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The odyssey of flemish public libraries

Facing opportunities and threats when becoming strategic partners in urban development

Nathalie Vallet,

Introduction

As cities change, public libraries need to remain alert for new challenges as well as altered urban settings that demand for an adjustment of their strategic management ambitions. This continuous demand for strategic vigilance probably explains why strategic management issues receive a lot of attention within the library management literature (Evjen, 2015; Manzuch and Maceviciute, 2014; Abram and Cromity, 2013; Skot-Hansen, Rasmussen, and Jochumsen, 2013; Goulding, Walton and Stephens, 2012; Buchanan and Cousins, 2012). Our research project aligns with this trend. It focusses on one particular challenge, namely the formation of so-called public networks or partnerships aiming for the future development and innovation of cities (Casey, 2015; Cristofoli, Markovic, and Meneguzzo, 2014; Koliba, Meek and Zia, 2010). By developing a grounded theory on the strategic roles of public libraries, we want to discover the alternative ways in which public libraries can join these strategic networks.

This article summarizes the results of our most recent case-study research realized in ten Flemish public libraries. Whereas our previous research initiatives focused on depicting the precise nature of the alternative strategic roles (Vallet, 2013), our latest research initiative examines the local policy context in which these strategic roles or partnerships are embedded. In view of our grounded theory ambitions and the previously mentioned dynamism of urban development, we want to know how the changing local policy context interacts with these strategic roles and partnerships? In particular we want to know (i) what kind of evolutions within the local policy context “prevent” (i.e. threats) and/or “facilitate” (i.e. opportunities) the formation, development and acknowledgment of the strategic partnerships and (ii) how public libraries encounter these challenges?

The structure of this paper starts with the description of the research design. Then we present our research results. Firstly, we summarize the uncovered strategic partnerships, then we depict the emerging threats and opportunities within the local policy context that interact with these partnerships and finally we uncover the strategies that public libraries use to cope with

this changing local policy context. The paper ends with some concluding remarks on the consequences of these research results for our grounded theory ambition.

A grounded theory “under construction”

As our recent research initiative is part of a more extensive grounded theory project, we use the same qualitative research guidelines as employed in the previous research initiatives (Birks, 2011; Stern and Porr, 2011; Morse, 2009; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Consequently, we start with the selection of six case-studies in which (i) the scale of the city (e.g. large, medium and small-sized), (ii) the position of the public library within the urban community (e.g. absent, limited or highly embedded), and (iii) the relationship between the public library and the local government as the dominant actor within the local policy context (e.g. absent, restricted or well-elaborated) varies considerably. As such, our research initiative includes the public libraries of Kortrijk, Sint-Niklaas, Turnhout, Geel, Maaseik and Dendermonde. In close consultation with the Flemish library platform Bibnet & LOCUS, we subsequently add four extra case-studies. It concerns municipalities that are formally not (yet) labeled as Flemish “cities”, but generate relevant information on the situation of the considerable amount of small cities in Flanders. Thus, we add the public libraries of Knokke-Heist, Hemiksem-Schelle, Balen and Boortmeerbeek-Haacht.

A next, rather crucial step is the operationalization of the central concept, being the *local policy context* in which the strategic partnerships of public libraries are embedded. On the basis of other realized research projects (Vallet, 2011) and in close consultation with three library experts of the Flemish library platform Bibnet & LOCUS, we learned that the local policy context is complex. This complexity is due to the involvement of many different actors[1], their numerous administrative relationships[2] and the dynamic and uncertain nature of these relationships[3]. In order to encompass this complexity, the data-collection is focused on three local policy domains that jointly determine the local policy context for the strategic partnerships of public libraries. It concerns the local *strategic planning* policy, the local *cultural planning* policy and the local *library* policy. For each policy domain we collect information on the process (i.e. the past, present and future actors involved as well as their administrative relationships) and the content (i.e. the past, present and future policy priorities).

The data-collection is realized by means of three data-collection methods. Taken together, these three complementary data-collection methods guarantee a rich set of in-depth information on the complex and evolving nature of the local policy context that interacts with the strategic partnerships of public libraries.

We start with thirty-three semi-structured interviews held with representatives of the local political and administrative policy makers[4] (e.g. the local city secretary, an administrative head of department, a mayor and/or alderman). By means of a half-structured checklist we ask information on the policy priorities and the process features of the (i) *strategic planning policy* (e.g. What is the present state of the strategic plan, is it still “under construction” or is it definite and complete? What are the future threats and opportunities for the urban development, and what are the associated strategic policy priorities or solutions? In what way do these *future* strategic policy priorities resemble or differ from the *present* and *past* strategic policy priorities? What kind of *alternative* strategic policy priorities have been considered but (finally) not been selected and why not, what are/were the administrative and/or political objections? How does the strategic policy process evolve, what kind of subsequent phases and political and administrative actors are/were involved, and why? What are the five most outspoken features of the strategic policy process and what do they imply? In what way does the *present* strategic policy process resemble or differ from the *past* strategic policy process and why?), (ii) the *local cultural planning policy* (e.g. In what way do the previous *future* strategic policy priorities relate to the different, more specialized policy domains amongst which the local cultural policy? Which *future* strategic policy priorities relate in particular to which *future* cultural policy priorities? What kind of *alternative* cultural policy priorities have been considered but (finally) not been selected for this strategic “fit” and why not, what are/were the administrative and/or political objections? In what way do the *future* cultural policy priorities resemble or differ from the *present* and *past* cultural policy priorities? How does the cultural policy process evolve, what kind of subsequent phases and political and administrative actors are/were involved, and why? In what way does the *present* cultural policy process resemble or differ from the *past* cultural policy process and why?) and (iii) the *local library policy* (e.g. In what way do the previous *future* strategic and cultural policy priorities relate to the *future* library policy? Which *future* strategic and cultural policy priorities relate in particular to which *future* library policy priorities? What kind of *alternative* library policy priorities have been considered but (finally) not been selected for this strategic “fit” and why not, what are/were the administrative and/or political objections? In what way

do the *future* library policy priorities resemble or differ from the *present* and *past* library policy priorities? How does the library policy process evolve, what kind of subsequent phases and political and administrative actors are/were involved, and why? In what way does the library policy process resembles or differs from the past library policy process and why?).

Additionally, we organize four focus-group debates including twenty-four representatives of the public libraries[5] (e.g. the library director and a public library staff member). By means of a self-designed set of “strategic fitting schemes” we invite the representatives of each public library to inventory subsequently (i) the future strategic policy priorities of their local government (as they “know” and/or “perceive” them), (ii) their own future public library priorities, (iii) the “fit”, as well as the “misfit” or “missing links” between both (as they “perceive” it), (iv) the actions that are and can be undertaken to support and/or improve the “fit” between both, and (v) the needed competences, instruments and/or “favorable” settings to facilitate a successful fit and implementation.

A third data-collection method consists of the analysis of policy-related documents (e.g. the overall strategic, cultural and public library plans). The collected documents are mainly used to check, confirm, illustrate, and complete the data of the other two data-collection methods.

A final step is the analysis of the collected data. The data-analysis is realized by one senior researcher, who presents and discusses the final results with four library experts of the Flemish library platform Bibnet & LOCUS. The coding of the data is realized by means of hand-written research notes, digital memos (e.g. word documents), coding lists and visual schemes (e.g. drawings in power point). As such, the transparency and traceability of the research results is guaranteed. Finally, the obtained research results are written down by the senior researcher in two extensively documented research reports[6] that are jointly discussed during a reflective seminar inviting all representatives that participated in the semi-structured interviews and focus-group debates. As such, our analysis of the collected data is double-checked, commented and adjusted - when needed - by the “field experts” involved.

Uncovering strategic partnerships

In order to detect the interaction between the local policy context and the strategic partnerships of public libraries, it is important to start with the examination of the strategic partnerships themselves. To do so, we do not only look for explicit formal statements made by the cities themselves (e.g. relating a particular strategic library priority to a specific urban

ambition), but inventory also the “matching” policy priorities that we detect ourselves throughout the analysis of all three policy domains (i.e. similar and/or strongly related strategic priorities). Thus, we do not limit the identification of strategic partnerships to formal statements, but include also implicit or by analysis “uncovered” patterns of strategic priority-alignment. The results of this investigation exercise are quite interesting.

Firstly, we notice that all formal statements imply a similar kind of strategic partnership described by a restricted set of very general ambitions. Thus, most formal statements for instance refer to (i) the overall development of “an” urban identity and the explicit but general recognition that cultural institutions can support such an ambition, and (ii) the development of the “soft” or “human” side of urban society and the explicit but general recognition that cultural institutions and public libraries in particular can contribute to this kind of ambition. Additionally, these formal statements also emphasize the more management-wise ambitions of the strategic partnerships. Several formal statements for instance refer to (iii) the overall importance of a (more) “efficiency and performance proofed” organization or infrastructural accommodation of public libraries, and to (iv) the overall creation of “innovative” and “future-oriented” public library using high-tech management facilities to the fullest. Irrespective of this outspoken isomorphic formal trend, our self “uncovered” similarities clearly suggest the presence of a much wider, diverse and more specific set of matching strategic priorities. Unfortunately, these uncovered matching ambitions are seldom seen or detected by the public libraries and the local governments involved. For them these similarities uncovered by the researchers often came as a surprise. Thus, we are inclined to conclude that the existing strategic partnerships are clearly made by “formal and distant acquaintances” and certainly not by “close and intimate friends”. After all, researcher-“matchmakers” are needed to uncover the more particular and specific common interests of all partners involved.

Secondly, there are the findings on the three specific strategic roles found in our earlier research initiatives (Vallet, 2013). Although explicit references in the formal statements are generally lacking, implicit references are clearly present. Most prominent are the numerous references to the strategic role of “urban landmark”. In our previous research initiative we depicted this particular strategic role as the one in which the public library reinforces the overall profile, image and identity of the city. As such, the public library is one of the major ‘attractions’ in the urban setting, offering unique, impressive and overwhelming facilities for urban encounter (“the public library as our new cathedral”). In our recent research initiative,

we find several references to this strategic role of “urban landmark”. Thus, the strategic role of public libraries is often associated with the concern for specifying or choosing an overall urban identity, the explicit need for an intense human encounter, the rise of a learning and information-based urban society (i.e. the identity of a ‘knowledge’ city) and the need for new and impressive public buildings amongst which also that of the public library (i.e. the presence of an impressive urban skyline). Less prominent, but certainly also present, are the references to the strategic role of “target group patron”. In our previous research initiative we depicted this particular strategic role as the one in which the public library protects and/or supports certain target groups within urban society (“the public library as liaison or personal coach of urban citizens with special social, cultural, informational and knowledge needs”). In our most recent research initiative, references are found to the concern for a “livable” urban society, the attraction of young urban citizens and the care of socially deprived urban citizens. Finally, the references in our most recent research initiative to the strategic role of “neighborhood oriented herald” are least present. In our previous research initiative we depicted this particular strategic role as the one in which the public library supports the (re)innovation and (re)development of certain areas or neighborhoods within the city (“the library as a partner and local representative of urban government”). Unfortunately and irrespective of the considerable concern for small-scaled and neighborhood based encounter initiatives, the results of our latest initiative indicate that the overall concern for financial cutbacks forces most public libraries to close down their neighborhood-oriented library branches. As such, the neighborhood oriented herald is forced to cease or “freeze” its strategic ambitions.

Emerging threats and opportunities

When we analyze the evolutions within the local policy context that prevent (i.e. threats) or facilitate (i.e. opportunities) the formation, development and acknowledgment of the previously identified strategic partnerships, we can distinguish three categories, namely (i) emerging strategic dilemmas between local policy priorities, (ii) emerging trends in policy frameworks, and (iii) emerging bottlenecks in needed methods and competences of local policy actors. These categories can be identified, irrespective of the specific strategic role, albeit that the impact of the emerging dilemmas has affected especially the neighborhood-oriented heralds.

Dilemmas between local policy priorities

A majority of the ten case-studies involved experiences mainly *negative* influences (i.e. threats) of emerging dilemmas between local policy priorities on the formation and further elaboration of their strategic partnerships. Although these dilemmas manifest themselves most often within the strategic planning policy, the other two policy domains experience considerable side-effects. When taken the specific nature of these dilemmas into consideration, three sub-categories can be distinguished.

The first dilemma concerns choosing between “reorganizing the internal finances” versus “realizing necessary investments”. A lot of local governments are faced with serious financial cutbacks on the one hand and with emergent needs to (re)invest in neglected public infrastructure on the other (e.g. sport facilities, school infrastructure and care-taking facilities for elderly citizens). When considering their strategic partnerships with public libraries, local governments tend to (over)emphasize the need for efficiency. This is realized by serious financial cutbacks (e.g. concerning the library staff, library-branches and collection) and by freezing budgets for new, especially prestigious and ambitious library projects (e.g. an impressive new library building or infrastructure). Consequently, investments and re-investments in the public library are kept to a minimum. The second dilemma relates to the development of a “cold” versus a “warm” city. In view of the first dilemma, a lot of local governments choose for severe financial cutbacks. These financial cutbacks however conflict with the growing need for a more “soft”, “human” and “warm” urban society as the amount of poor and vulnerable urban citizens increases in the aftermath of the overall economic crises. When considering the strategic partnerships with public libraries, local governments clearly want to use their public library for both ambitions. As both ambitions are however difficult to combine, public libraries often get “stuck in the middle”. Their efficiency priorities hinder the realization of their societal priorities, and vice versa. A third dilemma concerns choosing “the right” geographical scale. In view of obtaining extra financial resources, local governments often choose for the realization of subsidized Flemish and European library priorities instead of unique local ambitions that have to be financed entirely by themselves. When considering the strategic partnerships of public libraries, this results in vivid debates on whether to choose for a (subsidized) regional action radius of the public library versus a (non-subsidized) strictly local action radius? This dilemma is especially experienced in the strategic partnerships of the so-called urban landmarks.

Dominant trends in policy frameworks

In all of the ten case-studies, we register “mixed” experiences (i.e. threats and opportunities) in relation to the influence of policy frameworks on the formation, development and acknowledgment of the strategic partnerships of public libraries. A policy framework is defined as a set of beliefs, ideas and rules that is used as the basis for policy decision-making. Once again, these frameworks are most apparent within the policy domain of strategic planning, but have considerable side-effects on the other two policy domains. In general, five dominant trends are identified.

Firstly, there is the dominant use of the so-called rational management paradigm. Although its popularity during the New Public Management hype at the end of the eighties has faded substantially during the subsequent Public Governance hype at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Wynen and Verhoest, 2015; De Vries and Nemec, 2013; Vakkuri, J. 2010 Löffler and Bovaird, 2009), its presence is still very dominant within most Flemish local governments. The rational management paradigm favors a very strict and mechanically controlled management process in which top-down instructions as well as generic, cut-and-paste instruments from the profit sector are extensively used. Presumably, this dominance is related to the belief that this kind of management paradigm guarantees a firm grip in times of serious economic distress. Additionally, it has also been repeatedly propagated and even imposed by the surveilling Flemish government. According to the long research tradition of the disciplines of organizational theory and strategic management however, the merits of the rational management paradigm are only guaranteed in a (highly) stable, predictable and mass production-driven environment (Daft, 2010; Quinn, 1988; Mintzberg, 1979; Galbraith 1973; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Burns and Stalker, 1961). When organizations are confronted with a (highly) dynamic and unpredictable environment that demands for a more flexible, learning-oriented and stakeholder-related management style, the use of the rational management paradigm causes serious problems. When we consider the strategic partnerships of public libraries, their relatively newness as well as their on-going search for appropriate roles and relationships clearly does not fit the strict and mechanical nature of the rational management paradigm. This probably explains why the dominant rational policy framework is often experienced as highly obstructive or threatening for the formation, development and acknowledgement of the strategic partnerships within the ten case-studies involved.

Secondly, and partly related to the previous trend, there is the use of a new financial management framework, called the “BBC[7]”. By imposing an overall accounting information system in which all activities for the next six years are jointly specified, operationalized and budgeted at the start of each new term[8], the Flemish government wants to stimulate a more future-oriented, integrated and “strategic” mindset within Flemish local governments. The outspoken rigid and mechanical nature however of this financial policy framework matches clearly the rational management paradigm. When considering the strategic partnerships of public libraries, most case-studies acknowledge the opportunity of the BBC to trigger an explicit financial awareness when making cultural policy-related decisions. But, the associated threats however clearly outnumber this single positive effect. As such, the BBC framework is for instance related to (i) an overemphasis on the financial instead of the societal added-value of the strategic partnerships, (ii) less options for creative or innovative and therefore financially risky activities, (iii) less opportunities for a truly participative management style in which negotiations and agreements “may generate costs” and (iv) a highly bureaucratic and time-consuming registration method.

A third trend is the growing popularity of inter-municipal cooperation. Due to the cost-saving effects as well as the opportunity to offer a more complete or professional public service, inter-municipal cooperation is seen as an interesting policy framework for the strategic partnerships of public libraries. This is especially the case in the four smallest case-studies involved. Recent experiences however have revealed some threatening side-effects, such as for instance a geographical concentration of the public library service (i.e. only one central public library for all cities involved) and asymmetric involvements (i.e. the biggest or financially and politically most powerful local government “rules” the partnership). Consequently, rather mixed instead of univocal positive experiences arise.

The next trend is the increasing complexity and dynamism of what we tend to call the “actor-scenography” framework. When analyzing the key-players of all three policy domains, their respective influence on the decision-process and their mutual relationships, it is very difficult to make a clear and overall inventory that mirrors accurately the present situation. Due to the previously mentioned Public Governance hype within public management, vast networks come into existence that involve different actors fulfilling various roles in different circumstances. Local administrative representatives for instance (e.g. a city secretary, a head of the culture department) clearly gain influence as their professional expertise and experience increases, but loose influence as new political representatives come into power and want to

manifest their “democratically gained right” to have a decisive say in the matter. Likewise, local communities (e.g. inhabitants of a certain neighborhood) and formal institutions (e.g. official advisory boards) gain influence when their representation is unquestioned, but loose influence when they are ill informed or lack the needed policy-making competences. When considering the strategic partnerships of public libraries, most case-studies confirm the importance of “mastering” the actor-scenography frameworks in order to influence the formation, development and acknowledgment of the strategic partnerships in a direct and substantial way. After all, partnerships are “made and molded by people”.

A fifth and last trend are the growing interactions between the three policy domains of the local policy context. During the realization of our research initiative we noticed how the importance and elaboration of a certain policy domain can generate a “breeding ground” for subsequent elaborations and changes in the other two policy domains. Irrespective of the overall financial rationalization for instance, a growing interest in the attraction of young families and children within the strategic planning policy, creates opportunities to invest more in the youth literature collection as well as the story-telling and children’s theater activities within the public library policy. Consequently, changing breeding grounds can influence and change the strategic role of public libraries within an already existing or new strategic partnership (e.g. an urban landmark, a target group patron or an area-oriented herald). The precise nature however of these influences is not yet clear. Sometimes, a well-elaborated local culture planning policy for instance coincides with an even well-elaborated local library policy which favors the development of a firmly embedded strategic partnership for public libraries. But sometimes it does not. Sometimes the presence of public library goals within the strategic planning policy itself coincide with an elaborated public library policy and a consciously developed strategic partnership. But sometimes rather implicit and very general urban development ambitions within the strategic planning policy seem to stimulate a creative public library policy and a likewise strategic partnership. Therefore, future research initiatives are needed to gain more in-depth insights into the precise nature of these emerging interactions and their consequences for the features of the strategic partnerships.

Bottlenecks in needed methods and competences of policy actors

In all of the ten case-studies involved we have experienced difficulties in depicting the precise nature of the strategic partnerships, let alone in making public libraries and local policy makers see the numerous possibilities that we as researchers detected ourselves but were

clearly not noticed, picked up and explicitly used by them (see also before). On the basis of our research results, the reason for this is probably twofold.

On the one hand, there does not exist a hands-on method within the discipline of strategic management to detect matching strategic goals in a detailed, well-structured and creative manner. Therefore we carried out a small experiment during the realization of the focus group debates. We developed a kind of mind-setting format that supports librarians in the thorough analysis of the strategic management ambitions of their respective local governments and in a subsequent (creative) matching exercise with their own strategic library ambitions. As such, the experiment eventually generated a list of approximately forty matching strategic goals, all formulated in a well-structured and detailed way. As discussed at the end of the focus group debates, most public library participants emphasized the usefulness and importance of such a hands-on method in order to actually detect alignment opportunities for the strategic partnerships of public libraries.

On the other hand, each partner involved is a specialist within his or her own disciplinary field. Therefore it is not obvious that public librarians for instance entirely understand the political and administrative logic behind the strategic planning ambitions of their local government. Likewise, it is not self-evident that an alderman specialized in the infrastructural aspects of urban development for instance entirely understands or “translates” the societal ambitions of public libraries into “the right bricks and walls”. Additionally, we experienced during the realization of the interviews and the focus group debates that the strategic competences of most partners involved are limited to some general notions of mainly the rational management paradigm. As mentioned before, this paradigm is however insufficient to successfully manage the complex and dynamic nature of the strategic partnerships of public libraries. Therefore, we are inclined to conclude that most partners involved lack a more broadened view on the essence of strategic management (including alternative[9] management paradigms), which inevitably limits their present abilities to craft an appropriate and meaningful strategic partnership.

Coping strategies of public libraries

When we analyze how public libraries cope with the changing local policy context, and how they encounter the previously described threats and/or opportunities, the present research results suggest three types of coping strategies. Although the public libraries themselves do

not explicitly identify these strategies, our research results uncover their existence by analyzing the reactions of public libraries when faced with these threats and opportunities. Thus, and like the previously mentioned strategic partnerships (see before), the coping strategies are identified by the researchers themselves. Nonetheless, their relevance is explicitly recognized by the public libraries during the reflective seminar at the end of our research initiative. Once again, these coping strategies can be identified irrespective of the strategic role of each public library (i.e. urban landmark, target group patron or neighborhood oriented herald), albeit that the specific nature and features obviously differ (e.g. the kind of information gathered on “the others”, or the identity of relevant sparring partners).

Professionalizing their own strategic management profile

This coping strategy is focused on improving the strategic mind-setting and capabilities of the public libraries themselves.

On the one hand this coping strategy consists of clarifying the precise, content-wise nature of their strategic ambitions. Based on our research results, the vast amount of library goals and documents of which the status and interrelationship is often unclear (e.g. what are our strategic, tactic and operational goals? how do they relate to one another? what do they exactly imply ?) prevents the formation of a clear set of convincing, manageable and easy to align strategic ambitions. Thus, the strategic role of public libraries risks not to be seen, acknowledged and appreciated as such by the other members of the strategic partnerships.

On the other hand, this coping strategy is also focused on improving the overall design of the strategic management process. Our research results - and especially the results of the focus group experiment (see before) - indicate that most public library directors are not very familiar with the discipline of strategic management, let alone the existence of alternative paradigms and instruments. Sometimes they do feel the need for a more “intelligent” or well-considered use of strategic paradigms and instruments, but unfortunately they lack the strategic competences and capabilities to do so. Thus, they implement and accept for instance the imposed rational management paradigm and the BBC framework without serious questioning. Taken this problem into consideration, it is important not to restrict the future professionalization of library directors to public library competences (e.g. digitalization, e-books, databases) but also to consider more general strategic management competences.

By employing this coping strategy, public libraries try to encounter the particular emerging threats of the dominant rational management paradigm (i.e. they can put its dominance in a wider perspective and generate arguments in favor of alternative paradigms), the associated BBC financial framework (i.e. they can develop a more appropriate financial framework and open a critical debate), the complex strategic actor-scenography framework (i.e. they can strengthen their own strategic position within this scenography) and the bottlenecks of needed methods and competences (i.e. they can develop the needed strategic competences).

Exploring and mapping “the others”

The next coping strategy is focused on improving the knowledge of the strategic mind-setting and behavior of the other actors within the local policy context. It consists of a pro-active exploration and mapping of the strategic actor-scenography as well as developing supportive information channels.

Our research results indicate that public libraries have a limited knowledge of the strategic ambitions of “the others”. When asked for instance to list up the strategic ambitions of the political and administrative representatives of their local government, vague headlines and general key-words were used often inspired on a limited set of only formal information channels (e.g. publicity brochures distributed amongst urban citizens). Informal and personal networks were seldom consulted, let alone consciously developed. As such, no detailed or in-depth knowledge exists on the precise nature of these ambitions (e.g. why do they strive for a particular ambition? what is their underlying concern?), nor on their experiences with the dominant rational paradigms (e.g. do they approve of it or do they prefer an alternative paradigm?), the inter-municipal cooperation (e.g. what kind of threats and opportunities do they experience? are these similar to our experiences?) or strategic methods and competences (e.g. what specific methods do they use and why?). Consequently, this absent knowledge prevents most public libraries involved to detect interesting goal-alignments and find suitable sparring partners within the partnerships.

By employing this coping strategy, public libraries try to encounter the particular emerging threats of local policy dilemmas (e.g. they can better understand the causes of these dilemmas and look for acceptable solutions), the dominant rational management paradigm (e.g. they can identify the advocates and the opponents, as well as their respective motivation), the mixed experiences of inter-municipality cooperation (e.g. they can learn from their experiences), the complex strategic actor-scenography framework (e.g. they can identify the strategic priorities

and potential goals-alignments) and the bottlenecks of needed methods and competences (e.g. they can detect complementary methods and competences).

Crafting and designing alliances

The third coping strategy is focused on fulfilling a (more) active role in the crafting itself of the strategic partnership. When public libraries take the initiative, the chances are high that they obtain a better – central, influential - position to safeguard their interests. This however demands for appropriate competences such as competences to create, to negotiate, to lobby, to argument and to communicate. Consequently, public libraries have to leave their professional comfort-zone behind, or as a public library director said “... we have to leave familiar grounds”.

When looking for specific interventions, this coping strategy certainly consists of building awareness: public libraries need to make themselves explicitly noticed by the other partners. Our research results indicate that this is not self-evident. We notice for instance that most political and administrative representatives of the local governments (still) have a narrow and rather clichéd view on the present strategic role of public libraries. It is a place where urban citizens can find interesting books and encounter other fellow-citizens. A public library is therefore “a nice place to read and reside”. Simultaneously, it is also a place that becomes obsolete due to the digital revolution and the growing importance of social media. Therefore restricted or even decreasing investments are appropriate, certainly in times of financial distress. Public libraries try to remedy this clichéd image and growing skepticism by using for instance self-written “success stories” and launching trendy promotion campaigns for original, modern (e.g. high-tech) and eye-catching activities (e.g. “we emphasize especially the unexpected”). Thus, highly standardized and formal communication initiatives (e.g. “we send them our official library plans”) is not sufficient.

Secondly, this coping strategy also consists of identifying and constructing alignments: public libraries need to pro-actively detect and/or design strategic matches. Our research results - and especially the results of the focus group experiment (see before) – indicate that public libraries do not look thoroughly nor systematically for goal-alignments with the strategic ambitions of their local government, let alone dispose of methods and competences to do so successfully. Designing alignments in the sense of (re)modifying or (re)framing their own strategic ambitions in order to obtain (a better) fit with the other strategic partners, is even non-existent. During the focus group experiment however, public libraries suggested some

interesting ideas, such as for instance rephrasing their own ambitions in line with the particular jargon or lingo of each partner (“Language is after all our play-ground. We are good in it!”).

Thirdly, this coping strategy consists of negotiating and convincing: public libraries have to tell and sell. Thus, they have to initiate the dialogue, they have to communicate the identified and constructed alignments (see before), they have to acknowledge the needs of the partners (e.g. urban identity) and emphasize how their public library can contribute or facilitate this need. Simultaneously, they have to look for trade-offs (e.g. we are willing to freeze certain prestigious ambitions in return however for other ambitions that we do not want to give up), for synergetic effects (e.g. together we can reinforce the effects) and for sparring partners (e.g. we can join forces on the basis of common interests). But, also vigilance is recommended or as a public library director puts it “we may not sell too much, certainly not our soul”. As public libraries accommodate all kinds of other public activities (e.g. exhibitions, debates, music events, social encounter initiatives, coffee shop facilities, playgrounds for kids), they risk losing their fundamental “library” identity.

By employing this last coping strategy, public libraries try to encounter the particular emerging threats of local policy dilemmas (e.g. they can better solve or defuse dilemmas), the dominant rational management paradigm (e.g. they can negotiate or lobby for an alternative paradigm), the mixed experiences of inter-municipality cooperation (e.g. they can look for a win-win situation for all partners involved), the complex strategic actor-scenography framework (e.g. they can actively manage the scenography) and the bottlenecks of needed methods and competences (e.g. they can develop appropriate instruments as well as vital communication and negotiation competences).

Conclusion

In view of our grounded theory ambitions and the dynamism of urban development, our recent research initiative is focused on the interaction of the changing local policy context and the strategic partnership of ten Flemish public libraries. By identifying evolutions within the local policy context that “prevent” (i.e. threats) and/or “facilitate” (i.e. opportunities) the formation, development and acknowledgment of the previously depicted strategic roles and partnerships and by uncovering the ways in which public libraries encounter these challenges, the initial theory “under construction” is made more complete. As far as the evolutions of the

local policy context are concerned, we can distinguish three important trends, being (i) the emerging strategic dilemmas between local policy priorities, (ii) the emerging trends in policy frameworks, and (iii) the emerging bottlenecks in needed methods and competences of local policy actor. When we consider the way in which the public libraries try to cope with these trends, we uncover three coping strategies, being (i) the professionalization of their own strategic management profile, (ii) the exploration and mapping of “the others”, and (iii) the initiatives taken to actively craft and design the strategic partnership themselves.

In relation to the development of our grounded theory, three additional research findings are interesting to be mentioned. At first, we notice that a lot of strategic alignment opportunities are “missed out” by the partners themselves. As such, supporting “matchmaking” methods and even mediators (i.e. researchers) are needed to actually form, develop and acknowledge the strategic partnerships of public libraries. Presumably it is advisable to take these mediating needs or conditions explicitly into consideration when further developing our grounded theory. Secondly, we notice that most threats and opportunities are not related to one particular strategic role (i.e. urban landmark, area-oriented herald and target-group patron). As such, the interaction between the local policy context and the strategic partnerships of public libraries seems to follow a more *generic* than a *role-specific* rationale. Finally, most public libraries clearly seem to struggle with the uncovered coping strategies. As such, the coping strategies identified within our grounded theory under construction are still “in transition”. Future research initiatives are therefore needed to complete the presently uncovered set of alternatives.

It is clear that notwithstanding the fact that our recent research initiative has certainly generated some interesting new insights, our development efforts have not yet reached their destination. Parallel to the ongoing *urban* odyssey of most public libraries, we too will therefore proceed with our own *scientific* odyssey.

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- [1] For instance local political representatives, local administrative policy makers, individual citizens, local (informal) communities, local (formal) institutions and professional experts or consultants.
- [2] Not only with each other but also with actors on a regional, Flemish and/or European policy level.
- [3] The local actor "scenery" does not only change quickly (e.g. rationalizations, promotions, time-related projects), but also in an unpredictable way (e.g. the unexpected results of local elections).
- [4] Approximately three representatives per city or municipality.
- [5] Approximately two representatives per public library.
- [6] Containing several quotes, paraphrases and specific examples. The research reports are:

Vallet, N., Plateau, M., Somers, M., Van Lierde, A., and de Kepper, M. (2014), *De lokale beleidscontext in kaart gebracht ... over toekomstige uitdagingen en strategische opties voor OB's, Onderzoeksprojectrapport, Werkdocument deel 1, Strategische partnerschappen voor openbare bibliotheken*, Locus: Brussel, pp.134.

Vallet, N., Plateau, M., Somers, M., Van Lierde, A., and de Kepper, M. (2014), *De lokale beleidscontext in kaart gebracht ... over strategische partnerschappen geïdentificeerd door OB's, Onderzoeksprojectrapport, Werkdocument deel 2, Strategische partnerschappen voor openbare bibliotheken*, Locus: Brussel, pp.90.

- [7] BBC stands for "Beleids- en BeheersCyclus" or the Cycle of Policy and Management control.
- [8] In Flanders local elections are organized every six years.
- [9] We can for instance refer to the so-called "incremental or strategy formation management paradigm", and the "political or stakeholders management paradigm" (Vallet, 2011).