Public Libraries, the crisis of the Welfare State and the social networks: the Portuguese case

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Abstract:

This study present the path followed by the National Public Libraries Network, in Portugal, since its creation in 1987 to the present day. Public libraries have been benefiting from a strong investment from the state for their creation and maintenance but, currently, there are economic and political crisis situations that lead the state to reduce its investment in public services and the library's social role to become weak. In Portugal, we are currently discussing our Welfare State model. The country is facing a serious economic crisis and the debate about the intervention of state organizations and their social role in society is being recast.

On the other hand, the Web 2.0 technologies and the social networks are free platforms for content diffusion and they have the potential to generate shared information. These platforms may have an intensive use in times of economic crisis because their use has no additional costs and they can be excellent instruments to carry out the public library's social mission. We briefly analyze the pages and profiles of Portuguese public libraries on the Facebook social network, in May 2013, regarding their activity in terms of social mission.

This work is part of a broader research about the impact of the Web 2.0 in the social role of Portuguese public libraries observed on the Facebook social network.

Keywords: Social function of the public library, social networks, Welfare State, Economic Crisis, Portugal, Facebook.

1 INTRODUCTION

The guidelines documents for libraries, drawn up by the IFLA and the UNESCO, highlight the social function of the public library and underline the role of libraries as a driving force in the defense of human rights, in the struggle against social and digital exclusion and also in the promotion of the citizens' quality of life. The IFLA associates this social mission with the principle of free access to information and to the principle of freedom of expression. It is believed that the public library develops and enhances collective and individual social skills, social sensibility and the ability to take social action for the establishment of a democratic society.

Through reading the guidelines documents: the manifestos (IFLA, 1994), the guidelines (IFLA/UNESCO, 2001), among many others, a few timeless social features stand out, which are important to discuss the performance of the public library's social mission and to assess its contemporary nature. We point out some of the variables that take part in the formation of social capital generated within the public library: to promote the communities' well-being; to contribute to the sense of community and social cohesion; to promote peace, to be a meeting place and a center for the community; to be an agent for change within the community; to cooperate with local, national and international agents; to be a place of recreation and leisure; to contribute to an active role of the citizens; to preserve the values of democracy; to defend intellectual freedom; to make information and communication technologies available and to provide Internet access; to promote digital literacy; to be a life-long learning center, etc.

Public libraries have been benefiting from a strong investment from the state for their creation and maintenance but, currently, there are economic and political crisis situations that lead the state to reduce its investment in public services and the library's social role to become weak (Calixto, Nunes, Freitas, & Dionísio, 2012). We find libraries that due to the economic recession have shrinking budgets, less human resources, less cultural activities and outdated collections. The community they serve is also in a deep social crisis. On the other hand, there is a tradition and documents from global institutions that argue that public libraries have a social commitment to the citizens and an intervention and struggle against social and digital exclusion. Public libraries must continue to maintain a provision of continuous social services to their local and virtual communities. And how can they perform this role, when the Welfare State that supports them is moving away from its social mission towards the citizens? What challenges may the Web 2.0 offer to the public library, with its free resources and highly social characteristics? What strength do public libraries have within the social networks to bring about change within the community?

This paper is the result of an ongoing work for a broader research about the social role of the public library and the use of 2.0 technologies to intensify their performance within this field and is part of a research work that is being conducted under the scope of the Doctoral Program in Information and Documentation Sciences of the University of Évora (Portugal). This ongoing research work seeks to ascertain if the public library, within the 2.0 sphere, identifies with the paradigm of a library that produces social capital (COX, 2000) (VARHEIM et al., 2008) and if its services' users and the information professionals, who manipulate these technologies, are aware of the role

they may play in the construction of social bonds in the online library, in the construction of citizenship, social integration and cohesion.

First of all, in this work, we present a brief trajectory of the public libraries, in Portugal, during the last 26 years. Afterwards, we describe the Portuguese political situation and the crisis of the Welfare State. We present a brief analysis of the pages and profiles of Portuguese public libraries on the Facebook social network, in May 2013, regarding their activity in terms of social mission and, finally, in the last chapter, we present our conclusions.

2 PORTUGUESE PUBLIC LIBRARIES NETWORK – A 26-YEAR-OLD HISTORY

2.1 Historical background

This study do not intend to carry out a historical analysis of the evolution of public libraries in Portugal; several authors, such as Melo (Melo, 2004) (Melo, 2010), Nunes (1996), Rebelo (2002) have already approached it in depth. As Sá (1983) stated, the existence of public libraries in the I and II Republics (1910-1974) was not seen as a true public service to the community. In that sense, a different approach begins with the change of political and social paradigm brought about by the revolution that occurred on April 25th 1974. The construction of libraries and of a public reading network was not, at this time, a concern of the first governments of the democratic regime. It was necessary to overcome the political and economic instability and to consolidate the newly created democratic society. In 1980, the government was limited to political concerns related to the libraries that depended on the Ministry of Culture that were located on the district seats, among which six of them were called public libraries (Decreto Regulamentar n.º 34/80) (Moura, Silva, Figueiredo, Rodrigues, & Casteleiro, 1996). For a number of reasons, they were not serving the country's population, nor were they geographically distributed. There was also the creation of around 20 municipal libraries, without any professional monitoring and according to outdated models (Nunes, 1996). The resident Portuguese population in 1981 was of 9,833,014 individuals (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 1981), and we may conclude that the existing number of libraries was almost irrelevant to assist the country.

Besides this modest existence of public libraries, there were mobile and fixed libraries, as a result of an initiative from a civil institution – the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (FCG) – that between 1957 and 1987 provided an exceptional public service to the population in the public reading area, especially through their home book loan service and reading support (Moura et al., 1996) (Melo, 2005). In 1983, the FCG had 160 fixed libraries and 58 mobile libraries that covered mainland Portugal and the islands (Melo, 2005).

In 1982, there was the publishing of a first approach to the public library subject – *A biblioteca pública: aspectos tipológicos e linhas gerais da sua evolução* (Cabral & Real, 1982) – and, in the following year, during a meeting of professionals organized by the Instituto Português do Livro and by the BAD (Associação Portuguesa de Bibliotecários, Arquivistas e Documentalistas), the professionals were introduced to the philosophy that guided public reading and the policies for its implementation by the French government. What came out of this meeting was a strong motivation to change the Portuguese panorama and the approval of *A Leitura Pública em Portugal: manifesto*

(Cabral, Real, Nunes, & Moura, 1983), giving rise to the movement that would originate the National Public Reading Network, a few years later.

This manifesto presented the dramatic Portuguese situation, in terms of the number of existing libraries and of the population's illiteracy level, and mentioned the urgent need to raise the public opinion, the government and the councils' awareness for a paradigm shift and for the definition of a national policy for public reading (Nunes, 1996).

In 1985, the State Secretariat for Culture of the 10th Constitutional Government appointed a commission to analyze the publishing activity that presented a report in which there was a proposal for the creation of a national public libraries network. In the following year, through the order 23/86 of March 11th 1986 (Nunes, 1996, p. 106-107), the State Secretariat for Culture creates conditions for the establishment of this policy focused on public reading.

And therefore, in 1986, a working group was appointed to plan the network, which presented the document *Leitura Pública: rede de bibliotecas municipais: relatório* (Moura, Silva, Figueiredo, Rodrigues, & Casteleiro, 1986) laying the theoretical and practical foundations for the network's implementation, based on the accountability of the State – as a way to promote a new policy for this sector – and of the councils, which would develop concrete actions on the ground.

The birth of a national policy for public reading, in 1987, also involved the creation of the IPLL (Instituto Português do Livro e da Leitura), which would be in charge of providing technical and financial support to the councils (Decreto-Lei n.º 71/87). The goal of this policy was to build libraries all throughout the country with the council's help, according to the number of inhabitants of each municipality, a factor that would decide the library's dimension and the establishment of its bibliographical collections. Following a path of cultural democratization, as a result of a concept of Welfare State that should have a strong cultural intervention role, libraries would be for everyone and would answer information, self-training and leisure-time occupation needs. The articulation between the councils' – local power's role and the central State became decisive for the development of the council libraries network and of the cultural initiatives that would take place in these spaces (Melo, 2004).

Portugal witnessed the rise of a movement of creation and establishment of libraries, with public reading programs and cultural activities, training of human resources, etc. In the beginning, in 1987, only 51 municipalities joined this movement, within a total of 275 existing municipalities; in the following year there were 18 more, amounting to a total of 69 supported city councils. The IPLL draws up a series of documents to help formalize applications and understand the fundamental concepts to fulfill the program (Silva, 1987) *Programa de apoio às bibliotecas municipais* (IPLL, 1989). After 5 years implementing this policy, 90 councils had already joined the program, which may be considered as an excellent evolution (Nunes, 1996).

Portugal's entry in the EEC (the current European Union) had a positive impact because it financially strengthened public policies by developing the common European information market. The financial resources made available by the EEC demanded a financial contribution from the councils, which demonstrates the political importance

that public reading programs already had among the Portuguese political community (Melo, 2004).

Ten years after the start of the National Public Libraries Network (RNBP), the working group (appointed by Order no. 55/95, of December 12th, from the Ministry of Culture) presents the *Relatório sobre as bibliotecas públicas em Portugal* with the strategic guidelines for the development of public libraries (Moura et al., 1996). They showed a very positive balance in which, from the 275 municipal councils existing in mainland Portugal, 124 (45%) were supported; around 150 municipalities still hadn't joined the network, but 62 of them already had a library from the FCG, from the Council or other kind of library, which still had not been supported. There was no library worthy of the name in 89 municipalities (the municipalities from the Autonomous Regions (Madeira and Azores), which would only be included in 2003).

The RNBP Program progressively grew and became a reference within the national cultural plan, by the number of built/set-up/requalified libraries, moving Portugal's situation closer to that of the other European countries (Oleiro & Heitor, 2010). The partnership – central State and councils – was, in the beginning, an example of real collaboration that made investments possible and covered virtually the whole national territory. These libraries were set up according to established criteria and generically respected the principles and guidelines defined by the UNESCO and the IFLA regarding this matter, among which is the *Manifesto IFLA/UNESCO sobre Bibliotecas Públicas* (IFLA, 1994).

2.2 The current challenges of the National Public Libraries Network

The Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas (DGLAB) is the organism of the Ministry of Culture responsible for the Program of the National Network of Public Libraries (RNBP), which does the technical and financial monitoring of the municipal projects on the creation and installing of libraries. Following a study conducted by the DGLAB, Oleiro & Heitor (2010) presented a synthesis of the results and analyzed the degree of execution of the recommendations of IFLA and of the DGLAB, which confirms the perceptions that local government did not fulfill with information, human and technological resources required for the implementation and maintenance of libraries, noting that in some cases the initial financing of the government was the only investment.

The Direção Geral do Livro e das Bibliotecas referred – through its director-general's presentation in the 13th RNBP Meeting, in May 2012 – that the investment made on the RNBP over the last 25 years, through programme-contracts between the Central Administration and the Councils, reached around 170 million euro and the agreed investment reached around 200 million euro; the participation of the Central Administration, through the DGLB's budget, reached a maximum ceiling of 50% of the initial investment (DGLAB, 2012). After 26 years, there are 261 supported councils (Mainland Portugal and Autonomous Regions) with the inauguration of 194 libraries (Direção-Geral do Livro e das Bibliotecas, 2008) and with 68 libraries in different project/set-up stages. But since 2007 the State has not been signing new programme-contracts with the councils, for various reasons.

Currently, in the local administration, upon which public libraries depend, the financial situation is not positive and has an impact on the economic investments made on libraries. In the summary table regarding the resources invested on the RNBP, we are able to notice that the investments on the purchase of documents have been decreasing since 2001, from 2,417,503 € to a sum of 1,187,404€, in 2011. The average of the investment on documents per 1000 inhabitants was 817€, and in 2011 that sum amounted to 237€ (Direção-Geral do Livro, dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, 2007). There is a sharp decrease in municipal divestment.

The trend towards the non-decrease of home loans in public libraries, unlike the European tendency, is a sign that the Portuguese population still has a strong need for this social service. In the summary table regarding the investments made in 2011 (Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, 2012), the recorded numbers of loan requests were 881,210 in 2001 and 858,396 in 2011. The number of loaned documents (monographs) grew from 1,256,706 to 1,586,332 in 10 years.

Portugal is experiencing an economic depression and a generic crisis that hits all sectors of society. Its population amounts to a total of 10,781,997 individuals (PORDATA, 2013), being badly distributed in demographical terms; the inland is desertified and the majority of the population is living in the large cities of the coastal area. Public libraries from inland councils, with less financial resources, are also affected by a population decrease among its users. The low population density has been addressed with the set-up of poles in places located outside the municipality's center, reaching a total of 69 throughout the country, and with the creation of home loan services using travelling vans, reaching a total of 53. On the other hand, in the cities, the high population density shows communities with a lack of cultural identity, without any socio-cultural references to bind them, a lack of sense of community, ageing populations and other populations lacking social inclusion (DGLAB, 2012).

Over the last 26 years, the Portuguese population increased its schooling level and, by initiative of the Ministry of Education and of the Ministry of Culture (RBE, 2013), since 1996 there was the growth of an excellent school libraries network in public schools from all teaching levels. Potentially, public libraries began having more qualified users who sought them for other purposes, such as cultural fruition and leisure-time occupation, and students find resources in their school library that they no longer need to look for in public libraries. These can now invest on other functions, besides the informative and formative ones.

The 13th National Public Libraries Network Meeting was held in 2012, 25 years after the implementation of the network in Portugal, (13º Encontro da Rede Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas, 2012). This meeting gathered predominantly professionals from public libraries and a few politicians. From its thirteen presentations, which are published online, there are three that deal with challenging subjects regarding libraries: the transformation and update of their services, the valorization of local communities and the issue of their social value and role. One of the participants supported the idea that the depreciation of the libraries' social role may be a threat, but should also be a powerful challenge to the commitment with a social dimension focused on the citizen's interests and new needs. The public library must be transformed in order to achieve a high social value, involving community members directly in its management and turning its spaces into social meeting spaces (Leal, 2012). Neves (Neves, 2012) alerts to the political and social situation in which libraries find themselves – with austerity

policies and facing an organizational restructuring –, but claims that these situations must lead libraries to refocus on their community, seeking to implement social inclusion and territorial cohesion programs.

Some of the discussed categories that are important to the future practice of the library's social mission were summarized in its conclusions (13º Encontro da Rede Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas, 2012). Regarding the category about Portuguese society, there was a reminder to the fact that currently we have greater social inequalities, unemployment is growing and social and digital exclusion are a problem. The concept of globalization, the demographic changes, and the growth of ageing and immigrant populations were also addressed. As for the category related to library users, there is an acknowledgment of the fact they are yet to be adequately studied, but it is known that they are mainly from the middle-class, that they are digital immigrants and natives and, with the development of the Internet, that the community is also virtual. As for libraries, it was noted that they have less financial and material resources, that they practice the UNESCO's manifesto but are not very innovative, and that they are too focused on reading entertainment activities. Their social role is still undefined and forgotten, highlighting the absence of social and digital inclusion policies and programs and practices against exclusion.

The minor importance given to the public library's social function stands out from this national meeting of professional who work in Portuguese public libraries. Some professionals emphasized that the public library should make efforts in the struggle against social and digital exclusion – especially nowadays, when the Portuguese society is going through a deep social and economic crisis –, but that overall there is, neither awareness, nor practices to reinforce this idea with creative activities that work on the different sides of the library's social mission.

3 THE CRISIS OF THE WELFARE STATE IN PORTUGAL

The Portuguese experience, after April 25th 1974, confirmed the construction of a Welfare State that ensured the cohesion and equality of rights and duties for all citizens, enshrined in the Portuguese Constitution (1976). The state began having more social functions, and caring about the material conditions needed for the exercise of fundamental freedoms.

The Portuguese economic austerity situation is putting an end to the consensus about the Welfare State. The policies that existed until a few years ago were exerted within a concept of social contract in which the State is the public provider of education, culture, housing, sports, healthcare and social services (Gonçalves, Pato, & Santos, 2013). The crisis is felt all throughout Europe as a consequence of many factors and the States became more fragile in the social area with the liberalization of capital movements, with a growing structural unemployment, with migrating populations and the emergence of more disadvantaged groups and with an increase of a population with different levels of social exclusion. The current austerity policies that are being implemented in Portugal and in some European countries restrict the Welfare State's economic and social functions, limiting its presence within the public sector.

Due to its increasing debt, Portugal requested credit help to the *Troika* (European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank), in May 2011,

and implemented a series of austerity measures that questioned basic economic and social rights that were being ensured by the Welfare State: freeze of social supports and pensions, family allowances, social assistance, tax increase, cuts in unemployment benefits, cuts in wages and in the number of public employees, both in the central government and in the councils, cost control in the healthcare and education sectors (Social Watch, 2013). In March 2013, the Government and the *Troika* agreed on a huge public spending cut of about four billion euro (Governo de Portugal, 2013) mainly focused on the Welfare State (healthcare, education, pensions and social protection).

There is an economic and social retrocession in Portuguese society; public institutions have very low budgets to maintain primary public services; the unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2013 was 17,7% (INE, 2013); there were around 100 thousand Portuguese immigrants in 2012 (Social Watch, 2013); the level of poverty and social exclusion – 24,4% in 2011, corresponds to 2,6 million people. The Portuguese rate is highest than the UE27 average rate, which was 23,4% in 2010 (Eurostat, 2013).

Currently, there is a discussion about the reform of the Welfare State and its impossibility to ensure economic, social and labor rights as fundamental rights, being limited to sovereignty and governance functions. In view of this situation, this works questions if public institutions, which are State-dependent, will continue to perform their social function with commitment and to what degree will they perform it. The most radical question is knowing if public libraries, which are financed and maintained by the public administration, will be able to continue having social concerns; the fact is that they are also in economic crisis and, as a consequence of the political instability, they are also questioning their social mission and regressing on the promotion of social capital, restricting their functions to the information, education and other areas. The development of a community's social capital, the richness of its social interactions within the library is crucial for the development of full citizenship and of a more democratic society.

4 PORTUGUESE PUBLIC LIBRARIES ON FACEBOOK AND THE SOCIAL ROLE

As mentioned in the introduction, the political and social situation of public services in Portugal may prevent public libraries, which depend on the state, to perform social public services. On the other hand, the Web 2.0 technologies and the social networks are free platforms for content diffusion and they have the potential to generate shared information. These platforms may have an intensive use in times of economic crisis because their use has no additional costs and they can be excellent instruments to carry out the public library's social mission. The library's user is a target of its services and can also become the co-creator of ideas and opinions, contributing to the progress of the virtual service, enriching the online community by sharing contents and, finally, creating social capital. Although the social impact of technology is enormous, technology in itself does not lead to social change. It progressively shapes the social nature of the community that will obtain skills in order to be able to generate social capital (Williams & Durrance, 2008). Web 2.0 technology allows more sociability in communication platforms, the growth and penetration of contents generated by its users. The interactions between sociability and the production and distribution on information in the Web 2.0 may be seen as the promoters of actions that cross information and sociability (Del-Fresno García, 2011) and the new public libraries may take advantage of them to carry out their social mission. Social networks are the new access doors to libraries and may diffuse and develop services with a social nature.

In order to test this possibility, we carried out a first approach, which is described here in this work, observing Portuguese public libraries and their action in a single social network, trying to recognize some kind of action within the social area among their activities, as well as the number of actions and the target audience they are intended to.

To this research on social networks we have chosen Facebook because statistics show that in Portugal it has a penetration of 44.09% compared to the country's population and 86.28% in relation to the number of Internet users. The total number of Facebook users in Portugal reached 4,706,960 in March 2013, and grew more than 141,000 in the last six months (Socialbakers, 2013). The age range of 25-34 years old is the largest, with a total of 1.2208 million users, followed by users in the age group of 18-24 years old.

The statistical report of the National Network of Public Libraries in Portugal (RNBP) (Direção-Geral do Livro dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas, 2012) indicates that of the 194 libraries that are part of this network, 188 responded to the survey previous to the report, in 2011, and regarding the participation in social networks (Facebook and Twitter) 76 libraries (41%) participated in them.

In April 2013, there were 99 Portuguese municipal public libraries registered on Facebook, within a research universe of 301 public libraries (from the RNBP and all the other municipal libraries). We proceeded with the observation of the activity of public library pages on May 10th 2013 and collected information related to the public library's social function, corresponding to the last month of each library page/profile's news feed.

In chart 1 we see the result of the libraries' participation in social actions; from the universe of 99 libraries, 42% have activity (twenty six libraries have one action, twelve have two actions and four have three actions, as per chart 2), 49% haven't got any reference and 9% have no active Facebook page/profile.
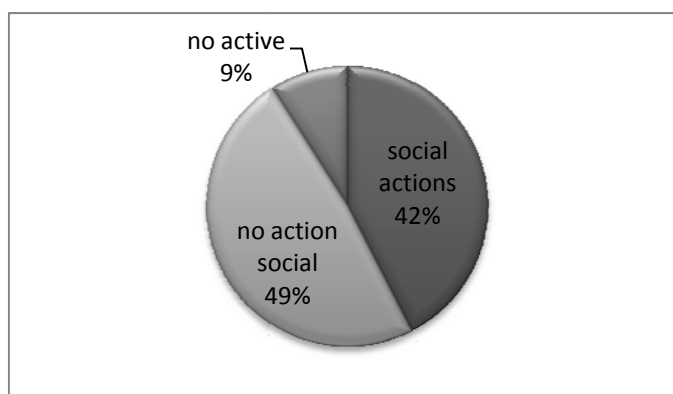

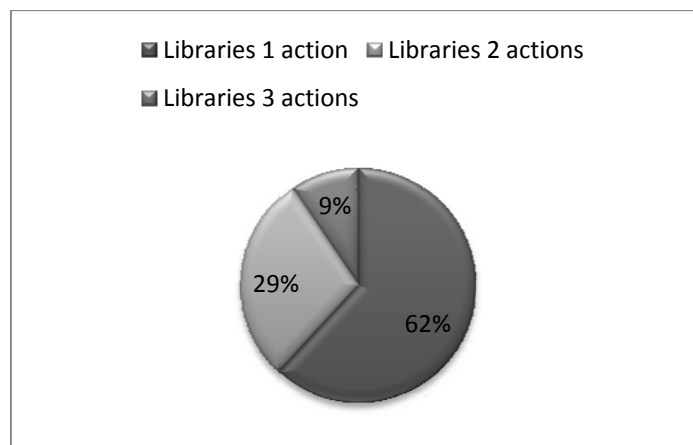Chart 1 Public libraries (PT) on Facebook and social function/May 2013

Chart 2 Public libraries (PT) on Facebook and no. of social actions/1 month in 2013

From reading the actions of public libraries we proceeded with their classification (chart 3) highlighting actions such as "contributing to the sense of community" with 18%, followed by "providing more spaces and a mobile library" with 13%; with 11% we have "being a life-long learning center" and "being a meeting place for the community/community center". The actions with 6% are "cooperating with local, national, international partners", "promoting social inclusion" and "contributing to an active role of the citizen". The other actions have residual values; with 5% "promoting services focused on the community", "promoting an intercultural dialogue" and "promoting digital inclusion"; with 3% "ensuring Human Rights", "being a center for personal development/self-training"; with 2% "allowing free access to information and services", "promoting peace/international understanding", "preserving civil rights".

Regarding the type of target audience to whom the actions of the public libraries are intended (chart 4), we found that 62% of the answers were dedicated to the general public, followed by 14% to an elderly population, 6% to the unemployed, 5% to people affected by gender discrimination, 3% to people with special needs and to schoolchildren, 2% to inmates, 2% to isolated people, 2% to people without Internet access and 2% to HIV-positive people.
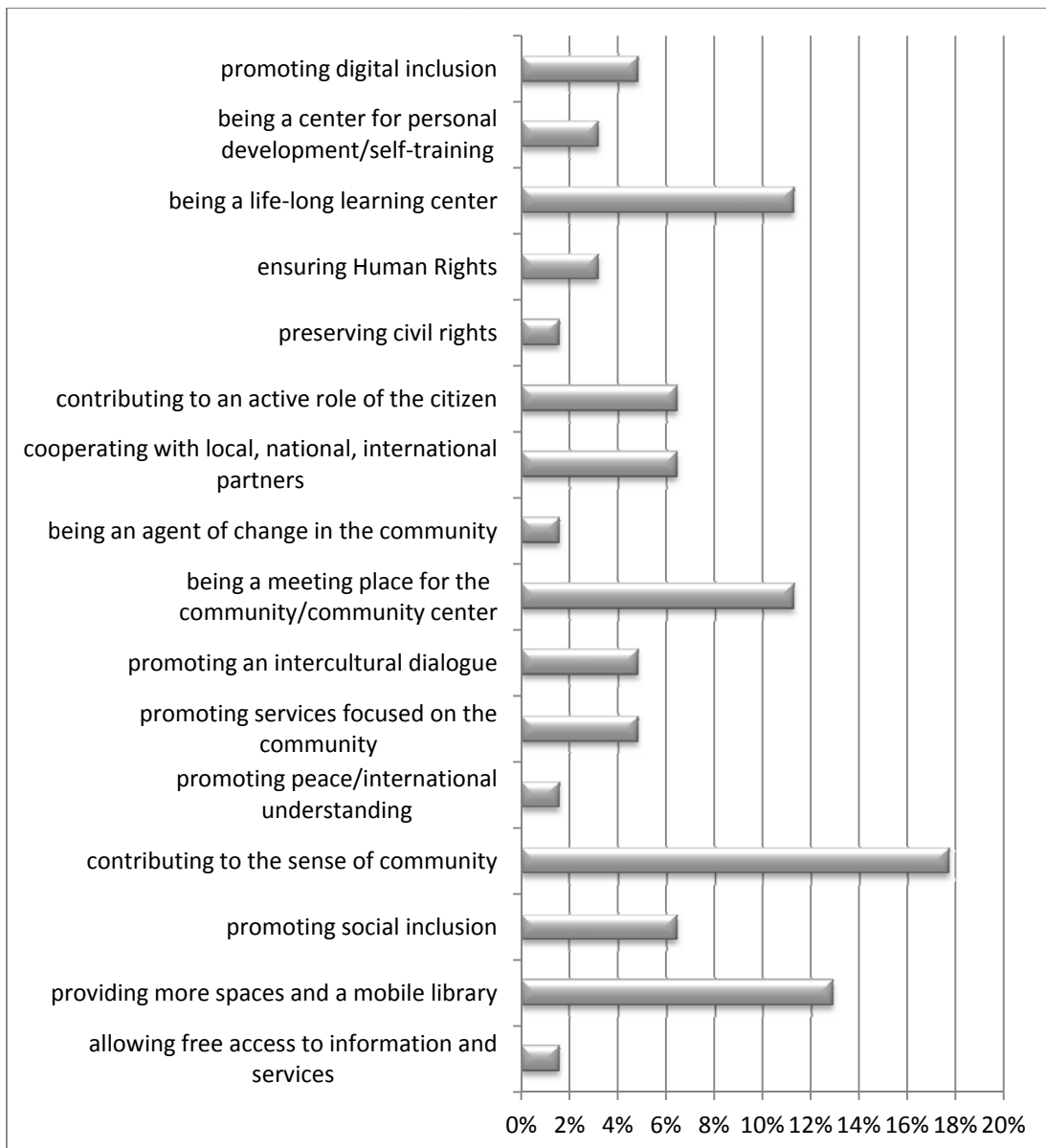
Chart 3 Type of actions developed by public libraries (PT) on Facebook/May 2013
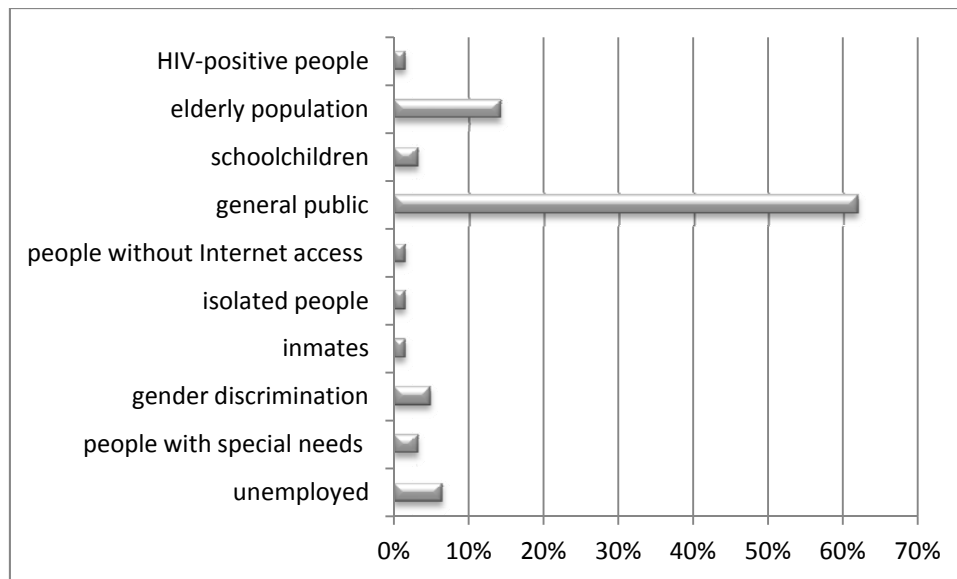
Chart 4 Target audiences of the social actions developed by public libraries (PT) on Facebook/May 2013

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

By presenting the results of this first approach to the issue of knowing if public libraries develop actions with a social nature through their presence on Facebook, as a possible example of intervention in the social networks, we found very weak data regarding the libraries' reaction to the social situation faced by the country. It could be expected that public libraries, in times of economic crisis and social recession, could develop social initiatives aimed at improving the populations' well-being and reducing social exclusion. At least through the social network, we were not able to find this scenario.

From the 99 libraries, 42% had a positive response, despite the fact that the number of actions was one to three actions/month. That does not mean that they are not developing actions in their own fixed spaces, during different periods of the year other than the month under observation, or publicizing them through other channels rather than the social networks. This situation should be studied in a future work.

The impact of the Web 2.0 in public libraries within the area of citizenship, integration and social cohesion is reduced to only a few types of intervention, reducing its social activity to a reduced number of aspects. The main variables that take part in the formation of social capital generated in the public library are not approached or mentioned, for example, in terms of the advertisement or marketing of the actions. These variables are limited to "contributing to the sense of community" with 18% and to "providing more space, creating library poles or improving the mobile library service", with 13%. The other actions have very reduced values. The variable with 13% of actions related to the creation of more decentralized library spaces (poles) and the use of travelling vans to provide book loans is the most consistent one with the report presented by Oleiro (2010), although it is still hardly considered in percentual terms.

Another important issue has to do with the publics to whom these actions are intended, and the answer of 62% of actions aimed at the general public is of little interest and hardly assertive. The publics that are more hit by social and digital exclusion are not taken into consideration in the actions, and even those who are referenced – like the unemployed population – are almost irrelevant. This issue should also be better studied in the future.

We must find out if the results of this analysis are a result of an inadequate training or of a lack of awareness of the professionals who work in public libraries, who are still too focused on the issues of information, on the promotion of reading habits and on literary and cultural activities. This issue had already been raised in the conclusions of the 13th RNBP Meeting (2012) that suggested a depreciation of the public library's social function by the professionals.

If that is the case, there will be the need to publicize, update and qualify the professionals to work on the library's social mission, because they have a broad field of work within the area of citizenship, social integration and cohesion; they should also demand a role that may generate social capital through inclusive actions, using the human and formative resources they have to improve the users' quality of life. These services may work on a virtual basis, taking advantage of free and open-source technologies and programs, such as the social networks.

Calixto, Nunes, Freitas, & Dionísio (2012) pointed out that the Portuguese socio-economic circumstances issue threats to public libraries that depend on council policies. The crisis deprives the state of instruments to intervene in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. But the crisis also challenges the public library's social role, so that it may develop into a meeting place – which may also exist on the social networks – and contribute to the community's social capital, well-being and confidence.

Despite the fact that economic threats hit public libraries, which are left with fewer human and financial resources, it will be important to know what libraries are doing in this situation, what challenges they are accepting for their mission. If they still have concerns of a social nature, if they invest on the richness of social interactions within virtual networks, if they develop other functions and turn the traditional functions of the public library into crucial functions for the development of full citizenship and of a more democratic society. For instance, after reading the DGLAB's report (2012), the loan and the intelligent dissemination of all kinds of documents and resources, according to a suitable quantity and update level – taking into account the socio-economic difficulties of a population that is refraining itself from purchasing documents –, might be one of the biggest challenges for the public library's social function.

It's time to rethink the public library's social missions. Despite the political and ideological constraints they are subject to, they may design social procedures that help the non-dilution of the citizen's rights, the strengthening of the concept of common good, the increase of social capital (Audunson, Vårheim, Aabø, & Holm, 2007), in order to improve the communities' quality of life (Koontz & Barbara Gubbin (ed.), 2010). Public libraries may be a driving force for social change.

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