

Portuguese mobile libraries: 50 years travelling throughout the roads, lands and people of Portugal

Nuno Marçal

Proença-a-Nova – Portugal

Abstract: The Mobile Libraries in Portugal, have influenced the promotion of books, reading, and knowledge. They always promote something more... Its history, its reappearance, the difficulties and its potential to take the library out of its walls.

Keywords: *mobile libraries, bookmobile, Proença-a-Nova, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation*



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Figure 1: First mobile library - 1953 - Cascais (city of) - Portugal | Cascais City Hall Archives

Although there are some older records attesting the existence of mobile libraries in Portugal (not motorized), it was only in 1958 that Branquinho da Fonseca created one of Portugal's main structures of Public Reading (Neves, 2005), with the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.



Figure 2 | Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Mobile Library - 1958 - Lagos(City Of) - Portugal

Throughout all these years the Mobile Libraries of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation were important cultural and educational landmarks, in a time where illiteracy was promoted by an over-controlling government. The mobile library service, along with the affections and the exchange of information it involved, travelled to the most hidden and inaccessible places of Portugal.



Figure 3: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Mobile Library – 1959 – Funchal (City Of) – Madeira - Portugal – Calouste Gulbenkian Museum

We still find remains of its influence in the lives of thousands of former users, visitors and friends who recall the old bookmobiles with nostalgia and a feeling of eternal gratitude. Thanks to this service, some people have accessed books for the first time, adopting reading habits that turned them into better and more literate citizens (Melo, 2004).

In 2002, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation decided to put an end to this noble project, passing this responsibility to the cities where the fixed libraries were installed. The mobile library collections were absorbed by the local libraries.

As to the original service, some cities recognizing the affectionate bond between the mobile library service and the populations, and respecting its importance, have put an effort into its modernization and development and have kept it until the present day; in some cases even the vehicles were preserved.

Recently, Proença-a-Nova city hall together with Sobreira Formosa's Santa Casa de

Misericórdia, decided to present a project on mobile libraries to PROGRIDE - a program designed to combat poverty and social exclusion.

This project originally included two vehicles: a mobile library and a mobile healthcare unit. The first trip of the bookmobile took place on the 26th of July 2006. Since then, the initial route – twenty-two villages, three primary schools and three kindergartens - has undergone some changes in order to adapt itself to the demands and interests of the population and to new social realities. Right now, the mobile libraries visit thirty-eight villages and four nursing homes.



*Figure 4: A frequent user in Rabacinas (small village) – “Bibliomóvel” - Proença-a-Nova – Portugal
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The services provided by the “Bibliomóvel” are not much different from those provided by the traditional libraries. They present two dimensions: The Librarian Dimension:

home loan – books, magazines, CD, DVD, “ask the mobile library answers!”, bibliographic reference service, storytime, workshops, librarian support services to nursing homes, schools, cafés, restaurants, internet, social and musical entertainment; and the Social Dimension: Proximity, Periodicity, Complicity and FRIENDSHIP.



*Figure 5: Some users and friends in Sobral Fernando (small village) – “Bibliomóvel” - Proença-a-Nova – Portugal
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Recently, the Proença-a-Nova's Bookmobile has initiated a new stage of its journey, adding to the services already available today, those provided by the citizen services by including the City Hall's Mobile Command Post.

In the near future, this offer can be expanded through collaboration with other departments, institutions or agencies in order to increase the scope of the initiative and facilitate access to those who live far away from the village.

On the Mobile Command Post you'll be able to submit online the various applications and forms concerned with Social Action, Water Supply, Farmer and Entrepreneur Support, Education and Civil Protection.



Figure 6: A frequent user searching information on internet - Corgas (small village) - “Bibliomóvel” - Proença-a-Nova - Portugal

To complement this new functionality, we have available a portable ATM, which allows our users to make various payments (water, electricity, telephone, insurance, etc.).

During the year 2011 the Bibliomóvel of Proença-a-Nova was chosen by DGLB - Directorate General of Books and Libraries to represent Portugal in the “Portfolio Por Leer” (2012/2013) of CERLALC (Regional Center for the Promotion of Books in Latin America and Caribbean).

CERLALC is an intergovernmental organization, under the auspices of UNESCO, providing technical support to Latin-American governments to define and apply politics, programs, projects and actions for the promotion of books, reading and copyright (in Spanish and Portuguese).

At this moment there are seventy mobile libraries that cover the entire territory with its roads, lands and people; carrying its human, bibliographical and sentimental resources.



Figure 7: Learning and use a portable pc - Rabacinas(small village) - “Bibliomóvel” - Proença-a-Nova - Portugal

The Mobile Libraries have played an important role, reducing the differences concerning access to books and reading, a result of the social and geographic isolation of some populations. Today, and certainly in the future, they will continue their important mission, promoting access to knowledge and generosity.

“Request a book in a mobile library is to borrow a book to a friend or neighbour”

— Roberto Soto



Figure 8: "Bibliomóvel" – Portuguese Mobile Library – since 2006 – Proença-a-Nova – Portugal

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