"L'appétit vient en comparant": the Swiss Benchmarking Project

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Swiss librarians have been grumbling about 'their' statistics forever. The national library statistics publication, *Schweizerische Bibliotheken: Statistische Übersichten*, is published annually by the Federal Office for Statistics and contains primary data of 47 libraries. On the one hand they go on about how the set of data published each year is too small and not defined clearly and unambiguously enough and that not enough libraries can participate; on the other hand they complain about the time-consuming process of collecting data.

This paper outlines a benchmarking project that was initiated by a group of librarians who tried to overcome this rather vague discontent. We were looking for a means to compare ourselves with each other, to introduce a 'best practice' model and for an instrument for evaluation and controlling. After a very brief introduction to Switzerland and its libraries, how the benchmarking project came about, its first results, its main difficulties, and the perspectives of the project will be presented.

The author is indebted to colleagues from the benchmarking group. Without their work, benchmarking would still only be a daydream. The benchmarking group consists of Dr. Hermann Romer, Deputy Town Librarian of the Town Library Winterthur and coordinator and motor of our group, Dr. Christine Holliger and Peter Probst of the Zentralbibliothek Solothurn, Eliane Latzel of the Kantonsbibliothek Uri, Dr. Gerhard Matter of the Kantonsbibliothek Baselland, and the author of this article, Ulrich Niederer.

Introduction

BASICS ABOUT SWITZERLAND...

Switzerland, set in the middle of Western Europe, is surrounded by five countries representing three major languages: Italy, France, and Germany, Austria and the Fürstentum Lichtenstein. Switzerland itself has four national languages: German (spoken by roughly 65% of the Swiss population), French (ca. 25%), Italian (9%), and Romanche (1%).

How big, then, is Switzerland really? Its surface is 41,285 km² or 15,940 sq mi, half of that surface being inhabitable. 7.1 million people live in Switzerland. By way of comparison: US New Jersey has a surface of 7,419 sq mi and 8 million inhabitants, or the German Bundesland Niedersachsen, Lower Saxony, has 18,384 sq mi and 7.8 million inhabitants.

Perhaps the most noteworthy fact is that the 26 cantons are the important political entity – Switzerland is organised politically in a strictly federalist way: very much bottom up, from community to canton, and from canton to federal government. Now various informal comparisons during this conference have yielded the curious fact that there are several nations competing for the most advanced state of federalism, the US and Canada being among the strongest competitors! Be that as it may: Switzerland's federalism is perhaps best expressed in that saying: "culture is for the cantons, the federal government takes care of the cannons". That means that universities, or libraries, are a matter of the cantons, and that there is no national funding for library projects. To try and get additional funding from the cantons for something like a library project – especially when it concerns more than one library (and thus almost certainly more than one canton) – is really a daunting challenge not many have dared take on; success is even rarer. That is why the benchmarking project I am going to detail is an initiative of a few libraries which also "sponsored" the project by delegating their people.

... AND ABOUT ITS LIBRARIES

There are four types of libraries open to the public. First, there is the Swiss National Library (SNL). One of a kind, it could be described as a special library in that it collects exclusively Helvetica (i.e. materials in any form published in Switzerland or by Swiss authors or dealing with Switzerland).

Second, there are the university libraries of the 12 universities. They all entertain more or less closely knit networks between the central university library, department and faculty libraries, and quite often also other special libraries. There are also two major cooperative networks, which include all university libraries (the 'Réseau Romand', RERO, in the French speaking part, and the IDS, the 'Informationsverbund Deutschschweiz' in the German speaking part).

Third, there are the public libraries. They come of course in all sizes, from large metropolitan networks in Zurich, Geneva, Basel and Berne, to small, one person community libraries, and they cater for a wide public interested in almost everything, though not on an academic level. Perhaps their most distinctive feature is that they usually do not keep or archive what they buy.

Fourth, there are the "Studien- und Bildungs-bibliotheken" which could be translated to "libraries for general education and culture". These libraries are somewhere between university libraries and public libraries, and their customers form a wide and unspecified group whose information needs are 'more academic', go beyond that which could be found at a large public library, but 'not academic' in the sense that they do not need scientific literature or information on a research level. Usually, these libraries archive at least part of their collections, which is why they often have substantial holdings and perhaps also special collections departments.

Now, to complicate things, there is the concept of "cantonal libraries", libraries that preserve the cultural heritage of a canton and collect all material published about the canton, published within the canton, or published by its citizens. This is a function, not a type! Though it is mostly libraries for general education and culture that have this function, it could also be assigned to a university library or a public library. University libraries, like the University Library of Basle, or the Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire de Lausanne, have taken over that function and thus have special regional collections. Then again, there are public libraries, like the Cantonal Library of Schwyz, or the Bibliothèque Cantonale Jurassienne, which have fairly extensive special collections with manuscript and regional holdings.

This differentiation might seem like a lot of definition tightrope walking. The combination of function and type has been practiced for so long now that it hardly raises discussions any more. On the contrary, it is seen as an important advantage – after all, if you can offer dual services, you have one library where otherwise you would have to have two. What is more, a university library that is open to the general public acts as a natural interface between worlds which universities want to link rather desperately elsewhere. It is thus a potentially powerful PR agent for the university and the library itself! In our context, however, that combination of function and type has two important consequences, which this differentiation might help to clarify.

1. Quite often, libraries do not represent a pure type, but perform dual services: University libraries are open to a general public, libraries for general education and culture are a combination of public and 'research' library, and public libraries have more archived holdings than they would usually have. They therefore cater for a fairly heterogeneous public.

2. This makes a lot of sense as far a library politics go, especially in a small country such as Switzerland. But it is responsible for a major problem for our benchmarking project! Usually, if you compare university and public libraries, you compare apples and pears – but here, all of a sudden, your apple has a pear-like bottom…

I shall come back to these difficulties after a brief outline of our project.

The benchmarking project: aims and first results

It was the Libraries for General Education and Culture Group, which decided to do something about the discontent with the existing national library statistics. Today they are collected and published by the Federal Office of Statistics, they give only primary data, which are purely input-oriented, they contain no indicators, and they do not allow for comparisons between targets and balances.

Another major driving factor to start the project was the change to New Public Management, which has taken or is still taking place in many city and cantonal administrations and in the federal administration, too. This means, among many other things, a switch from input to output and outcome oriented controlling and a need for new, meaningful figures and reporting frameworks.

The task group that was set up consisted of six members, acknowledged in the abstract to this article, and the following aims were defined:

The group should propose a benchmarking framework that allows to

- Compare libraries;

- Thus evaluate effectiveness and efficiency of their services and of their workflow processes;

- Develop an effective controlling instrument; and,

- Define a reporting framework usable in npm contexts.

It should as well

- Remain open to include other types of libraries; and,

- Thus help bring about a change in the national library statistics.

And, need I mention, the framework to be suggested should be a very pragmatic, easy-to-use instrument (remember Charles McClure's "brutal world out there"?). (McClure, 2000)

Phase 1 of our project started in January 1999. Its most important goal was to establish a set of data and precise definitions and to elaborate the indicators. We soon decided not to start from scratch but to adopt the framework of the "Betriebsvergleich", the inter-library comparison project for public libraries which the Bertelsmann Foundation started in the mid-nineties and which led to the BIX, the library index that Petra Klug presented at this conference. (Prohl and Windau, 1997) The Bertelsmann Foundation kindly gave their

consent. In elaborating our set of data, we tried to remain as close as possible to the adopted framework while taking into account various Swiss specifics, such as the facts that most libraries for general education and culture have more or less extensive special holdings, that the public for our libraries is very difficult to define strictly, etc. But we wanted to remain close to the Bertelsmann framework to see whether we could also use the BIX and how that would compare to the German results.

Our phase 1 came to a close in June 2000 when we presented our first results at a meeting of the Libraries for General Education and Culture Group: a data framework, a handbook and a first, still tentative test of the data done with the task group members' libraries. What were the data we suggested?

There is a set of 87 primary data in 7 groups:

1.	local demographics	(how many potential customers?)
2.	customers	(how many active customers? how many new customers? how may visitors – i.e. people coming to the library without getting a card – to the library?)
3.	staff	(how many FTEs? how many staff hours per year?)
4.	access	(opening hours per year? how much space for the public? how long till the new media are ready?)
5.	finances	(gross costs? income? sponsoring?)
6.	holdings	(size? growth? how much in open access? how much weeding?)
7.	services	(circulation figures? guided tours? events?).

These primary data allow for 41 indicators in 4 groups: achievement of mission, customer focus, economics, and staff focus. Examples for the first group, achievement of mission, would be

- Holdings per capita of population you want to reach (how rich are your holdings in relation to the population of your service area?);

- % of new media to all holdings (how up-to-date are your holdings?);

- Staff hours per capita of population; and,

- Public area surface in your library per capita of population (how is your infrastructure?).

Indicators for the second group, customer focus, comprise

- Active users per capita of population (what ratio is there between active and potential users?);

- Circulation per capita of population (how well accepted is your collection?); and,

- Circulation compared to holdings.

This last figure is one of the very early standards for public libraries, and it has long been one of the most important controlling figures: if the circulation figure is four to five times as high as the complete holdings, your library does, over all, well. If it is lower, then you should look at your holdings: perhaps they are just too large for the population you serve, but probably they are not quite what that population would like. In most of these cases, they are too old and/or not attractive enough (e.g., not enough weeding is done). If it is higher, your holdings are overused, and you will have too few items on your shelves at any given time – you should start a campaign for more acquisition money! Of course this indicator does not work properly if your holdings comprise a large and growing archival part because you collect and keep part or all of the acquired books. And, comparisons between libraries that keep media for good and libraries that don't are not really working.

Before continuing to discuss the difficult points, let's have a look at the other two groups of indicators. The third, economics, has, among others:

- Financial resources;

- Total costs per capita of population, per visitor, per active user;

- Media costs per capita of population; and,

- Staff resources (circulation per staff hour, visitors per staff hours).

Finally, the fourth group, staff focus, centers really on personnel administration:

- Hours of absence (sick leave etc.) Per total staff hours;

- Hours of further education per total staff hours; and,

- Hours of meetings per total staff hours.

When we did the first tests with the framework within our group, we quickly discovered that there were a few rather stubborn difficulties. We included some very diverse libraries – even among the original group of five, there were strong differences that influenced the outcome considerably: e.g. 'pure' public libraries vs. libraries that have significant archival holdings. When we compare indicators like 'circulation compared to holdings', or 'total costs per capita of population', the figures are not on the same level at all! The solution to that difficulty, however, seems to be

fairly easy as soon as the number of participating libraries grows: sectorize the libraries, organize them in groups that contain the libraries that are comparable.

Another difficult point was the indicator 'staff hours per hour of service to the public' – is it good to have a high or a low figure? Among libraries of the same type there was a difference between 5 and 12 hours. What does 'best practice' mean here? We do not know yet.

These difficulties have to do with the interpretation of the results. Another kind of difficulty has to do with the definition of primary data, one in particular: the population in your service area. This is easily the single most difficult factor. It is, however, a pivotal figure – it is at the core of all comparisons of what you actually do against your claim. To name but a few: How much does a library spend on media per capita of the population served? Or: how many media does a library have per capita of population? And, of course: how many of the whole population are active customers?

It is a very difficult figure to define, especially in our mixed type and function environment: How do you define the service area of a small town library which caters for its town but also for a few communities near that town? What do you do in a situation where the periphery of a large canton is closer to the center (or at least the next bigger town library) of another canton? Or, how can you define that figure for a university library that is also a cantonal library – but in a really very small canton (14 sq mi!), and you know that a significant number of users come from at least two more cantons… What is more: the nearest cantonal library certainly has a conflicting service area! (It is interesting to note that the Bertelsmann BIX project has encountered the same difficulty, as is explained in the latest publication on BIX). (Klug, 2001) In our case, we will try out various definitions during phase 2, among others the definition for several agglomerations as given by the Federal Office for Statistics to find out what will work best.

Phase 2 of our project started in June 2000 after we presented the results to the Libraries for General Education and Culture Group. The Group approved of our findings and of the suggestion to go on with a larger test group. Thus the second test, now under way, is run with 15 participants, and is done for the years 1999 and 2000. The overall aim here is fine-tuning the set of primary data. This phase should come to an end in November 2001, when a meeting of the Group will have to decide whether to carry over the project into a regular and continuous benchmarking process. If so, it would be of paramount importance to have a professional infrastructure, and to have help with the evaluation procedures for the result as a whole, but also on various aspects of the results. That could be a research and development project for our library and informa-

tion science schools. And we will of course go on to develop the framework: in the next version, we will include data and indicators for the usage of the digital library.

We will also make sure that our project has due influence on the reform of the national library statistics. In fact, one member of the statistics task group the Swiss Libraries and Librarians' Association set up recently belongs to our benchmarking group. This guarantees networking at close range!

Above all, it should bring about less grumbling about library statistics, more interest, and perhaps a certain pleasure or at least a lively curiosity in comparing. Or, as the French saying has it: "l'appétit vient en mangeant" – appetite comes with eating – in this case with comparing!

References

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