Storytelling and the Italian public libraries. Emerging research patterns

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Abstract. The transition from the so-called Evidence-based Librarianship (EBL) to the Narrative-based Librarianship (NBL) - in line with the "narrative turn" occurred in the social sciences and humanities - is taking places in Italy too. Starting from the acknowledgement that field surveys using narrative methods are increasing in the Italian public libraries, the paper presents the methodology and the first outcomes of a meta-research built upon a *corpus* encompassing the textual data produced by means of qualitative research techniques. Applying a software for automatic text analysis (IRaMuTeQ) and using both an inductive and a deductive approach, the authors analyse the lexicon behind the narratives of users, non-users, opinion leaders and staff members and chase various objectives. The result is a map of questions and answers that brings to light emerging research patterns and boosts further considerations about the chosen methodological approach.

Keywords. Narrative-based Librarianship, Public libraries, Automatic text analysis (ATA)

1. Introduction: research aims

Since the Seventies, the expression "Evidence-based Librarianship (EBL)" (Eldredge, 1997) - named after the "Evidence-based Medicine (EBM)" (Evidence-based Medicine Working Group, 1992) - is used to define an approach that promotes the data collection and analysis from field surveys, mainly quantitative, and is meant to contributing to the progress of library science, profession and services (Showers, 2015; Koufogiannakis and Brettle, 2015).

The recent introduction of the "Narrative-based Librarianship (NBL)" (Brophy, 2007) has put an emphasis on the role of ethnographic techniques and qualitative research in the evidence-based approach. The starting point is the

acknowledgment that the quantitative tools alone are not enough for interpreting the meaning and identity of the contemporary library and should be complemented by the narrative approach (Faggiolani and Galluzzi, 2017; Cecchi, Faggiolani and Montepeloso, 2018).

This is in line with the so-called "narrative turn", occurred in the humanities and social sciences. Following the attention given to the measurement of social impact, librarians - in Italy as well - have started using the qualitative methods more and more frequently (Faggiolani, 2012).

This paradigm shift focuses on the importance of stories in people life, culture development and general understanding, and implies a central role of storytelling, a technique that conveys contents - sometimes ideological - in an engaging way.

In our field (Faggiolani and Galluzzi, 2017), the narrative turn has mainly acted in two ways: firstly, on the advocacy and communication side: during these years the library, public in particular, has been the subject of a narrative aimed at fascinating people and boosting their sense of belonging (Lankes, 2011); secondly, on the research side: qualitative research has used narrative as a tool for scientific analysis aiming at exploring library identity.

Our study belongs to this second branch. It started in 2016 exploring and counting the qualitative surveys carried out in Italy during the last years. The aim was to understand if there is an underlying perception of the contemporary public library springing from the narratives and going beyond the specific research design of each survey (Galluzzi and Faggiolani, 2018).

The data collected through qualitative research are textual; therefore, from a methodological point of view there are two possibilities of analysing them: in a qualitative manner interpreting the contents (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Faggiolani, 2011); in a quantitative manner using the automatic text analysis (ATA) [1].

We have chosen the second approach, being aware of its strengths and weaknesses and knowing that - as for any other methodology - it has supporters and opponents.

In this paper we intend to expose some general problems referring to the chosen method, as well as to present some outcomes of the *corpus* analysis.

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[1] Among the most used software for the content analysis, consider Atlas.ti and NVIVO that explicitly take roots in the *Grounded Theory* method. Among the software for ATA consider TaLTaC2, Alceste, T-LAB, IRaMuTeQ.

2. A map of qualitative surveys in Italy and the *corpus* building

In the first phase of our study, in 2016, we built a *corpus*[2] encompassing the texts produced by eight surveys about the following libraries: Casa della Conoscenza in Casalecchio di Reno (Bologna) (Bergamaschi, 2015); Perugia library network (Faggiolani, 2013); Terni public library; Marche public libraries (Di Domenico, 2012); Prato public library (Petroselli, 2014); Sala Borsa Library in Bologna; the public libraries in the Avellino area (Bilotta, 2016). This first *corpus* consists of 219 texts, developing 328.137 tokens and 9.823 types[3].

During 2017-2018 four more surveys were added regarding the following libraries: Cori public library; Montanari public library in Fano (Cecchi, Faggiolani and Montepeloso, 2018); Antonelliana public library in Senigallia (Paiano and Montepeloso, 2018); Trento public library (Ciorli and Gjeka, 2018). The enlarged *corpus* consists of 295 texts (+76%) producing 591.964 tokens (+44%) and 13.926 types (+42%).

The collected set does not pretend to be exhaustive: we have no certainty that all the qualitative surveys carried out in Italian public libraries in the last 7-8 years have been included, but - for sure - we have intercepted the main ones.

The subjects of these surveys are more or less the same - perception, identity and impact of libraries -, which is a demonstration of the fact that there is a need to go beyond the data about user satisfaction and delve into the reasons why the identity of contemporary library is unstable.

In analysing these data, it is necessary to be aware of the relationship between text and context. The context refers to the research questions that have stimulated the survey and its design, whereas the texts are the products of the surveys. At the beginning, we considered the application of ATA a way to give autonomy back to the text (outside the context that produced it) and to bring meanings and lexical patterns to light beyond the intentions and interests of researchers. Over time, we have found that the analysis shows a delicate balance between text and context. We shall come back to this.

3. Beyond quantity. Some outcomes

The textual *corpus* has been analysed in different ways: statistical analysis of tokens and analysis of keywords by means of word clouds; analysis of specificities in the word usage according to some variables we have considered

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[2] The data *corpus* is a homogeneous collection of texts. The texts we collected are the results of different qualitative techniques - in-depth interviews, focus groups, on-site observation - and come from the transcription of audio and audio-video recordings, ethnographic notes, written answers to open questions etc.
[3] We used the software IRaMuTeQ to analyse the *corpus*. For more information consult http://www.iramuteq.org/.

important, for example the role of the speaker (patron/librarian/opinion leader); analysis of emerging topics thanks to a classification of texts based upon the logic of similarities.

By extracting information and knowledge from narratives in a rigorous and controlled way, it becomes possible to answer some interesting questions like: how librarians and patrons talk about libraries? Do opinion leaders have a different idea of libraries if compared to the staff? Do users and non-users confer different meanings to libraries? In the next paragraphs, we are going to present some of the outcomes of this analysis.

3.1.   Emerging topics

First, we have tried to study the changes occurred after the enlargement of the *corpus* with four more surveys. This analysis has been carried out comparing the two different *corpora* (the 2016 one encompassing eight surveys and the 2018 one referring to twelve surveys) by means of a classification based upon the search for similarities (the presence of the same types) in the text or part of it (Reinert, 1983; Reinert, 1990).

The aim of this method is to analyse the internal structure of a text by studying the word distribution and association in its parts. It is therefore possible to bring to light the underlying vocabulary and the frequency of some expressions identified as typical.

Figure 1 shows the dendrogram referring to the first eight surveys. In order to interpret the graph correctly, it should be underlined that the classes are based upon content similarity. The branching shows how much and how the clusters are connected: the classes at the end of the branches are the most similar.
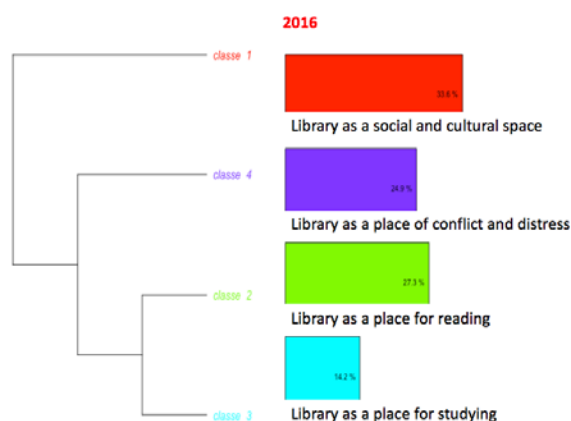

Figure 1 – Dendrogram about the *corpus* encompassing the first eight surveys
(Galluzzi and Faggiolani, 2018)

The analysis reveals the coexistence of multiple library identities in line with the fragmentation and heterogeneity that characterise the library panorama in Italy.
When submitting the enlarged *corpus* to the same analysis (Figure 2), the emerging issues decrease. The classes reduce from four to three:

Class 1: library for personal development
It is the largest class, collecting 50% of the texts. The keywords are: 'book', 'pleasure', 'do', 'reading', 'baby', 'home', 'year', 'friend', 'school', 'memory', 'child', 'come', 'university'. This class conveys the voice of patrons who talk about public libraries as places where 'doing something'. It absorbs the Class 2 (*Library as a place for reading*) and 3 (*Library as a place for studying*) of the previous *corpus*.
Class 2: library as collection
This class collects 13% of the texts and reflects a conventional idea of libraries. It is no coincidence that it conveys the voices of librarians and professionals. The keyword of this class are the following: 'collection', 'patrimony', 'acquisition', 'investment', 'cut', 'cooperative'.
Class 3: library as social space
This class encompasses 35% of the texts and absorbs the class 1 (*library as a social and cultural place*) and the class 4 (*library as a place of conflict*) of the previous analysis. It seems that the library openness to the community needs and the lowering of the entrance threshold are an opportunity for the urban context and - at the same time - they contribute to transferring the external inconveniences and conflicts from the outside into the library space. This confirms that the two above identified classes of the first phase of the survey were two sides of the same coin. The keywords are 'space', 'patrons', 'believing', 'social', 'public', 'grouping', 'role', 'improper', 'citizen', 'important', 'problem', 'city'.
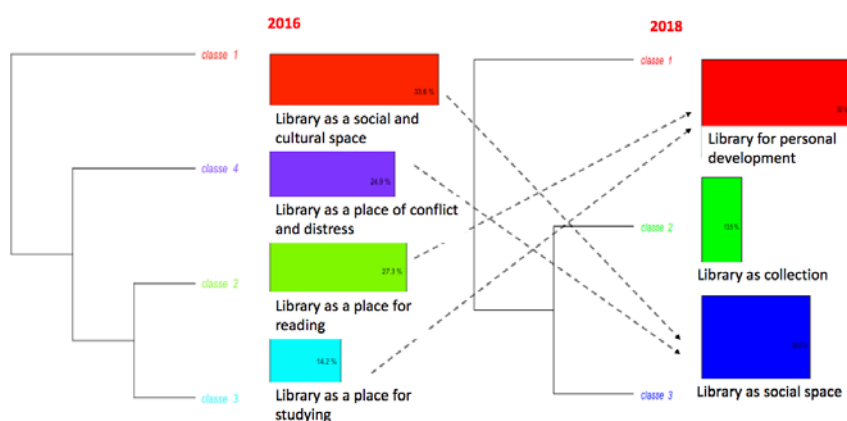

Figure 2 – Dendrogram about the complete *corpus* (2018)

4.   Words specificity

In order to delve into the relationship between the text and the context and to verify how much the context weighs on the texts it is necessary to study the words specificity. This means focusing on the most specific words compared to the expected mean, not on the most used ones.

When analysing the lexicon of each survey, the contexts and the initial methodological objectives remain clearly visible like a watermark; however, when submitting the texts to a cross-analysis, specific lexical identities emerge.

For example, considering the variable 'speaker category' (potential and actual users, librarians and other staff members, opinion leaders), we find that actual users talk about the library as a place where doing things. Therefore the most important aspects for them are the opening hours and the activities they carry out in the library, regardless of whether these are consistent with the library services or not. The opinion leaders express a vision and a wish about the library and its roles in the city context, but their words seem far from the daily life of public libraries. The potential users have difficulties in expressing either a point of view, a wish or an opinion about libraries, as they do not belong to their experience except for a vague memory.

The analysis proposed so far is the result of an inductive approach. However, it is possible to question the *corpus* in a deductive way, by checking the use of specific words or expressions in relation to several variables. For example, Figure 3 shows that the word 'strategic' - which conveys an ideological point of view about the role of libraries in the society- is only used by opinion leaders, whereas librarians and library staff are the only speakers using the word 'improper' that implies the categorisation of users and usages (Figure 4).
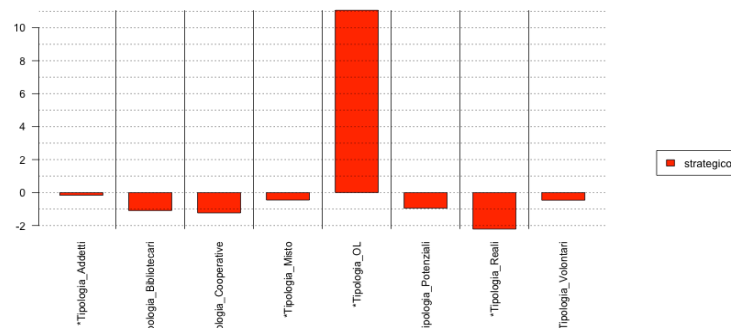

Figure 3 – The specific usage of the word 'strategic' in relation to the type of speaker
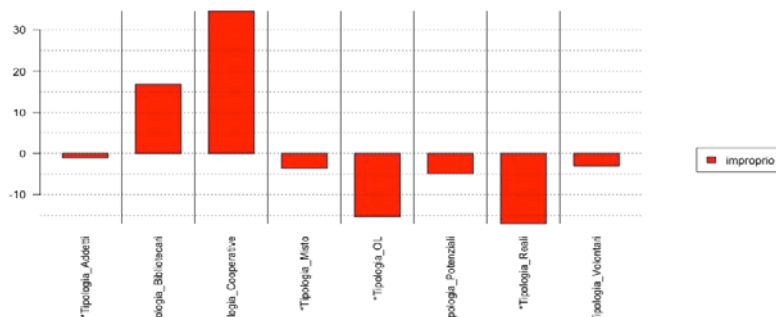
Figure 4 – The specific usage of the word 'improper" in relation to the type of speaker

5.   Conclusions: lessons learned and open questions

After the second phase of the research, we have learnt that the more the *corpus* enlarges the more the outcomes of the analysis become relevant, as it happens in any statistical set. Consequently - and inevitably - the interpretations change as well. It is not easy to say at which *corpus* size the statistical mechanisms work better. The *corpus* is a shifting entity that changes shape and nature by incorporating new texts. By analysing the *corpus* while increasing, it would be then possible to verify if a saturation point exists.[4]

This analysis has also made us aware of two things: the application of ATA to the texts coming from qualitative research may contribute to identifying library models and better understanding the contemporary public library (Galluzzi and Salarelli 2018; Galluzzi 2016); the quantitative approach based on the metric analysis of texts does not nullify the specificities of the single surveys, rather it saves and promotes them.

Therefore, a delicate balance between text and context occurs, that makes the text meaningful and distils the strengths and specificities of the context.

The ambition of this research is the creation of a permanent observatory that would allow librarians and researchers collecting stories and narratives about the contemporary public library in Italy, as well as analysing the textual data while they increase in order to bring to light changes and emerging questions and patters. This way the possibilities for the analysis would increase as well, and the future library historians would have a precious source of information.

The ATA itself should be considered just one of the tools available, not the high road to understand the library phenomena. Therefore, its application needs to be cautious and its outcomes should be confronted with the results obtained with other methods and tools, in order to minimize the weaknesses and maximise the strengths.

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[4] In qualitative research the term 'saturation' refers to the analysis of a number of data that is sufficient to guarantee a complete and detailed understanding of the considered issue. The saturation point is reached when the analysis does not bring to light further categories and the emerging theory complies with all the collected data (Faggiolani 2012, p. 171).

Going back to the narrative turn and the power of storytelling cited at the beginning, our analysis is a safeguard from dangerous simplification: storytelling becomes anecdotal if it does not lay on solid and scientific grounds and the advocacy should always be the arrival point of a fact-finding process. The greatest communicators and popularisers are those who are fully aware of the reality complexity. Otherwise the risk is to fall from simplicity to simplification, as well as from knowledge to opinion.

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