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## **Public Libraries as Place and Space – New Services, New Visibility**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper will explore what can be called a social shift in Norwegian public libraries, connected to a change in The Norwegian Library Act in 2014 stating that the public libraries shall be independent meeting places and arenas for public conversations and debate. I will look at some of the intentions behind the change in Library Act, what theories we can use to explain the intentions, as well as the events and activities set into action in order to fulfil these intentions. The paper will reflect on whether the role of Norwegian Public Libraries as meeting place and arena for public discussions and debate contribute to a renewed legitimization of the library as space and place, and if it can it provide a new visibility and a new way to promote libraries in a digital age.*

**Keywords:** Public libraries, Public sphere, Meeting places, Democratic arenas

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### **Introduction**

Norwegian Public Libraries have taken what can be called a social turn, changing focus from collections to connections. Where the libraries traditionally have been focusing on the maintenance of sustainable library collections, they have shifted towards a focus on shared learning, knowledge sharing, knowledge creation and cultural experiences (Audunson & Aabø, 2013). This shift towards a more social public library has been going on for some time, with an increasing focus on activities such as book readings, lectures, courses, workshops and so on. However, in Norway the more drastic changes happened as a result of a change in the Norwegian Library Act (Folkebibliotekloven, 1986) in January 2014, stating that the libraries should be more active disseminators as well as independent meeting places and arenas for public conversations and debate. The new mission was followed through by a substantial amount of easy accessible arena development funds from The Norwegian National Library.

The change in The Library Act has created a strong focus on specific tasks and activities in the Norwegian Public Libraries, forcing a change from mainly making books and other media available, to active dissemination, activities and happenings. These tasks are not necessarily new for the public libraries, as events in the library space has been going on for a long time. Still, the amount of the activities targeting all library users has increased immensely in the last few years. This creates a different working environment for the librarians, with change in work patterns, and the need for new skills and competence. At the same time, the activities might create a renewed visibility for libraries, challenging the traditional view on libraries and their purpose. It may in other words create a room for the libraries to legitimize and promote themselves in a new manner. This paper will reflect on whether the role of Norwegian Public Libraries as meeting place and arena for public discussions and debate contribute to a renewed legitimization of the library as space and place, and if it can it provide a new visibility and a new way to promote libraries in a digital age.

An important backdrop is the digital and global modern society, which provides a new role for the libraries related to the public sphere. The public sphere can be defined as an arena between the private sphere, the market and the state where public matters are discussed. The public is a part of societal life, which is open, in principle for anyone, and not closed or private. It is constituted by independent members of the populace. Agreement is reached through deliberation, with participants committed to the value of the better argument (Kalleberg, 2015).

The modern society challenges the public sphere, and at the same time brings new possibilities for participating. Digitalization can have a positive effect on participation in the public sphere by facilitating access and lowering the threshold for participation. The extensive access to knowledge and information can also have a democratizing effect (Jakobsen, 2016). Digital platforms makes it easier for everyone to express himself or herself, and strengthens democracy by increasing participation in political debates. Digital platforms can also make online participation from the public possible in cases of community interest, having both a democratic and deliberative effect (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2013). On the other hand, the digital society challenges the public sphere through the growth of the informational state and the transformation of power from the citizen to the state (Braman, 2006), as well as social organizations leading to democratic infrastructures being undermined (Tranvik & Selle, 2003). The digital society creates challenges related to fake news, surveillance and reduces privacy, in addition to fragmentation and echo chambers. Additional challenges is that a few giant digital companies has gained a high degree of control over the access to the public sphere (Jakobsen, 2016).

Public libraries are often seen as a possible counterbalance to the negative consequences of digitalization on the society and the public sphere, by having the power to establish meeting places and public spaces for deliberation (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010; Alstad, 2003; Audunson, 2005; Buschman & Warner, 2016; Frederiksen, 2015; Johansson, 2004; Newman, 2007).

### **A social library – challenges and changes**

The practical meaning of public libraries taking a social turn is that they have changed character, where there are conversations and talking going on, and where silence to a lesser degree is a valued virtue. The change is not just present in the way people interact in the library, it is also often shown in the way the library space is shaped, where updated interior design gives room for social interaction and events. The most important change is thus visible in the myriad of activities going on in the library space. To name a few there are book readings and interviews with authors, concerts and interviews with musicians, theatrical plays, clowning, films, storytelling, debates on various subjects, language cafes, and game nights (board games as well as data). There are workshop and courses on different topics such as music and composition, handicraft, drawing, genealogy, use of computers, programming and so on. There are also lectures on topics as for example literature, history, science, art, feminism, environment, racism, religion, family, sports, data and technology.

The activities are part of a policy of arena development stated in National Library Strategy 2015-2018 (Kulturdepartementet, 2015), containing specific measures for developing the public libraries as arenas for debate and learning, as well as meeting places and mediating institutions. The strategy was followed through by an extensive sum of easy accessible project funds, where libraries could apply for funding for activities in the libraries as well as equipment for the library space to become more suitable arenas for these activities (chair, microphones, stage lights and so on). The strategy period ended last year, but funds have been extended also to this year, as it has been announced Year of the Book. In total The Norwegian National Library has granted 57 million NOK in arena development funds. Including this year's funds, the total sum granted is 100 million NOK. The investment seems to be paying off, as a fresh survey<sup>1</sup> shows that 54% of the inhabitants report to have used the libraries last year, which are historically high numbers. Of the library users 36 % reports to have been attending meetings, performances, courses, debates and similar activities, a clear increase from 23% in 2015.

At the same time, the new services and tasks challenges the libraries on different levels. First of all there is a need for renewed competence for library staff, as the average workday for most of them has changed. The activities demands skills in programming of events, as well as professional public appearances as hosts for the events. The head of libraries are also given a new role as editor towards what events to open up for in the library space. As an arena promoting freedom of speech, what voices should the libraries allow to be heard in the library space? Are there some voices they should chose not to give room because they represent more extremist views? Secondly, social gatherings and events are rarely quiet activities. For the people coming to the library looking for a space to read or learn, it can be a disappointment if there is no room for these activities. Especially the smaller libraries can find it challenging to be both a quiet and a social arena. And thirdly, there has been some discussions within the library sector on whether the libraries are moving to far away from their traditional mission as promotors of literature and knowledge, and to much towards the social library, creating a more featureless institution.

### **Intentions with the change in The Library Act**

So why this change in The Library Act, stating that public libraries shall be independent meeting places and arenas for public conversations and debates? The purpose is to make visible the role of public libraries as meeting places and cultural arenas, and reflecting their responsibility as active communicators of knowledge and culture. The public libraries shall be a place for all citizen, regardless of political views, religion and social belonging. The independence of the public libraries is an important aspect in fulfilling the function as a democratic arena. This aspect contributes to fulfilling the right to freedom of speech, and secures the facilitation of an open and enlightened public conversation (Kulturdepartementet, 2013). The revision of the library legislation is also one way that the Norwegian authorities live up to the infrastructural obligation in §100 in the Norwegian constitution (Grunnloven, 1814) concerning freedom of expression.

The change in The Library Act relates to the public sphere, and two different dimensions with the public are implemented in the new part of the law. One of the dimensions of the public relates to the public library as an arena for the reasoning process of deliberation, formulated in the act as “an arena for public conversation and debate.” This dimension is often linked to the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas and his theory on the public sphere. The other dimension of the public implemented in the Library Act, is related to the public library as physical place and a meeting place. This dimension can be linked among others to the sociologist Richard Sennett and his theory on the public as “a public realm” (Sennett, 2010), as well as the concept of “the third place” presented by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg (Oldenburg, 1989). In the following chapters, these links will be further outlined.

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<sup>1</sup> Prefomed by Nordstat for The Norwegian National Library

## **Public libraries and deliberative processes**

The first dimension of the public sphere implemented in the new part of the law, is related to democratic processes in the public libraries. The Library Act (Folkebibliotekloven, 1986) states that the public libraries shall be arenas for a public conversation and debate, and by that secure the freedom of expression and facilitate an open and enlightened conversation. (Kulturdepartementet, 2013) This dimension is often linked to the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas and his concept of The Public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1997). Habermas stresses the importance of deliberation, a reasoning process that consists of measuring and exploring all angles of a case against each other carefully in an open and critical discussion of a topic. The purpose of deliberation is to develop a public opinion, gaining agreement between opposing interests and preferences. Public opinion on political and moral issues is created through deliberations, valuing the best argument regardless of status and resources. Legislative and governmental activities should principally be based on this opinion (Habermas, 1962/1997).

The objective with these processes is to achieve a deliberative democracy where the democratic dialogue is central as it is based on a network of regulative negotiation processes and a myriad of different forms of argumentation, including pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses. (Habermas, 1994). A basic principle in democratic deliberation is that all citizens has equal access to participate. No dominating relationships shall apply, and there shall free access to the debate. This principle is criticised by Fraser (Fraser, 1992), a critique later embraced by Habermas. Fraser sees the public as a myriad of competing publics instead of just the one. She argues that members of subordinate social groups creates their own alternative publics. Especially multicultural and egalitarian societies has this plural character of several public arenas where the contestants represent groups of different rhetoric and values (Fraser, 1992).

The library is claimed to have a key role for conversation, inclusion and democracy (Buschman & Warner, 2016). Public libraries have always had a democratic function by giving equal access to knowledge and information for everyone. By the change in The Library Act the library has expanded its key role regarding democracy by facilitating actual democratic processes. In the library space, free expression and democratic conversations can take place. By facilitating discussion and discourse, and by being open to everyone, the libraries can be a public place in the Habermasian sense. Public Libraries can be physical and psychological spaces for public discourse and contribute to reconstructing political and social trust (Alstad, 2003). In the fragmented, modern society of many different publics (Fraser, 1992), the libraries can establish communication between different publics and the more general public, contributing to the voices of these publics being heard and integrated in the broader public, and by that prohibit the development of parallel publics (Audunson, 2017).

## **Public libraries as meeting places**

The second dimension of the public sphere implemented in new part of the law, is related to the library as a meeting place and a physical arena. The Library Act (Folkebibliotekloven, 1986) states that public libraries shall be independent meeting places. The independence of the libraries is important for fulfilling the function as a democratic arena, a place for all citizens, independent of political views, religion and social background (Kulturdepartementet, 2013). This dimension by the public can be linked to two sociologist and their more or less contradicting views on the public as a place, namely Richard Sennett and “the public realm” and Ray Oldenburg and “the third place”.

Richard Sennett defines the public realm simply as a place where strangers meet (Sennett, 2002). According to Sennett, the difference between the public and the private lay in the degree of acquaintance a person or group of persons have to each other. In the private realm, as in a family, there is good and close acquaintance to the others, whereas in the public realm, there is not such an acquaintance (Sennett, 2010). The public realm is a place, traditionally defined by physical boundaries and staged in an urban context. It is a place where we primarily meet people not familiar to us, or knows to us just as a category, ruled by norms for behaviour between strangers. The most

important fact is what happens in the realm, which are activities based on the fact that it is a gathering of strangers. These activities does not or cannot as well happen elsewhere, or in any other way. They make it possible for people to extend their fixed role in the social order and achieve individual development in an anonymous and impersonal setting. «In public, people can discuss and debate with people who may not share the same assumptions or the same interests. Democratic governments depends on such exchange between strangers» (Sennett, 2010, p. 261).

The dimension of the public as a meeting place is also related to Ray Oldenburg and his concept of “The third place.” (Oldenburg, 1989) While “the first place” is the home and the family, and “the second place” is the workplace, the third place represents a public place to relax, where you meet familiar faces and get new acquaintances. A third place anchors society life, and simplifies and creates a broader and more creative interaction. According to Oldenburg third places are important by peoples attachment to the actual place, and as a place to meet people we know. Oldenburg stresses the importance of such informal public spaces for a functioning civil society, for democracy and for participation. (Oldenburg, 1989)

In relation to public libraries, Sennett and Oldenburg represents two similar but different views on the meeting place concept. Both Sennett and Oldenburg focuses on the importance of actual meeting places, and also on the physical space and place that constitutes the realm or the third place. They both agree on the necessity of actual places for people to meet in public, for conversations and discussions, and the importance this has for democracy. Sennett stresses the importance of people meeting in the realm to be strangers, an element that might be stronger in urban communities and urban libraries. Oldenburg on the other hand, sees the necessity of the third place to be a place to meet people you know, an element that might be best suitable in smaller communities and rural libraries. Both elements are present in all libraries, but the balance might differ in regard to the characteristics of the community.

Research within Library- and Information science show that the public library can operate as nodes for recovering social relations and support people in different stages of life (Frederiksen, 2015). The library is one of few remaining low-intensive meeting places, where people are exposed to values and interests unlike their own (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø et al., 2010; Audunson, 2005). The opposite of low intensive meeting places is high intensive ones, where we are exposed to values and interest that correspond with our own. The libraries are used both for low intensive and high intensive meetings, and seems to be a safe space for being exposed to the complexity of the digital and multicultural society (Aabø et al 2010). The library can establish arenas for people not participating in the dominating public, and be a meeting place where different publics become visible for each other and can communicate. Each separate public is a high intensive meeting place, whereas the arenas where they become visible for each other and communicate are low intensive (Audunson, 2005).

### **Towards a new visibility and legitimization of public libraries?**

The new role of Norwegian Public Libraries as meeting place and arena for public discussions and debate has changes the public libraries into far more social places, linked to the library as a public sphere and as facilitators of democratic processes. The change in the Norwegian Library Act has underlined the necessity of the physical place and space of the public library, in the sense of a meeting place as in Sennett’s concept of The Public realm and/ or that of Oldenburg’s Third Place. The libraries have also been given a specific task as promoters and facilitators of democratic processes, such as the reasoning process of deliberation in the Habermasian sense of the public sphere. But can the new role contribute to a renewed legitimization of the library as space and place? - And can this provide a new visibility and a new way to promote libraries in a digital age?

Theories in the public sphere brings a possible solution to a question that the public libraries face, a question vitalised by the digital and global society, namely the purpose of the library (Widdersheim, 2015). Library critics often use the massive excess to knowledge through Internet and specifically through Google as an argument for the redundancy of library services and library space, as well as the

need of libraries as knowledge providers. Digitalization and google has for sure facilitated access to knowledge and information, and technology has made the maintenance of the library collections easier. (Audunson & Aabø, 2013) At the same time, the digital society comes with negative consequences like fake news and echo chambers, bringing the need for libraries to act as possible counterbalance by their function as meeting places and democratic arena. (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010; Alstad, 2003; Audunson, 2005; Buschman & Warner, 2016; Frederiksen, 2015; Johansson, 2004; Newman, 2007) To define the libraries' role as a meeting place in a multicultural and digital time revitalizes how important the libraries is as a physical space and place and can contribute to equip the libraries with a new and vital argument for their very existence (Audunson, 2005).

Theories on the field of Library and Information science (LIS) legitimate the library as having an important effect on democracy. The library is one of the few remaining low-intensive meeting places, where people are exposed to values and interests unlike their own (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø et al., 2010; Audunson, 2005). The library is claimed to have a key role for conversation, inclusion and democracy (Buschman & Warner, 2016). Public Libraries can be physical and psychological spaces for public discourse and contribute to reconstructing political and social trust (Alstad, 2003), for example by sustaining communication between different types of publics (Fraser, 1992), and operating as nodes for recovering social relations and support people in different stages of life (Frederiksen, 2015).

Most of the research and writings on libraries as institutions promoting democracy can however be said to be normative and to a little degree empirically documented (Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016; Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2013). The result is that "Public libraries continue to rely upon assertions and rhetorical claims when seeking support through the political process rather than bringing forth evidence or data to make the case for their democratic contributions and for the increasing level of support granted to these contributions" (Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2013, p. 369). There is thus a need for more research on the links between public libraries and public spheres, as well as the democratic role of the libraries. Research is also needed to consider whether the social events and activities in the libraries functions according to their intentions.

Despite the need for research, the change in the Norwegian public libraries is real. The expanded purpose of the libraries stated in The Library Act in combination with state funds for arena development, has provided renewed conditions and broaden up the space in which the libraries operate. The original mission statement to promote the spread of information, education and other cultural activities has served us well (Kulturdepartementet, 2013), and still do. The revised version of the mission statement including the role as independent meeting place and arena for public discussions and debate becomes a new layer of legitimation on top of the traditional one. The new mission brings a lot of potential for actualizing the public libraries by the very same digital societal factors that library critics use to argue for their redundancy. The libraries has become more social arenas, with a myriad of events and activities going on in the library space, and with renewed design and equipment to fit the arena mission. The extensive services with meetings, performances, courses, debates and other activities brings possibilities for the libraries to promote themselves as vital and visual social institutions and as cultural arenas, as well as arguing for the need for these activities in a digital time.

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