Is the established role of the public librarianship still valid, or will it have to be fundamentally revised due to the digital revolution?

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The last nearly two years I have had the opportunity of being president of the Norwegian library association. This has given me an opportunity to study to some extent present EU developments and policies. This definitely has influenced this contribution. It is quite evident for me that Norwegian policies and also global policies are to a large extent influenced by what is planned in the EU-system. The Information society as defined by commissioner Martin Bangemann as a main player in developing new strength in the european economic system means that there is in general an approach to the benefits of technological developments, which can be quite astonishing sometimes.

Is the established role of public libraries still valid?

The question in my presentation is rather concrete:

> *"Is the established role of public librarianship still valid, or will it have to be fundamentally revised due to the digital revolution?"*

We might ask: Who is really in a position to predict what will happen? We might at least agree on the following : Nobody (as far as I know) has really predicted the pace of the present development. In that context it is rather dangerous for anyone to take part in this sport of prediction.

Public libraries as political projects

UNESCO public library manifesto opens with "Freedom, progress and development in society for the individual are fundamental human values". It says further on that these values can only be fulfilled when well-informed citizens can take part in society and use their democratic rights. Public libraries are then put into this political context. When public libraries emerged in the United states this meant also some kind of grand influence world-wide. As you know the Norwegian organiser of this seminar, Ragnar Audunson made the thesis "Change processes in public librarianship" in 1996. In it he says:

> *"...public libraries in all developed countries up to now have had a common professional and ideological basis. It is more than an accident that the central actors in the creation of the modern Norwegian and Hungarian public libraries respectively - Haakon Nyhus and Szabo Ervin - both entered the stage and started their work at almost exactly the same time (around 1900). To a large extent their ideas on public librarianship were very much the same, and their sources of inspiration were also similar; i.e. the Anglo-American ideas on public librarianship."*

Audunson further on says:

"The fundamental idea of the modern public library system which has developed throughout this century, can be summed up in the following sentence : Promoting equal access to knowledge and culture by putting books and other kinds of documents at the free disposal of the public, thereby furthering values like meaning, participation in society, access to education and the cultural heritage regardless of economic means and social status and in the end a widening of democracy. Quality, not demand, as the basis for including documents in the library stock (although in practice many a library is just as much an entertainment centre as a centre of knowledge and culture), services free of charge, and pluralism in selection policy have throughout the whole century been central dogmas in the ideology of public librarianship." (1).

We can find many ways of saying the same things - but Audunson is here to the point in an excellent way:
- equal access meaning free of charge
- all kinds of material
- quality, not demand as selection principle

In fact the public library in this tradition was and still is a counter culture activity with regard to the former and present development of markets for educational and cultural goods. In other words - we do not need public libraries like the ones Audunson describe in order to promote educational and cultural progress in a society. But if you want all persons in the society to have the possibility of gaining access to this development, you need institutions like public libraries and some other mechanisms in society.

Based on Norwegian experience I would like to discuss some policy elements as they normally can be defined by mainstream politicians - without the special public library approach.

Political project: Wealth distribution policy

First and foremost the public library project can be considered an integrated part of a general policy for wealth distribution in society. Studies show that high-income groups use public libraries more than low-income groups. So we might say that this service even increases the imbalance of distribution of public goods in society. But this argument can also be used for public educational services in general. But when we consider free access libraries as main players on the arena for wealth distribution, we take into account that this is our only effective way of giving the possibility for wealth distribution in this field. All other alternatives as far as I can see, will mean that market mechanism will distribute in its own way. Then wealth distribution policy will in all aspects be the most powerful element in this respect.

Political project: Educational policy

Public libraries must also to a large extent be considered part of a total educational policy in a country. Public libraries can be supportive for educational activities at nearly all levels of the educational system. With the development of lifelong learning and distance learning concepts public libraries will be even more important as political instruments than in the former period.

Political project: Cultural policy

Public libraries can also be considered important elements in a national cultural policy. When a national language or a minority language is under pressure from world-languages (due to the global media revolution) public libraries can be developed into effective tools for distribution of texts and other artistic material in the native language.

Political project: Regional policy

Public libraries can also be used by society as one of the mechanisms for executing regional policies. A national public library law might say that there shall be a public library in all municipalities of the country. In that way you are able to secure for all citizens as part of a national regional policy some minimum services in this field.

Political project: Democratic access to information

Last but not least public libraries can be used in a systematic way in order to be the basic or one of the basic tools for giving all citizens access to important information about the society. This will meet the demand of securing a minimum of access both to local, regional and national public information which is a prerequisite for taking part in democratic activities and is part of the strategy for developing an educated population.

Challenges due to the digital revolution

On our agenda is the possible change of role of public libraries due to the digital revolution. It will always be very difficult to evaluate a process which might be dramatic or very strong and might have consequences which really mean a change of role. We are always in the midst of this development and process and what can really be a dramatic or real change (when you look at it in perspective) seems just like an evolutionary process. When we talk about the digital revolution, the essence of this is of course **the content** in digital format. If a public library during and throughout the digital revolution continues to concentrate on the printed or analog material, this public library might end up without any significant changes or the changes might be minimal. This could be the situation at least for two reasons. Either the library has no or little funding in order to enter into the digital age or the library is refused by their owners to do this. We must fear and expect that this can happen and this will also mean most probably in the long run that this type of library will end up as a "book museum". The extension or volume of this problem will be parallel to the extension or volume of digital material in society.

I would now like to identify some challenges which - as far as I can see - can be important for future developments of public libraries in the digital revolution. But I would like to stress that my considerations are based on probable or possible challenges for public libraries in a long-term perspective - at least 10 to 15 years ahead. I would like this to be kept in mind : do not think about the coming 3-5 years. I will also try to take the role of the pessimist - maybe that can contribute to our discussions.

First challenge: Copyright

The challenges derived from changes of copyright regulations in the digital age are real and important. More or less all library associations and associations of library association like the global IFLA or the european EBLIDA take these challenges very serious. The proposals from the US government and from the European commission are based on an interest in establishing new modernised regimes for electronic publishing and distribution nationally and world-wide of products consisting of electronic text, sound and images. If you are going to sell these products world-wide in a network environment, you need world-wide regulations. And if you are going to sell these products it is not so nice to have institutions which deliver these products out for free. Or we might say in another way: If there should be a possibility to sell these products world-wide there must be new developments in this field which will give control of the use of products. Rightsholders and governments fear that public institutions like public libraries can become instruments for unauthorised publishing and copying of copyright protected works. Then security systems have to be developed and what was traditionally access to physical items which the library will in the future be access to netbased products and activities.

Second challenge: Electronic commerce

A large development is at present taking place world-wide but also in Europe in order to develop what is called "electronic commerce". A european initiative (COM(98)157) stressed the importance of this development saying:

> *"Stimulating competition in the single market, electronic commerce is already bringing profound structural changes, new skills will be needed to create and maintain new jobs in Europe. Europe's main competitors have already resolutely seized opportunities offered by electronic commerce - with the US building a substantial lead. However, Internet commerce is catching up in a number of member states. In this respect, Europe can marshal a number of specific strengths in the fields of technologies, content creation ad linguistic and cultural diversity. Similarly, the use of a single currency in the world's largest single market will represent a strong incentive for the take-up of electronic commerce in Europe, whereas conversely, electronic commerce can contribute to the acceptability of the Euro." (2)*

What this tells us is that this new development - in which new technologies are combined with the general need for economic development in Europe - will - if it succeeds - represent a major force in the new european and global economy. It will also mean that content which was formally just items in a special cultural, scientific or educational sphere will now first and foremost be normal commodities in a new and developing economy. A new economy is planned which to a very large extent will be based on trading intellectual property on the net. This will mean in its optimal form that from every access point (PCs etc) it will be possible to search, order, pay and get downloaded all kinds of items or commodities which in any form can be stored and transported digitally. It is already some activity based on net-based searching, ordering and paying. But the item is normally delivered physically in the traditional way. When digitally stored items or goods are really delivered directly to the buyer - maybe in seconds - over the net, we have a new situation. At the moment this happens to a very limited extent. This is actually defined as a problem. Commissioner Martin Bangemann from DG XIII recently made a speech at the ITU - International telecommunications union saying:

"The task is to create mass markets and this requires products to be cheap and easy to use. In many cases this is simply not happening." (3)

In fact the enormous possibilities for trading especially moving images and sound have not yet materialised. But also in connections with text-based products and multimedia products where text is an essential part, this will mean a basis for considerable economic growth. However there are certain obstacles to this. In a global environment there is a need to develop global solutions which cover all potential sellers of products, all potential buyers of products (which theoretically and in the long run will mean all citizens in the world) and all products. In order to get beyond the experiment phase important new technical solutions must be developed. But we must expect that these new solutions will rather soon be fully operating. In this environment we need new arguments in order to go on with public library activities based on digitally stored and transported products. And these new arguments have to be in accordance with competition policies in the single market. It is not evident that publicly financed institutions can go on delivering products free of charge or cheaper than market price. If this shall happen we need concrete and relevant political arguments which define the role of the public library in an environment where everybody can access everything and at any time (if you are able to pay for it).

Third challenge: Convergence and conditional access

Convergence is a phenomenon characterised by a blurring of the distinction between telecommunications, broadcasting and information technology industries. Traditionally, communications media were separate like broadcasting, voice telephony or online computer services. Each "channel" was regulated by different laws and different regulators, usually at national level. Technology allows now (or very soon) these services to be transported over the same networks and to use integrated devices for different purposes. But we must be aware that some of these channels are already based on conditional access or restricted access systems (some satellite TV-channels). If a real technical and regulatory convergence is conducted in the coming years (and this is very probable), we must expect that the question of conditional access will become a much more urgent question for the libraries. We have become acquainted with the open net (Internet) in recent years which is not based on conditional access in general. We know already about conditional access for satellite TV. The European commission has recently proposed

> *"a directive on legal protection of television and radio broadcasting and information society services offered to the public at a distance where access is subject to payment. Such services include pay-TV, video-on-demand, music-on-demand, electronic publishing and a wide range of other on-line services. If adopted by the Council of ministers and the European parliament, the directive will require Member states to prohibit and provide appropriate sanctions against all commercial activities related to unauthorised access to a protected service ..." (4)*

I have no problems in accepting the good reasons for introducing a more systematic and legal approach to the question of pirate decoders, smart cards and software unlawfully sold and used in order to circumvent information systems. But we must be aware that in this process we can end up with networks which are only adjusted to the needs of systems for "conditional access" and not adjusted to the "open" networks which we now know and also need in the future. I believe that libraries can be harmed by this development. It is in my opinion rather clear that "public service" activities like

public service broadcasting and public libraries will come under pressure. The market value of special content like sports rights illustrates at the moment this pressure very clearly.

Fourth challenge: Communication to the public

An especially interesting challenge is introduced through the new developments in copyright regulations world-wide. But it can be considered a separate challenge which is not necessarily part of the copyright challenges but derived from it. When WIPO - the UN-affiliated World intellectual property organisation in 1996 convened a global copyright conference in order to make important decisions on copyright regulations for the digital age, they also introduced into the legal framework of WIPO the phrasing "communication to the public".

In the new "WIPO copyright treaty" adopted December 20th, 1996 it says concerning **"Right of communication to the public"**

> *"Without prejudice to the provisions of articles 11(1)(ii), 11 bis(1)(i) and (ii), 11ter(1)(ii), 14(1)(ii) and 14bis(1) of the Berne concention, authors of literary and artistic works shall enjoy the exclusive right of authorizing any communication to the public of their works, by wire or wireless means, including the making available to the public of their works in such a way that members of the public may access these works from a place and at a time individually chosen by them". (5)*

What is really new here in this context is that the concept of services for many people or services for all people is no longer valid in the sense we used to handle it. "Communication to the public" represents all kinds of electronic deliverance of access "by wire or wireless means" and we are here not talking any more of the public in a collective way. When we here talk about "wire or wireless" means it must be taken into account that related to the question of convergence this will be all kinds of communication and this means in the long run that there emerges new regimes of regulations where all media forms are treated in the same way. But what is most important in this context is the whole question of the public. And this will be directly relevant for the public library in which "the public" normally means all the persons in a fixed geographical area. The chairman of WIPOs Committee of experts, Jukka Liedes, was responsible for the proposal which was the basis for the WIPO discussions last December (1996). Let us listen for a second to his way of describing the term "public". He says that in the context of the Berne convention it is a matter of national legislation.

> *"The "public" consists of individual "members of the public" who may access the works from different places and at different times." (6)*

We are not at the moment able to analyse the long-term effects of this new "right". It can definitely influence the possibilities of delivering services in general to the public library "public" as a collective.

Developments which are not challenges but regular improvements

One could after these deliberations have the feeling that we are only facing challenges in the negative sense. I belong to those who have been committed to a policy which considers new technological developments as important improvements for public

libraries. There is no need to go into detail. Technological developments have made it possible for public libraries to give their users services which were formerly impossible to give. But when the services in public libraries to a large extent can be dominated by digital content and not by physical objects, we must expect that the whole environment and societal surroundings will put pressure on the future of public libraries.

Or maybe the development of a widening gap between information-rich and information-poor will really give the public library a new strength based on the traditional role but with new political support.

Conclusions

It is the long-term effects of digitisation in all its forms and in all fields of the society which really mean a real challenge to the very role of public libraries. If we just keep our public libraries running with a majority of non-digital objects and services we do not need to fear the digital revolution. But if we really enter into the digital revolution in depth, in my opinion we have to face the challenges mentioned here and also some other challenges. If we look back on the "ethos" of the public library as described by Audunson, I see no other main political and legitimate arguments for public libraries than those mentioned in my speech. If we are not able to give good reasons for publicly-financed public libraries in that context in the digital age, the public libraries in a longterm perspective will be dead.

In a longterm perspective it is not impossible but rather difficult to maintain the traditional role of the public library. If the role is changed in a decisive way, we might say that the public library will cease to be a public library and become something else.

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