony, the defence of human rights, environmental sustainability and a long etcetera. Such issues are often not commercial priorities, yet often allow the

reader to discover works and authors that would go completely unnoticed were it not for the library.

Furthermore, the public library complements the commercial circuit and its collection does not respond to commercial but to technical and coherent criteria, since one of its aims is to be a record of humanity, with particular regard to everything that refers to its community, and as a consequence it works transversally with local information and publications. These are items that have to be promoted and conserved beyond their limited commercial stock life in a bookshop.

Readers know that at the library they will always find a type of book that there is no longer any interest in maintaining within the commercial circuit.

In recent years, our country has experienced a true resurgence in public libraries and socialisation with regard to books and reading. There has been an extraordinary increase in activities to encourage reading, aimed at both adults and children. These are activities within this spirit of equilibrium and of working to equip the community with values that will make it fairer, more supportive and cohesive.

Among a mediatic, technological and virtual society, book clubs and activities based on books in the style of literary salons of the 18th century, public libraries are becoming increasingly important.

We have presented a brief overview of the world of reading and of readers from the perspective of the public library and its function as an intermediary in the author-reader relationship. For a library, the user is its *raison d'être*, and its principle function is to know how to put readers in touch with the books they request or require.

We are aware that not all users of public libraries are readers. Increasingly, today's public library is a hybrid library with the presence of both galaxies: the printed and the multimedia galaxy, and takes the form of a true media centre. However, in this new public library, the book and the reader remain the most important elements that the library interrelates, the true protagonists and beneficiaries and its *raison d'être* in public service terms.