

## THE HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD NATIONAL LIBRARY'S MESSAGE TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

### PORUKA STOGODIŠNJE NACIONALNE BIBLIOTEKE BUDUĆIM GENERACIJAMA

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#### Abstract

The role and tasks of the library as an institution have considerably changed. Libraries are more and more regarded as powers that create and connect communities. The National Library of Estonia keeps that in mind when maintaining and establishing networks both as a humanities library as well as a social sciences and parliamentary library. Partnerships with libraries and memory institutions are especially important, as we are becoming a central service development institution for Estonian libraries.

A great change has taken place in our way of thinking. The National Library of Estonia is no longer collection-centred, not only carrying out the mission to preserve cultural heritage, but is also human-centred, customer-centred. Our goals are to make collections available as much as possible, to address our users, and to provide an inspiring environment via the library space. The modern national library should indeed remind of a modern public library – the library of the whole nation. It is a place from where to draw inspiration, where to create and expose the creation, and where to hold discussions and debates.

Today we offer a bulk of digital content as open data and the development of digital humanities services is in progress. Still we have to admit that the library's role in teaching people how to use (open) data and how to support users with digital competencies should increase. Libraries are facing a never-ending work in developing the digital competences of their staff, who, in turn, will teach the library users, the citizens of e-governed state.

The vision of the National Library of Estonia for the coming years is to be the library of a new generation and the developer of librarianship ideas by providing an open, inspiring, and participatory environment for activities. We have used a metaphor of a bridge while drawing up our new strategy. We aim to create a bridge between knowledge and people. A bridge that every new generation will build again and what will become ever more telling, significant and lasting by every generation.

**Key words:** openness, vanishing boundaries, library space, rebuilding premises, customer-centred approach, digital competencies, support to e-governance, library's image, changing attitudes

#### Sažetak

Uloga i zadaci biblioteke kao institucije su se znatno promijenili. Biblioteke se sve više smatraju silama koje stvaraju i povezuju zajednice. Nacionalna biblioteka Estonije to ima na umu kada održava i uspostavlja mreže i kao biblioteka humanističkih nauka i društvenih nauka, ali i kao parlamentarna biblioteka. Posebno su važna partnerstva s bibliotekama i institucijama za pamćenje, budući da postajemo središnja institucija za razvoj usluga estonskih biblioteka.

Došlo je do velike promjene u našem načinu razmišljanja. Nacionalna biblioteka Estonije više nije usmjerena na prikupljanje, ne provodi samo misiju očuvanja kulturne baštine, nego je usmjerena i na čovjeka, na korisnika. Naši su ciljevi učiniti zbirke što je moguće više dostupnim, obratiti se našim korisnicima i pružiti inspirativno okruženje putem bibliotečkog prostora. Moderna nacionalna biblioteka trebala bi podsjećati na modernu nacionalnu biblioteku – biblioteku cijele nacije. To je mjesto odakle se crpi inspiracija, gdje se stvara i razotkriva stvaranje te gdje se održavaju diskusije i debate.

Danas nudimo veliki dio digitalnog sadržaja kao otvorene podatke, a razvoj digitalnih humanističkih usluga je u toku. Ipak, moramo priznati da bi se uloga biblioteke u podučavanju ljudi kako koristiti (otvorene) podatke

i kako pomoći korisnicima s digitalnim sposobnostima, trebala povećati. Biblioteke se suočavaju s beskrajnim radom na razvijanju digitalnih sposobnosti svojih zaposlenika, koji će zauzvrat podučavati korisnike biblioteka, građane države e-upravljanja.

Vizija Nacionalne biblioteke Estonije za naredne godine jest biti biblioteka nove generacije i biti graditeljica ideja bibliotekarstva pružanjem otvorenog, inspirativnog i učesničkog okruženja za aktivnosti. Koristili smo metaforu mosta dok smo sastavljali našu novu strategiju. Cilj nam je stvoriti most između znanja i ljudi. Most koji će svaka nova generacija ponovo graditi i koji će postati sve jasniji, značajniji i trajniji za svaku generaciju.

**Ključne riječi:** otvorenost, granice koje nestaju, bibliotečki prostor, obnova prostora, pristup usmjeren na korisnika, digitalne kompetencije, podrška e-upravljanju, slika biblioteke, promjena stavova



The National Library of Estonia was established as a parliamentary library on 21 December 1918 – the same year the independent Republic of Estonia was founded. Knowing that the first European national libraries began developing in the 17th and 18th centuries, then one hundred years of existence is not exactly a long history for a national library. At the same time it can be said that the history of no other library in Estonia has been to such extent entwined with the political history of the Estonian society as is the history of the National Library. The building of the National Library, which was opened to the public twenty-five years ago, also carries symbolic value. The building was designated as a protected cultural property in September 2018 and recalls our people the years of the restoration of independence of Estonia, the Singing Revolution. The National Library is a part of the history of the Estonians' self-determination

and independent thinking. But in what way does the National Library relate to the modern world, the modern society, and how does it address today's generations and might address the future generations – these are the questions I am trying to answer here.

It has been said that the Estonians are book people, the fact about our home libraries corroborates the saying. *The Guardian* recently published an article about the research that revealed that Estonians came in first regarding the number of books on their shelves at home. An average Estonian has 218 books at home. According to the survey results, Norwegians placed second with 212 books and the people of the Czech Republic placed third with 204 books. Pondering upon our home libraries, a beloved Estonian writer and semiotician, Valdur Mikita, has said, "A person who in the

summer evening sits amidst the total chaos of one's grandmother's home library, wearing socks with holes in their heels, and has lost one's mobile phone should be the prototype of a happy human." In what way should it concern a national library? I am of the opinion that the metaphor of the prototype of a happy human, proposed by Mikita, in a way, sets an example for the spatial design of a modern library. This figurative expression gives a hint of the idea of a natural, homely environment, where a person can let one's thoughts wander. The metaphor of the mobile phone refers, in turn, to noise. As a counterbalance to the world full of noise – and noise may, of course, appear both in the forms of information, sound, image, as well as light –, noiseless areas are gaining value. I am convinced that library space should definitely be among those noiseless areas. Proceeding from that, the National Library of Estonia has set itself a goal to offer an inspiring library space, which, in turn, provides space for new ideas and creation.

And proceeding from this knowledge, we have formulated the vision of the National Library of Estonia for the coming years – to be the library of a new generation and the developer of librarianship ideas by providing an open, inspiring, and participatory environment for activities. However, the word *openness* has a special meaning in this context. Openness is one of the basic values of libraries that supports the mission of the library as an institution that provides free access to information for everybody. At the same time we are aware that there can be several interpretations for carrying out this mission. For instance, in the case of national libraries, the dilemma has existed between the long-term preservation of cultural heritage and making the collections available. The digital age has diminished this contradiction a lot and, at the same time, brought along revising the ideas of the library as a space and the space as a service. In the course of this revision process and following the example of many libraries, the National Library of Estonia has also been striving to achieve greater openness.

Here, I would like to recall a past incident. Ten years ago, when the National Library launched its home lending service of books published after WW II, a manager of one of Estonian public libraries asked me whether we were going

to compete with public libraries. Back then, I thought that this was meant to be a reproach. Today I take it for a compliment, because the National Library has advanced in huge steps making its collections easily available.

And if we take a look at the direction in which the libraries are developing, then the boundaries between libraries of different types are not as clearly definable as they were some decades ago. The role and tasks of the library as an institution have considerably changed. Libraries are more and more regarded as powers that create and connect communities. While imagining its future, the National Library of Estonia exactly keeps in mind the ways to maintain and establish networks both as a humanities library as well as a social sciences and a parliamentary library. Partnerships with libraries and memory institutions are especially important. We are becoming a central service development institution for Estonian libraries. To date, the developments include the e-publications lending environment, the digital archive of Estonian publications, an innovative system of interlibrary lending, an idea of a common information system of Estonian libraries.

The road to openness has not been easy, overcoming one barrier at a time. The National Library's unique, extremely important task of the preserver of cultural heritage and the architecture of its building that reminds of a fortress have shaped the library's image a lot. It is the image of a dignified institution, a closed membership club, if you please, where not everyone is welcomed. And this image is difficult to change in spite of all the efforts. This is quite well illustrated by a reaction that I heard when discussing the remodelling of the library's building that will start next year. Under this plan, there is an idea to erect a separate building for stacks outside the main library building. Someone involved in the discussion remarked with a surprise that if the building of the National Library would not hold stacks any more, then what would remain to be housed there at all – for them the National Library is just one big storage facility.

Today we can state that there are neither physical nor virtual barriers that restrict entrance to the library. True, the restrictions and barriers provided by the law have remained – for instance, the access protected by the Copyright

Act while entering the e-Library. Nevertheless, the physical library space must support openness in any possible way. So, we have tried to redesign in that spirit certain areas in the library's building that would help to refute the previously described image of the National Library as a closed institution. The entrance, which – perhaps surprisingly too many – might turn out to be a decisive obstacle to entering the library, serves as a good example of areas that needed improving. Our visitors frequently asked where the library began in our building. We redesigned the entrance area to the library, applying service design methods. The result is clearly visible and works well.

As mentioned previously, we are waiting for the realisation of a wonderful opportunity to remodel the building complex of the National Library into a modern, inspiring cultural and educational centre in the coming years. The vision of the new centre is to be the heart of Estonian humanities that consolidates into a single centre the provision of services to state authorities with similar functions. In the future, the departments of the National Archive of Estonia that are located in Tallinn will also be housed in our building. It will provide an opportunity to offer new services on the basis of the emerging synergy and to improve the quality of services provided to already existing target groups.

A great change has taken place in our way of thinking. The National Library is no longer collection-centred, not only carrying out the mission to preserve cultural heritage, but is also human-centred, customer-centred. Our goals are to make collections available as much as possible, to address our users, and to provide an inspiring environment via the library space. As we know, changing the way of thinking and attitudes is the most time-consuming and difficult part of making any kind of changes. I can be proud of our national library, as today we are all tuned to the common understanding, being of the opinion that the purpose of all our activities is to serve our library user in the best possible way. The modern national library should indeed remind of a modern public library – the library of the whole nation. It is a place from where to draw inspiration, where to create and expose the creation, and where to hold discussions and debates.

Though the physical library and library space are time-tested values whose necessity no one

doubts, the library is becoming increasingly important fulcrum for the citizens of e-governed state.

It should be mentioned here that Estonia holds sixteenth position among 193 countries in the United Nations' E-government Development Index (UN E-Government Survey 2018 / Department of Economic and Social Affairs. New York: United Nations). Denmark leads the Index.

In the context of a modern research library, including the national library, the data-centred approach rather than the collection-centred approach is used while dealing with the library's assets. The Estonian Legal Deposit Copy Act, in force since 2017, requires the publishers to submit to the National Library an output-ready file of any publication they publish. In that way, the amount of data in the digital archive of the National Library is growing in addition to digitised collections and the Web archive. And the capacity of the library's digital content depends on the capability to provide services that make these data available and enable to process these. Today we offer a bulk of digital content as open data and the development of digital humanities services is in progress. Nevertheless, we have to admit that, at the present maturity level, the library's role in teaching people how to use (open) data should increase. If we take a look at the Estonian e-governance, then the e-governance has made a bulk of data public, but there still is an undiscovered potential in showing how to understand and profit from these. That in turn, in connection with e-governance services, leads us to the important role of libraries – to support users with digital competencies. By employing digitally competent librarians, the libraries of e-governed state have an opportunity to assist the citizens in using e-governance services and support other communication with the e-governed state. Both trends – the use of open data and teaching digital competencies – precondition that the library's staff has new competencies, including the understanding of how the e-governed state functions and the ways the user wants to benefit from it. So, libraries are facing a never-ending work in developing the digital competences of their staff, who, in turn, will teach the library users, the citizens of e-governed state. A number of development

possibilities for using the data also depend on the acquired digital competencies. The national library has a big opportunity to learn in this field and pass on the knowledge it has gained.

### To sum up

One of the strategic focuses of the National Library in the recent years is titled “The Story of the Collection”. This is a word game that urges us to tell stories on the basis of our collections in addition to collecting books. This is a weighty task and, at the same time, a serious challenge. In fact, we are talking about the ways how the National Library can address today's and new generations, tell meaningful stories.

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Rein Raud, an Estonian man of letters, says in his book *Meaning in Action. Culture as a Network of Practices*, “The knowledge, the skills and the views do not simply have to be accepted by each new generation of performers; they also have to become meaningful for them. In the process of transmission the cultural practice is constantly reconstructed, even if it is carried on without alterations.”

We have used a metaphor of bridge while drawing up our new strategy. We aim to create a bridge between knowledge and people. A bridge that every new generation will build again and what will become ever more telling, significant and lasting by every generation.

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