Libraries and public perceptions: A comparative analysis of the European press. Methodological insights

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1   Premise

Measuring and assessing the quality of library services is an integral part of the managerial approach to libraries (Solimine). As a consequence, where a patron-driven approach is more rooted and library is conceived as a social institution (Traniello) and managed as a complex organisation, the need to adopt assessing tools in order to explicit the results gained by library services was felt earlier and more intensely. In recent times, the mainly quantitative approach has turned to a properly qualitative one and tools like interviews and focus groups have been adopted to let patrons' expectations and perceptions about libraries and their services coming out (Pickard; Faggiolani). As a consequence of using the methods of the social sciences (Bryman; Corbetta) and moving from the relative objectivity of quantitative data to the substantial subjectivity of opinions, the level of complexity of evaluation has grown, as well as the capacity to understand the phenomena which affect the library life. Under this

methodological framework, library quality in all its meanings and sides was first emphasised; later the analysis has gone beyond the boundaries of the library environment. Faced with the deep changes occurred in the social, economic and technological context, libraries need to prove their usefulness in increasing the social wealth and be sure this is recognised by the society as a whole. Over the last years there has been much research and discussion about the future of libraries (Coffman; Bell; Lankes R.; "America's Libraries for the 21st Century: An annotated bibliography"; Osif, "W(h)ither libraries? The future of libraries, part 1"; "W(h)ither libraries? The future of libraries, part 2"), particularly public libraries (Di Domenico; Galluzzi, "Che ne sarà dell'impero bibliotecario?"; "Biblioteche pubbliche tra crisi del welfare e beni comuni della conoscenza. Rischi e opportunità"; *Biblioteche per la città. Nuove prospettive di un servizio pubblico*; Levien; Salarelli; Conti); the numerous papers and contributions range from the analysis of new models and new perspectives of library services in the digital era to the investigation of the cultural, political and sociological premises libraries are based upon. The economic crisis has exacerbated this situation as libraries are facing increasing budget cuts and forced closures.[1] Consequently, the issue of the future of libraries has gone beyond the boundaries of the librarians' playground, flooding the ground of public opinion by means of the mass media. In these difficult times, many methods have been applied to prove the social and economic impact of libraries (Poll, "I dati che abbiamo e i dati che potremmo avere: nuovi sviluppi nella valutazione delle biblioteche"; *Bibliography* "*Impact and outcome of libraries*"; Chiessi; Ventura, *La biblioteca rende: Impatto sociale e economico di un servizio culturale*; "La valutazione

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[1]The following are just a couple of examples of websites born to debate the budget cuts and the library closures in the UK, to publish news about these issues and to advocate for libraries: http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com and http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk

della biblioteca pubblica: problematiche e strumenti di misurazione dell'impatto culturale, sociale e economico"; Markless and Streatfield) and, in many cases, the resulting reports have contributed to putting libraries on the political agenda. Nonetheless, the methods used so far are mainly library-centred and not far enough from the library world to catch on the prevailing and indefinite feelings permeating society. This is why the analysis of newspapers has been figured out as an alternative method to measure the relevance and the public perception of libraries (Thelwall; Giménez Guardiola and Pedreño). Looking at newspapers is an attempt to move outside the specialised literature concerning libraries. Approaching newspapers for this type of research requires awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of this method which are a consequence of the specific characteristics newspapers have as sources of information and of their relation with the public opinion building process (Barsamian and Chomsky; Habermas). Consequently, it is essential to outline how newspapers work (Zelizer; Boldrini; Lorusso and Violi; Martin and Copeland; Sheridan Burns). Newspapers make their news selection starting mainly from the national and international press agencies. This means that the decision to publish a piece of news depends on the characteristics and nature of the newspaper and is by itself an aspect to be analysed and interpreted. The selection of news published on newspapers depends on the issues which are considered of paramount interest for their readership or those to be put to the attention of the public opinion. Newspapers are crucial in defining the political agenda as they are important loudspeakers of the main opinion leaders, groups, lobbies and movements and deeply affect the public perception. On the other hand, it is undeniable that nowadays traditional newspapers are not the one and only conveyors of public opinions. Their initial role in informing citizens and spreading information has been complemented and partially

replaced by other communication media: first radio and television, then the Internet. From the points of view of promptness and audience, the traditional newspapers have been completely walloped by the other media. Nonetheless, they have reacted reinforcing their role in commenting, debating and analysing the news, which has been further boosted by the launch of the 2.0 newspapers' websites. In sum, though newspapers are not completely representative of the public opinion anymore, they are an important detector of the issues at stake and their non specialised - even sometimes inaccurate - approach is particularly useful in bringing out stereotypes and general opinions. Consequently, they can offer an interesting point of view, particularly on smaller subjects like libraries.

2 Aims and contents of the research

This research aims at quantifying and qualifying the presence of issues concerning libraries in the European press over the last years (Faggiolani; Bryman; Pickard) in order to answer the following research questions:

- which are the most discussed topics concerning libraries and have they changed over the last years?

- are there any significant differences between the European countries in the debate about libraries?

- are there any significant differences between the European newspapers in the debate about libraries?

The chronological span covered by the research is five years, from 2008 to 2012. This choice was made because 2008 is generally considered the starting point of the economic crisis which is still deeply affecting the Western economies and political scenarios. As for the

geographical coverage, the focus has been put on Europe, the so-called "old continent", which is currently observed with special attention by the Western countries and the other nations based on capitalistic economies, as it is the main theatre where the economic crisis is deploying its heavy consequences. The countries taken into account are the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy, since they are considered representative of different areas and cultural traditions in Europe, as well as expression of diverse economic and political situations. A second selection was made among the numerous print newspapers published, with the objective of choosing two titles for each country according to the following basic criteria. The two newspapers were picked among those of national relevance, the most widespread and the oldest in each country, avoiding - if possible - those officially representing political parties and the radical ones. Attention was also put in covering both the centre-left area and the centre-right, in order to have different points of view on similar issues and more elements to explain the weight each newspaper gives specific topics in relation to governmental policies. The economic and sport newspapers were not taken into account. The selected newspapers are the following:

- The United Kingdom: *The Times* (centre-right) and *The Guardian* (centre-left)

- France: *Le Figaro* (centre-right) and *Le Monde* (centre)

- Spain: *El Mundo* (centre-right) and *El País* (centre-left)

- Italy: *Corriere della Sera* (centre/liberalism) and *La Repubblica* (centre-left)

As for Italy, while *La Repubblica* evidently belongs to the centre-left area, *Il Corriere della Sera* cannot be considered a right-wing newspaper; it rather is an expression of liberalism and, from a political

point of view, is closer to the centre area. France has a similar situation, since *Le Monde* can be classified as belonging to the centre-area, whereas the left is represented by more radical titles. The databases used to go through the chosen newspapers were Lexis Nexis™ News for *Le Monde* only and Factiva™ for all the other titles. For all the newspapers - whenever possible - the source selected was the national print edition (without the local editions). The coverage guaranteed by the same database for different newspapers is not always comparable, depending upon the agreements with the publishers. In sum, all the titles cover the national print edition and encompass the supplements; two of them, *El Paìs* and *Corriere della Sera*, include the regional or local editions too. In one case, *La Repubblica*, though the database declares that regional editions are available as separate sources, the fall in the number of articles retrieved from 2011 on (see figure 1 on page 50) makes clear that, for the previous period (2008-2010) the database encompassed the pages of the local editions as well. This lack of consistency cannot be corrected, as it is not possible to clearly distinguish the articles coming from the national edition and those included in the local ones. This is why the comparisons between the absolute numbers of articles for each country and newspaper were avoided and a statistical analysis of the data was needed to make the numbers meaningful. The keywords used as query parameters in the full text search were "librar*" and "bibliot*" (according to the language of the newspaper). For the French newspapers only, a second query was performed using "mediat*" as keyword in the full text search, in order to avoid losing the articles concerning public libraries (which are mainly called "médiathèques" in France).

3 The numbers

The articles retrieved using the above-mentioned parameters are 41,611. After the retrieval of the articles responding to the query parameters, the second step was to select the pertinent ones, i.e. those articles which concern libraries in a proper sense. The uses of the terms "library" and "librarians" which were not considered pertinent are the following:

- personal libraries;

- house furniture;

- the place where an event or an exhibition is held;

- the place where a murder or a crime occurs;

- the title of a book series;

- a bunch of physical or digital objects (e.g. iTunes as a music digital library);

- the name of sections of newspapers;

- idiomatic expressions and figures of speech encompassing the term "library", like "Library of Babel" or "bookworm" (which is "library mouse" in French, Italian and Spanish);

- libraries cited in tender announcements;

- libraries cited in biographies and stories.

The pertinent articles are 3,659.

Newspapers	2008		2009		2010		2011		2012		Overall total	
	Total	Pertinent	Total	Pertinent	Total	Pertinent	Total	Pertinent	Total	Pertinent	Total	Pertinent
Corriere della Sera	915	78	1070	103	1306	84	1428	104	1992	268	6711	637
La repubblica	3584	231	3445	228	3104	215	529	43	627	92	11289	809
Italy	4499	309	4515	331	4410	299	1957	147	2619	360	18000	1446
The times	1162	110	1161	68	1009	75	961	82	769	99	5062	434
The guardian	1395	63	1349	77	1251	125	1269	131	851	110	6115	506
The United Kingdom	2557	173	2510	145	2260	200	2230	213	1620	209	11177	940
Le figaro	630	62	517	55	446	48	436	27	478	37	2507	229
Le monde	433	62	487	86	455	91	408	59	448	44	2231	342
France	1063	124	1004	141	901	139	844	86	926	81	4738	571
El Pais	1065	81	1220	107	1306	110	1348	110	1015	126	5954	534
El Mundo	384	40	382	42	367	30	308	32	301	24	1742	168
Spain	1449	121	1602	149	1673	140	1656	142	1316	150	7696	702
Overall total	9568	727	9631	766	9244	778	6687	588	6481	800	41611	3659

Figure 1: Overall numbers of the articles examined and pertinent ones

4   Processing the articles

After the selection, a text and content analysis of the articles was carried out (Neuendorf and Copeland; Krippendorff). To support this process many computer software for qualitative data analysis are available, which help in organizing and analyzing non-numerical and unstructured data. As for this research, the pros and cons of using this type of software were attentively evaluated. Though aware of the many advantages (speed, completeness, objectivity and precision) of an automatic processing, the risk to think that the whole analysis could be delegated to computer software, instead of using them to speed up and enhance it, was given a special credit. In fact, without a previous coding process, the automatic search of keywords throughout the texts was deemed to be potentially misleading. Without the appropriate questioning during the analysis, the risk either to run the wrong procedures and queries or to create fictitious relationships among concepts and documents was considered high. Furthermore, in this case the analysis of articles in four different languages would have increased the variables and the potential inconsistency of the results. All things considered, the analysis was carried out manually and no text analysis software was used, starting from the firm belief that no software can replace human reasoning. A certain degree of subjectivity was considered somewhat inevitable and acceptable, provided that the reasoning is logical and intelligible and the results are consistent. First of all, each article was identified with a univocal name and an Excel^{TM} worksheet was prepared to host the results of the coding. Then, the articles were analysed and coded. Coding written texts presents nearly the same problems as subject indexing and classification, though in a less formalised context (Neuendorf and Copeland; Krippendorff). In particular, the following main aspects of the text and content analysis were taken into consideration:

- the different ways of conveying the same concepts (synonyms and quasi-synonyms);

- the need to distinguish among different types of concepts (main concepts, their attributes and so on);

- the need to clarify the relationships among concepts (for example, parent/children).

This is why Text analysis is a gradual process, as a clearer map of concepts and their relationships can be approached only by means of subsequent attempts. At the beginning, the texts were carefully reviewed and all concepts and ideas were annotated as they appeared and then grouped. Afterwards, the articles were coded according to the following categories and sub-categories:

- country

- newspaper title

- year of publication

- prevalence or not of libraries as subject of the article

- type of library considered: Public, National, Academic, School, Special/Specialised, No specification or more than one type

- main topic of the article: Mission/Roles, Conservation/Holdings/ Catalogue, Digitisation/Digital libraries, History, Reading/ Marketing, Politics/Strategy/Management, Library closures/ Budget cuts, Internet/E-book/Technology, Services/Users, Staff/Recruitment, New libraries/New buildings, Acquisitions/Open access, Buildings/Architecture.

- the newspaper section where the article is published: Opinions/Letters/Debates, Culture/Education, In brief, Cities/Local news, National news, World/International news, Market/Economy/Business, Society, Science, Other

- in case the article deal with libraries of other countries, in addition to the other codes, it is coded under the country it talks about, according to the following scheme: Portugal, Spain, Austria/Switzerland, Scandinavian Countries, Eastern Europe, Greece, Germany, Italy, France, UK/Ireland, Europe in general, Rest of the World/World in general.

As for the topics, which are the more thorny aspect of the coding, they were defined insofar as the text analysis went on; in the end, a flat schema (not a classification schema) was adopted, putting together those issues which could be assimilated and trying to avoid any overlapping. While some groupings were obvious and look self-evident (e.g. "Mission/Roles", "Politics/Strategy/Management"), others, like "Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue" or "Acquisitions/Open Access", need a further explanation as they came from an articulated reasoning. As for the former, it should be stressed that newspapers rarely deal with library catalogues in a technical way, rather they consider catalogues as a direct expression of a rich library collection.

Therefore, the "catalogue" issue is just another way to celebrate what libraries hold and preserve. As far as the "Acquisitions/Open Access" topic is concerned, the label was chosen to put together all those issues pertaining access to library collections. The attention of newspapers is not about selection methods and tools (which would be a too technical approach), but about variety and accessibility of the collection which encompass books and periodicals acquisitions and alternative ways of making them accessible.

To correctly interpret the results of the subject analysis, events and debates which have come out and raised prolonged attention during the considered period should be highlighted, as they could have inspired a high number of articles and created a full strand, which could be either supra-national or strictly linked to the national context. Another clarification is needed for the geographical groups used to categorise the articles concerning libraries of other countries. Like the whole research, they follow a Europe-centred approach. Consequently, all the articles talking about countries outside Europe are put together under the label "Rest of the World/World in general", whereas the European countries are processed individually or are grouped according to geographical and cultural areas. After processing all the articles and completing the Excel™ worksheet, various pivot tables were built to sort and summarise the data and these were the starting point for the discussion of the findings.

5   Some first findings

The data analysis and processing is ongoing and the research findings are far from being complete. As for now, some first findings in form of tables and graphs can be offered with some first comments. A preliminary quantitative analysis of the articles retrieved concerns the prevalence or not of the library subject (fig. 2 on the next page). Actually, many articles only cite libraries within descriptions and debates regarding more general issues and together with many other topics. These articles are anyhow important, as they vouch for the consideration of libraries when talking about issues like cultural policies, budget planning, national heritage and so on. However, the articles totally centred on libraries are much more relevant in respect to this research, since they highlight the issues that the newspapers deem to be of general interest and valuable of becoming subject of

the public debate. In addition, these articles allow the researcher a deeper examination of topics and offer more material for the textual analysis.
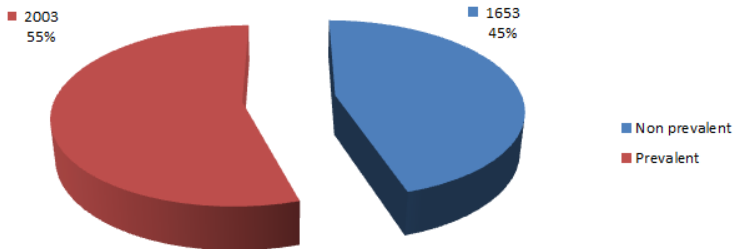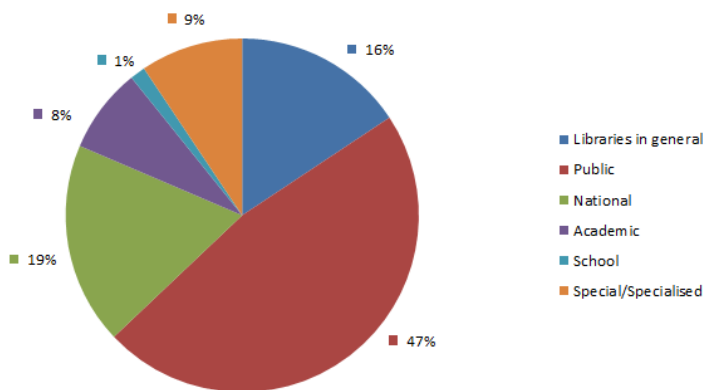

Figure 2: Articles where the library subject is prevalent vs. those where it is not

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Another question this research has tried to answer is which types of libraries newspaper articles deal with the most. In figures 3 on the following page and 4 on the next page the results of the analysis are shown respectively as percentages of the total number of articles and as percentages of those articles which mainly talk about libraries.

According to figure 3 on the following page, almost half of the total articles are devoted to public libraries. The second most represented type of libraries is national libraries (13%), followed by special and specialised libraries (8%) and academic libraries (7%). School libraries are quite absent from the chosen newspapers. In the 22% of the articles the subject are libraries in general or more types of library altogether. Considering only the articles where library subject is prevalent (fig. 4 on the next page), the percentage of articles talking about libraries in general is lower, whereas the percentage of
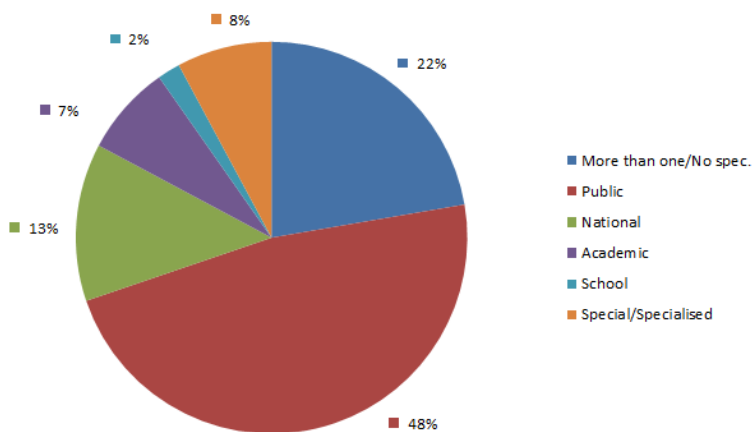
Figure 3: Types of libraries (% on total articles)

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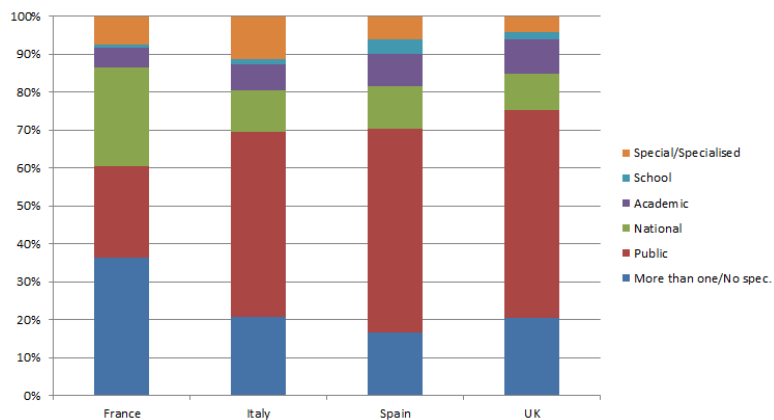**Figure 4:** Types of libraries (% on articles where the library subject prevails)

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national libraries increases up to 18%. This could mean that, when libraries are only mentioned in writing about more general issues, it is more likely that no specification is given about the type of library considered. The global results concerning the types of libraries deserve a more in-depth analysis in order to verify if there are any differences between the selected countries and newspapers. In the figures 5 and 6 on the following page the data are processed and analysed by country.

From the observation of the two graphs the following considerations emerge:

- France is the only country where national libraries, instead of public libraries, are the most present in the debate. This is even truer when considering only those articles mainly talking about libraries; in this case, the number of articles concerning libraries in general declines to the advantage of national libraries;

- the presence of academic libraries in the debate is proportionally higher in the UK and Spain than in France and Italy;

- in Italy the presence of articles on special and specialised libraries is higher than in the other countries and partially balances the low percentage of articles concerning national libraries.

In order to get further elements to interpret the data concerning the most debated types of libraries, in figures 7 and 8 on page 60 these data are processed and analysed by newspaper. From the observations of the two graphs the following considerations emerge:

- as for Spain, France and the UK, the centre-right newspapers (*El Mundo*, *Le Figaro*, *The Times*) seem to give more attention to

Figure 5: Types of libraries per country (on total articles)

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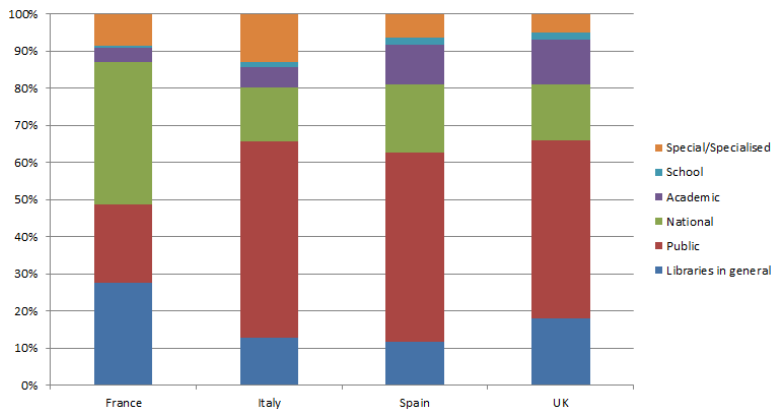
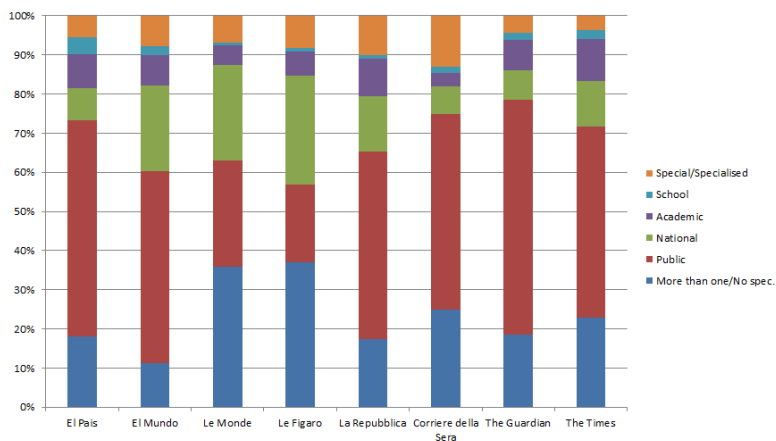**Figure 6:** Types of libraries per country (on articles where the library subject prevails)

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the national libraries in comparison to the centre-left newspapers (*El Pais*, *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*), whereas the centre-left newspapers compensate with more articles on public libraries. The only exception is Italy; in this case the number of articles on national libraries is higher in *La Repubblica* than in *Corriere della Sera*, but the centre newspaper has the highest percentage of articles on special and specialised libraries, which can be considered contiguous to the national ones;

- as for the rest, the graphs confirm what emerges from figures 5 and 6 on the facing page.

The analysis of the data from the point of view of the topics discussed in the articles offers many insights into the way the European press look at libraries and helps in getting a closer idea of the conception of libraries they tend to convey. First of all, it could be interesting to verify how the topics are distributed on the total number of the articles and on those where the library subject is prevalent (figures 9 and 10 on page 62).
From the analysis of these graphs it is possible to rank the most popular topics concerning libraries (the two percentages in parenthesis refer respectively to the figures 9 and 10 on page 62):

1. Politics/Strategy/Management (28%-22%);

2. Library closures/Budget cuts (17%-14%);

3. Digital/Digitisation (11%-12%)

4. Services/Users (10%-11%)

5. Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue (8%-11%)

6. New libraries/New buildings (7%-9%)
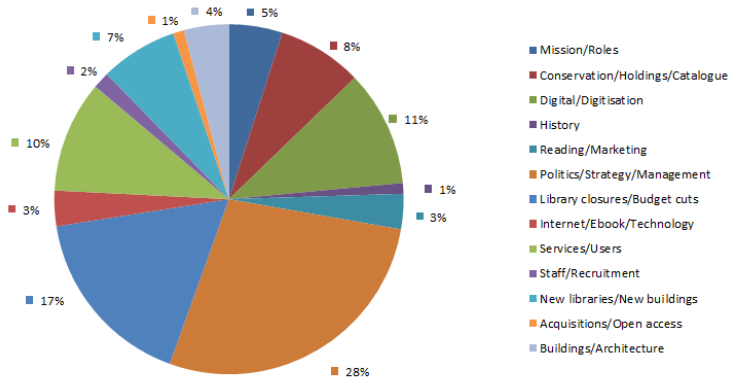
7. Mission/Roles (5%-6%)

**Figure 7:** Types of libraries per newspaper (on total articles)

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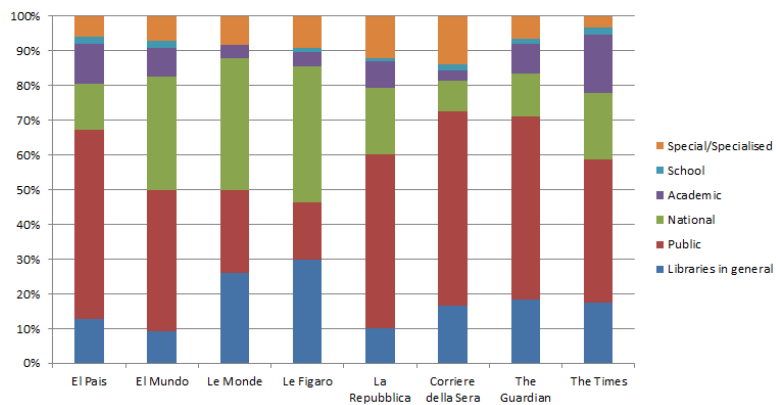
Figure 8: Types of libraries per newspaper (on articles where the library subject prevails)

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8. Buildings/Architecture (4%-5%)

9. Internet/Ebook/Technology (3%-4%)

10. Reading/Marketing (3%-3%)

11. Staff/Recruitment (2%-1%)

12. History (1%-1%)

13. Acquisition/Open access (1%-1%)

Figure 9: Topics (% on total articles)

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Considered that newspapers tend to give particular attention to those topics which are of interest for the public opinion, it is quite obvious that the most debated topics concern the least specialised and the most political issues. It should also be highlighted that, considering the overall number of articles, the first two topics cover about 45% of the articles, whereas the percentage declines to 36%
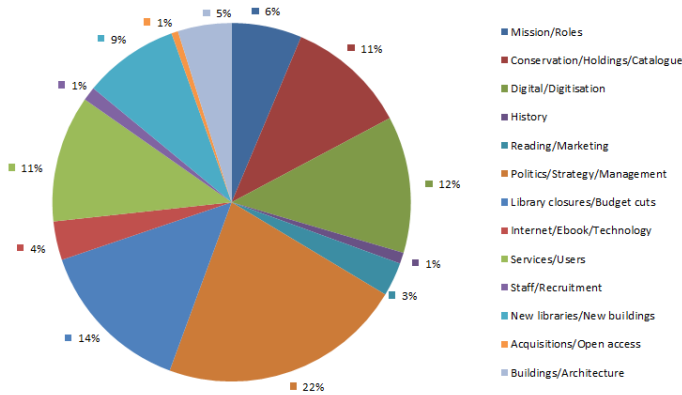
Figure 10: Topics (% on articles where the library subject prevails)

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if only the articles mainly concerning libraries are taken into account. A possible explanation of this finding is that libraries are frequently mentioned in those articles broadly regarding politics and cuts, while in those articles where libraries are the main subject the contents become more specific. For example, topics like "Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue" and "New libraries/New buildings" are more represented in the articles where the library subject prevails.

Figures 11 and 12 on the next page show the overall distribution of the most popular topics (those beyond the 5% threshold) over the time lapse considered, without distinctions among the four countries, in order to verify which of these topics have been steady and which have been affected by the surrounding political and economic situation over the time.

From the observation of the two graphs a somewhat consistent picture emerges, despite the minor differences between the two. In particular, the following trends are worth being highlighted:
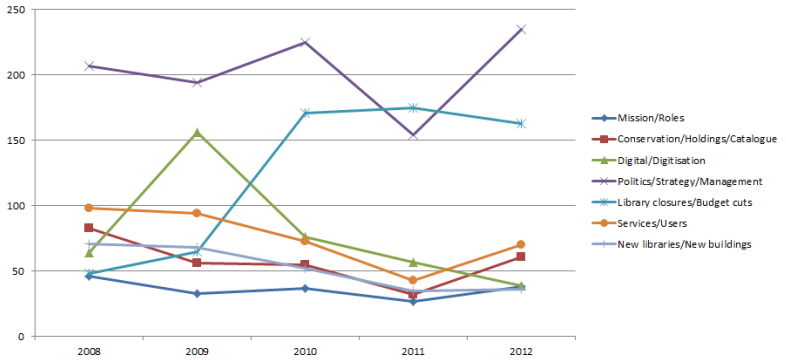
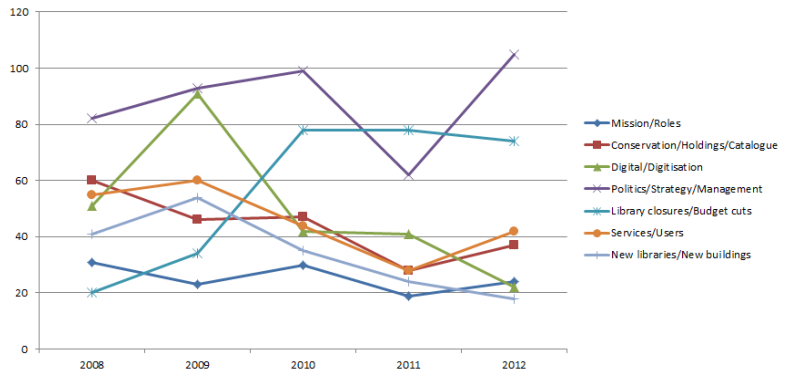**Figure 11:** Main topics (over the 5% threshold) per year (on total articles)

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Figure 12: Main topics (over the 5% threshold) per year (on articles where the library subject prevails)

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- "Mission/Roles" is the only topic which looks essentially stable during these five years;

- as for "Digital/Digitisation", after a peak in 2009, its presence decreased in the 2010-2012 period; this evolution is probably linked to the rise and decline of the debate after the case involving Google, libraries and publishers on the Google Books project occurred between 2008 and 2009;

- the two topics "Library closures/Budget cuts" and "New libraries/New buildings" have opposite and complementary trends; the first underwent a sharp rise from 2008 to 2010 and kept basically high between 2010 and 2012, whereas the second one had a constant decrease from 2009 on; in this case the link with the economic situation is clear as the ever-increasing negative effects of the crisis have not only stopped the investments, but also brought into questions the survival of many libraries;

- on the contrary, the topics "Services/Users" and "Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue" show fluctuations which seem independent from the external situation; both tend to slightly decline, though from 2011 to 2012 a minor increase was registered;

- the most popular topic "Politics/Strategy/Management" shows a drop in 2011 (which is not easily intelligible), but is basically stable or increasing, as it is a cross-cutting and evergreen issue.

The overall picture emerging from the previous analysis does not take into account the differences between the countries, which could help in further interpreting the trends and better understanding the national specificities and their correlation with the data commented

so far. In 13 and 14 on page 66 a comparison among the four chosen countries is proposed concerning the seven most popular topics.

This detailed analysis partly confirms the general trends already illustrated and partly highlights relevant specificities at the national level, which require supplementary considerations. In particular:

- France is the most interested in the "Digital/Digitisation" and "Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue" topics, which are far more present in the French press than in any other country. This finding is consistent with the extensive presence of the national libraries in the French newspapers (see figures7 and 8 on page 60) and with their traditional high consideration of the national heritage. It is worth remembering that in France digitisation has a central role in the cultural policy and raise important public investments; therefore, the lawsuit concerning the Google Book project - that some French libraries have chosen as partner in digitisation - initiated a lively debate in France between those in favour and those against the private way towards digitisation;

- in Italy the debate on digitisation and digital libraries is relatively scarce which is quite surprising if considering the wide and important printed heritage it can be proud of. After all, despite the immense collections held by the Italian libraries, the national policy concerning digitisation is feeble and highly fragmented; therefore, this issue stays somehow outside the general interest and is debated almost exclusively by librarians and IT people.

- in the UK the "Library closures/Budget cuts" topic seems to dominate the picture, meaning that the debate is lively and deep. Over the last years the news about the hundreds of libraries forced to close or to cut their services due to the
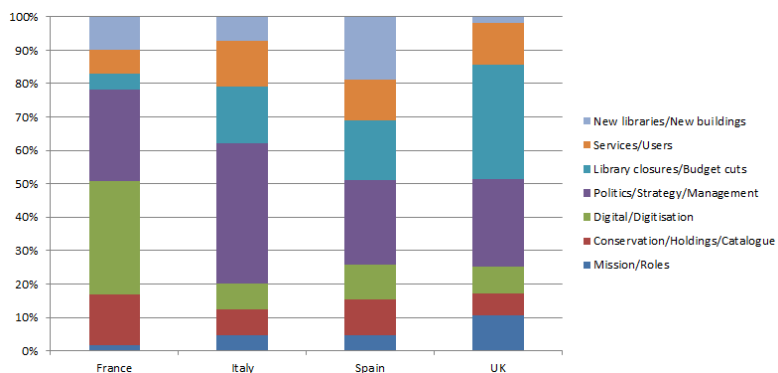
Figure 13: Main topics (over the 5% threshold) per country (% on total articles)

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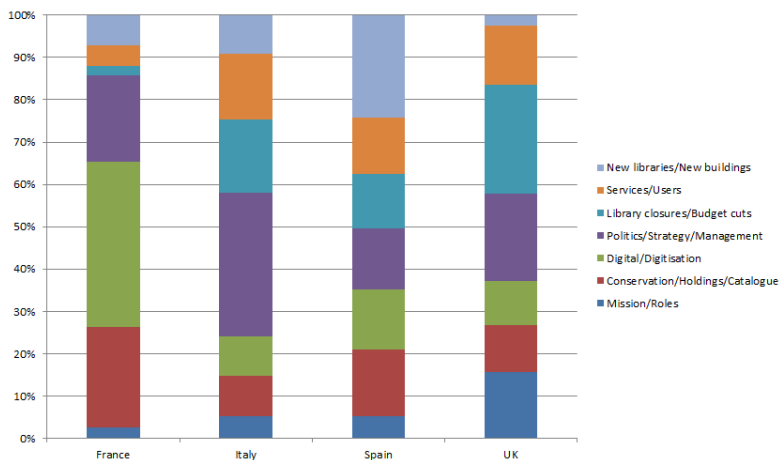
Figure 14: Main topics (over the 5% threshold) per country (% on articles where the library subject prevails)

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governmental austerity policies have crowded the pages of professional reviews and websites, but have also become a matter of general interest flooding the pages of the press;

- as for Spain, the highest percentage of articles concerns new libraries and new buildings, which could be considered quite surprisingly given its well known difficult economic situation. The distribution over time should be verified in order to check if the effects of the economic crisis have changed the terms of the debate during the chronological span considered;

- as far as Italy is concerned, the "Politics/Strategy/Management" topic widely dominates the picture and is far more present than in any other country; when summed with the articles concerning library closures and budget cuts, they cover more than 50% of the most popular topics. The well-known tendency of the Italian politics to be over-represented in the national media seems to be confirmed for the library issues as well.

Some of the findings and questions raised by the above analysis could find an answer by further processing the data. In particular, it could be worth focusing on the two topics which have probably been affected the most by the economic crisis, i.e. "Library closures/Budget cuts" and "New libraries/New buildings", in order to check if the four countries, taken one by one, show different trends over the time lapse considered (figures 15 and 16 on the following page).

As far as the "New libraries/New buildings" topic is concerned, all the countries, with the exception of France, exhibit an evident fall in the number of articles after 2009, though in the UK this trend seems to change after 2010 showing a slight increase. In the case of the Italian newspapers, this finding is complementary to the trend registered for the "Library closures/Budget cuts" topic, which is basically increasing after 2009, though going through ups and
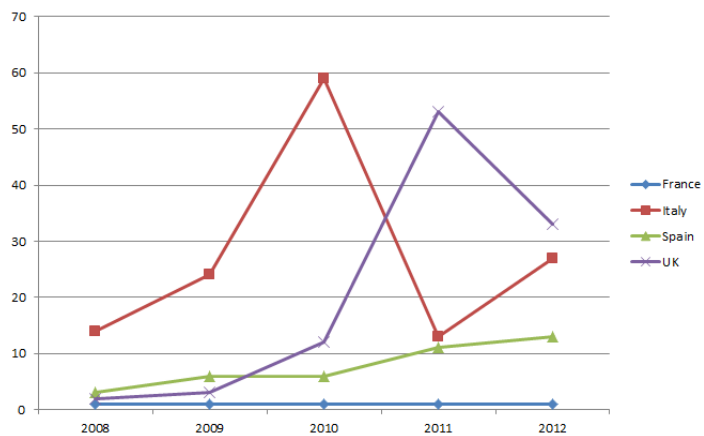
Figure 15: ''Library closures/Budget cuts'' topic per country (2008-2012)
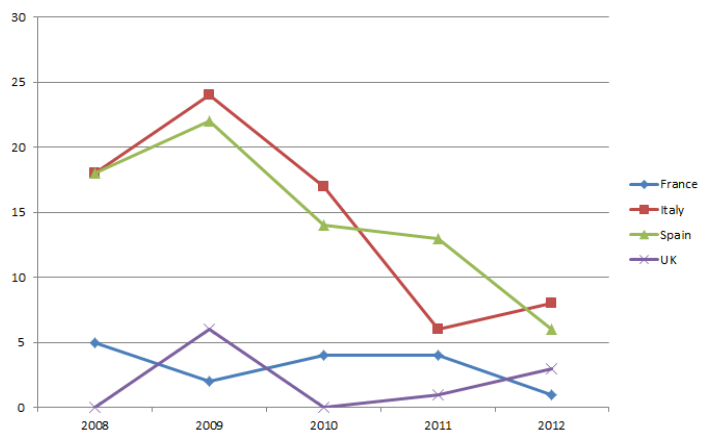
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Figure 16: ''New libraries/New buildings'' topic per country (2008-2012)

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downs, and is in line with the data registered in figures 13 and 14 on page 66 concerning the percent distribution of topics. As for Spain, the significant decline registered for the "New libraries/New buildings" topic is not balanced by the slight increase of the "Library closures/Budget cuts" topic. Given that the Spanish press shows an extensive attention towards new libraries and new buildings, the figures 15 and 16 on the facing page help in getting this topic into the right perspective and reveal that, though central, it has been affected by the crisis in Spain as well as in the other countries, whereas the debate about cuts has become hotter insofar as the economic crisis has deployed its effects. In the UK, while the "New libraries/New buildings" topic keeps low in numbers, though slightly increasing from 2010 on, the debate about library closures and budget cuts seems to burst into flame after 2009, confirming the overall picture coming from the percent distribution of topics. On the contrary, the French newspapers seem not to be involved in the fierce debate about budget cuts and their consequences and register a negligible number of articles on this topic in the whole period, confirming what emerged from figures 13 and 14 on page 66. The articles concerning new libraries and new buildings seem slightly declining, but do not present significant highs and lows. Some more possible keys to interpret the overall picture come from the analysis of the topics distribution in the newspapers. In figures 17 and 18 on the following page a comparison between the eight chosen newspapers is proposed.

The major specificities emerging at newspaper level are the following:

- a comparison between the two graphs highlights that for all the newspapers the number of articles concerning "Politics/ Strategy/Management" is higher if considering the total number of articles rather than those where the library subject is
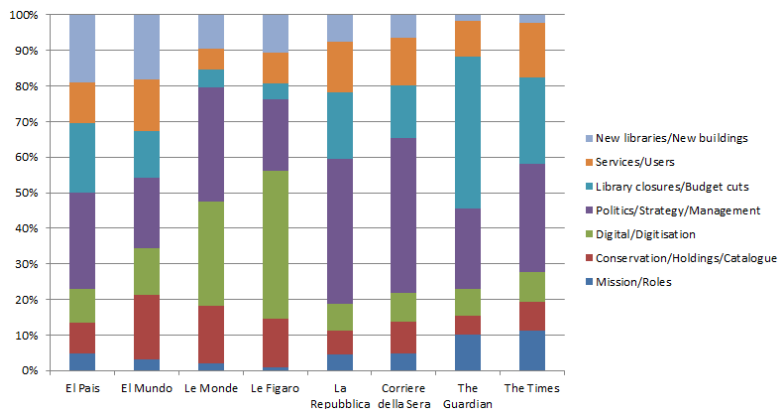
Figure 17: Main topics (over the 5% threshold) per newspaper (% on total articles)

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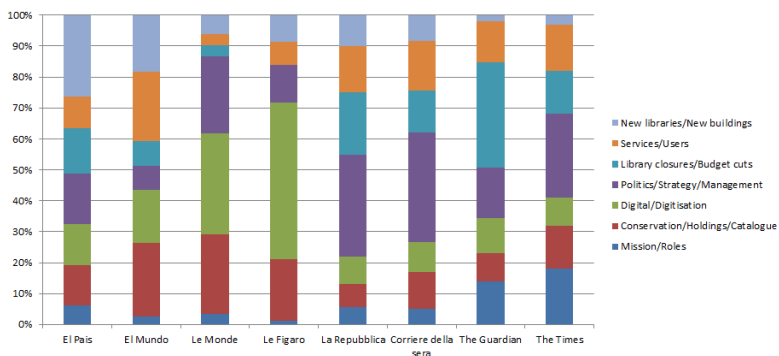
Figure 18: Main topics (over 5% threshold) per newspaper (% on articles where the library subject prevails)

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prevalent. This finding confirms what emerged from figures 9 and 10 on page 62, i.e. when the articles are mainly focused on libraries the issues dealt with tend to be more specific;

- as far as the Spanish newspapers are concerned, there are significant differences among *El Pais* and *El Mundo*; the first one gives extensive attention to the "New libraries/New buildings" topic and secondly to "Politics/Strategy/Management", whereas *El Mundo* seems more interested in topics like "Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue" and "Services/Users". This could mean that *El Pais* focuses on more sensitive news for the current political affairs, whereas *El Mundo* has a more conservative and traditional approach;

- looking mainly at Fig. 18, as for the French newspapers, the predominance of the "Digital/Digitisation" topic is true for both newspapers, though *Le Figaro* looks particularly sensitive to this issue which covers more than 50% of the articles concerning the seven most popular topics; in *Le Monde* a relevant number of articles is also devoted to the "Conservation/Holdings/Catalogue" and the "Politics/Strategy/Management" topics;

- the Italian newspapers seem to be more aligned on the most popular topics; *La Repubblica* shows a slightly higher percentage on the "Library closure/Budget cuts" topic, which is balanced by a slightly higher percentage on "Politics/Strategy/Management" registered in *Corriere della Sera*;

- as for the British newspapers, the political positioning seems to have more consequences on the distribution of topics; *The Guardian*, which is the left-wing newspaper, gives a special attention to the most sensitive topic in respect to the governmental politics, i.e. "Library closures/Budget cuts", whereas

The Times preferably deals with the more generic debate about "Politics/Strategy/Management" and "Mission/Roles" of libraries;

- an overall analysis shows that no common approaches can be found in those newspapers referring to the same political areas; maybe, a connection between the selection and the choices made by the newspapers and the contingent political situation of the country could be inferred by means of a deeper analysis.

6   Conclusions

In this paper the methodology of a research on the European press has been illustrated; this research is aimed at evaluating how the public perception about libraries has evolved over the last five years in four countries: the UK, France, Italy and Spain. The methodology has been explained and discussed to highlight its strengths and weaknesses and some first and temporary findings have been offered in form of graphs and comments. The data analysis has showed the following main trends:

- the prevalence of public and national libraries in the debate, with some significant differences among the four countries;

- a general agreement on the most popular topics, though France seems more interested to the "Digital/Digitisation" topic, whereas the other countries are more sensitive to the political and strategic framework in which libraries are inserted; in general, newspapers confirm to be loudspeakers of topics of general interest, while are less attentive to more specialised issues;

- no clear connection can be traced between the political areas the newspapers belong to and the topics dealt with; a deeper

analysis of the national context is required to better interpret
the differences among the data registered in the different news-
papers;

- the effect of the economic crisis on the evolution of the debate
over the last years is evident both in the presence/absence
and in the rise/decline of some topics (e.g. "New libraries/
New buildings" declines, while "Library closures/Budget cuts"
rises).

As for now, the research proves to be effective not only to highlight
the topics and the approaches that newspapers spread in their role
of loudspeakers of society, but also to understand how they relate
with the common thoughts and the general feelings autonomously
emerging from in the society (both influencing them and being
influenced by them).

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ABSTRACT: Purpose. The paper presents the first results of a research which aims at evaluating how the public perception about libraries has evolved over the last five years in Europe. It quantifies and qualifies the presence of issues concerning libraries in the European press in order to answer the following research questions: which are the most discussed topics and have they changed over the last years? Are there any significant differences between the European countries and newspapers in the debate about libraries? The research is based upon a comparative textual analysis of eight print newspapers of national interest coming from four different European countries (UK, Italy, France and Spain) and concerns the quantity and quality of articles on libraries published from 2008 to 2012. The data analysis highlights the following main trends: public and national libraries are prevalent in the debate; a general agreement is found on the most popular topics; no relevant connection can be traced between the political areas the newspapers belong to and the topics dealt with; a deeper analysis of the national context is required to better interpret the differences among the newspapers; the effect of the economic crisis on the evolution of the debate is evident both in the presence/absence and in the rise/decline of some topics. As for now, the research proves to be effective not only to highlight different topics and approaches, but also to understand how newspapers relate with the common thoughts and the general feelings autonomously emerging from in the society.

KEYWORDS: Libraries, European press, Methodology, Content analysis, Public perception