Library Review
Libraries and Public Perception: A Comparative Analysis of the European Press, By Anna Galluzzi

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It's not uncommon for libraries to prove their value to the communities they serve. Traditionally this comes through cost-benefit analyses or return-on-investment models. The problem with this sort of analysis is the focus on the quantitative and not the qualitative. 'The price of everything, and the value of nothing,' as Oscar Wilde might say.

Libraries and Public Perception takes a unique approach here, exploring a different way to measure the worth of a library.

Galluzzi starts with a comparison of other ways to gauge value, most of them from an economic impact worldview. She then explains how none of these quite fit how and why libraries operate, and proposes a new way of determining value by analysing newspaper references.

The author goes into great detail about how the research method, applied across newspapers from the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy from 2008 to 2012. In order to achieve a balance, two newspapers were chosen from each country, one reflecting a centre-right viewpoint, and the other a centre-left.

Next, the author undertook a form of text-mining of references to 'library' or 'libraries'. Database queries uncovered articles from the eight newspapers, and a secondary selection process was needed to take into account any 'false positives' to exclude such things as figures of speech or book titles. After selection, the articles underwent text and content analysis, which was performed manually, as Galluzi believes 'that no software can replace human reasoning'. However, the author doesn't give an indication of how long this work took.

The difference of this approach is clear – viewing the value of libraries through the eyes of the communities they serve provides an outside-in perspective rather than the library-centric point of view normally used in such situations.

Galluzzi delves into the analysis by country and newspaper, providing a well balanced view of things, as well as presenting library topics and trends covered by the all the newspapers. The author found 13 main topics, ranging from 'politics/strategy/management' to 'acquisition/open access'.

The author then examines country-by-country and newspaper-by-newspaper, providing an interesting perspective on the public opinion of libraries (and the presumed priorities for libraries) in those countries. This segues into what Galluzzi calls 'supranational' analysis, where common threads across countries are investigated. The main focus here seems to be – in descending order – digital libraries and their impact; the global financial crisis and budgets; and the role of libraries in society. While the weighting here seems very public-library-oriented, it's still a hopeful view of matters, as the discussions are not based purely in economics.

Several graphs of these analyses are provided to help understand how it all fits together; unfortunately, these are in black and white, and shading to indicate different topics is inconsistent and at times unclear.

Galluzi's exploration of letters to the editor and opinion pieces regarding libraries is useful. Whilst there are a few negative comments, there are more praising the work done by libraries and the significance of their role in society. This section should come in very handy to a librarian wanting to respond to the 'why do we need libraries when we have the internet' question.

The book finishes with a synthesis of the themes and topics from the analysis, viewing them from both the library and public perspective. Galluzi draws both threats and opportunities from this synthesis, and makes some good recommendations for librarians based on the public perception of libraries.

Libraries and Public Perception provides a new lens on an old conversation, and while there may be few libraries able to undergo the same analysis, the book provides much to consider.