

Understanding the Elderly Non-users with Visual Impairments

The Case of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind

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Abstract

With an increasing number of the visually impaired elderly population libraries need to adjust their services to this audience which is often under the risk of becoming library non-users. The aim of this paper is to determine the profile and reasons for non-use of library services by the visually impaired elderly basing on the case study of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind (LLB). Findings of the structured interview survey have shown that most non-users don't use libraries due to low motivation, health and mobility issues. They have few purposes for information use, get it incidentally, and apply the simplest and easy-to-reach assistive technology. The findings can be used in libraries to develop targeted services for this population.

Keywords: Visually impaired, Elderly, Non-user survey, Library services

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1 Introduction

Contemporary libraries have sound reasons to get an in-depth knowledge about the elderly visually impaired persons who do not use library services. Due to demographic changes that take place in various countries, the societies are ageing. According to the United Nations, in 2050 persons aged over 60 will comprise over one fifth of world population (United Nations, 2013). Inevitably, ageing is accompanied by illnesses and disability. According to the World Health Organisation, in 2010 much more than a half of visually impaired blind persons were of 50 and older age (World Health Organisation, 2012). Therefore, libraries need to adjust their services to the needs of the visually impaired elderly people.

Due to special needs of this population they are under the risk of becoming library non-users. However, it is not necessarily related only to the issues of accessibility. Important factors are information needs and behaviour of the visually impaired elderly.

The aim of the paper is to determine the profile and reasons for non-use of library services by the visually impaired elderly persons basing on the case study of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind. The research questions are the following:

- What is the experience of the elderly persons with visual impairments in using/non-using library services?
- What are the major reasons for library non-use?
- What are the patterns of information use by the elderly visually impaired non-users of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind?

According to the Lithuanian Union for the Blind and Partially Sighted, in 2014 there were 6524 members of the union (Lietuvos aklujų ir silpnaregių sąjunga, 2015). Currently, this is the only available statistics about the size of this population. However, in reality the population of visually impaired people may be larger. There is a need to understand the needs of this population and offer relevant library services.

Analysis of the elderly visually impaired library non-users is beneficial for public libraries as well as libraries for the blind. In many countries services for visually impaired persons are provided both by the libraries for the blind and public libraries. The paper is based on the findings of the pilot study of the non-users of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind in Vilnius city and region. The research was funded by the Lithuanian Council for Culture.

2 Related work

The review of literature did not identify any studies about the visually impaired senior library non-users. According to Davies (2007), more research is needed to discover why visually impaired people in general do not use (or do not even start to use) libraries.

Due to the lack of publications on the topic, literature exploring information and ICT use by the visually impaired and/or elderly might be useful to understand the reasons for library non-use. Again few publications are focused on these topics, although some useful references are available in the papers of a broader scope (e.g. see Gell et al., 2013; Williamson & Asla, 2009; Williamson, Schauder & Bow, 2000).

Useful references on patterns and factors of information use by the visually impaired seniors are provided in the disability and gerontological research. It is mainly focused on the core daily routine, leisure and other important activities (Stevens-Ratchford & Krause, 2004; Berger, 2012; Alma et al., 2011). Occasionally, researchers analyse reading activities and experiences of the visually impaired seniors (Lang & Brooks, 2013; Ryan et al., 2003).

Most studies of information behaviour, leisure activities and daily routines of the visually impaired persons are qualitative inquiries into their lives and involve a small number of respondents. Available research also does not allow making conclusions about library non-use.

3 Information use by the visually impaired seniors

Aspects relevant to the research including information use, sources of information, media, use of assistive technology and constraints to information use are discussed in this section.

Several purposes for using information were identified in literature: leisure, health, finance. Reading for leisure is an important activity to visually impaired seniors (Ryan et al., 2003; Lang & Brooks, 2013; Williamson, Schauder & Bow, 2000). The perceived importance of reading does not

change with the vision loss (Ryan et al., 2003). Reading is a popular leisure activity among senior adults without visual impairments as well (Dodge et al., 2008; Williamson, 1998). Health and finance as topics of interest were identified in the research of information seeking behaviour of visually impaired citizens by Williamson, Shauder and Bow (2000). Topics in health and finance are relevant to the elderly persons in general (Niemelä, Huotari & Kortelainen, 2012; Williamson, 1998). A decline in the purposeful information seeking was observed by Williamson and Asla (Williamson & Asla, 2009; Williamson, 1998). It occurs due to worsening health condition and disability and causes a reliance on an 'incidental information acquisition'. The latter refers to obtaining information without any purposeful action to seek for it, i.e. by talking to family members, friends, watching TV, listening to radio (Williamson & Asla, 2009; Williamson, 1998).

The visually impaired elderly use various media and sources to get information. The most important sources of information are other people (e.g. family, friends etc.). This was obvious in the general research of information seeking behaviour of the visually impaired (Williamson, Shauder & Bow, 2000), elderly people in general (Wicks, 2004) and in some research focused on the visually impaired elderly (Ryan et al., 2003). Other information sources are radio (Williamson, Shauder & Bow, 2000) and talking books (Ryan et al., 2003). However, the use of Internet among the elderly people with visual impairments is lower than among their peers without vision loss (Gell et al., 2013; Lee, Chen & Hewitt, 2011).

A number of assistive technologies are employed by the visually impaired older adults. As reported by Ryan et al. (2003), elderly participants of the study mostly used simple means (e.g., magnifiers, felt pens, high intensity lamps etc.), some of them also – computers. However, computers were not considered a convenient and accessible device (Ryan et al., 2003). Similarly, Fok et al. (2011) observed that among adults with an average age of 56 years large monitors and screens, TV, DVD players were mainstream devices used in daily life, while computer assistive technology was mostly not used.

Use of information by the visually impaired elderly is limited by certain constraints. These include worsening health and declining cognitive, memory and other functions (Williamson and Asla, 2009; Lee, Chen, Hewitt, 2011), loss of vision in the old age as opposite to young years (Stevens-Ratchford & Krause, 2004; Williamson, Shauder & Bow, 2000; Williamson & Asla, 2009), necessity to adopt and use assistive technologies (Ryan et al., 2003; McCreadie & Tinker, 2005), limited mobility (Berger, 2012; Alma et al.,

2011). The engagement in various activities is also pre-conditioned by the attitude, ability and strategies chosen to cope with challenges (Stevens-Ratchford & Krause, 2004).

4 Method and data collection

In this research a non-user survey of the visually impaired persons was conducted. Non-user research is a well-established practice in libraries to develop the strategies for attracting new library users and identify possible barriers that prevent citizens from library use. In such studies the profile of non-users, previous experience of library use and patterns of information seeking and use (Sridhar, 2002; Sin & Kim, 2008) are considered crucial to understand the factors of library non-use. Part of data of the survey of non-users of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind which is presented in the paper is focused on these aspects of non-use.

Following Sridhar (2002) definition, the persons who didn't use library services either in premises or online in the last 12 months were considered non-users. This group included the following types of non-users (Sridhar, 2002): a) former users of the Library for the Blind; b) current/former users of other libraries; c) non-users of any libraries.

Data was collected by conducting structured interviews both by telephone and by means of face-to-face conversations in July-October 2014. The population of visually impaired non-users of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind in Vilnius city and district (701) was estimated by analysing the data about the members of the Lithuanian Union for the Blind and Partially Sighted and the users of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind. The sample of 248 (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error) respondents was calculated.

The data was collected by the staff of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind. The database of the members of the Lithuanian Union for the Blind and Partially Sighted was used to identify and reach the participants of research. The respondents were contacted in random order. Most of them were recruited and surveyed by telephone; others were visited and surveyed at home upon the agreement by phone.

In this paper only answers by respondents in the age groups of 56–70 and 71+ were considered.

5 Findings

94 records of interviews with senior respondents were suitable for analysis. Findings are presented according to thematic parts of the survey: a) demographic features of respondents; b) previous experience of library use and reasons for current non-use, and c) habits of information use.

5.1 Demographic features

The survey collected information about gender, age groups, education, and occupation. 68.1% of respondents were females and 31.9% – men. Within the age group of senior citizens, 40.4% belonged to the age group of 56–70 years, while 59.6% – to 71+. Most respondents acquired secondary education (38.3%). Only 18.1% of respondents had higher education, 16% – advanced vocational. 16% stated that they had basic education. 16% provided their own comments on education that included secondary education, self-learning, and incomplete higher education. Only five respondents (5.3%) indicated that they were employed. The majority of participants of the survey didn't work (94.7%). None of the respondents were studying.

5.2 Experience of library use and non-use

This part of the interview was aimed at determining a previous experience of library use (if any) and reasons for not using the library service (table 1).

Table 1. Experience of using the Lithuanian library services

Use of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind (respondents, %)		
	More than 12 months ago	Never
Used LLB services online	8.5	91.5
Visited the LLB	40.4	59.6
Use of other libraries (respondents, %)		
Don't use	Currently use	Used more than 12 months ago
78.7	14.9	6.4

Table 1 show that the majority of respondents were non-users without any previous experience of using the LLB services in premises and / or online. Most respondents currently don't use services of any Lithuanian library, and few of them have had any experience of using library services in the past.

The respondents did not use the LLB services mainly because the need to use library services was absent, difficulties in reaching library premises were faced, and information was obtained by other means (see fig. 1). 24.3% of respondents were not aware about the LLB services before the survey.

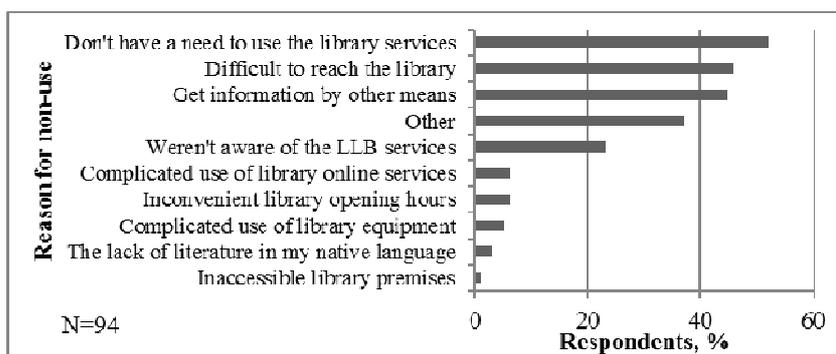


Figure 1. Reasons for non-use of the Lithuanian Library for the Blind

Respondents who selected the answer 'other' provided comments where the major reasons for the LLB non-use were illness or declining health condition in general (51.4% of all comments). Less significant reasons included other ways of getting information (e.g. download on the Internet, getting information from other people), the lack of time, and absence of a talking book reader, age etc.

5.3 Habits of information use

This section contained questions about the goals, media, and channels to get and use information, access to and use of assistive technology.

As shown in table 2, most respondents used information for leisure purposes, while some of them were also interested to find out more about disability.

Table 2. Purposes of information use (N = 94, respondents, %)

Leisure	Information about disability	Professional work	Studies	Other
73.4	15.9	3.2	0	36.2

Only few respondents used information for professional purposes and none – for studies. One third of respondents indicated other purposes: getting news about politics and sport, listening to various thematic TV programmes etc.

Majority of respondents relied on three easy-to-reach sources to get information (table 3) – radio, other people and television.

Table 3. Major sources for getting information (respondents, %)

Source	Respondents (N)	Often	Rare	Don't use
Radio	N = 93	82.8	10.7	6.5
Television	N = 94	55.3	23.4	21.3
Internet	N = 89	5.6	6.8	87.6
Print publications	N = 93	12.9	16.1	71
Audio publications	N = 90	5.6	11.1	83.3
People	N = 92	57.6	22.8	19.6

As demonstrated in table 4 respondents lacked skills to use complex means, formats and tools for information access.

Table 4. Ability to use information in accessible formats and assistive technology (N = 94, respondents, %)

Listen to audio publications	Read enlarged print materials	Read Braille	Use computer with a speech synthesizer
81.9	25.5	5.3	1.1

Most respondents were able to use audio publications, some – enlarged print materials, while only few of them could read texts in Braille and use computers with speech synthesizers. Moreover, as shown in table 5 respondents were not sufficiently provided with assistive technology.

Table 5. Availability of assistive technology to respondents (N = 94, respondents, %)

Talking book reader	Doesn't have any assistive technology	Computer	Speech synthesizer	Braille display	Other
32.9	31.9	7.5	5.3	1.1	23.4

Approximately one third of respondents had a talking book reader, while almost the same number of them did not possess any assistive technology.

Few respondents had electronic devices as a computer, speech synthesizer and Braille display. In comments the respondents who selected the answer 'other' described circumstances of use/non-use of technology: e.g. did not use any assistive technology, used magnifiers, radio, had access to technology but did not know how to use it, the device was broken.

6 Discussion

This study has shown that a large portion of respondents were so-called absolute non-users of the Lithuanian libraries. More than a half of respondents had never used any library services. Among respondents persons with low level of education (secondary and less) were pre-dominant. Similarly, Kim and Sin (2008) considered the level of education an important factor of library use/non-use. However, the sample of respondents in this study was too small to make a sound argument about it.

The Lithuanian libraries in general were not considered as an option for information use in contrary to the LLB. The number of former users of the LLB was significantly higher than of other Lithuanian libraries.

The visually impaired elderly did not use the LLB services because of a declining need for information coupled with the health and mobility issues. The findings have shown that the major reason for non-use of the LLB services was the absence of the need. Similarly, Williamson (1998), Williamson and Asla (2009) found the decline in purposeful information seeking with age and worsening health condition. For almost a half of respondents reaching the LLB premises was a problem and approximately a half of all who commented on other reasons for the LLB non-use stated that the declining health condition was the major pre-requisite for non-use. Other researchers have also concluded that a limited mobility of the visually impaired elderly (Berger, 2012; Alma et al., 2011) is barrier to get involved in various outdoor activities.

Similarly to other research, this study identified the narrow scope of the purposes for information use by the elderly persons with visual impairments, passive acquisition of easy-to-get and affordable information:

- Seniors had only few purposes to use information. They aimed to get information for leisure, about disability and to stay current.

- They were incidental information seekers and usually acquired it from mass media which was not generally aimed at the purposeful information seeking.
- The respondents used only simple and easily reachable sources, media and assistive technology (radio, TV and people, simple accessible formats and assistive devices). Few respondents used Internet to get information and utilized an ICT-based assistive technology. The latter requires competency, effort and is less affordable.

7 Conclusion

This research provided important insights about the profile and behaviour of the visually impaired seniors that could be applied in developing targeted programmes for this group. The lack of interest in using library services results from a combination of multiple factors. Disability and declining health, narrowing scope of interests are the reasons for a lower motivation to use information, while difficulties in the use of ICT-based assistive technology pose additional constraints. The lower motivation and specific strategies to cope with problems (as e.g. selectivity in the use of assistive technology) may cause the non-use of libraries. The absence of any previous habits of library use may cause the present non-use of libraries as well.

The study has shown some opportunities for libraries to attract senior visually impaired non-users. Libraries should offer outreach programmes to serve the elderly at home because of their limited mobility. Most non-users are not active seekers of information but are interested in books for leisure and about disability. Considering the fact that non-users rely on communicating with other people to get necessary information, face-to-face user advisory services by librarians would be a good solution. And finally, traditional and simple assistive technologies and accessible formats should be considered (e. g. as shown by the survey most non-users can listen to audio books).

This research was not specifically designed to study the habits of information use among the elderly visually impaired persons. However, the experience of this research suggests that in future studies such aspects as the ability and attitude to coping with challenges of aging and disability, circumstances of the vision decline (age and severity) should be considered. These are the

pre-requisites for engaging in various activities and, perhaps, the use of information and library services.

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