# The curious case of travel-related events in public libraries

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## Abstract

Public libraries should be community centres that nurture cultural development, lifelong learning and socializing. All of these aspects are typical for library events. This paper presents research into how travel-related events support a library's mission, how they are organized, promoted and how users view them. Several studies were conducted in Mestna knjižnica Ljubljana (MKL) at travel-related events in 2015 and 2016, including interviewing ten librarians and four users, questionnaire survey with 160 participants and analysis of 129 travel-related events. The results revealed that travel-related events are frequently organized in all branches of MKL, they are well visited and users are generally satisfied with them. However, there is still room for improvement in organization and promotion of events. Furthermore, this paper argues that this type of event is a good opportunity to help fulfil the library mission and bring people into the library.

**KEYWORDS:** public libraries, events, adults, travel-related events, lifelong learning

## Introduction

Public libraries have many roles: for example, they have to provide for cultural development, support lifelong learning and have a social role, as well. An important role of the public library is providing a focus for cultural and artistic development in the community and helping to shape and support the cultural identity of the community (Koontz and Gubbin 2010, 8). Libraries, especially public libraries, create a diverse cultural context, freedom without stereotypes and lifelong learning for different users. Use of the library for research, education, and leisure interests brings people into informal contact, providing a positive social experience. Libraries should foster social and cultural activities, which support community interests (Koontz and Gubbin 2010, 9). One of the ways to do this is by providing space and organizing diverse cultural programmes and special events, including travel-related events. In Slovenia the number of library events quadrupled in the last 25 years while the number of attendees per event remains constant (Statistični podatki o knjižnicah 2017).

This paper focuses on a part of a broader study of user experience of events for adults at MKL (Ljubljana City Library – Mestna knjižnica Ljubljana). It is the largest public library in Slovenia, catering to needs of approximately 300 000 inhabitants of Slovenia's capital and surrounding municipalities. MKL network consists of 37 branch libraries, with 13 of those located in eight nearby municipalities. It has also Central regional library Office to coordinating of the tasks of the central regional library for the central Slovenian region. The study was done in collaboration with MKL, where they identified a need to improve their events and were looking for a partner to help them with the assessment of the situation and provide them with a starting point for preparation of guidelines. With this MKL showed its strong dedication to research-based library practice.

This paper aims to present the results pertaining to travel-related events as well as discuss the place of travel-related events in the broader field of library services

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## Theoretical framework

Events in a public library are a targeted and time-limited activity. The main purposes are to motivate specific target groups to visit the library and use its services and materials, develop reading culture and promote lifelong learning. Carefully planned programmes and events bring people into the library. Public library events are usually open to general public, which means libraries should offer events for a wide variety of audiences: children, young adults, parents, senior citizens, small business owners, corporate executives, homemakers, college students … But the audience is only one element. For the right topic, librarians may want to let their library collection be their guide: they know which items are always checked out; what questions patrons are asking at the information desk; they can analyse and generate data that show circulation trends. "Books on computers and technology, travel, and cooking always seem to be in demand. This shows the areas of interest to library patrons" (Lear 2013, 80).

In today's online world, libraries remain places of contact and community. With the goal of becoming a multipurpose community centre, libraries are increasingly adding many special programs and services such as yoga or Pilates, Zumba classes, tai chi, fitness program … (Fowler 2016; Mulholland 2011; Rohr 2016; Lenstra 2018). This transformation is a consequence of trying to "flexibly respond to the diverse needs of the communities they serve" (Lenstra 2018, 63).

However, librarians cannot settle on a particular event simply because someone thinks it would be fun, or they heard it was done successfully at another local library, or speaker is supposed to be good. They have to make rational decisions, based on the library's mission and goals.

Preparation is the key to success. Librarians have to organize and determine: the purpose of event, target audience, event type and title, date and start and end time, number of people expected to attend, preliminary budget, special

equipment needs. While sometimes libraries involve volunteers in preparation of events (Stevenson 2012),usually they do not invite users or attendees to help. Novljan (2002, 77) suggests that users should be made aware that they can help with preparation and execution of events.

Further, "it makes good sense to have clearly identifiable goals with quantifiable, measurable objectives" (Stevenson 2012, 19), as it makes evaluation of events relatively easy. Of course, one might argue that there is nothing special about organizing events and that it can be done by any professional with managerial skills, inside or outside of a library. While there is no denying that having good managerial skills is critical for organization of events, librarians should have some other key advantages. They usually have a very good understanding of their users through work experience.  But perhaps more importantly, professional librarians are best equipped to assess the information wants and needs of their users, or rather specific groups of users, and hopefully also have a refined sense of social justice, which is very important in the context of public libraries, but often neglected in terms of management in general. Public libraries should therefore be well-suited to host such events, when thoughtfully planned and/ or prepared by skilled librarians.

**Travel-related events**

This paper focuses on travel-related events, which we define as any event having to do with travel. Many of these events can be described as travelogues (i.e. they describe a particular journey undertaken by an individual or a group or they present a certain place) and can take different forms including film projections and travel lectures. There are also events that do not present accounts of travel, but rather focus on the culture of a foreign country (e.g., Moore (2015) reports on an event featuring French cuisine and movies), which can lead to wish for travelling abroad. Other travel-related events may be associated with travel tips or acquiring skills, useful for travelling. For example, Rothstein and Schull (2010, 121-23) suggest some Library 2.0 oriented programmes that should help older adults find and share travel-related information online. In fact, Vavrek (1995, 24) suggested seniors to be the most appropriate audience for travel-related events. However, others targeted such events to attract those between ages of 20 and 40 (Moore 2015), or even children (e.g. Skokie Public Library 2016).

There is no single categorization of library events. For example, MKL sorts its events into: professional and popular lectures, literary events, travelogues, con-certs, films, theatre performances, craft workshops, classes and exhibitions. In fact, Slovenian public libraries frequently host travel-related events (e.g. Jenko 2013; Logar 2010), but they are obvious outliers,when comparing MKL's catego-rization to those of other similarly sized public libraries throughout the world. In fact, many libraries around the world do not hold travel-related events, or if they do, these are one-off events that are promoted simply as lectures / presenta-tions. It is therefore not surprising that travel-related events in libraries are not a popular topic in literature. If they are discussed at all, they are mentioned very

briefly (Lear 2013; Walton 2001). Sometimes, the focus is on the skills, needed to travel, rather than travel lectures (i.e. storytelling with photographs, videos and artefacts), which account for the vast majority of travel-related events in MKL.

Of course, travel related events are not unique to libraries. The lack of travel-related events inlibraries may be a result of similar events being held by or in other types of profit (e.g. travel agencies) and non-profit (e.g. community centres) institutions. However, it has to be stressed that Ljubljana also has other venues (e.g. geographical society, youth centres, bookstores …) where travel-related events take place outside of libraries, although this appears to be more or less ad-hoc and is not a result of carefully planned system.

Travel-related events offer a strong dimension of engagement. The choice of event usually depends on library's resources, presenters' availability, location and patron demographics. These events reinforce the idea of the library as a centre of community and lifelong learning. Travel-related events offer the participants an opportunity to gain new knowledge or expand their knowledge in different areas, e.g. geography, history, cultural anthropology and ethnology. They generally follow the same concept: a speaker talks about his experiences of travelling abroad, while showing photographs of in her/his travel, and sometimes also original artefacts related to the region discussed. Education is often combined with entertainment through amusing anecdotes and the atmosphere is usually relaxed. Not only is there a contact between the lecturer and the audience, travel-related events can involve all of human sensory systems, including tactile, olfactory and gustatory systems. While travel-related events may help fulfil the educational needs, this cannot be the only factor in organization of such events, including cultural, recreational and social factors.

That travel is an attractive topic was shown by the results of a study among MKL users (Šinko, 2013), where courses on travel-related topics, such as preparing itineraries, were found to be of the most interest. Moreover, travel-related events are generally well visited, at least in Slovenia (Praprotnik 2014).

Another issue that arises when dealing with travel-related events is the fact that sometimes they are provided by for-profit companies, such as travel agencies. They see public libraries as an inexpensive / free-of-charge venues for promotion of their services. While this does not differ greatly from authors promoting their books (some of them also travel-related), which has been the mainstay of public library events, there is still the question of whether public libraries that are funded by public money should offer free advertising space for private companies. On a related note – should libraries remunerate presenters for their travelogues, especially if the presentations are more or less promotion oriented?

## Research questions

While our research focused on events for adults in MKL in general, this paper presents results pertaining to the state of travel-related events in particular. The main motivation for our research was to gain insight into the user experience of the participants. We also aimed to find out, what the characteristics of the people attending travel-related events in MKL are and if they differed from those attending other types of events. Based on the distinct lack of literature on the subject of travel-related events, a more general question arises: Should there be a place for travel-related events in public libraries?

## Methodology

We used several methods and techniques (surveys, in-depth interviews, reaction cards, content analysis, and observation) to obtain information about events for adults from participants, librarians and written sources. We conducted personal interviews with four participants of two travel-related events and ten librarians. Attendees were asked to participate in the study after the end of the event, when they were leaving the library, at the events in March 2016. Most of them were pensioners and one was a student.We also interviewed librarians, who are responsible for organizing events in various branches of the library (which differed in various characteristics, e.g., size, number of members, distance from the city center, demographic structure of population served, suitability of event venue(s), number of employees and availability of other events in the local area) in summer 2016.  Theanalysis of a three-month period of events in MKL (March-May 2016), based on library website and brochure information, gave additional insight into events. Crucially, based on the previous research, in November 2016, we conducted a questionnaire survey of attendees at all types of events (excluding reading groups, exhibitions and various courses) in MKL in that month, with a response rate of about 50%. Out of 790 responses at 54 different events in MKL, 160 (20 %) were by participants at 10 travel-related events.

Table 1. Researches about travel-related events in MKL

|  | Time span | Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Analysis of events in libraries | 2015 | 97 travel-related events January-December 2016 |
| Analysis of events in libraries | 2016 | 32 travel-related events March-May 2016 |
| Interview with participants | March 2016 | 4 participants at two travel-related events |
| Interview with librarians | July-August 2016 | 10 |
| Questionnaire survey | November 2016 | 160 participants at 10 events |

# Research Results

## Travel-related events in MKL

In 2015 MKL held 1063 events for adults. Of these, 97 were travel-related and attracted 3288 participants. With an average of 34 participants per event, travel-related events ranked as the most visited type of event in MKL, which is in line with the results of November 2016 survey (there the average was 31 participants) as well as reports from elsewhere (Lear 2013, 198, Moore 2015). Travelogues were among the less frequent types of events at MKL in 2015, behind professional and popular lectures and literary events (when including reading groups). The same pattern was also observed in our analysis of the period from March to May 2016 and again in November 2016, when we carried out our survey (14 out of 78 events were travelogues). While the varied nature of events makes it difficult to compare data, it is estimated that about 10-15% of events in MKL are travel-related. The only comparable percentage found in literature is that by Sapir (1994, 16-7), where 15% of events for seniors that took place in Western Pennsylvania were travelogues. A quick look at the web sites of some major public libraries around the world suggests this percentage to be considerably lower.

## Attendees of travel-related events

We were also interested to find out, who attends travel-related events and how their characteristics compare to those attending any kind of event. We did not find significant differences between the two (percentages are provided for easier comparison). According to data from our survey, about 70% of all participants were female and almost 90% came from the city of Ljubljana (Table 2). About 40% were retired and another 40% were employed. Two thirds of participants were over 45 years old and less than 20% were under 35 (Table 3). Almost two thirds of participants had at least a college degree and most of the rest were high school educated (Table 4). More than two thirds of participants described themselves as at least occasional attendees of library events in MKL (Table 5). About two thirds of participants of travel-related events were members of MKL, which is about 10 percentage points lower than the number for all events.

Table 2. Certain demographical characteristics of attendees (in %)

|  | Female | MKL Member | Resident of Ljubljana |
|---|---|---|---|
| Travelogues | 70 | 66 | 89 |
| All events | 72 | 76 | 82 |

Table 3. Age structure of attendees (in %)

|  | <25 | 25-35 | 36-45 | 46-60 | 61+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Travelogues | 7 | 10 | 17 | 28 | 37 |
| All events | 9 | 14 | 15 | 25 | 37 |

Table 4. Educational structure of attendees (in %)

|  | First visit | Rarely | Occasionally | Frequently | Regularly |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Travelogues | 9 | 12 | 35 | 36 | 7 |
| All events | 10 | 8 | 33 | 35 | 15 |

Table 5. Frequency of event attendance (in %)

|  | Elementary | Vocational | High | Junior | University | Masters/doctorate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Travelogues | 1 | 3 | 31 | 25 | 36 | 5 |
| All events | 2 | 3 | 32 | 24 | 31 | 9 |

Interviews with librarians showed that most of them are sure that this type of event is the best opportunity to attract young and male population, i.e., two of the least frequent groups of visitors in the library. However, the survey does not confirm this, as the majority of participants are over 45 (Table 3) and women (Table 2), just like withall other kinds of events. In the survey 28% of participants were non-users. This, at least in part, confirmed reports by interviewed librarians that travel-related events attract more non-users, unemployed users and in general a more mixed group of attendees (gender- and age-wise) compared to other types of events.

Our interviews with librarians showed that travel-related events also attract people with special needs, especially people with mental disorders, who are regular attendees in certain libraries. In general, the topics are interesting to them due to the quantity of pictures and the picturesque examples, as well as the opportunity to ask questions and speak freely.

**Participants' satisfaction with travel-related events**

Generally, our survey found that participants were highly satisfied with the events they attended in general and travel-related events in particular (on the scale of 1 to 5 the average score was 4.73; only 2 participants rated a particular event as low as a 3). Further, in-depth interviews showed that the participants especially enjoyed picturesque photography, as well as inspiring, interesting, witty and well-prepared lectures. Their motivation for attending were new

knowledge about the county, people and their culture or habits and not least practical information about the travel, e. g. airfare costs, personal security, transport and overnight stays.

Table 6. Satisfaction with the event on the scale of 1-5 (in %)

| Rating | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Travelogues | 0 | 0 | 2 | 22 | 76 |
| All events | 1 | 1 | 6 | 18 | 73 |

In both the survey and interviews there were only a few isolated cases, where participants expressed minor dissatisfaction with a particular component of an event, e.g. the extensive length, poor view, quiet speaker, poor air quality, too many or too few audience members …

Additionally, almost 40% of all respondents in the questionnaire survey (regardless of event type) chose travelogues (the second most popular choice behind personal growth) as the content of events that they would like to see more of.

As the main purpose of the study was to gain insight into user experience, we also provided a list of attributes of both the event and the presenter, which we grouped in three dimensions (quality, utility emotions), where participants could choose as many attributes to describe their experience as they liked. Out of all the different event types, travelogues were the ones where the three dimensions were the most balanced. It has to be noted that this only takes into account the positive attributes, as there were not enough negative attributes chosen.

While overall feedback is certainly positive, this may be a result of events being free-of-charge. Also, it is possible that those who did not enjoy the events as much, declined to take part in the survey and interviews.

Additionally, there is a significant group of (especially older) people that attend various events (half of the people in our survey identified themselves as - at least - frequent attendees) and is therefore less likely to criticize any particular event. In fact the survey also found, there is a slightly lower percentage of travelogue attendees that only attend events at their own branch (24%) compared to 29% for all respondents. This was also detected in our interviews, where librarians observed that travel-related events drew a different group of visitors than other types of events, with some of the attendees coming from different parts of the city.

**Organization of travel-related events**

Most librarians that we interviewed in MKL organize at least one travel-related event per month in their library. It depends on the size of library, space capac-

ity and financial resources. A librarian from a small rural branch of the library mentioned that this type of event could be the most appropriate for their users and confirmed that attendance is the highest for this type of event. As time for preparation is also important, it must be stressed that some librarians do not consider travel-related events to be as time consuming to organize as some other types of events because speakers relatively independent..

While library events are often based on programmes that cater to the needs of specific groups of users, MKL is often not as proactive. In fact, there is a distinct lack of true programmes with a clear motivation, although there is much dedication particularly to travel-related events from the staff. Many events of different types, including travel-related events, are a result of offers that come from outside the library rather than a product of careful planning. In fact, librarians that we interviewed said that they receive many (from 5 to 40) e-mails per week for different types of events, including travel-related events, from individuals and associations. This does not imply, however, that there is no control, as all of the events have to be approved. Also, at least one branch of the library actively seeks to include local travellers and their presentations. In the end, the lecturers are very independent and the librarians often trust and leave them to conduct the event themselves. Therefore, sometimes the librarians are disappointed or surprised by the quality of presentation.

There are also fluctuations of events throughout the year as well as during the week. For example, events are rare in the summer, while colder months (from September to April) are the most fruitful for events. Additionally, Fridays generally are not as suitable for library events as other days, as there is much competition from events hosted by other institutions throughout the city. This can also be seen in our analysis of the events in March through May 2016, where we found that the majority of travel-related events took place in the middle of the week, mostly on Tuesdays (43%) or Wednesdays (31%). None of the events took place on Fridays and only one event took place on a Monday. A similar pattern was observed for all types of events. Holding events on the same day of the week also means that occasionally two travelogues will take place on the exact same date. For example, in May 2016, travel-related events took place on seven different dates, with two of these dates having two events. There is clearly room for improvement in scheduling of events, especially considering that there is a sizeable group of people who attend travel-related throughout the system.

Two librarians mentioned that the time of day of an event defines which user groups come: earlier starting times are more suitable for pensioners and evenings for employees. However, travel-related events in the three month period all took place in the evening, with the starting times from 6PM to 7:30PM. This may be due to the fact that all of the travel-related events that had declared target audience (some events were missing this piece of information on the website) were intended for the target group of Adults. Majority of the events also had additional target groups, either only Seniors or both Young Adults

and Seniors, However, this was not due to any differences in the contents of events but rather dependent on the library, where each event took place. The same pattern was detected for all types of events. In any case, the declared user groups are probably too generic.

## Promotion

Promotion is a very important part of organization of events and can be a decisive factor in high attendance and success of a particular event. Interviewed attendees mostly found out about the event either through posters in library or printed event guide brochure (*Napovednik prireditev v MKL*), one interviewed student found outabout the event via presenter's website and some relatively young attendees found events on library's website (https://www.mklj.si/prireditve). On the website events are categorized by type of event and short description is included, as well as place and date of event, target group(s) and tags.

Results of the questionnaire survey closely follow the same pattern. Older generations tended to find out about travel-related events via leaflets and event guide brochures, middle-aged attendees used library's website and e-mail service, while younger generations obtained the information from the speaker (the survey did not distinguish between different ways of obtaining information from the speaker).

Librarians use traditional and digital communication channels of promotions. At one branch of the library, interviewed librarian reported preparing leaflet advertising planned travel-relatedevents at the end of each event. While this is a good strategy to help retain regular visitors, it does not attract new ones, on its own.

We also compared librarian-given tags used in promoting events on library's website. We found that tags were used inconsistently in general, but also for travel-related events in particular. While in a few bigger branches tagging was fairly consistent, elsewhere there were issues. Occasionally similar events or even same event was described differently in various branches of the library. For example, in the period of March-May 2016 three events related to Japan took place in three different branches, of which two were basically the same event. However, other than the tag for Japan, they were described using different tags (Asia, Far East; Travelogues, Travel lectures; names of particular programs and cycles). Also, there were inconsistencies in the geographical granularity of the applied tags for travel related-events (e.g. some events were tagged with names of cities, countries and/or continents, while others left out some or even all of this information).

While this may seem like a minor issue as uncontrolled tagging is a staple of Web 2.0 and, therefore, found and used on many websites, it is problematic in several ways in case of MKL. Firstly, people associate libraries with high quality services regarding organization of information. On a more practical level, inconsistency in tagging may cause user of MKL's website to miss events they

would like to have attended. We also must not forget that in a library tagging is too time-consuming and costly to offer inconsistent solutions. When discussing this issue with librarians from MKL, it was pointed out that there is a system in place that tries to minimize such occurrences.

Evidently, there is room for improvement in terms of promotion, but also in terms of selection of events that will cater to and attract various user groups.

**Evaluation**

Each event should be evaluated. After the events, librarians should be able to answer, if they accomplished the goal, reached the target group and if the promotion was successful. Based on this answer they may have to ask themselves about potential improvements; how to make events more attractive, the promotion more effective and which components of the event need more attention.

In MKL, librarians, charged with organization of events, have to report to the administration only the number of attendees and the costs, associated with each event. While almost all of the librarians that we interviewed have many years of experience, this can lead some to perform only brief mental evaluation of the events. In fact, only a few write down observations about speakers and topic.

Librarians estimate the quality of the events by the number of attendees, their feedback and the general atmosphere of the event. One librarian pointed out that even poorly prepared presentations may be held in good atmosphere: »All evening long, the speaker talked about food and almost all pictures were of plates with food. It was the worst travel-related event ever, but atmosphere was very good and at the end some people praised the speaker and how the evening were fun.«

## Discussion & Conclusion

In the end, the question any library needs to ask itself is: why do we organize (travel-related) events? The answer lies in the tasks, goals, mission and vision of each library. The clearer those are, the easier it is to provide a balanced list of public library events.

The next step is to try to organize events that are intended for specific user groups. While it might appear that travel-related events are aimed at population-at-large, as everybody loves to travel, at least some differentiation in terms of intended audience(s) could be beneficial. There are those that have been to a destination and would like to reminisce, those that are planning to go in the near future or at some point in their lives, those that like to hear interesting stories … Even the topics of interest will not be the same for everyone. For example, some (e.g., senior citizens) may want to see museums, while others (e.g., college students) are interested in nightlife, and others still may be interested in e.g. business travel. They may also have different preferences in terms of

travel arrangements, etc. It can be difficult to provide for such differences in a single travel-related event. On the other hand, at least respondents in our study largely enjoyed the experience at travel-related events, even without distinct differentiation of user groups.

Library programming - just like any other public library service - is a two-way affair. Public libraries have various roles they must carefully balance in order for everybody to benefit. However, particularly, the cultural and educational aspects of public libraries may not be to everybody's taste. Travel-related events are a good example of events that combine the more »boring« cultural and educational aspects with the more »fun« leisure activities. Even more importantly they are relatively popular (at least in MKL) and can be therefore seen as a way of promoting the library to those that are not its users or are infrequent users. MKL - and potentially other libraries – should try to ensure that the events provide enough motivation for people to start using libraries more frequently. One of the ways to do that is to provide a connection between the event and the library collection. While the obvious solution is to promote tourist guidebooks, there are other, perhaps more hidden connections. For example, in conjunction with events, libraries could promote fiction, which takes place in the geographical area featured in the presentation, cookbooks featuring regional cuisine, biographies and history books, dealing with a particular country or people …

Clearly, there is place for travel-related events in libraries, however, without a clear understanding of what a library is trying to achieve, the impact of travel-related events in libraries can be limited.Systematic programming should lead to a community where lifelong learning affords anybody the possibility to gain knowledge. Travel-related events can support and engage users to improve, at least, their knowledge of geography, history and general knowledge. Additionally, these events can bring people, who might not normally visit, into the library, giving them a chance to see the services and materials that library provides.

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