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Community, conflict and neutrality – a Scandinavian perspective on public library research

Sunniva Evjen

Abstract

As Scandinavian public libraries have developed and adapted to societal and technological changes over the past 15 years, their role has become increasingly complex. On the one hand, libraries are becoming important community hubs with extensive outreach and programming. The COVID-19 lockdown showed clearly how important physical library space is for many visitors, especially children, young people and senior citizens. On the other hand, an increasing level of conflict and tension has arisen, as political divides have found their way into libraries. Scandinavian public library research reflects these issues, and providing increased understanding of the complex role of the library in changing times seems more important than ever. Also, as Scandinavian public library research is closely connected to librarianship as a field of practice, scholars aim to provide practitioners with both knowledge and tools to develop their practice further.

Keywords

public libraries, community building, neutrality

⇒ Titel, Lead und Schlüsselwörter auf Deutsch am Schluss des Artikels

⇒ Titre, chapeau et mots-clés se trouvent en français à la fin de l'article

⇒ Titolo, riassunto e parole chiave in italiano alla fine dell'articolo

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Introduction

Scandinavian countries are celebrated for their equal, peaceful welfare societies, where some of the world's highest levels of trust[1] can be found. In the field of librarianship, they are known for extensive library networks, a high level of service and public spending, and even library architecture (Reuben 2019). But what does library and information science (LIS) research tell us about how Scandinavian public libraries operate, their challenges, impact on society and their ever-evolving role?

20 years ago, Norwegian professor Ragnar Audunson published the article *The public library as a meeting-place in a multicultural and digital context: The necessity of low-intensive meeting-places* (2005). Here, he argued that common arenas in modern society were slowly disappearing, and people were consequently exposed to people different from themselves to a lesser extent than previously. A more compartmentalised society could lead to growing division and eroding trust, as for instance Robert Putnam described in his seminal work *Bowling Alone* (2000). Public libraries, Audunson (2005) maintained, remained one of the few arenas where a variety of people could still come and be part of an open, accessible space. In the paper, Audunson (2005) introduces the concepts of high and low-intensive meeting places. This dichotomy is linked to social capital and describes two different types of arenas where people interact. Highmeeting places' (2005) are where we primarily engage, often reflecting our value system, whether it is a professional setting, a school or university, or different kinds of organisational activities, like a political party, a religious congregation or other places where we meet and connect with like-minded people, so-called «bonding social capital». «Low intensive meeting places», on the other hand, are arenas where we are exposed to people different from ourselves, are exposed to people who have different interests, values or priorities. Leaning on Putnam (2000), Audunson (2005) held that such arenas are vital for *bridging social capital*, which refers to connections between individuals or groups that are different in some way, for instance in terms of religion, cultural background, age, etc. Audunson argued that we now have fewer low-intensive arenas, and that this is concerning as it results in a more divided, less connected society. Public libraries, he argued, have the potential of functioning as low intensive meeting places, as they are open to all, widely used and widespread.

The idea of public libraries as low intensive meeting places was further examined through the research project PLACE[2] (2015). From 2006 to 2012, multiple studies were conducted by Audunson and his colleagues, enabling them to determine that public libraries did function as low-intensive meeting places, in addition to containing other social and community aspects. A survey showed that library patrons to a large degree believed that they did observe people who were «different to themselves» while at the library, and many also reported having spoken with strangers there. The survey data further showed that the library also provided an arena that was part of the public sphere, in a more Habermasian sense, a place in which ideas are developed, knowledge sought and ideas discussed (Audunson et al 2010). A later study, this time using observational data and interviews with library patrons, showed a more nuanced picture of how the different aspects of the public library as a meeting place played out (Aabø & Audunson 2012). For instance, they found that many patrons' library use includes both high-intensive and low-intensive aspects, like meeting friends, but also being exposed to «otherness». Some came to the library to find literature about political issues, but also engaged in private interests. They also observed that «few community arenas exist with participation from such a variety of the local inhabitants» (2012, p. 148).

[1] See for example World survey data https://ourworldindata.org/trust

[2] PLACE: Public Libraries – Arenas for Citizenship: An Investigation of the Public Library as a Meeting Place in a Digital and Multicultural Context (2007-2012)

During the same period, in Denmark, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Jochumsen & Skot-Hansen revised a model for public library practice entitled the Four-Space Model (2012). Originally developed for Danish public libraries to adapt to the changing societal needs in the knowledge society, the model soon became widely adopted in Nordic libraries for spatial redesign, partnership development, and policy planning, serving as a framework for libraries to enhance their democratic role. In short, the model emphasises four goals: experience, involvement, empowerment, and innovation, and outlines the corresponding spaces of inspiration, learning, meeting, and performative spaces. These spaces aim to transform libraries from passive collections to active centres for community engagement. In their paper (2012), the authors debate whether the model encourages creativity or risks homogenizing library practices. It concludes by advocating for the model as a tool for discussion and development, aligning traditional library values with modern societal demands.

During this period, the «tagline» *from collections to connections* (Audunson & Aabø 2013) became widespread within libraries, archives, and museums. Especially public libraries as public sphere arenas, physical spaces and community hubs gained scholarly interest from researchers. An important backdrop for this research development relates to how Scandinavian library policies developed in the 2010s. In 2013, a revised Norwegian public library act was passed which stipulated that public libraries should be «an independent meeting place, and an arena for public conversation and debate» (Folkebiblioteksloven 2013). This led to a vast increase in events and activity in public libraries. Similary, in Sweden, a new library act was passed in 2013, which stated that (publicly funded) libraries «should work for the development of democratic society by contributing to knowledge building and the free and open formation of opinion» (Bibliotekslagen 2013). Making this clear connection between libraries, democracy and the public sphere, both librarians and researchers perceived that libraries' political and societal role was strengthened and legitimised. Söderholm and Nolin (2015) describe this development as «the social turn», by which they mean the prevailing social perspective of western public library development.

Audunson and several Scandinavian and European colleagues developed a new project further investigating how libraries – but also archives and museums – functioned as public sphere arenas (Cristin, 2017), entitled ALMPUB - The ALM-field, Digitilization and the Public Sphere. Addressing Jaeger et al (2013), who claimed that the assumption that libraries' contribution to democracy lacks empirical evidence, the project collected different types of empirical data to investigate if this contribution exists.

By means of a survey, and a number of cases, the varied role of libraries[3] was elicited further, in the context of reading circles (Fagerlid 2020), or as a sanctuary for pre-teens (Vold & Evjen 2020). These case studies – though small-scale – Illustrate the library's role as a physical space in the community. The survey data indicate that while digital library use is important, physical library visits remain the most important point of contact for library users. Library professionals acknowledge that they have adapted to the so-called «social turn» (Söderholm & Nolin 2016). The digital shift has also brought about a renewed focus on library services; however, for the most part, aside from e-book lending, library services related to digital competence and inclusion are based on physical encounters between librarians and users in the library, like computer classes, helping users with devices, and helping them with e-government and e-banking (Audunson, Hobohm & Tóth 2020b). As the editors comment in the introductory chapter of the project anthology (Audunson et al 2020):

> The users frequenting a library, an archive, or a museum do not frequent an abstract «meeting place.» They go for an experience, to find a book, to work, to relax, to search for a piece of information they need in their everyday lives, to read newspapers, to listen to an author or to be with others – in short, they visit the library to satisfy individual needs and interests. The library's role as a democratic community-building meeting place is a side effect. Nevertheless, in our qualitative observations, as well as our survey, we find that libraries are important places for a variety of meetings and encounters.

[3] The studies also investigated the role of archives and museums.

War and refugee crisis

As an open institution, free for the public, the library is constantly affected by societal and demographic changes. The Syrian War and the resulting refugee crisis presented European countries with an increased need for integration and cross-cultural understanding. In many countries, not least Sweden, which welcomed 165000 refugees in 2015 alone (European Economic and Social Committee 2015), public libraries experienced a surge of patrons with an immigrant or refugee background. At their own initiative, or in collaboration with volunteer organisation, libraries met this challenge by acquiring books and media adapted to refugee needs, and arranging language-learning activities like language cafés and other activities aimed at welcoming and integrating newcomers in local communities.

While the services seemed timely, they developed solely on the initiative of librarians, and while the services were welcomed, the outcomes or impact needed study. Johnston undertook an extensive study of library-run language cafés in Sweden and Norway, trying to elicit their potential in terms of language learning, (political) integration, and social connectivity (Johnston 2016; Johnston 2017, Johnston & Audunson 2017; Johnston 2018). Johnston found that language cafés were for many newcomers one of few arenas where they interacted with locals – and vice versa (2016; 2017). The notion of the library as an important arena for trusting interactions between members of minority and majority population echoes the earlier work of Vårheim (2014), who found that participants in a compulsory introductory program for newcomers experienced the library setting as important and valuable.

The vast increase in immigration and refugees was also the background for Olsson Dahlquist (2019), who studied how public libraries' democratic and educational missions were affected by changes related to digitalisation. More specifically, she examined three libraries, and their activities aimed at increasing individuals' digital skills, information literacy and participation in society. She found that libraries play an important role in expanding access to media, information literacy, and digital resources, helping individuals and communities engage more effectively, not least newcomers. Her findings resonate with those of Audunson et al (2020b). By doing so, libraries support active citizenship through everyday activities involving information – and most importantly in the physical library space. In her dissertation, Dahlquist stresses the complexity of libraries' democratic role, and how societal shifts and local community needs affect library practices.

At the time, a much-debated topic was paperless migrants, an especially vulnerable group lacking the status of a formal asylum seeker, and with few actual rights. Many libraries all over Europe provided the same basic services for this particularly marginalised group. A study with a Scandinavian perspective discusses Malmö (Sweden) as a significant location for understanding contemporary migration and rights practices (Lundberg & Dahlquist 2018). In 2013, Malmö's Cultural Committee allowed irregular migrants including rejected asylum seekers access to library services, reflecting the library's mission to provide free and equal access to information, especially for vulnerable groups. The article explores how Scandinavian city libraries, like those in Malmö, Copenhagen, and Oslo, enacted sanctuary initiatives as a way to claim rights and contest state deportation regimes. These initiatives illustrated new forms of citizenship and human rights practices within public spheres, highlighting libraries as spaces that foster community, equality, and democracy for those lacking the actual status as citizens. The study investigated how these practices emerged amid increasingly restrictive migration control measures and emphasised the role of libraries in promoting inclusivity and social cohesion. By means of case studies and surveys with librarians, the research examined the implications of library services for irregular migrants, exploring the balance between providing access to rights and protecting from police detection. The article concludes that local sanctuary initiatives can challenge sovereign migration control, suggesting that public institutions play a critical role in developing alternative forms of citizenship and human rights in a transnational world.

After Russia's attack on Ukraine and the resulting war, the issues of the role of the library in integration and their programming and outreach to immigrants and refugees have only increased in relevance. Scandinavian and Nordic research on this topic have also extended into an international research network, PubLIB[4], which is dedicated to this particular research topic (see for example Johnston et al 2025).

[4] https://sites.google.com/view/publib-for-refugees/home

In the aftermath of crisis

While wars and international conflicts have led libraries to develop new services for refugees and asylum seekers, the 2020-COVID pandemic came with new challenges. During the first stage of the first lockdown of 2020, Scandinavian countries – and in turn, also their libraries – handled the situation somewhat differently. While Norway and Denmark for the most part closed down during this period, Sweden had a more open approach. The first Norwegian lock-down, in which schools, kindergartens, and libraries were physically unavailable to children, caused broad concern among healthcare workers, teachers, social workers and so on. Vulnerable children and young people became even more vulnerable when they lost their usual havens away from an unsafe home environment. A Danish study also showed how Danish digital library services – which, of course, were still available to the public – were mainly used by patrons with a higher socio-economic status. The results of this study indicate a digital divide between adult users that also affected children's access to library services. It also indicates that the physical library space is very important, perhaps especially for children whose parents are less able to navigate libraries' digital services. The need for open library spaces became evident during this period, and as the second lockdown approached during winter of 2020 and 2021, Oslo's city councillor stressed that libraries would stay open as long as it was considered safe for the library staff (Lauritsen 2020).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, a number of colleagues from OsloMet and I decided to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted the societal mission of libraries in Norway, focusing on their ability to remain open and provide cultural experiences and reliable information. Based on a survey of 843 library workers across public, academic, special, and school libraries conducted between June and August 2020, our study analyses both quantitative and qualitative data to understand how libraries managed the crisis. The findings revealed that while digital services showed potential, the closure of physical libraries significantly affected the libraries' ability to fulfil their social mission. The study highlights the need for sector-wide leadership and crisis management plans that incorporate libraries as part of society's democratic infrastructure. Our findings also indicated a lack of structures and plans for crisis situations. The article calls for libraries' roles and missions to be integrated into crisis management strategies to better navigate future crises.

While the work of integrating libraries into national crisis' response stalled in Norway, the situation in Sweden has been somewhat different. Libraries are incorporated into the country's crisis response, perhaps most notably in the battle against disinformation. Rydbeck (2024) explains how Swedish library policy has been greatly influenced by «community librarianship» over the past decade which emphasises the library's democratic and social role. However, the national library strategy highlights the significance of libraries in times of crisis and war, emphasizing the importance of access to evidence-based information, and the need for individuals to seek, evaluate, and use information. Here, libraries play an important role in enhancing public competence. Carlsson & Engström (2025) analyse policy documents to understand how the democratic mission of public libraries is understood. They find that while libraries are not understood as vital institutions in times of crises, key actors in the library field play a part in national contingency plans. The authors argue that while taking on a role in crisis response could increase libraries' legitimacy in relations to government, this role could potentially prove more problematic to library users, should libraries be construed as information agencies on behalf of the authorities.

These publications show differences in the political considerations concerning the role of the library, both in general, but also in particular related to crisis and crisis management. While Norwegian public library legislation ambitiously considers libraries as part of a functioning public sphere, their place in municipal management is somewhat fragile and limited. As Evjen et al (2021) showed, this vulnerability becomes evident when crises occur. As Rydbeck shows (2024), the Swedish strategy more clearly assigns libraries a role in crisis management. Carlsson & Engström (2025), on the other hand, points to the potential duality of taking – or being assigned – a role in crises response.

Agree to disagree?

As mentioned, Scandinavian library practice and legislation evolved during the 2010s. The specific wording in the Norwegian preamble required public libraries to be «independent meeting places, and arenas for public debate and discussion» (Folkebiblioteksloven 2013). Active dissemination was also added to the list of

library responsibilities. The increase in Norwegian library programming, dissemination and activities was noticeable in the years that followed. And while most activities and events happened peacefully, there was nevertheless an increase in conflict level concerning who and what was given «a stage» in Norwegian public libraries. Especially debated was the acceptance of right-wing voices into the library. While there are many examples, the controversy concerning the Norwegian anti-Islamic group SIAN[5] is perhaps the most noticeable. Larsen (2024) describes some of these controversies, and highlights the challenges faced by library directors in managing their spaces as civil public spheres. In the Norwegian town of Kristiansand, the library director rejected the group's request to host a meeting in the library, because the «purpose of the organization and the format of the proposed information meeting, conflicts with the values underlining the work of Kristiansand municipality and public library» (Sellevold, 2014). SIAN complained to the municipality, and the city council decided that the library director could not deny the group access on those grounds. When the director invited them back for a panel discussion on religion and freedom of speech, the SIAN group was still not satisfied, as they considered it their right to host their own meeting at the library. Eventually, a complaint was sent to the Norwegian parliamentary ombudsman[6]. The case went back and forth, and after three years and three appeals, the ombudsman concluded that the library should reassess its decision, noting that simply rejecting a request because the organization's values conflict with those of the municipality and library was not acceptable. Furthermore, the ombudsman clarified that the library has the authority to shape the format of a meeting and can refuse applications for gatherings that do not effectively foster public discussion and debate.

The SIAN case is one of several similar cases that underscore tensions between maintaining public libraries as neutral spaces and the pressure to exclude groups perceived as promoting hate speech or controversial opinions. Larsen's paper demonstrates how library directors navigate complex boundary struggles as well as considerations concerning security and inclusivity while upholding free speech principles. Larsen (2024) suggests that programming debates with diverse viewpoints and moderating discussions could be effective strategies. However, the role of libraries as neutral, inclusive institutions remains contentious, with ongoing debates about managing these spaces in line with their societal mission. Scandinavian public libraries are currently balancing their role as neutral civic spaces with the need to address contemporary social issues, ensuring that citizens have access to a variety of literature and viewpoints – even those that are controversial. This ongoing debate reflects broader societal tensions around identity politics and the role of public institutions in promoting democratic values.

As a consequence of ongoing tensions, Swedish library researchers have introduced the perspectives of Chantal Mouffe (2008) to lend a new perspective to studies of libraries as arenas where conflict arises. Jürgen Habermas champions deliberative democracy, where rational discourse and consensus-building are central, which for many has become synonymous with the understanding of public sphere theory (Webster, 2014). He envisions the public sphere as a space where individuals engage in reasoned debate, aiming for consensus through communicative action. Mouffe (2008) critiques the Habermasian focus on consensus, arguing that it overlooks the inherent nature of power and conflict in politics. Her concept of «agonistic pluralism» acknowledges that societal disagreements are often irreconcilable and rooted in deep-seated values and identities. She contends that democracy should embrace these conflicts rather than suppress them in the pursuit of consensus.

To illustrate how these theoretical standpoints have been used and discussed by public library researchers, some examples are necessary. Engström (2022) explores the need for a renewed understanding of democracy and democratic practice in public libraries. The liberal democracy ideal, in which consensus is the goal, is not only unrealistic, but also undesirable when anti-democratic tendencies gain traction. Engström stresses the relevance of Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism in a library context, in which full inclusion and accessibility are unrealised ideals (2022). Carlsson, Hanell and Hansson (2022) explore the increasing level of tension in some Swedish municipalities, where the right-wing party Sverigedemokratarna (SD)[7] has

[5] SIAN- Stop Islamification of Norway

[6] The Parliamentary Ombud investigates complaints from citizens who believe they have suffered an injustice or an error on the part of the public administration.

[7] The Swedish Democrats (SD) (author's translation)

gained ground, challenging the representative liberal democratic model, advocating for a democracy centred on nationalism and the majority's will, potentially undermining individual rights. In their analysis, the authors also apply Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism, and the study views libraries as arenas for debate and conflict resolution, essential in a politically turbulent landscape. The study, based on surveys and interviews with library managers in southern Sweden, shows that while political pressure is uncommon, it often arises around issues of cultural diversity. Libraries respond by developing professional policies and sometimes avoiding certain activities. The findings highlight the need for libraries to actively maintain their democratic role and adapt to changing political climates to continue facilitating open dialogue and ideological debate.

Following up, Carlsson, Engström and Hanell challenge the idea of the library as a low-intensive meeting place in their paper «Revisiting the notion of the public library as a meeting place: challenges to the mission of promoting democracy in times of political turmoil» (2023). Their argument is linked to the right-wing turn in political discourse – in Sweden particularly, though the trend is international – and the multicultural ideals on which Audunson's argument is based are now considered a threat by nationalists. They observe that, «public libraries in Sweden have become politicised in a new, more explicit way», and in their paper they explore how public librarians understand and perform the democratic mission of public libraries in times of political and social turbulence. Two perspectives on democracy are represented: social-liberal democracy, focusing on libraries as promoters of equality, and deliberative democracy, focusing on the library as a place for rational deliberation. Two professional dilemmas in particular present challenges to librarians: how to handle undemocratic voices and how to be a library for all. The authors argue that their findings show the benefit of applying a plural agonistic perspective for analyzing and strengthening the role of public libraries.

A different perspective is adopted by Koizumi and Larsen (2023) when they examine the role of public libraries in the Nordic societal model, focusing on libraries in Oslo, Tromsø, Stockholm, Aarhus, and Helsinki. They analyze how libraries facilitate democratic activities through book clubs, exhibitions, and political events, emphasizing neutrality and freedom of speech. The authors describe how library legislation in the Nordic countries has been revised to underscore the importance of libraries as democratic meeting spaces, reflecting the strong state support characteristic of the Nordic model. Their article highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by libraries in managing these democratic roles, particularly in balancing neutrality with the need to address societal issues. Through these activities and policies, Nordic libraries are portrayed as vital arenas for deliberative democracy, fostering social integration and public discourse in their communities. Koizumi and Larsen, however, note the dilemmas faced by both library directors and librarians who curate and manage the sometimes highly debated events.

Neutrality – an idea or an ideal?

Some years ago, the American LIS professor David R. Lankes introduced his idea of «new librarianship» (2011), by which he presented librarians in the centre of action, viewing them as «radical positive change agents», with the common objective to improve their communities.

A decade later, in 2021, Lankes and colleagues hosted an online «post-neutrality» symposium, in which researchers came together and discussed the issue of librarianship, activism and neutrality. Two of the Danish contributors, Mia Mathiasson and Henrik Jochumsen later summarised the discussions from the 2021 Post-Neutrality Librarianship Symposium (2023). In their paper, they challenge the traditional notion of neutrality in librarianship, emphasizing the need for libraries to actively engage with communities and societal issues. They identify two main dichotomies: neutrality versus post-neutrality, and passive versus active roles. During the symposium scholars debated whether libraries can be neutral while promoting social justice, inclusion, and empowerment. Participants argued for libraries as safe spaces for dialogue but also as proactive agents of change. The symposium highlighted the importance of relational competencies, self-reflexivity, and critical thinking for librarians, advocating for a nuanced understanding of neutrality as both a tool and obstacle. It calls for LIS education to prepare future librarians for complex ethical, social, and environmental challenges, stressing the need for collaboration and self-awareness in navigating post-neutrality librarianship.

Furthermore, the issue of neutrality – or indeed post-neutrality – has continued to puzzle both librarians and scholars in recent years period. A recent article by Nissen and Kann Rasmussen (2025) examines the concept of a public library «for all» and the associated conflicts surrounding neutrality in Norway and Denmark. The paper's premise is that «*for all*» is a core value for libraries, «expressed through the principle of free access to both materials and the physical library space for all citizens in society» (2025). As the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) states: materials, facilities and services must be «equally accessible to all users» with no discrimination due to «race, creed, gender or age» (IFLA, 1999). By means of a document study of library profession magazines over the course of a decade, the research identifies five different notions of «for all», highlighting the diverse interpretations of who is included. First, there is the neutrality notion, built on the premise that libraries should not take sides, but make different viewpoints available. The second notion is tied to the «meeting place» ideal, built on the premise that people need physical places to meet, and that this is a key offering from libraries to all groups. The third notion links to availability, in which equal access and variation are important elements. Fourth, the concept of equity highlights the needs of minorities and marginalised groups, and how libraries should aim to level out social differences. The fifth and final notion of «for all» is tied to how libraries should strengthen people's «disagreement competence», include different voices (even those that could cause offence), focus on freedom of speech and work against censorship. Utilizing the «What's the Problem Represented to be?» approach, the study reveals that both advocates and opponents of neutrality use «for all» in their argumentation, but with differing definitions. As Nissen & Kann-Rasmussen state «although *for all* is used as an argument by both advocates and opponents of the neutrality principle, there are different notions of *who* constitutes for all» (2025). The typology offers a new framework for understanding these conflicts, emphasizing the need to discuss the use of «for all» to foster nuanced dialogues about the democratic role of public libraries. The article suggests moving beyond debates about neutrality to focus on contexts and uses of «for all», thus enhancing discussions on libraries' democratic responsibilities. The authors especially stress how it can be fruitful to approach discussions related to «the library for all» with how «for all» is used, instead of *who* «for all» includes – or excludes.

As described in the section «Agree to disagree?», the level of conflict connected to libraries and neutrality in recent years has given new direction to Scandinavian public library research. While research cannot give simple answers to the complex questions arising from conflicts of a political or ideological nature, frameworks such as the one Elbrønd Nissen and Kann Rasmussen (2025) have provided can contribute to a better level of understanding as to why conflicts arise, based on our different considerations of what the library «for all» entails. Also, discussions such as those Mathisen and Jochumsen have engaged in can add to reflections concerning librarians' understanding of their complex role, and thus help drive librarianship forward.

The need for community remains

While the aforementioned PLACE-project (2015) represents an early exploration of the complexity of the physical library space in an urban context, a more recent Norwegian study by Golten (2022) investigates how librarians, users, politicians, and partners in two rural communities perceive libraries as meeting places and contributors to a sustainable public sphere. Using qualitative interviews, the study compares these libraries within their local contexts. It employs different theories and concepts, one example is Oldenburg's «third place» (1999). It refers to the places which are not our home (first places), work or school (second places), but arenas in between, where we spend time, interact with friends or community members, and are open and inclusive. Other theoretical perspectives include public realm concepts from Lofland and Sennett, and Audunson's high and low-intensive meeting place concept (2005), alongside Habermas' public sphere theory. Findings reveal that community demographics, history, and proximity to urban areas affect library roles as local public spheres. Libraries predominantly attract the elderly, women, and children, with young people and immigrants less involved. Event topics and timings influence attendance, enhancing social interactions mainly through informal gatherings around events. They partially align with third place theory but are too structured to fully match Oldenburg's concept, alternating between «low and high-intensive» meeting places. Sennett (2003) and Lofland's (1998) urban-focused public realm perspectives serves as an interesting backdrop to the empirical evidence for the very real need for meeting spaces in rural areas. Division and lack of social connection is not necessarily an urban problem, Golten finds. She also

observes that debate hosting is underutilised, revealing challenges in library autonomy and voice inclusion. Informants equally prioritise libraries as traditional and social arenas, valuing them for personal and communal benefits. There is a call for libraries to adapt and stay relevant in the digital era.

In the chapter «LAMs and Community», Johnston, Jochumsen and Edquist (2022) discuss the evolving role of libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) in fostering community connections and supporting democracy. They highlight the importance of LAMs as public sphere institutions that facilitate informed discourse and social interaction. The decline in civic engagement and social ties, as discussed by scholars like Robert Putnam and Judit Bodnár, poses challenges for LAMs in maintaining vibrant communities. These concerns resonate with those expressed by Audunson (2005) 20 years ago, but are updated, and include a broader perspective that goes beyond libraries, and includes archives and museums. The exploration of LAMs' shifting focus from collections to connecting people, encouraging meaningful engagement and community building is an important scholarly contribution to library research. This shift is illustrated through Charles Vogl's Inner Rings Principle, which describes various levels of community involvement and progression. Johnston, Jochumsen and Edquist (2022) adapt Vogl's principle to LAMs, showing how they support users, volunteers, and collaborators in deepening community connections and fostering dialogues. Overall, LAMs aim to create spaces for sharing stories and nurturing social cohesion amidst increasing social fragmentation.

In some ways, the community focus we find in this chapter – and in the research tradition dating back to Audunson's (2005) paper on libraries as meeting places – emphasises the opportunities found in public libraries, and indeed archives and museums. As previous sections demonstrate, Scandinavian library research has developed as the field of librarianship has grown more complex over the past 20 years and has managed to shed light on the current challenges and conflicts libraries face, for example related to neutrality. While these areas of library research especially point to the library space and institution, library researchers from each country pose different questions and consider libraries from their own perspectives, reflecting the differences within the Scandinavian context. The fact that Scandinavian library research is multifaceted is part of what strengthens both the field of research and practice.

Summing up

As demonstrated in this article, over the past 15 years, Scandinavian public libraries have strengthened their role as community spaces and have become more closely connected with democratic practices. They are to a large degree associated not only with reading and books, but with the social aspects surrounding literature and knowledge, even extending to integration and social connectedness. This role is – to some extent – reflected in national legislation, as in Norway and Sweden. Arguably, this has strengthened the societal role and mission of libraries, making them more relevant for a larger number of people, but it has also brought about new challenges, dilemmas and conflicts, especially connected to neutrality and the library as a democratic space.

Mirroring this development, Scandinavian library research has in turn set out to explore the evolving role of libraries connected to both democratic practices and community hub. This research is broad, aiming to build knowledge both about library use and the impact libraries have in society. In recent years, several researchers have tried to dig deeper into areas of tension and even conflict in the field of librarianship. While Scandinavian countries are much less troubled with culture war than others, these tensions do exist, and they bring new dilemmas to librarians. Particularly in Sweden, the political fronts have been harsh. While research cannot solve the issues themselves, it does bring new understanding of how conflict and tension can be handled or even reframed.

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Gemeinschaft, Konflikt und Neutralität – eine skandinavische Perspektive auf die Forschung im Bereich der öffentlichen Bibliotheken

Sunniva Evjen

Abstract

Da sich die skandinavischen öffentlichen Bibliotheken in den letzten 15 Jahren weiterentwickelt und an gesellschaftliche und technologische Veränderungen angepasst haben, ist ihre Rolle zunehmend komplexer geworden. Einerseits werden Bibliotheken zu wichtigen Gemeinschaftszentren mit umfangreichen Dienstleistungs- und Programmangeboten. Der COVID-19-Lockdown hat deutlich gezeigt, wie wichtig der physische Bibliotheksraum für viele Besucher ist, insbesondere für Kinder, Jugendliche und Senioren. Andererseits haben sich zunehmende Konflikte und Spannungen aufgebaut, da politische Spaltungen ihren Weg in die Bibliotheken gefunden haben. Die skandinavische Forschung zu öffentlichen Bibliotheken spiegelt diese Probleme wider, und ein besseres Verständnis der komplexen Rolle der Bibliothek in Zeiten des Wandels scheint wichtiger denn je. Da die skandinavische Forschung zu öffentlichen Bibliotheken eng mit dem Bibliothekswesen, dem Bereich der Praxis, verbunden ist, zielt sie darauf ab, Praktikern sowohl Wissen als auch Werkzeuge zur Weiterentwicklung ihrer Praxis an die Hand zu geben.

Schlüsselwörter

öffentliche Bibliotheken, Gemeinschaftsbildung, Neutralität, Öffentlichkeitsarbeit

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Communauté, conflit et neutralité – une perspective scandinave sur la recherche dans les bibliothèques publiques

Sunniva Evjen

Résumé

Au cours des 15 dernières années, les bibliothèques publiques scandinaves se sont développées et adaptées aux changements sociétaux et technologiques, ce qui a rendu leur rôle de plus en plus complexe. D'une part, les bibliothèques deviennent des centres communautaires importants, avec des activités de sensibilisation et des programmes étendus. La fermeture de nombreuses activités durant la pandémie COVID-19 a clairement montré l'importance de l'espace physique des bibliothèques pour de nombreux usagers, en particulier les enfants, les jeunes et les personnes âgées. D'autre part, un niveau croissant de conflits et de tensions s'est installé, les divisions politiques ayant fait leur apparition dans les bibliothèques. La recherche sur les bibliothèques publiques scandinaves reflète ces questions, et il semble plus important que jamais de mieux comprendre le rôle complexe des bibliothèques en cette période de changement. De plus, comme la recherche sur les bibliothèques publiques scandinaves est étroitement liée à la bibliothéconomie, le domaine de la pratique, elle vise à fournir aux praticiens à la fois les connaissances et les outils nécessaires pour développer davantage leur pratique.

Mots-clés

bibliothèques publiques, renforcement de la communauté, neutralité

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Comunità, conflitto e neutralità – una prospettiva scandinava sulla ricerca sulle biblioteche pubbliche

Sunniva Evjen

Riassunto

Negli ultimi 15 anni le biblioteche pubbliche scandinave si sono evolute e adattate ai cambiamenti sociali e tecnologici, rendendo il proprio ruolo sempre più complesso. Da un lato, le biblioteche stanno diventando centri comunitari importanti, con una vasta offerta di attività e programmi. Il lockdown dovuto al COVID-19 ha mostrato chiaramente quanto sia fondamentale lo spazio fisico della biblioteca per molti utenti, in particolare bambini, giovani e cittadini anziani.

Dall'altro lato, si è andato accumulando un crescente livello di conflitto e tensione, man mano che le divisioni politiche hanno fatto il loro ingresso anche nelle biblioteche. La ricerca sulle biblioteche pubbliche scandinave riflette queste problematiche; appare oggi più importante che mai aumentare la comprensione del ruolo complesso delle biblioteche in un'epoca di cambiamento. Inoltre, poiché la ricerca sulle biblioteche pubbliche scandinave è strettamente collegata alla professione bibliotecaria, essa mira a fornire ai professionisti sia conoscenze sia strumenti per sviluppare ulteriormente la propria pratica.

Parole chiave

biblioteche pubbliche, costruzione della comunità, neutralità

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