

Review

Mobile Libraries: Defining the phenomenon

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This article presents a brief historical review of the appearance of mobile libraries and then continues to define the phenomenon on the basis of two of its distinct features: library services and mobility, which both concern institutional Mobile Libraries and non-institutional mobile libraries. In addition, special reference is made to the significant presence of non-institutional mobile libraries in the world of books. The text closes with a short reference to the social contribution of mobile (and mobile) libraries (education and lifelong learning, entertainment, communication - connection - meeting) to everyone and, more particularly, to people with special physical and/or social needs and the necessity to support the continuation of their operation.

Key words: Mobile libraries, non-institutional mobile libraries, library services, library mobility, social contribution of mobile libraries.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile libraries: A brief historical review

In the 1800s, the travelling libraries were the most popular method for books to reach the people who, for various reasons, did not have access to libraries. To be more specific, these were boxes filled with a collection of 25 to 50 books that were delivered to predetermined deposit stations by hand-pushed trolleys or horse-drawn carriages (Walter, 1920). The travelling libraries –found until the middle of the 20th century– gradually spiralled into decline. At the same time, the mobile libraries appeared around the world in various forms.

The shift from using vehicles to deliver boxes with books, to using vehicles for book storage and circulation, that is, to mobile libraries, is an important milestone in the history of books and libraries. We do not know the exact date when various transport means began to be used as mobile libraries. Relevant references to horse-drawn

carriages that carried small collections of books for borrowing purposes are found in the late 1850s in the United Kingdom (Hedrick, 2011).

In the USA, the role of Mary Titcomb, an active librarian in Washington County Free Library, Maryland, was truly remarkable; in her effort to expand the services of the library to the rural country, she introduced the deposit system, on the basis of which reading material was packaged in boxes and delivered by a horse-drawn carriage to houses, stores, post offices, etc, scattered throughout the county. When Titcomb realised that these stations were not accessible to people who were limited by time or transportation restrictions, she designed the Book Wagon, a specially arranged carriage with shelves on the outer surfaces. The black wagon, which was staffed with a librarian and a coachman since Conventional library and information services (LIS) such as Online Public 1905 visited institutions and houses. Its

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routes ceased in 1910, when it was struck by a train (fortunately the coachman and horses were not hurt). Thanks to a donation, in 1912 the carriage was replaced with a car and that was the first *bookmobile* (Lamb, 2012; Kara, 2010; Weinberger, 2013). The idea spread fast in the USA and within a few decades hundreds of bookmobiles were travelling in rural and urban areas (Cara, 2014; Lamb, 2012).

In the decades that followed, mobile libraries appeared all over the world in various forms: simple carriages, waterborne means and state-of-the-art electronic vessels (Mounir and Shafeek, 2003). It is a fact that the variety of forms which such a mobile library may adopt is quite extensive. However, the most widespread type of vehicle that carries books and other relevant material and provides library services is the bookmobile, that is, a specially designed vehicle for use as a library that provides books and other reading material, and often, nowadays, audiobooks, IT equipment and Internet access.

Defining the phenomenon: Services and mobility

But what exactly do we mean when we call a Library *Mobile*? When we think about a Library, we visualise a whole building or perhaps a specific area inside a building (for example, in a school, a hospital, etc.) where books and relevant material are kept and circulated. Some Libraries, however, do not operate behind walls, nor do they wait for their users to find them; they make their way to them in the most unexpected ways: with buses, ships, trains, bicycles, elephants, camels, donkeys, etc. In fact, anything that can be moved and carry books or relevant material can be called a *Mobile Library* as long as its aim is to serve the public and disseminate knowledge to all, especially to those who find it difficult to resort to standard Libraries due to social or geographic reasons or health issues, old age, etc. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA): “Any library service that does not stay in one place is classed as a Mobile Library” (Stringer, 2010).¹ From the aforementioned definition it appears that two basic conditions must be fulfilled to classify a Library as *Mobile*: to provide *library services* and to be *mobile*, that is, not to operate permanently in a specific area, but move from place to place.

On library services

A library with books and relevant material aims at

informing, guiding and serving its users in a way appropriate to promote their education and entertainment. These goals are realised when the Library offers to its users the collection of its material – books, journals/magazines, cds, etc. – and *library services*, such as:

- (1) Printing and photocopying its material
- (2) Lending its material to individuals and other libraries (interlibrary lending)
- (3) Accessing multilingual and multifaceted resources
- (4) Supporting and facilitating research on various issues
- (5) Promoting love for reading
- (6) Providing access to the library area and equipment
- (7) Using the Internet and providing information technology learning services
- (8) Providing access to individuals with physical and learning difficulties
- (9) Organising various cultural/entertaining activities for the public, etc.

The variety and depth of providing the aforementioned services depends on the potential of Libraries and also on the needs and size of the community they serve. And it is also worth noting that the above should be offered in an organised, systematic and planned manner by specialised staff and within a certain institutional framework.

It is a fact that in order for a mobile library to fulfill its purpose and offer services to its users it should work in an organised manner, be staffed with people who serve it and be included in a certain framework with some form of institutional recognition. So to complete the definition: Libraries in any form that move in any manner, offer library services, are served by specialised staff and work in an organised manner within an institutional framework, can be formally classified as *Mobile Libraries*.

This category includes mobile libraries which are created and supervised by the central government of a country or by local governance authorities or by an institutional body (or are the result of the collaboration of these authorities). The most common of these libraries are those that run as branches of public – and also municipal, school, academic and generally institutional–libraries.

Thus, collections, itineraries and schedules of mobile units, the frequency of their visits to lending centres, their terms of lending their material, etc. are determined by their central Library and depend on the collection that is provided for the Mobile Library, the number of mobile units that the Library has and the area of the territory they should cover. We should point out that the operation of mobile units which are branches of institutional Libraries is often a strategic choice on the part of the latter in an effort to increase their volume of lending material, the number of their users and the number of those (overage or underage) who take part in activities (cultural,

¹ According to the IFLA Mobile Library Guidelines (Professional Report No. 123): “the term *Mobile Library* is mainly used by British/Australian librarians. They use it to describe a motorised vehicle carrying library material. Other countries call these variously Bookmobile, Bibliobus, Bucherbus, etc. This document uses the term in its broadest sense. Any library service that does not stay in one place is classed as a Mobile Library” (Stringer, 2010, p.5).

promoting love for reading, etc.) they may organise.

Note that it is possible that institutional mobile libraries run without being linked to central libraries. In that case, however, a centre must have been designated or an administrative amendment must have been applied so that the aforementioned mobile libraries can control and renew their collection of material. A starting point-base should also be determined to serve as the base of mobile libraries where the vehicles will also be maintained, park and start their journeys to the areas they serve. Such a case may be found, for example, in sparsely populated areas, where there are no urban centres. This category may also include any Mobile Library that is founded and runs under the supervision of any public body, without necessarily collaborating with a mother Library. Institutional Mobile Libraries also include those that have been founded and run under the supervision of non-governmental organisations, religious associations and other similar organisations in cooperation with State authorities. For example, in Haiti the organisation *Libraries Without Borders* in cooperation with the local National Library supports the operation of three bookmobiles, the *Biblio Tap Tap* (<http://www.bibliosansfrontieres.org/?s=biblio+tap+tap>).

On mobility

Mobility –or even the potential for mobility– is a sine qua non criterion for a library to be classed as mobile. In fact, such a potential for mobility does not only concern their routes, but also anything that relates to mobile libraries – for example, the services they offer in an effort to satisfy their users' needs and the form/construction of all sorts of vehicles– as they always undergo changes, that is, they alter or convert, in other words, they *move*. To put it simply, mobility –which is by definition regarded as the change of position in space in relation to a fixed point, as the movement of vehicles and pedestrians or even as the action taken to achieve a goal, an effect and as activation/action that seeks to face something– contains, in a broader perspective, the concept of change, alteration and conversion. In other words, mobility presupposes *flexibility-adaptability*.

Therefore, an inherent quality of mobile libraries is their flexibility-adaptability. This quality can be ascertained in anything that relates to Mobile Libraries from the choice of the suitable type of vehicle, the collection of material (which may change as appropriate) and the routes (which are scheduled, but may change to cover the users' extraordinary needs, changes in conditions, etc.) to the activities developing around them, the audience they are aimed at or even the staff that serves them (for example, in recent years a constantly increasing number of volunteers support the duties of regular staff), etc. And one could claim that the more developed the ability of a Mobile Library to adapt to the needs arising, the greater

the probability to serve its audience effectively and survive successfully under adverse economic conditions.

A relevant example relates to the choice of vehicle for a mobile unit of a standard library: In the community of Pocatello, in Idaho, USA, the staff of the Public Library used to organise summer activities for children in an effort to urge them to spend their time creatively during their holidays. However, many children did not come regularly and others did not even show up at the places where these creative activities were offered. So they thought about reaching the children in their favourite summer spot, the parks, where they hang out with pleasure. But such a large bookmobile would not be flexible enough to move in such areas. First they solved the problem using boxes that they filled with books and moved to certain spots in a van. Their audience –the children– responded in such a positive way that a need for a more permanent solution arose. With financial support from sponsors, a trailer was purchased with room for the material and necessary librarian operations, which offered a final solution to the problem.

The *Book Wagon*, as they called it, was small and flexible and did not require any special driving skills; anyone could drive it after some practice. The cheers of joy from children welcoming the *Book Wagon* were the library staff's reward for the effort they made (Poulter, 2007). In another case, the staff of a Public Library, the Port Phillip Library in Australia, reacted in a flexible manner when they realised that those going swimming in their adjacent beach found no interest in visiting their Library. They thought that if the Library moved and went closer to them, then it would spur their interest. This is how the *Whellbarrow Library* was created, a trolley with which books were carried and given to swimmers on the beach (Clay, 2007).

A similar action was also pursued by the Library of Blackpool in the Lancashire coast in North West England (Monahan, 1999). From the examples above, we can draw an important conclusion: in any case, the degree to which Mobile Libraries adjust to the conditions and needs of their existing or potential audience depends on the mentality, willingness and skills of those responsible for their operation.

Another observation related to mobility: this motion, change, conversion that accompanies Mobile Libraries by definition is usually substantiated with *stability*, as far as their itineraries are concerned. This phrase may sound paradoxical, but it expresses a simple fact: as a rule, Mobile Libraries aim at having standard itineraries with specific stops, which are announced to the public in ways that are appropriate depending on the place and time (for example, using leaflets, with announcements in public areas or through the Internet). Thus, users know when and where to wait for the Mobile Library that is more convenient for them. However, for some special Mobile Libraries this kind of stability is not required. For example, there is a possibility that:

(1) The mobile library is seasonal, like a two-wheeled vehicle with books in five languages (Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian and French) that the Municipality of Tel Aviv placed on a beach. Visitors can choose, borrow and return the material without the presence of any staff responsible (Ziri, 2013).

(2) The mobile library follows an audience that changes location. For example, the *Uni Project*² or the *Ideas Box*³ adjust their programme and move where they are needed.

Non-institutional mobile libraries

There are also non-institutional, that is, non-formal, mobile libraries; to serve the needs of this text and in order to differentiate them from institutional Mobile Libraries, we use lowercase letters when we refer to them. This is a variety of mobile libraries that are the result of private efforts and operate outside an institutional framework thanks to the initiatives taken by individuals or groups of citizens. These are people who believe in the value of books and studying –activists of literacy, in essence– and want to contribute to disseminating knowledge and building a better future for those located within range of their mobile library, investing effort, time and money with a view to offering to the public.⁴ Some characteristic examples of such an initiative are the following:

(1) The *Weapon of Mass Instruction* is a 1979 tank that was transformed into a mobile library. Raul Lemesoff, who was the inspirer behind this special construction, goes around Buenos Aires, in Argentina, giving away books (Zimet, 2012).

(2) Laura Moulton, whose self-definition is that of a *street librarian*, wanders –together with seven other people– round the streets of Portland on a library-bike, called *Street-Books*, lending books to the homeless (streetbooks.org; Johnson, 2014).

² *Unis* are made up of many cubes that can be easily converted into different forms and are installed in squares, parks and other public areas. They are actually portable reading rooms, pop-up outdoor reading areas with books or material for various activities (drawing, jigsaw puzzles, origami, etc.) that are not borrowed, since the aim of *Unis* is to bring readers together and read/engage in team activities (<http://www.theuniproject.org>).

³ The *Ideas Box* is an innovative construction by Philippe Starck (2012) that can be positioned in any place in minimum time by trained volunteers and is addressed to refugee groups. Providing access to the Internet, books, educational resources, theatre and films, the *Ideas Box* strengthens individuals and communities to rebuild what they have lost (ideas-box.org).

⁴ We should note that this field also includes relevant business activities, such as the *Tell a Story*, a mobile bookshop that runs in Lisbon and promotes the local culture to tourists through translated Portuguese books (Laylin, 2013) or the *Penguin Book Truck* by the well-known publishing house (Attig, 2013). This kind of business activity has a long history that starts with chapmen who travelled in the European countryside selling cheap small books or pamphlets containing poems, stories and religious tracts. The turning point was the bookmobile that appeared in the 1950s in the USA. It was created by 58 British publishers, whose aim was to expand their market, bringing their books to the American audience (Attig, 2013).

(3) Gabriel Levinson, who has been driving his *Book Bike* in public parks in Chicago since 2008, distributes free books to whomever may be interested, merging his two passions: cycling and reading (Davis, 2010).

In other cases, similar successful initiatives taken by individuals are placed under the umbrella of non-profit organisations. An example of a non-formal mobile library organised by a private initiative and supported by such an organisation is *Bicicloteca* in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The programme was initiated by Robson Mendonça, who, being homeless, faced discrimination in the Public Library: he could not borrow books, since he did not fulfil the prerequisite of a permanent residence, and whenever he attempted to read inside the library, he was treated with contempt by other users who avoided studying close to him. These bad experiences led Mendonça –who stopped living in the streets– into deciding to help the homeless so that they could recover their self-esteem and reintegrate into society.

In fact, after reading George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, he started seeing things from a different perspective and realised that books can change people's lives. Thus with his *Bicicloteca*, a bicycle-library, Mendonça approached the homeless in their surroundings and offered them access to books and the very act of reading. After some time, Mendonça worked together with the organisation *Green Mobility*. The venture was so successful that, in January 2013, the *Bicicloteca* fleet included seven bicycle-libraries equipped with computers that ran on solar power and served 100-180 users on a daily basis. "The best news you can hear is that someone has stopped drinking because he has started reading", says Mendonça (Bonela, 2012).

Note that, by definition, mobile libraries are the ones that both offer library services and change location. So a question arises whether non-institutional mobile libraries fulfill the above criteria. It is clear that, as regards library services, the issue is as follows: can a mobile unit offer library services without some form of institutional recognition? And what kind of services can these be? It is obvious that, in this case, library services are considered within a broad perspective.

A small van, bicycle, etc. loaded with a randomly compiled and very limited collection of books that moves around the streets following an initiative taken by an enthusiastic individual, who believes it is important to disseminate his love for books to his fellow citizens, cannot be viewed as comparable to the organised library services determined under strictly defined specifications that institutional Mobile Libraries provide.

On the other hand, however, it is self-evident that non-institutional mobile libraries respond by their nature –just like institutional ones– to the criterion of mobility. But the former accomplish motion, change, conversion in a more or less different way compared to institutional mobile libraries. For example, standard itinerary timetables, which we mentioned above as a key defining element of

mobility, relate primarily to institutional/formal Mobile Libraries and to a much lesser extent to non-institutional ones, where keeping to a fixed itinerary is not imposed by the regulations of an organisation, but depends on the choices of person who operates this mobile library under his/her own initiative. But even in this case individuals or groups that support non-institutional mobile libraries try to establish a basic itinerary schedule so that their users can find them and use their services.

Mobile libraries and mobile libraries: Both offer and need support

Mobile libraries (and mobile libraries) carry and offer:

(1) Education and lifelong learning: Mobile libraries offer knowledge/education/culture to everyone. Of course, the group that they primarily address is children. In fact, appropriately arranged Mobile Libraries are directly linked to an educational administration, thus making up for the shortage of School Libraries or acting as a supplement to them.

(2) Entertainment: Mobile libraries provide the opportunity for substantial entertainment, both through their material and with the organisation of a range of relevant activities (for example, cultural events, projects centered around what is known as 'love of reading', invitations of authors, etc. to fêtes, carnivals and shows) which are often organised in cooperation with archives, museums, galleries and exhibitions.

(3) Communication - Connection – Meeting: Mobile libraries create a strong and beneficial networking environment, since they offer opportunities for communication, get-togethers and connections. Apparently their users find refuge in their 'premises' (interior and/or exterior, real or symbolic), a friendly place to communicate not only with their staff or with one another, but also with the world of books and culture. Every kind of mobile unit –a bicycle in Italy, a donkey in Colombia, an ultramodern bus in the USA, a boat in Thailand, etc.– does not simply carry books, knowledge, information, but a whole world. Their vibrant presence adds colour to 'single-coloured' exteriors or interiors, connects people and creates a sense of community. After a Mobile Library (or a mobile library) unit visits a place, people no longer feel alone; no matter how great their geographical or social distances may be, they are bridged via books, the Internet and relevant activities.

Mobile libraries (and mobile libraries) offer all of the above to everyone and, more particularly, to special categories of the population: people with special needs, users with mobility issues, prisoners, very old people who live on their own or are occupants of retirement homes, people who live away from the centre, homeless, unemployed, groups who are suffering (refugees, people struck by earthquakes or other natural disasters, etc.),

people confined to their home (very old, patients, people with disabilities, mothers who have no external help with their little children, etc.) and generally people who, for various reasons, cannot have access to local branch Libraries or other forms –for example, school– of libraries.

However, although Mobile Libraries (and mobile libraries) offer important services, a lot of them are lately facing considerable difficulties, since they are obliged to narrow their activity (for example, fewer routes and stops, shorter journeys, etc.) or even discontinue their operation. Shrinking budgets and the potential of the Internet –which may not be accessible to everyone and in all areas– may lead many people to the opinion that mobile libraries (and mobile libraries) tend to become an obsolete institution. Besides, in most cases, institutional mobile libraries are an integral component of the corresponding mother public libraries, which, on their part, provide for the supply, maintenance and safekeeping of their vehicles and equipment, the staff that carries them, the material they carry, their itinerary schedules, the promotion of their activities, etc.

Therefore, the economic crisis that plagues Public Libraries also affects their mobile units, resulting in the emergence of underfunding issues that in turn lead to shrinkage of activities, routes and, finally, bookmobiles being parked in some garage. For example, in the USA mobile libraries flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, but their number began to fall substantially in the decades to follow. As a result, according to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the 819 Public Library bookmobiles that travelled in 2006 were reduced to 660 in 2011 (ALA, 2017: 2) (ALA, 2017).

We consider the education, entertainment and communication services provided by formal or non-formal mobile libraries to be invaluable and, therefore, believe that they should be supported by everyone so as to continue their significant activity. Since their first appearance and thereafter, formal and non-formal mobile libraries have run innumerable miles and made immeasurable stops in order to offer services to millions of people that needed them around the world. We hope that they will continue to do so.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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