

Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library

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In early 2003 all was well and fine in Austria. The Nobel Prize Jury had just announced that Elfriede Jelinek had been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Everyone seem pleased. Even the Austrian tabloid, the Kronen Zeitung, which can be compared with German Bild-Zeitung with regard to both circulation (hard to believe, but 43.7% of all Austrians read this paper every day) and its hard tones vis-à-vis critical writers, identified with the otherwise strongly attacked Elfriede Jelinek. Austria was once again celebrating itself as a country of culture par excellence with a great literary past and a vital literature and reading scene, which the government made every effort to promote.

Only a few weeks after the Nobel Prize Jury announced its decision and the effusive patriotism shown for “our” Elfriede Jelinek, the image of the country of education and reading was shattered by the results of the PISA study. In the study carried out in 29 OECD countries, Austria only scored 19th. To make things even worse, it not only slid to down from 10th, it also had to share its 19th rank with Germany.

PISA and the Consequences

The debate that followed was a heated one both politically and in the media. People spoke about the failure of the Austrian education system. It gradually became clear that the lacking or non-existing reading skills of 20% of all Austrians was not just a problem of a small section of the population, it was an enormous problem affecting society as a whole. Austria’s poor ranking in international comparison is the result of a disproportionately large number of young people with reading problems and a small group with outstanding reading skills. In the middle range, Austria scored similarly as other successful countries. Whereas in the PISA study’s winning country Finland 48% of all young people have excellent reading skills (level 4-5), in Austria the figure is only 29%. However, in Austria 20% of the young people are classified as belonging to the risk group (level 1 and below), whereas in Finland only 6% figure in this group.

Austria is thus saddled with a veritable time bomb – which poses a threat not just to education but also to the economy and democracy. If we take this study seriously, it means first that 20% of young Austrians cannot qualify for a number of professions because of their lacking or not even existing reading skills and cannot play an active role in the economy and second that there is a large group which can no longer be reached with written information, can hardly partake of a serious political discussion and thus is vulnerable to radical political positions.

The debate continued even though reform measures were initiated – such as the truly sensational abolishment of the two-thirds majority that was traditionally necessary to pass school laws. In reality politicians have yet to recover from the shock of the PISA study results. Media and oppositional parties refer to PISA all the time. In the fall of 2006, three years after the report was published, the educational system was a central issue in the election campaign of the Austrian parliament – which ended with a new government being elected.

The Lacking Perception of Libraries

Here is not the place to examine the discussion in all its facets, to comment on it and to assess it. However, it does seem worth mentioning that at the beginning of the controversy there were politicians who rightly pointed out that schools should not be given all the blame for the poor reading skills. Unfortunately, no consequences were drawn from this good point. In strategies the focus was almost only exclusively on schools with school libraries only being marginally taken into account.

Especially tasteless, but also typical, was the article written by a former Municipal School President who likes to write columns for a newspaper with a dubious horizon. As a remedy for the PISA disaster he recommended transferring “bean counter” and “destructive thinkers” from the teaching faculty to the school library, since they were able to do the least damage there.

Much more worrisome than such an abstruse statement was the fact that a heated debate was being conducted in Austria on how to tackle the embarrassing and worrisome lack of reading skills without taking into account the libraries - Austria's greatest institution for the promotion of reading. Obviously, PISA not only revealed young Austrians' massive reading deficits but also a serious lack of perception of Austria's libraries.

The responsible authorities in the Austrian Library Association and in the ministries were, of course, aware that this situation called for immediate action. An international conference with experts from Finland, Great Britain, Holland, Southern Tyrol, Germany and Austria took place in Austria on the subject of reading – society – libraries. Its task was to analyze weak spots and develop new strategies that would tap the potential of libraries. Here it became clear not only that those countries that scored highest in the PISA comparison had a well-developed library system but also that those countries that were able to launch large-scale national library campaigns succeeded better in fostering an awareness of libraries among the population, the media and politicians than in those countries that banked more on small-scale initiatives and sporadic, individual measures.

It was precisely here that we analyzed our weaknesses. To eliminate the deficits, the head of the Austrian Library Association decided in June of 2005 to launch an Austria-wide campaign. The goal of the campaign was to be to make publicity for reading by means of entertaining, stimulating initiatives and to pool initiatives to improve the visibility of libraries. The campaign was carried out in October 2006 following more than one years of planning and organization.

The focus of our work was to organize
an Austria-wide literature festival in the libraries
an accompanying publicity campaign in daily papers.

Concept of the Literature Festival “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library”

From the very outset we knew that we were sitting on a real treasure, which we only had to lift from the sea. Austria's libraries are extremely active and creative in the event sector. Every year, countless events take place. Each organizer is sure of the quality of the event – and usually rightly so. Unfortunately, however, the wealth of activities is not perceived and the potential is not tapped for enhancing the libraries' visibility. It is here that we wanted to proceed – to convince libraries to pool their efforts, to contribute to publicity measures and to market our campaign as the biggest Austrian literature festival. With thousands of readings, literary tours, storytimes, kid's cinema, reading nights, reading festivals, workshops, literature-café's, book exhibits we also succeeded in doing this in one week.

With the title “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” we wanted to draw the public's attention to the subject and to get people to identify it with libraries, signaling competence and authority. It was important to get all libraries on board. While the umbrella organization of the Public Libraries was responsible for the initiative and planning, we deliberately decided not to call our campaign “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Public Library.” We wanted the title to refer to all libraries, to make publicity for them. And we succeeded in doing precisely that. The Austrian State Library was a committed, valuable partner. Our colleagues from the Society of Austrian Librarians motivated their members at academic libraries to become active and the school libraries moved their “Open House of School Libraries” to the week our campaign took

places. Libraries throughout all of Austria - from community and parish libraries, school libraries, municipal and provincial libraries, university libraries to the Austrian State Library - took part and invited the public to take part in the dialogue on reading and literature. With "Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library", we were able to organize a joint initiative with all the different types of libraries in Austria.

From the beginning "Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library" was geared to creating a label that could easily be noticed and recognized. Pointing to an event that was to take place every year at the same time. We decided that our annual campaign was to take place on October 16 to 22, the week before the Austrian National Holiday on October 26. The intention was to link "Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library" with the national holiday so that eventually the Austrian public would come to see Austria's biggest literature festival in the libraries as a contribution to the national holiday. It is a dream we are still working on.

Whoever wants to create a label also needs corporate design. Self-made posters and invitations, which are often made in Austria – simply as a product of necessity – have a certain charm and give the events a personal stamp. They are not, however, conducive to conveying the image of an institution working in a professional way and certainly not to the idea of a common appearance. In an attempt to counter the negative cliché of a sterile library only frequented by school children and housewives, we used a laid-back young man who was floating on a book while reading as the central motif in all of our publicity material which was designed by a well-known graphic artist. We supplied more than 2,500 libraries (this figure includes all public libraries and school libraries as well as a large number of research libraries) with free posters, invitation leaflets, and book markers in a uniform design. The same posters that made publicity for a joint initiative of all Austrian libraries were to be found on the walls of libraries, schools, museums, banks, restaurants, etc.

The T-shirts with the Austria-Reads design proved to be a real best seller. We had to reorder the T-shirts several times to meet the demand. Library teams from the Austrian State Library to a small village library wore Austria-Reads T-shirts and we were also able to win over one or the other prominent person to wear this T-shirt. The Austrian writers' soccer national team wore the T-shirts in their historical victorious matches against Hungarian and Swiss writers. And following the humiliating defeat of the Austrian librarians' soccer team, unfortunately the Germans won the sought-after T-shirts as a trophy. Salmon Rushdie appeared before an audience of 600 (including a number of prominent figures, e.g., the new Austrian Federal Chancellor) wearing the Austria Reads T-shirt and swore that he would wear his new favorite T-shirt not only in Austria. (We were able to win Salmon Rushdie through a cooperation agreement and organized together with him a press conference and a photo shooting at a library.) Politicians, bishops, athletes, and artists received T-shirts and became the advertisers in our campaign. As you may have already noticed, the initiative picked up steam. The investment in corporate design had certainly paid off.

Mobilization and Motivation

The concept of the campaign was developed in close cooperation with the responsible department in the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture which we were able to win as the main financial backer of the campaign.

In early 2006 the basic concept was ready. We informed Federal President Dr. Heinz Fischer about our project. Our president, himself a passionate reader and author of several books, was enthusiastic about our campaign and spontaneously agreed to assume the patronage. This was fortunate for us since it gave the campaign weight and reputation and the president also later played an important role in opening doors for us.

We then turned to the main stakeholders in the provinces and tried to win them as partners and integrate them in our work. (Similar to the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria has a

federal structure.) As opposed to Germany the provincial bureaucracy also has competences for the public library system but without any legal provisions or coordination.) After a number of negotiations with the representatives of all nine provinces, something truly sensation happened. For the first time the central government and all nine provinces co-financed a library project, entered into a partnership and made “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” their joint project.

We then proceeded to win over the library world for our concept – since it was essential to inform our colleagues in the provinces – and to motivate them to participate. In some cases, we had to persuade colleagues to reschedule already planned events to the week of the campaign. The Library Association is well organized. Our databases have stored the addresses, phone numbers and e-mail accounts of all public libraries in Austria. We distributed information with direct mailings. One a month at least one mail was sent to each library. Three letters were sent out to all libraries with the request to participate. In our own paper “Bücherei-Perspektiven” (Library Perspectives) we informed the readers about new developments and offers. In addition a new homepage was created (www.oesterreichliest.at) in which updates, news, tips, suggestions and services could be easily accessed.

Loads of written information. Yet we were aware that this was still not enough. Written information did not really replace face-to-face contacts. To motivate people we had to reach out to our colleagues. To do this, we founded the BVÖ “Reading Academy”. The goal of the reading academy was to expand the education program for librarians, enabling them to convey literature and promote reading in the provinces on site. We had to provide suggestions and assistance for events during the reading week and to speak personally with our colleagues. The provincial associations, professional offices and the diocesan libraries were valuable partners. They organized provincial meetings where they provided information and mobilized the participants.

At the federal congress of the BVÖ in June 2006 it was clear that the measures had had an effect. What had taken some time to get off the ground was now developing ever more momentum and enthusiasm. Librarians informed other librarians, persuaded them to participate. While initially we tried to win over partners, the institutions now approached us and asked whether they could participate.

Advertising campaign: The Crème de la Crème to Promote Reading and Libraries

By conventional means – press mailings as well as well-designed posters – one only reaches people who already have an interest in reading and libraries. Press reports on libraries appear, if at all, in the cultural section, and are only noticed by people who already have an interest in culture. We wanted to achieve more. We wanted to break out of this cycle. We had to take people by surprise.

To this end, we designed an insert campaign in which individuals with a high degree of publicity and an image, who were not immediately associated with libraries, made publicity for libraries or reading in a very personal way. The goals we set ourselves were very high. We would only consider individuals with a high degree of visibility, who did not have a polarizing effect and could appeal to a large target group.

We were able to win the crème de la crème of several different professions for our campaign: Anna Netrebko, an international style and everybody’s darling in Austria, a country of opera fanatics, the singer Christina Stürmer, who children and young people dream of, the team coach of Austria’s national soccer team Josef Hickersberger, the slalom world champion Michel Walchhofer, many-time sailing Olympic champions Hagara and Steinacher and the Olympic champion in Austrian ski jump Toni Innauer. Absolute top stars who also have visibility outside of the world of culture.

Whoever knows that normally press inserts featuring Anna Netrebko are linked to six-figure Euro fees, will all the more appreciate the fact that Anna Netrebko and all other stars provided their services completely free of charge for the press campaign.

All media inserts had the same design – a portrait of the star, a very personal, succinct slogan for libraries and/or reading, the logo “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library”, the date of the action, a reference to the homepage and the logo of our financial backer, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The thirty inserts in the daily papers with the greatest circulation – and also placed most favorably on Saturdays and Sundays on page three, and in the cultural or sports section in all other days – had an impact, drawing attention and interest. The librarians reacted either pleased or annoyed, but time and again one’s friends, colleagues from culture and education, but also unknown persons would mention the inserts. No one expected libraries to be able to pull off such an initiative.

Summary and Outlook

With “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” the Austrian libraries launched a campaign that was unprecedented to date. Thousands of events in the libraries – 480,000 visitors in one week (Austria has 8.2 inhabitants), internationally renowned stars who volunteered to appear completely free of charge in a press insert campaign promoting the libraries. Our goal to promote reading and libraries with the campaign “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” was reached. The campaign met with great enthusiasm from the very start and surpassed quite a few expectations and desires.

From the community and church libraries, school libraries, municipal and provincial libraries, university libraries all the way to the Austrian State Library – libraries throughout all of Austria participated and put together an attractive program, which featured readings, recitations, literary tours, storytimes, kid’s cinemas, reading nights, reading festivals, workshops, literature cafés, book exhibits, etc. Almost all of Austria’s well-known authors appeared in libraries during this week.

There was enormous coverage in Austrian daily and weekly papers. A number of radio stations and all provincial studios of the Austrian Radio and Broadcasting Company reported on the events. The collection of press releases on “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” compiled by the Austrian Library Association comprised more than 800 pages. The press reports ranged from front-page reports on the situation of Austrian libraries to announcements and thousands of reports on readings and other events. The big daily papers reported in-depth on the services offered by libraries but also – in part astonished and angered – on their precarious financial and legal situation. We succeeded in making the situation of libraries an issue in the media. And this at a really crucial moment in time – when the coalition or government negotiations were underway.

After this success we were obliged to take major steps to make the campaign even more visible this year to draw an even greater number of readers. The active participation of libraries is just as crucial as the support offered by well-known figures and publicity-gear marketing.

To make an ever greater public which in part was not so library-conscious aware of “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” the Austrian Library Association did a publicity campaign by naming a train after the library campaign. From December 10, 2006 to December 8, 2007, the IC 744 train “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” traveled daily from Vienna to Salzburg. Its arrival was announced over the intercom at all train stops along the way. In a train journal we informed travelers about the campaign and promoted libraries.

Several Austrian dailies have already approached us to speak about media partnerships for “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” in 2007. We are very pleased with the great interest that we have received from these papers for 2007.

One reason for the enormous success of the “Austria Reads. Meeting-point Library” was certainly the support of artists and top athletes. Anna Netrebko, Christina Stürmer, Roman Hagara & Hans-Peter Steinacher, Josef Hickersberger, Toni Innauer and Michael Walchhofer were enthusiastic about the success of this campaign. We are doing our best to keep them on board in 2007 as well. Moreover, we are of course interested in expanding our circle of prominent supporters.

Our concept is to win the provincial governors (in Germany: minister presidents) for our press insert campaign. Inserts in which, for example, the governor of a province appears would have a symbolic effect for the organization funding the libraries and thus supports library work in an important way. In the previous year we were only able to achieve this in the province of Styria. We are convinced that in 2007 we will be even more successful.

For the First Time: Public Libraries as Part of the Government’s Action Plan

It is not possible to precisely assess the success of campaigns. However, it is no coincidence that public libraries figured for the first time a post-war government of Austria’s 2nd Republic in a government action plan. This plan was presented on January 11, 2007 – that is, three months following our campaign. For the first time a government program signaled a need to take action and to change things in this area:

“Public libraries are centers for education, culture, information and social integration. They make an important contribution to ensuring a country-wide supply of literature and offer access to new media. In cooperation with federal government, provinces, cities and towns, a comprehensive development concept is to be developed for public libraries together with legal entities, experts and those working in the field.”

We have yet to reach our greatest goal, i.e., a library law which would define standards, services and financing of libraries, and thus ensures equal access to literature, information, education and culture in Austria and in comparison to other European countries. But with targeted lobbying, accompanied by an Austria-wide campaign that has a high level of visibility we have succeeded in putting libraries on the agenda. We have already submitted our wishes to the new government.