

Görüşler / *Opinion Papers*

Whither Nordic Public Libraries? Towards a Cross-country Research Initiative on the Historical Heritage, Role, Self-perception, and Challenges of Public Libraries in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden

Leif Kajberg*

Abstract

In these years, the role and mission of the mainstream Western world public library are increasingly being questioned and challenged. Current discussion as it has unfolded during the last few years within the public library community, and among educators and researchers in the field, more and more point to the fact that public libraries are facing a need for reorientation and reconsideration of their role along with the services they provide to their users. Public library use, primarily the number of library loans, seems to be shrinking, but the function of the library as an informal meeting place and a social space in the local community seems to attract an increasing amount of interest professionally and academically. As a by-product of this interest, various scenarios for the development of the public library have been presented. The nature of challenges confronting public libraries - including those emerging from the web, from the dispersion of social software and changes in users' habits, tastes, preferences, etc. - are examined. Moreover, commoditisation of human life, a manifest phenomenon in the age of late modernity, has gradually led to a shift in emphasis from enlightenment to a short-term and customer-centred perspective. The discussion of emerging identities and roles for the public library can be seen as the starting point for a joint research initiative initiated by Library & Information Science (LIS) schools in the Nordic countries. Detailed treatment is given to the efforts to get this research initiative, which aims to reflect strategically on the role of the public library in democracy and welfare state in Scandinavia, off the ground. In defi-

* Specialist., Royal School of Library and Information Science. e-mail: lk@db.dk

ning the contents and direction of the research initiative, a public library researchers' seminar was held in Uppsala, Sweden in May 2007. Finally, some critical observations are presented on the way in which current professional policy-making, LIS scholarship and theory building as developed in the United Kingdom and North America seems to impact on - and to some extent ignore - developments in public library communities outside the English-speaking countries.

In these years, the role and mission of the mainstream Western world public library are increasingly being questioned and challenged. An increasing amount of research papers, conference presentations, anthologies and monographs express a critical concern with the public library as an agency rooted in modernity and growing out of the age of industrialisation, urbanisation and popular movements (Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007, p. 45-59). Theorists, scholars, educators, columnists and opinion leaders in the public library field argue and substantiate that public libraries are at the crossroads and face a need for reorientation and redefining their mission as well as the nature of their tasks including the services, they provide to their users. The same kind of warning message and "wake-up call" is echoed by public library policy makers, library association officials, national library and information agency officers and executives and those professionals, etc. in the field who serve on committees within international associations, etc.

In critically examining the public library's past, especially the genesis and development of the public library in the era of modernisation of Western society, library historians and analysts have shed light on what they see as the actual purpose of public libraries including some of the inherent or hidden intentions/motives of the efforts of public libraries: the educational and disciplining functions performed by the public library along with its adherence to the task of serving as agency for maintaining specific social and cultural values and as an instrument for social control.

In the late modern or post-traditional society in the sense of British social theorist Anthony Giddens with the attack on and erosion of traditions within the private sphere, in cultural life and in society, the self-perception of the public library is being challenged. Existing ideals of the public library as an agency of the local community with a uniform and universal profile adhering to common norms and standards and basing its offerings on the notion about library services that are broadly-based and "global" in nature are coming under attack as well. Also under critical scrutiny is the concept of (uniform) quality as a universal entity defined and maintained on the premises of the library on the basis of specific tastes and value criteria.

In addition, the critical concern with the role and tasks of the public library covers the knowledge organisation activities in public library environments. For instance, knowledge organisation tools in public libraries such as classification schemes (e.g. Dewey) are critically analysed for their embedded ideological values (Andersen and Skouvig, 2006, p. 300-323).

Challenges facing public libraries partly emanate from the advent of new information and communication technologies and the booming Internet with search engines like Google. For the time being, innovative features such as Web 2.0 applications along with the concepts of Library 2.0 and Second Life attract a great deal of interest within the library world and in the professional communities of librarians. Similarly, phenomena such as My Space and YouTube and an array of other social networking sites on the Internet increasingly capture the interest and attention of children and young people. Besides, their media consumption including, for instance, podcasting and MP3 files is overwhelming. Thus, in satisfying their curiosity and their need for communication and cultural, social, and intellectual stimulation, children and youngsters turn to these new media constructs and virtual social spaces with the consequence that public libraries are losing users within the young generation. They find libraries less attractive and drop out of them. Many public library systems have noted the same tendency when it comes to adult users: they are going elsewhere to satisfy their needs for information, knowledge, culture, entertainment and social interaction. But everything is not bad to the public library. The differentiation of user needs, the change in habits and preferences of individuals - some of them representing the manifestation of changed social characters - generate new social and cultural needs that can, in some cases, be identified and successfully responded to by public libraries with their social credibility and their massive social capital. Thus, the function of the library as a meeting place and a social space in the local community allowing people to interact informally and do a range of more unstructured activities seems to be gaining growing importance. Ragnar Audunson reports progress within a Norwegian research project that sets out to examine the role and potential of the public library in metropolitan areas as meeting places fostering social capital and participation (Audunson, 2007, p. 411-422).

The cultural and social changes in society leading to the emergence of more autonomous, articulate and conscious individuals and the manifestation of a diversity of tastes, preferences and needs on the part of users also affect the public library and the way it sees itself in relation to society and to users.

Thus, public libraries have gradually adopted a more supply-oriented attitude that concentrates on servicing the user or client and satisfying his/her more ad hoc-oriented and situation-specific needs. Libraries have tended to give more priority to the immediate user demand and the short-term informational and recreational needs as they are articulated by the user. But as a consequence, that part

of the library's role and mission that centres on the sustained, long-term effort to educate and empower the individual, the library user, has been steadily declining. The same is true of the library's more targeted contribution to the development of the user's personal and cultural experience and enrichment along with his/her learning activity and acquisition of knowledge, etc. In Denmark, this reorientation process and the adjustment of public library purpose is, for example, mirrored by the statement of the aims and objectives of the public libraries as it appears in the Ministerial Order regarding Danish public libraries (2000): Now it is just about buying a suitable amount of books and other materials and making them available to the library's public. Pushing it to extremes: it largely boils down to passive and mechanic provision of materials and providing access to them.

So what we are witnessing here, in the age of late modernity, as an effect of the diversification of public library purpose and priorities, is a change in emphasis from enlightenment to a short-term and customer-centred perspective. The shift to a consumer-oriented perspective imitating or drawing upon inspiration from private enterprises and companies involves the risk that public library services are transformed into commodities with commercialisation increasingly finding its way into the public library sector.

Hence, the scene has been set for identifying and discussing new and expanded roles for the public library in Denmark, in the Nordic countries and in other parts of the world. The discussion of emerging identities and roles for the public library could be structured around the following issues and challenges:

- Provision of services to immigrants and library offerings to citizens in the multicultural society
- Enhancing the public library's function as a meeting place in local community
- Provision of support to education
- Promoting information literacy and counteracting trends towards digital divide
- Enhancing the cultural role, mediation of culture, i.e. the library serving as a cultural centre.
- Redesigning the public library's space and providing virtual rooms. Taking into consideration the volume of digitisation of media and materials and the increasing distribution, impact and use of electronic materials, it seems obvious to reconsider and redesign the public library's space: will there, after all, be a need for the library in a physical sense?
- The innovative public library - how to keep library innovation processes going and how to ensure constant dynamics?
- Public-private partnerships in the library field and the outsourcing of library services to commercial firms. Opportunity and dilemma.

The issues and challenges listed above are dealt with in a recent monograph

on Nordic public libraries in the knowledge society (Larsen and others, 2006). Another recent publication, a booklet issued by the Danish National Library Authority, outlines a strategy for transforming the existing, traditional library into the library of the knowledge society (*Strategi: Fra information til viden...*, 2006). It is asserted that the library of the industrial society - be it an academic or a public library - has almost had its day. Thus, new visions and action plans are required and the emphasis should be shifted from the library and its collections to the user. The strategy outlined consists of eleven steps or items. In April this year, Lars Qvortrup, Rector of the Royal School of Library and Information Science, published a feature article on the public library and the need for transformation. In his newspaper piece Qvortrup addresses the future roles, identities and challenges as they affect the public library in the knowledge society. Convinced about the need for the public library as a key agency in today's society and in the future, Lars Qvortrup suggests sketching out three scenarios for the development of the public library. The first scenario considers the public library as a media centre. Basic to the public library in its role as a media centre is that the book is no longer the only or the most important medium. Today we have hundreds of media, which individually provide access to knowledge. The keyword characterising the media centre is not the book but desire for reading, longing for interpretations or, with a new word, meaning-mania. What do different kinds of signs, pictograms, entities and phenomena mean? Who is the murderer, the butler or the housemaid? What is the complete story about society and the full picture of life? The media centre is a multimedia library and the employees are mediators. The second scenario is about the network library. The network library is the libraries' response to the Internet and googlization. Today, the library is only one among information providers and in searching information it comes natural to people to turn to podcasting, Wikipedia, web engines, etc. But who screens, scrutinises, guarantees and blueprints the quality of information located and what are the relevance criteria? Can you have confidence in the answers produced by commercial search engines? In other words, here lies an opportunity for the public library to act as a neutral quality assessment and validating agency strongly adhering to the principle of public service and sharing the basic values of, for instance, Radio Denmark or BBC, the national broadcasting and television companies. Thus, it is suggested that the public libraries, in Denmark, should join forces with Radio Denmark so as to create a super public service network library. The third scenario is concerned with the knowledge library. The basic function of this library is to transform information into knowledge. The mission of the modern library is not to devote itself to accumulate as much information as possible and make it available to its users. The task is not only to give people situation-specific factual knowledge to be quickly reproduced, but the library should also assist its clients in utilising and refining this knowledge so as to develop compe-

tences and to change competences into creative resources. The essential thing is to be able to use your knowledge - factual knowledge and skills - for problem-solving purposes (Qvortrup, 2006).

In this climate of stocktaking, reappraisal and confronting the challenges facing public libraries, the idea of a joint Nordic research project addressing public libraries in the Nordic countries was born. The idea of formulating a joint project was ventilated by Leif Lørring, Rector of the Royal School of Library and Information Science, at a Nordic Library and Information Science (LIS) schools meeting in Budapest in late January 2005. But why a joint Nordic project in this area? Well, there is a long-standing tradition of collaborative activities undertaken by LIS academic institutions in the Nordic countries including student mobility within the NORDPLUS scheme (a parallel to EU's ERASMUS programme), the operation of a PhD programme within the context of NORSLIS (Nordic Research School in Library and Information Science), the conduct of joint research seminars and the planning of a joint Master's programme covering knowledge management. Joint Nordic library-related publications have been issued as well including a collective volume in English featuring Nordic public library research (Kajberg and Johannsen, 2005). In addition to these cooperative activities, an annual orientation and planning meeting attended by representatives of the Nordic LIS schools is held (in connection with the BOBCATSSS conferences). Further, the Northern countries boast an established formal cooperation, their societies have a lot of features in common and internationally the five countries are known for their Nordic model of welfare. Thus, in an international perspective, Scandinavia, or the Nordic countries, constitutes an entity and even a brand. Since the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish languages are very close to each other, talks, negotiations, presentations, etc. at joint Nordic meetings, etc. plus face-to-face contacts can be performed using one's own language, i.e. one of the three languages. Further, in joint Nordic communication processes, some Finnish and Icelandic people master of one of the three Scandinavian languages. The same is true of written communication between Nordic citizens.

Moreover, there is a long-lasting cooperation among public libraries in the Nordic countries involving, for instance, associations and central agencies in the field and one of the cooperative projects has for many years been the issuing of the periodical *Scandinavian Public Library Quarterly*, which appears in English. Thus, it seemed obvious to review the results and achievements of public libraries in the Nordic countries and try to examine their future perspectives along with the risks and challenges libraries have to confront in these years considering the dramatic changes in society and such factors as the globalisation trends and the upcoming knowledge society.

The preparation of the Nordic LIS schools' research initiative started in January 2006, and an interim project developing group met mid-March 2006 in

Copenhagen to further develop the project idea. The project group met again in Uppsala, Sweden mid-September 2006. Project development work continued throughout 2006 and in early 2007 - conducted mainly through e-mail communication - and included the planning of a Nordic public library researchers' seminar. The role of the public library in democracy and welfare state, in a Nordic perspective, was singled out as a major theme of research. In addition, the joint study should explore the profile and identity of public libraries in Nordic countries and identify similarities and differences in public library development in the countries under study. A chief objective would be to reflect strategically on the way public libraries in the Nordic countries should go in future. One of the unique things about the project would be the comparative, cross-country and inter-cultural perspective. A fairly large body of professional and academic literature exists on the situation, role and history, etc. of public libraries in individual Nordic countries, but the comparative, overarching studies and research approaches are lacking. In fleshing out the content of the joint piece of research to be undertaken, some attention was given to defining keywords serving to identify and "label" the challenges/risks dimension of the public library research theme:

- The dramatic impact of the Internet on public libraries and their services
- New expanded roles for public libraries in society
- Evidence on trends in public library use, library statistics (signalling decreasing loans volume in the Nordic countries)
- The situation that arguments are required in support of the continuation and existence of public libraries to justify resource allocation, rate payers' money, and expenditure in the field. What type of arguments is needed in support of public library roles and tasks/services?
- The need for developing new measurement instruments capable of mapping public library use outside the more tangible and conventional materials/loans/media area. In other words, how to make visible and exploit the extensive hitherto rather un-used social capital and amount of trust possessed by the public library?
- The library profession's need for a new identity; the need for raising positive issues to help the public library qualify for continued public support. For example, the role of the public library as a node in the web-dominated environment supporting access to web-based resources and services
- Libraries and educational institutions, the joint crisis faced by educational institutions and libraries (role and mission), the need for partnerships and synergies; resources and expertise to be offered by public libraries in this respect. The legitimacy crisis facing the public library, in a democracy-related, cultural and economic sense and in relation to industry and commerce, etc.

Based on this, it was decided to define four major research themes/indicative lines of research:

- Scenarios for public library development trends (a "paradise" and a "horror" scenario)
- Major/general research issues including overall challenges, changes and issues coming up and to be faced in the public library field and examined comparatively
- Social and political functions of public libraries as well as the economic/financial, organisational and technological issues facing the public libraries
- Public libraries and their user clienteles and target groups

In continuing project development, a joint Nordic public library researchers' seminar was scheduled for 11-12 May 2007. The location of the seminar would be the University of Uppsala in Sweden. As part of the seminar planning process, a so-called "platform paper" was prepared by Norwegian public library researcher and Chairman of EUCLID (The European Association for Library and Information Education and Research) Ragnar Audunson. The drafting of the platform paper was decided at a joint project group and Nordic LIS school meeting in Prague late January 2007. The platform paper sets the scene for the envisaged public library activities by providing background for the research areas to be defined within the Nordic project framework. The platform paper outlines a variety of thematic approaches and sub areas to be analysed with the public library as a key institution in the Nordic welfare states as a major thematic focus. In addition, the range of researchable topics presented includes the value base, identity, profile, user clients of the public library and especially the way this value base has come under pressure in a digital age. Also addressed in the paper are the challenges - and opportunities - of new information and communication technologies, not least those arising from the growth and sophistication of the web. Additional topics include the place of the public library in the knowledge and experience economies and the function of the library as meeting place, the library's role as a social and (multi)cultural space in the local community as well as the role of the library as learning arena and cultural communicator.

The work aiming at defining and concretising the Nordic public library research initiative made considerable progress at the above Nordic public library researchers' seminar in Uppsala, Sweden in May 2007. A considerable interest in the seminar and in the research theme was noted within the Nordic LIS researchers' community. 32 researchers in the field including a couple of members of the project organisation group had registered for the seminar. Prior to the Uppsala seminar, those researchers who had registered were asked to indicate their research interest(s) and state them in brief summaries that were to be

research e-mailed to the project organisational group. A few researchers had to send their regrets, but almost everyone had, as required, drafted brief outlines/abstracts of their intended research area/individual topic of research. At the pre-seminar stage, the project organisational group had, as mentioned above, presented its ideas for the issues, trends, developments and challenges to be explored within the framework of the envisaged Nordic public library research project. From the very outset of the research discussion initiated by the project group, the comparative and cross-country dimension was emphasised as an essential ingredient. Also, there was consensus among members of the project group that, organisationally, small cross-country research teams should be formed that could concentrate on the analysis of well-defined themes and sub-projects. In the process of discussing the content, profile and geographical coverage of the public library research initiative, the idea came up that the project could be broadened to include a Baltic dimension. In other words, the geographical and cultural scope of the project should be widened allowing for the participation of academic colleagues from LIS research environments in the Baltic countries. Accordingly, invitations were e-mailed to Baltic LIS research colleagues and one colleague from the Tallinn, Estonia attended the Uppsala researchers' seminar in May. To allow for a more structured discussion of research themes, seminar participants were divided into groups formed by broad fields of interest. Two major headings were defined for the group discussions:

- Focus on the functions and roles of the public library in the age of late modernity
- Focus on the development of innovative services, offerings and forms of activities in public library settings

The researchers' work groups were asked to consider the following issues and problem areas:

- Identification of concrete research themes
- Identification of methodological and theoretical approaches
- Suggestions for the time line of the project
- Suggestions for desirable project outcomes and tangible results to be produced
- Discussion of modes and vehicles of communication within the public library researchers' community that had come together along with ways of post-seminar networking
- Clarifying the interest of the attending researchers, their commitment and wholeheartedness toward the implementation of the Nordic research project ; participants willingness to contribute to fundraising efforts
- Suggestions for sources of financial support and relevant grants schemes to be considered in this respect

The next day was reserved for seminar participants' continued thematic discussions and plenum presentations. The researchers' groups presented their findings, analytical models and approaches along with their views of how broader public library-related themes of research could be defined. But group inputs and plenum discussion also provoked critical responses from some of the participants. Some of the basic ideas and theoretical assumptions underlying the research proposal in its present shape were questioned. Some participants were hesitant or reluctant to recognise the existence of a special Nordic public library model and others of those present had reservations about the pre-defined Nordic investigational context. Why do a Nordic comparative analysis, they asked. What is special about the Nordic dimension and does it exist at all? Maybe the Nordic aspect of the collective piece of public library research under discussion should be downgraded? The querying of some of the implications of the tentative project framework by some of the researchers present led to the decision of abandoning the existing platform paper. It was agreed that the platform paper be replaced by a new "vision paper" as a basis for going on with determining the content and purpose of the Nordic public library initiative. In reviewing and summarising current areas of research in the public library field, the revised paper should not least give attention to such fields as the history of public libraries, the meeting place function, the social capital issue and the challenge from digitalisation. It was suggested that the paper be structured in small well-defined project outlines that can be drawn upon in drafting applications for project funds.

At the same time the need was articulated for preparing a set of state-of-the-art reviews that could serve to review progress, developments and issues in specific public library relevant areas. In taking the project planning process further, opening up towards the public library community more broadly and initiating a dialogue on the orientation of the research project with library practitioners from the various Nordic countries was suggested as an additional step. To enhance communication and networking within the Nordic group of public library researchers a listserv facility should be created along with a brief e-mail newsletter.

Even if the Uppsala seminar on preparing for a Nordic public library research project did not generate an elaborate project framework with detailed descriptions of objectives and consensus on areas to be covered, the outlines are emerging of a Nordic public library researchers' network.

Finally, the decision was made to organise a follow-up seminar for researchers in Copenhagen on 26 - 27 October. Representatives of library associations and national central agencies within the library sector in the Nordic countries will be invited to attend this seminar and contribute to the discussions.

Do the ideas behind the public library research initiative as it has developed within the Nordic LIS academic community translate to public library sectors or

landscapes as they are found in other parts of Europe and outside Europe? Well, to some extent public libraries are facing the same problems and challenges in many European countries, but there are differences. The situation of public libraries may be divergent in say Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Also differing are the nature and the scale of difficulties with which libraries are currently struggling. But no doubt some challenges confronting public libraries are of a universal nature and can be generalised to public library settings in many parts of Europe. However, these days it cannot be taken for granted that the legitimacy of the public library is unchallengeable and in many regions and local communities, public librarians together with public library board members and local councillors - to the extent such exist - are forced to defend the legitimacy of the public library as a societal agency. They also have to consider the factors affecting this legitimacy. Obviously, they have to think about the implications of new information and communication technologies, but they also have to respond to more mundane problems such as funds drying up, obsolete and outworn library materials or how to ensure library users access to the Internet. Needs and challenges are varying from place to place. Thus, in some countries, professional priorities in the public library field will be directed towards the role of public libraries in nation-building efforts and in restoring and regenerating cultural heritage. At the local level, provision of printed materials available in residents' language(s) and promotion of reading and enhancement of literacy among the local population are receiving priority along with classic library services aimed at backing (adult) educational and enlightenment activities including the provision of support to individuals' own opinion-building processes.

Now and then a feeling creeps in that some public library development and innovation initiatives grounded on and inspired as they are by current professional policy-making, LIS scholarship and theory building in the United Kingdom and North America represent ideological undertones and even hegemonic features. In some sense, the responses provided and the solutions devised to tackle current problems and challenges as they are identified in Anglo-American LIS professional communities tend to mirror issues, models, theories and thinking etc. in this part of the international library world. However significant they may appear, broad issues such as market, technology, globalisation and the upcoming knowledge society with their touch of postulated universalism and "determinism" tend to usurp the attention of LIS communities and that of opinion leaders and policy makers in the field. But the risk is that public library issues and concerns embedded in specific geographical and cultural environments - e.g. outside the English-speaking countries - tend to be overlooked or become marginalised.

It can be argued that different cultures and language contexts still have a role to

ways in which public library research is affected by language contexts and interact with different social, cultural, historical and epistemological traditions.

References

- Andersen, J. and Skouvig, L. (2006). Knowledge Organization: A sociohistorical Analysis and Critique. *The Library Quarterly*, 76 (3): 300-323.
- Audunson, R. (2006). "The Public Libraries' Potential in Promoting Social Capital and Community Involvement in a Digital and Multicultural Context," in Herbert K. Achleitner and Alexander Dimchev, eds., *Globalization, Digitization, Access and Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Papers from the International Conference, Sofia, Bulgaria, 8-10 November 2006* 2007(pp. 411-422). Sofia: "St.Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia.
- Holmgaard Larsen, J. and Wigell-Ryynänen, B. and others, (eds.). (2006). *Nordic Public Libraries in the Knowledge Society*. Copenhagen: Danish National Library Authority. <http://www.bs.dk/publikationer/english/nnpl/index.htm> (accessed June 15, 2007).
- Hvenegaard R., Casper and Jochumsen, H. (2007). Problems and Possibilities: The Public Library in the Borderline between Modernity and Late Modernity. *The Library Quarterly*, (77) (1): 45-59.
- Kajberg, L. and Johannsen, C. G. (eds.). (2005). *New Frontiers in Public Library Research*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow.
- Qvortrup, L. (2006). Folkebiblioteket under forvandling. Information 11 April 2007. *Strategi: Fra information til viden. På vej til vidensamfundets bibliotek*. Copenhagen: Danish National Library Authority.