

# The library, lifelong learning and promotion of reading and literacy

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The Evora Public Library celebrates its 200 anniversary. 200 years is a considerable age for a library that is neither national nor royal. Still there are a number of libraries throughout Europe that date back to the Age of Enlightenment. Allow me in just a few lines to draw an extremely rough picture of the scene – not as it was then, but as it has been handed down to us. Most of the libraries dating back to the enlightenment movement started in the same way: private book collectors were inspired by the new philosophy and opened their private libraries to the reading public for lending. Enlightenment was a tool to liberate men opposing the idea of born rights. We must remember that already in 1776 the American Declaration of Independence stated in its opening line that ‘all men are born equal’. In my opinion we are forever indebted to America for those four words. In the simplest and clearest way possible they express the very foundation of our present society, and the libraries were very important tools in bringing the statement from a colonial peripheral position to the basis of the democratic world.

13 years were to pass between the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution with its motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. Because of the close connection between the encyclopedists, primarily Diderot and the men behind the French Revolution, it is even more obvious to draw the parallel to the library. What Diderot wanted in his encyclopedia was to express and gather the knowledge of man in its true version – that means uncensored – in order to liberate men.

In the Nordic countries there are a number of examples of private libraries being opened to the public in the late eighteenth century. In most cases the money for the private libraries came from commerce – rich merchants with a taste for letters collected books. The best example is from Oslo, where the collector Deichmann was himself a merchant, whereas his Danish parallel Suhm was a professor at the University in Copenhagen, but being married to the daughter of a rich merchant

had been able to collect a hundred thousand books. When I first visited the Oslo Public Library 30 years ago, I was confronted with the story of Deichman because the library bears his name even today. And in 1975 his collection was still present in the library and integrated in the card catalogue. The collection was not for lending, but the librarians claimed that even so they were receiving requests for them, but shortly afterwards the books were removed from the galleries because they were falling apart – and in fact they should have been removed much earlier.

My point in recounting these bits and pieces from the history of the bourgeoisie and the origin of the public library is to state my reasons for my tribute to Evora in general – and especially on the occasion of the anniversary. Edmund Burke gained a reputation for being a conservative philosopher, because in his 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' (1790) he actually criticised the French Revolution, but his statement that we should "change in order to preserve" is worth remembering in this context – as I believe this statement to be extremely relevant for the situation of libraries today where we really have to change them in order to preserve them.

The Evora Library is unique in the sense that it was not a metropolitan library. We also have early provincial libraries from that period in Denmark, or at least one, but libraries evolving fifty years later are still "early" as many big European cities did not have public libraries till after 1900. The typical early provincial town library is dependent on an idealistic priest who is able to organise support for a small collection to enlighten people, and as we celebrate the Evora Library, maybe we should also contemplate that the process from stating that all men are born equal to the realisation of democratic societies has been long and troublesome.

The problem with the wonderful American statement was that the category 'men' was taken to mean white males and not human beings of whatever sex or colour they might have and that it took more than 200 years to include Afro-Americans in the understanding of born rights in God's own country. There is a clear parallel to that development in libraries: it took many years for public libraries to become public in the real sense and open to all.

In a library context you may say that the opening of the libraries for public lending was one of the shift of paradigms in post-medieval library history, and that the next shift of paradigm was related to the industrial society where the idea of library lending was not associated with a few loans to some good and well-known fellow citizens but to real big scale lending to the masses.

My point is that the ideological foundation of libraries in the era of enlightenment is still valid for centuries to come. I see two absolutely fundamental changes since the founding of the lending libraries of the enlightenment era. The first is inspired by the American free public libraries at the end of the nineteenth century – that is about a hundred years after their founding. The next fundamental change – a change so basic that we may talk about a shift of paradigm – is occurring right now – roughly speaking another hundred years later.

The first change was due to philosophical and methodological progress – Dewey and the decimal classification system, to standardisation in cataloguing as for instance the invention of catalogue cards instead of protocols, to establishing of interlibrary lending models etc.

The second basic change is the one we are in the middle of right now, where the essence is that the invention of information technologies makes it possible to access not only the webbased library catalogue from any connected computer but also a growing amount of content in the form of electronic journals, e-books, music files, databases. The ultimate perspective in this change is that the traditional library institution built on a collection of books and other materials tend to break up. 'Collection' is replaced by 'connection' and the user tends to become more and more independent. In consequence of these changes the role of the library seems to be moving from a basic function of giving access to information to a more proactive learning role as a learning institution.

## **Globalisation**

If we want to understand the new role of libraries and the potential of the change we must understand the frame for the change that is driving our European societies in these years. When I speak of European countries, I am of course well aware that the conditions of life and for changing a society into a modern democratic welfare society are decidedly different. But I do believe that the mentioned change is what all European countries are aiming at. And the most appropriate term to describe the process, I think, is globalisation which I also reckon is a somewhat imprecise term. Still: we all recognise the changes. And globalisation means that we are all becoming more and more dependent on each other. It is no longer possible to close the door to the national state, and those few examples of this we see in the world have basically failed to provide welfare for their citizens and probably only stay isolated due to despotic rulers. It is very clear when we look at the

trends in producing goods. Europe's industrial workers are losing their jobs – for a short period to colleagues in Eastern Europe, but in the long run the jobs will probably go to farther places, China and India, where they will be a global source for new wealth. Jobs stay in Europe as long as we can compete on quality (special traditions in various countries) Which leaves Europe and the rest of the western world with a tremendous pressure to create new jobs, and the globalisation of the big firms means that Europe can deliver jobs for instance in design, marketing, innovation, management and learning. But globalisation also means that national systems won't work. Not even for instance the Danish model for a welfare society. In the long term we are forced to think in European frames as regards policies, and at the same time we have to be keenly aware that we are competing on the same strategy: that we build on enforcing research and education. You will hardly find any European politician who does not have strong support to higher education and research on his agenda. But as we do so, we also have to be very aware of what we are good at in our countries realising that to have a chance you must be very good indeed. In Denmark a future strategy for new industries might build on industries where we have been successful so far: the health industries, the living industries and industries for playing and learning.<sup>1</sup>

In the same breath as we speak of the knowledge society and globalisation, we also face a tremendous challenge in our societies: the digital divide, or the information gap, that future researchers and sociologists have been pointing to for some twenty years, but which now seems to turn out a much stronger threat to social stability than we had imagined. A growing amount of the population in western societies is diagnosed as functional illiterates. In my country it is now estimated that one out of six schoolchildren is leaving school after nine years without proper reading and writing skills. The figure is to some extent due to the growing immigration and a failed strategy to integrate immigrants in Danish society, but not exclusively so. Also a growing amount of ethnic Danes turn out to be losers in the strong competition and victims of the pressure of innovation. The obvious fact is that there are fewer and fewer jobs for unskilled workers, and basic service jobs that can be handled without good reading skills are simply disappearing.

### **The role of libraries**

What will the role of libraries be in a knowledge society context where education and research and innovation will be at the forefront? And where a growing number of citizens are under pressure to

innovate and build new skills to stay in the labour market? And where social and political tension is a result of the very different living conditions between the information 'haves' and 'have-nots'? That is between the population who can manage and is able to benefit from the new conditions and those that are not able to meet the new demands of the labour market?

Libraries have always supported the purposes of other institutions, and library strategies have in a historic context clearly been a tool for the rulers. A few examples will illustrate my point: in the middle ages the libraries were monastic libraries, supposed to support the Catholic church, and even in later centuries we must realise that the only reason we have kept most of the printed books is due to the Inquisition's keen ability to identify – and keep – dangerous books. In the seventeenth century the library of the absolute ruler was a means to legitimate himself, while the public libraries in the late eighteenth century were accessible to the bourgeoisie as the coming ruling class. And certainly the libraries in the socialist societies were tools to support the 'scientific socialism' and Marxism–Leninism as the prevailing ideology. The situation today is *in principle* not different. That is: the modern European library should support the democratic knowledge society, aiming at creating a welfare state for everybody. The difference between the library of a truly democratic society and libraries in all other types of societies that I know of, is that freedom of information is a cornerstone in democracy. Freedom of information means that anybody may publish what he wants to publish or what he can find a publisher for. Of course, he will be responsible in relation to legislation on not offending other people or spreading false information that may damage other people. If you publish you are responsible in relation to the free press legislation, but there is no censorship, and Internet has actually given 'Everyman' a true opportunity to publish. Libraries in my country have for nearly a hundred years built collections on the principles of quality, actuality and diversity – and have not been supporting specific political ideas. Everybody can publish what he wants subject to a number of laws – being obliged to submit a copy according to legal deposit rules, which will then be accessible to the public.

So libraries are cornerstones in democracy by giving access to – in principle – the whole human record – all published works throughout the world. To me the ideological impact of this principle is tremendous, and it is a principle that should be promoted. The idea of skilled and enlightened citizens as a prerequisite for the 'people's rule' – the basic democratic idea – is still as important as in the late 18th century with Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire – just to mention the original French inspiration that found supporters and predecessors in practically all European countries.

But libraries have a potential that reaches far beyond 'general information and enlightenment'. Libraries may deliver specific and needed information to even very small target groups and ultimately to every single individual, tailor-made for your personal profile and needs. And libraries may be cultural institutions of a far more proactive kind than we see in most cases today. It is my impression that most public libraries in Europe are still passive, in the sense that they have a collection that they promote, but they do not very often face difficult problems in relation to culture, they do not have programmes for building cultural identity, which is necessary, even in old homogeneous states like my own which has been a kingdom where Danish has been spoken for more than a thousand years. They do not have programmes for integrating ethnic minorities or giving ethnic minorities – whom you will find everywhere – an access to their own culture. There is a potential here in public libraries that is not unfolded. And what about a very basic thing such as giving access to the web? Does every public library throughout Europe give access to the web and do they support the citizens who want to have access – actually even in Denmark which has one of the highest rates in the world in terms of Internet access at home, one out of four has no such access. Maybe they don't need it? Maybe they want to stay ignorant? I don't believe so. Everybody wants to be enlightened and everybody should have the chance.

### **Planning library activities for the knowledge society**

What may the vision be then for a public library in the knowledge society? It is worth remembering that particularly in the early days of ICT, there were many predicting the death of libraries due to the potential of having remote access to digital resources. Actually this did not happen, and there are not many signs that it will happen. In my country the experience is that users – be they citizens, students or researchers – still use the physical library, but they use it for other purposes than before. In short, libraries change from traditional 'book-factories' into info-, learning and cultural centres.

The potential of virtual access is that you can integrate the access to information in everyday activities, literally speaking we have info at our fingertips. The use of the physical library space is for learning, social and cultural activities. The library is still popular as a meeting place, for reading papers and journals, and of course lots of people still use the library for borrowing books and media.

For me the two different types of use indicate the hybrid library where virtual services go hand in hand with traditional and new services. The four cornerstones of the hybrid library are

- access to digital and real material both in the physical and virtual library – access to, in principle, the human record in whatever published form it may be stored. The access may be to a lending library or it may be to a library where all materials are kept
- web based access to catalogues, homepage, portals, info-services, a constantly growing access to full-text, multimedia, music
- Professional support for searching and learning – web based or on the spot
- Inspiring physical spaces for learning, searching, reading, meeting and participating in events, exhibitions, presentations.

How do we create hybrid libraries, how do we support the development? I can answer only by outlining the Danish experience, obviously there is not one but many answers. My answer builds on the Danish tradition. Since 1920 public libraries have been regulated by legislation. The Library Act has been changed regularly, the last time being in 2000 where a thorough revision pursued the objective of providing new frames for the public library to suit the knowledge society.

### **The new web-based services**

Since 1997 the hybrid library concept has been the guiding star in our work step by step to help libraries match the development within the information and knowledge society.

Let me describe some of the services and programmes that we find in our hybrid libraries.

First of all we see each library as an entrance to a larger network of knowledge-institutions, in principle all libraries. But still each library has an identity of its own with a service profile matching local information needs.

In Denmark the backbone in the networking libraries is '**bibliotek.dk**', the national database containing all media titles bought in any library in Denmark. The database is free accessible for anybody and offers very simple but efficient search- and request facilities. It works in the way that when you have identified the title you want you want to order, you do so with a few clicks, and just has to decide on which library you will pick it up. An e-mail will tell you when it is at hand. An extremely efficient national transportation system distributes the requested media every night.

The bibliotek.dk system is a kind of superstructure for the libraries as each library has its own homepage with access to the catalogue and web-based request service as well.

The lending system is tending to be fully automatic and selfservice-based, leaving space for the librarian to more qualified tasks.

It is an important point that since 2000 our public libraries deliver all kind of media, text, film, pictures, sound.

Books are still the most used material for lending in public libraries (app. 70%) but the use is stagnating while the use of other material is rising.

A new music service opened last year, giving users possibility to download music files from their home computer. All Danish recorded music has been digitized by the University and State Library in Århus and an agreement made between the right holders, the national library authority and a number of central libraries, but the lending of CDs still dominate the music field.

Also videos and multimedia tend to be used more.

An other important trend is that the catalogue tend to develop into a portal. In bibliotek.dk you will find access to a number of e-services such as

- e-reference/ask a librarian service open for chat and e-mail service 7 days a week in 82 hours
- web-guide, that is a subject guide to a selection of the best websites on thousands of subjects
- Finfo - special information for immigrants and ethnic minorities in their own language (12 languages)
- guide for legal questions

- support for visually handicapped
- support for children's homework
- virtual library for small children
- promotion and dissemination of fiction in a portal that also offers access to an updated e-dictionary on moderns Danish writers, organised and edited by public libraries
- promotion and dissemination of music likewise with access to e-dictionaries and sheet music
- Portal for art and architecture

All these gateways, portals and services are produced by networking libraries. For instance the e-reference is organised in cooperation between 60 libraries – public as well as academic. The result is a very fast and competent service that has lead many of the libraries to close their reference desk at the library to give a faster, better and cheaper service on the web.

It is noteworthy that while the Danish research libraries distribute two electronic text each time they borrow a printed one. This is not the case in public libraries. The reason is primarily that in the research libraries articles in English is the most used material. And the international publishers of English language professional journals have years ago based their business on e-journals, while Danish publishers are more conservative and stick to printed materials. One day they must surrender. Already now there is a need for access to electronic dictionaries, encyclopedias, non-fiction, standard hand books in Danish. I suppose the situation is pretty much alike in other small countries where the national language is not big enough to form a strong market, but the pressure from international trends must force publishers to cooperate on digital access-solutions.

### **The library place**

What happens with the traditional library space when more and more services are web-based or selfservice? In my experience there is a change going on, but much more slowly than the change we face with web-based services. My point is that the use of the library is changing. We know from surveys in Denmark that approximately half of the visitors in public libraries are not coming to lend

anything. They come to read newspapers and magazines, use the internet-connection, look something up in an encyclopedia or get an answer to a legal question. They may come to see an exhibition at the library, hear a presentation, or even find a quiet corner to do some homework. The children may come to play, see theatre or film or hear a story. I think that the number of users, that do not lend anything is impressive because very few libraries are organised to meet their needs and wishes properly. The book shelves are still dominating tremendously in most libraries and they are often full of old, scarcely used titles. While there is often lack of good places to sit, access to coffee, and inviting activities.

In some of the front-running libraries there are new models with space for learning activities, such as regular computer-classes and support for searching the web. You will also find more proactive and inspiring exhibition-like presentation of books and media and you will find space for cultural activities.

For me the most important point is that libraries think in terms of offering programmes meeting different information needs in the population they serve. Such programmes can aim on social inclusion for ethnic minorities, lifelong learning for many groups, reading programmes and campaigns.

The role of the librarian change under these circumstances and we see librarians as web-masters, instructors, consultants, and of course still as subject specialists.

### **Some recommendations**

To create a hybrid library system libraries must work together and coordinate action. If there is a national coordinator it is well, if not somebody must take the role. Some kind of policy document or vision should be at hand outlined with the main needed actions outlined.

A strategy for competence building, continuing education and new skills in the library sector is a must.

Projects setting up new services on the conditions that are at hand.

Models for networking and knowledge sharing.

It is also a general overall recommendation to produce more web-based services.

Start by giving the public access to the web in the library, and support them in using the new tool, so assistance to users can be on the spot as well as online.

New cooperation is a third key word. New cooperation could be on learning programmes, on developing services for schools and other institutions and organisations.

Lastly I will recommend that all libraries create a clear strategy for their activities. A strategy could include local cultural and information political goals, it might include a analysis of needs of different user groups and suggestions on how to match them, it might include a map on the cooperative framework – who are the partners, what can the library offer? And it certainly must include a plan for the development of the library.

Libraries have a great future in the knowledge society – go for it.

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<sup>i</sup> The discussion on globalisation is mainly building on Danish sources such as 'Den danske strategi' (Mandag Morgen, 2004) ('The Danish Strategy', an analysis done by the Danish Council on Innovation) and '13 udfordringer til den danske velfærdsstat' 2004.)