REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL LIBRARY IN THE WORLD OF WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

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In the present age of neoliberalism, late globalisation, faltering economies, retrenchments, and New Public Management, current discussion concerning the role of the public library within society is far distant from library debates and librarians' thinking in the 1970s and the early 1980s. At that time, within public library circles a considerable amount of interest was focused on political and social priorities. Over the years, social and political issues, however, have become less prominent discussion points and have almost disappeared. However, in the early 21st century, new challenges and problems have manifested themselves which justify reconsiderations of the purpose of the public library, the library as an institution in support of democracy, and perhaps a revival of the concept of "the political library."

A major challenge to public library service provision stems from digitization of information and the increasing growth of electronic networks, which have created new opportunities for providing information resources and services for citizens. Thus, harnessing the benefits and challenges of Web 2.0 and new services and networking forums such as Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube and social tagging remains a major challenge to public libraries today.

But at the same time library funds are dwindling, branch libraries are closing down and staff are being fired. No wonder that public libraries, many of them, find themselves in a phase of crisis and reorientation.

Methodology

The study presented here aims to analyse ways in which public libraries can strengthen their survival capacity by drawing upon the new Web 2.0 technologies and developing new community-oriented roles including that of serving as a resource centre for democratic processes. This article will review selected writings covering such key notions as public libraries, the nature and development of democracy, and social software applications. Also revisited is the dated concept of the "political library." Based on observations emerging from this analysis, a revised role is outlined for public libraries in the era of digital information and Web 2.0 with a special

focus on the library's role in support of democracy, serving as a democratic agora. Thus, part of the analysis consists in shedding light on the nature, viability and conditions and opportunities of information democracy within the framework of today's social networking media.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework provided for the present study draws on inspiration from Doctor's piece on justice and social equity in cyberspace (1994). This article was published in the early days of the internet, a time characterised by enthusiasm, euphoria, and a fascination of the promising new potentials and possibilities represented by the new global medium and utility.

It is noted that current professional literature on the implications of Web 2.0 technologies for libraries and their service provision tends to emphasize the new social software tools and media as information assets to be integrated in existing service offerings. The Web 2.0 social media are typically seen as opportunities and means for supplementing, enhancing and enriching the existing mix of library-related services and facilities. Briefly, Google and interactive technologies such as wikis and blogs are considered new devices in the library service provision toolbox.

However, there are signs that a more critical awareness of the Web 2.0 phenomena is beginning to gain ground. Brabazon (2006) has some serious reservations about the whole ideology behind (and peer production practices of) *Wikipedia*, and she is very concerned about Google's impact on student study habits, projects, and assignments. In a very thoughtful piece, Waller (2009) takes a close look at the relationship between Google and public libraries and explores similarities and differences. On the surface of it, Google seems to pursue goals and offer services and products that are parallel to or overlap the kinds of searching assistance and information provision that are core activities in libraries, but in the end the two players in the information arena deviate markedly from each other. The author demonstrates that the *conceptions of information* inherent in (1) Google as a commercial firm and (2) public libraries as providers of balanced and consolidated information are fundamentally different. The commercial firm and the public agency simply do different things. Waller's reflections on the democracy-underpinning role of public libraries in maintaining a balanced and non-commercial information provision are very central to the observations on a redefined role for public libraries in the present paper.

A decidedly pessimistic view of Web 2.0 and interactive social media can be found in Keen's book *The Cult of the Amateur* (2008). The book embodies a frontal attack on what the author sees as a frightening regime of amateurs and a pervasive culture of narcissism resulting from the Web 2.0 revolution. Keen provides a coherent and very critical perspective on the Web 2.0 tools and phenomena and demonstrates their manipulative potential and how

they erode expert knowledge and expert performance, gradually bringing about de-professionalization in some respects. Professionals replaced by noble amateurs. Keen explores the seamy side of blogs and blogging, and addresses the problem of tricksters and their fraudulent behaviour. He provides examples of dubious editorial practices characterizing *Wikipedia* and the mediocrity of content provided by contributors. Above all he laments the downgrading and dismissal of experts and the devaluation of expert knowledge. Sounding a bit like an old moralizing culture critic, Keen draws attention to a range of critical and pertinent issues affecting all web users. Related problems – the spread of obscurantism, the crumbling status of scientific evidence and research-based knowledge along with people's increasing difficulty in making informed selections from the endless mass of garbage and more reliable sources available pell-mell on the internet – have been dealt with in a recent monograph by Michael Specter (2010).

Published literature on the implications of Web 2.0 and social networking for community involvement in public libraries is very sparse. Actually, very few contributions address the role of libraries in maintaining freedom of information in the Digital Age along with their supportive role in relation to campaigning initiatives, local grassroots activities, the organisation of political debates, as well as the provision of alternative, anti-mainstream and anti-elitist information, etc.

In contrast, library literature, especially that part of it which covers 20th century developments in libraries and librarianship in Australia, UK and USA, provides considerable coverage of the role of libraries in promoting and consolidating democracy. For instance, Waller (2009, p:6) refers to what she calls the "grand tradition" of public libraries in the 1950s describing Lionel McColvin, of the UK, as one of the leading figures. For McColvin public libraries would have a leading role in advancing democracy, in knowledge building and dissemination, and in empowering citizens through the possibility for self-education. More recently similar ideas have been expressed regarding libraries and democracy, and the societal role of libraries. In his monograph, *Civic Librarianship,* McCabe explores the concept of civic librarianship and develops a vision for the mission and purpose of the public library. Civic librarianship differs markedly from the notions of public library as agend for liberation, and it is also very different from the public library of the traditional type, which has often fallen short in fleshing out its basic mission into effectual and tangible strategies for action. McCabe (2001, pp:78-79) sees a broadened role for public libraries and identifies a number of areas where strategic action is needed:

- Restore the confidence of public librarians and trustees in exercising social authority.
- Renew the public library's historical mission of education for a democratic society.
- Develop the public library as a centre of the community.
- Develop strategies to build communities through public library service.

- Use services and collections to meet social as well as individual needs.
- Strengthen the political efforts of public librarians and trustees.

As can be seen, the suggestions for reforming public libraries in line with the conceptual framework of civic librarianship are of a more general nature and because the book appeared in 2001 there is no treatment of the challenges of new technologies (social networks for instance) and the way people communicate and organize information-related activities *outside* the library.

Clearly, civic librarianship was meant as an effort to update and expand the role of the public library while keeping the library's historic mission of education for a democratic society. The author's insistence on civic dialogue and social interaction is certainly of relevance when discussing and defining the role of the public library in times of web 2.0.

Kranich (2001, 83-95) explains how libraries help reduce the digital divide, increase access to government information, and fight against both censorship and private interests to ensure that access to information is as free as possible. The library as civic space creates opportunities for community and dialogue, which she considers a very important democratic function supplementing information-related and education-centred services. In their joint article, Canadian library researchers Alstad and Curry (2003) describe how squares and other public spaces are increasingly replaced by corporate-owned areas such as shopping malls, where people no longer act as citizens, but are primarily consumers. In order for libraries to support democracy and serve as a public space they should, among other things, take a more proactive stance making room for lectures and discussion groups. A Danish perspective is provided by Skot-Hansen and Andersson (1994) who carried out a study of libraries as a resource in the local community. As pointed out in the study, for a library to serve as a local driver it should relate actively to the community it belongs to and sharpen its profile in interaction with other institutions, associations and groups. In a contribution in the anthology entitled *Libraries and Democracy: the Cornerstone of Liberty,* Durrance and others (2001, 49-59) explore several American library projects that address web-based community information, which are considered as a possible aide in strengthening civil society.

Issues in and requirements for theory-building in civic librarianship are also addressed by John Budd (2008, 147-223) who takes a fresh look at (public) library purpose and sets the scene for a fundamental re-examination of the social foundations of librarianship. What Budd offers is an intriguing in-depth analysis of the interrelatedness and interplay between the vital concepts of social responsibility and intellectual freedom. Based on extensive reading of academic texts in disciplines such as philosophy, political science, public sphere theory and democracy research, new light is shed on basic ideals and tenets in library service provision including, for instance, value neutrality (controversial as this is). Concepts are

critically examined and typically given a philosophical twist that facilitates identifying new and unorthodox facets and perspectives. In exploring the place and role of (public) libraries in a democracy society, Budd starts right from the beginning and embarks on a conceptual analysis in order to come to grips with democracy as an entity. In carrying out this mapping exercise, Budd focuses special attention on the notion of deliberative democracy, which has a parallel on Danish ground. Danish theologian, professor and folk high school principal Hal Koch can be said to be the founding father of a conception of democracy termed *samtaledemokrati* ("conversational democracy"). According to Koch the essence of democracy is conversation and dialogue and not just a form of governance. Budd thoroughly explores how deliberative democracy relates to libraries and librarianship and the extent to which these practices actually inform specific library-related contexts. Fairly detailed coverage is given to the phenomenon of neoliberalism and the way this ideology leaves its stamp on current library policy-making and rhetoric. Budd's approach, his painstaking analysis of the democracy sustaining and supporting role of librarianship, is very refreshing and stimulating, and is matched by very few contributions in the field.

John Buschman (2003, 120-121), cited by Budd, strongly disputes one-sided economic logic, customer-centeredness, marketplace thinking and value-added, fee-based regimes in (public) librarianship. Reservations about the risky elements of such business strategies are voiced as follows:

> The democratic public sphere roles of libraries as disseminators of rational, reasoned, and organized discourse, as a source of verifying or disputing claims, and as a space for the inclusion of alternative views of society and reality have no place in the vision of the library as the instant-satisfaction, fast-food equivalent of information.

The Political Library: Revival of a Concept?

In her thesis, *Political Library: Public Library as a Space for Citizens' Participation and Public Discourse*, Jadinge (2004) discusses the potential public libraries have for actively supporting civic participation and public discourse. The study seeks to explore the origin of the idea of the political library in a Swedish context in the mid-1970s. The author observes that the idea of the political library deserves to be taken out of oblivion for two reasons. First, it is an idea that is quite radical (in the general sense of the word!) by today's standards, and should therefore serve as fuel for a renewed discussion of library ideology and democracy, in practice as well as in research. The concept of a political library is interesting because it affects some fundamental aspects of library and information activities, such as the neutrality/objectivity issue and the relationship that libraries have to civil society. Secondly, it is relevant in offering a historical perspective on today's library debates. The author's view is that undertaking a comparison

between the context of the 1970s and the situation and conditions of the 2000s can be fruitful. As is the case today, problems regarding democracy were frequently and sometimes heavily discussed in the 1970s, but the atmosphere and context was different and attention was focused on how the political library should act so as to maintain the library's neutrality. To be neutral may nevertheless often involve some sense of commitment.

The results of the Swedish study prompt further analysis of the notion of the political library, its relevance today, along with its potential for renewing the role of a public library in transition. Today, appraising the generalizability and pertinence of the political library and giving the concept a much needed brush-up demands an awareness of the opportunities of Web 2.0 tools and applications.

Access to Alternative Information

Access to alternative and independent information resources is seen by Robert Dahl (2005, p.189) as a hallmark of democracy in a comprehensive sense:

> Citizens have a right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information from other citizens, experts, newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications, and the like. Moreover, alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single political group attempting to influence public political beliefs and attitudes, and these alternative sources are effectively protected by law.

Given the extent to which public libraries take their function as provider of alternative, non-elitist and non-mainstream information seriously, there are many situations where the active involvement and service provision of libraries would be relevant and desirable. Illustrative examples are the campaigns and debate sessions preceding elections, referendums, etc. Typically, and this observation could be generalized to many countries, the official information presented to the electorate is biased. Thus, for instance, in Denmark the many referendums relating to Denmark's entry into the Common Market and the EU, as well as Denmark's accession to the EU treaties, etc., constitute an illustrative example: there is unequal access among Danish citizens to information and lack of funds for distributing alternative information. Frequently, there is a marked lack of alternative information resources reflecting positions other than those held by the establishment and those possessing the political power and the money. Kajberg (1999) provides a striking example of inflexible and restrictive attitudes toward alternative and unofficial materials on EU matters and similar political topics held by some Danish public libraries. There is a great need for information that provides alternatives and challenges the official and dominating messages and viewpoints. The new social network media have partly remedied this situation, but libraries could still play a

more active role here. Thus, scanning shelves and displays for brochures, etc. on national and local government information and similar kinds official information sources in printed formats in an average Danish public library reveals that problems of bias and exclusion of alternative opinion, insights and perspectives still exist.

Facebook as an Information Tool for Local Protest Actions: a Danish Example

In Denmark the controversy over and the fight for the survival of a local railway in a thinly populated area provides an illustrative example of the involvement or lack of involvement of the local public library in a much discussed local matter. TheWestern railway, a local railway line in the western part of Denmark, is at risk of being closed down because a majority of Regional Council Members consider it loss-making; they argue that it is too expensive in terms of operational and maintenance costs, and the case is made that buses are a better solution. The prospect of a rural railway line ceasing to exist because of a Regional Council decision evoked strong protests from parts of the local population, created a heated debate, and led to the formation of railway protection initiatives. Also, a group on Facebook named "Save the Western Railway" was set up. However, the local library adopted a fairly passive role in relation to the railway issue. No meetings have been hosted by the library and the only activity organized by the library was the setting up of an exhibit featuring the railway and its history. The citizens' initiative to protect the Western Railway represents an interesting case illustrating how Facebook can be used by politically articulate and engaged individuals and groups. There are tens-of-thousands of examples of this nature on Facebook. These grassroots activities, campaigns, protest groups and unofficial networks confronting decision-makers and those in power provide examples of how initiatives are born, strategies developed, individuals involved becoming members of groups, how communication takes place, how various types of information and views are presented and exchanged, and how decisions are made, etc. Also illustrated are the exchange of information, views, advice, and know-how between bodies of varying expertise and those who maintain grassroots initiatives. And last, but not least: studies of the emergence of grassroots initiatives in a Facebook context – or as they develop within other social networking media – could be designed so as to explore the ways in which libraries respond to, support, or ignore groups and initiatives arising and developing within the social networking media.

There are various ways in which public libraries could adopt a more proactive role in relation to Web 2.0 and citizens' campaigns and initiatives. Thus, a Danish project, outlined on the web pages of the Librarians Union, addresses the role of the public library as a moderator of current political debates, etc. going on in the local community. The library could provide balanced subject-specific input for discussions progressing in social network media of the Web 2.0 type. People could debate current and crucial topics

and issues on the web. But the prerequisite is that the library prepare solid background information and dare to raise controversial questions, tender subjects and sensitive issues for discussion. Also, be ready to interact with other media. On the whole, libraries could adopt a more active democratic role.

Libraries as Democratic Agoras

In the municipality of Odder (Denmark) it has for several years been natural for citizens and politicians to engage in discussions on a variety of issues using web-based discussion forums. According to Claus Buur Rasmussen (2009), the previous year's municipal elections in Denmark provided an example of the electronic communication between citizens and local politicians in that more than 400 comments were posted as part of a lively debate between citizens and those standing as candidates for the Odder Town Council. One of the reasons for the success in raising and maintaining e-debates is that those responsible for hosting and maintaining the debate invest quite a lot of effort in furnishing people with background knowledge on a specific topic or issue. For instance, all town council decisions are described in a journalistic vein on the commune homepage. In addition, video transmissions of sequences selected from, among other things, town council meetings and local civic meetings on key issues are available. It is crucial to bring up sensitive issues for discussion. If you dare not put matters on-the-line and raise controversy regarding areas and issues people are eager to engage, they tend to drop out and ignore debates.

Unfortunately, most local authorities and councillors tend to avoid conflicts and shrink from raising sensitive subjects. Thus, it is obvious that the initiative rests with the libraries when it comes to providing local residents with opportunities for making themselves heard in public life and as part of a functioning democracy. Public libraries could take a role in fostering active democratic communications in matters and issues that are of concern to citizens. However, a task like this cannot be reduced to acquiring and having district plans ready for examination or distributing election campaign material (flyers, brochures, etc.). It is much more than that. Libraries must dare to act as initiators and take the lead. What must not be forgotten in this respect is the interaction with other media. Consideration must be given to involving several target groups and communities. In the context of the 2009 municipal election, video-based profiles and portrayals of the candidates for municipal election were made available. At the same time, a group was set up on Facebook in the hope that in relying on this vehicle, there would be better possibilities for appealing to and attracting the interest of younger target audiences.

Digital debate is not better than analogous debate, and it is a mistake to say that discussion on the web is better than conventional discussion, letters in newspapers, or exchanging questions and views at civic or election meetings. But e-debates facilitated by forums such as the Odder Net in the

time before and in the run-up to the municipal election could be instrumental in helping citizens make informed decisions when casting their votes. At the same time, it must be noted that quite a few citizens express themselves only on the web. Obviously, a certain amount of resources are required for setting up an adequate framework for a debate. Thus, the role of the library/librarian is primarily that of a mediator.

Another example, considerably broader in scope, is a draft development project presented by the Aarhus Municipal Libraries and entitled *demokrateket* (2010). The vision underlying the concept of *demokrateket* is to vitalize societal and community-related challenges to citizens and to create physical and virtual fora that allow citizens to be involved in shaping the political agenda. *Still in a preparatory and pilot project phase*, *demokrateket* is intended to develop innovative approaches to the library's communication and mediation of community information as a proactive and interactive activity, which would include users and political players in the physical library environment along with web pages and social and mobile fora. The final project will be unique in that it envisages a shift of the library's role in providing democratic (physical and virtual) spaces from a reactive and communication-centred role towards a proactive, front-edge and staging role. In assuming this new role, the library would establish and facilitate interactive, independent and direct channels of communication between citizens and their political representatives. In doing so, the library would support free opinion building and active citizenship. The library staff's competencies in terms of serving as trend-spotters, identifying social and political issues, and performing the function as moderator of debate-prompting and democratic processes, become of central importance in implementing the *demokrateket*. The project was initiated by the Aarhus Municipal Libraries and a local adult education association. Potential partners for the project include media houses in the Aarhus area, a folk high school (Thestrup), political parties and social science departments (e.g. political science) at Aarhus University. The intention is to create a forum for Aarhus as a whole. Modeled after popular reading clubs, which functioned successfully for many years, are a range of debate clubs which would be set up to operate digitally as well as physically. Opinion formers, experts and politicians will be invited as contributors and presenters. An essential principle is that the library should act as facilitator, while content will be provided by others, but the library system could support and qualify debates on varying themes, local as well as national. An interesting new informational role is envisaged for Aarhus librarians in that library professionals could compose "information packages" covering specific themes and thus tailored to the needs of debate clubs and those actively participating in debates. These theme-specific information packages could be downloaded for use either in the library or in private homes. Social media like Facebook might, in spite of their quick, flickering, elusive and somewhat superficial nature, have a curiosity-raising effect and could serve as a vehicle for highlighting and spreading information on *demokrateket* and ongoing public debates.

Related to the Aarhus project is a previous project undertaken by the public library in Frederikshavn and supported by a grant from the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media. The project, which is completed now, was entitled "The Library as a Democratic Agora" and had as one of its objectives the exploration of the role of the public library as a "third place (space)" and as one of the cornerstones in Danish democracy. In examining and further developing this role, which included facilitating democratic discourse, a challenging and slightly more provocative approach could be adopted. Critical analysis of the findings of the Aarhus and Frederikshavn projects and output from similar democratic discourse projects conducted in library contexts is essential in defining a new role for the public library.

A Danish report on the future role and services of public libraries in the knowledge society appeared last year (2010). The report is structured in five parts under the following headings: Open Libraries, Inspiration and Learning, The Danes' Digital Library, Partnerships, and Professional Development. Unfortunately, the report is almost silent on the role of public libraries in democratic processes, in enhancing participatory democracy, and in the establishment and monitoring of discussion fora. Occurrences of the term "debate fora" *can* be found and partnerships within the framework of civil society are touched upon as well, but there are very few concrete examples of partnerships representing the civil society and there is no mention whatsoever of groups of citizens committed to specific issues, associations, grassroots initiatives, political groups, political parties, NGOs, etc. Unimpressive and not particularly ambitious as the publication is it can be said to slightly mirror what John Budd calls neoliberal consumerism.

Concluding Observations

For quite a few years basic public library roles and tasks tended to include such service areas as provision of books and other materials, information services, reference work, supporting learning activities, organizing cultural activities and promotion of reading. However, during recent years in some countries efforts have been made to redefine public library purpose – the mission of public libraries – with a view to the role of supporting political debates, campaigns, citizens engaging in social and grassroots issues, "activism," etc. But assuming a sharper role in relating to and supporting citizens' political and community-related activities is not a new phenomenon. Actually – as shown by an illustrative case from the Swedish public library history summarized earlier in this article – in some countries there has been a tradition of public libraries committing themselves to making information resources available in connection with community action and citizens' initiatives of various kinds, and by hosting discussions and meetings. In this context it is worth referring to the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, which supports the participation of citizens in civic life as an overall aim of public libraries.

The findings and reflections embodied in the Swedish study of the political library and the results of McCabe's analysis of the concept of

civic librarianship provide good starting points for further analytic work. In defining an appropriate role for the public library in the Age of Web 2.0, there is a need for re-examining and partly reviving thoughts and ideas regarding how libraries could support grassroots initiatives and alternative political viewpoints and analyses. Hence, libraries and librarians need to discuss and clarify their stance towards key issues such as participatory democracy, political participation, empowerment and emancipatory roles.

One can imagine that libraries are keen not to become completely left behind now that e-democracy is taking root in many contexts and environments. Here, the libraries' role can be – as an extension of efforts geared to reduce the digital divide – to provide part of the community dialogue that is undertaken in municipal websites as "real-life" physical sessions (by organizing such activities as politicians' cafés and the like). Still many people do not use or have access to computers and the internet, and clearly this situation somewhat limits the suitability, performance and impact of internet-driven social media as a tool of democracy.

The interesting question here is: Can the public library redefine its mission and will politicians and decision-makers be willing to shift in this direction? Our review of selected readings on Web 2.0 and social media, on the role of libraries in enhancing and consolidating democracy and the need for relaunching the political library indicates a fruitful direction for further discussion regarding a new social role for the public library. But can the public library be transformed into an agency that capitalizes on the social media and their innovative applications in supporting democracy, citizen participation in community development and political processes, multiculturalism, etc? To shed light on this issue more explorative efforts are needed. Thus, in carrying on with the analysis of an updated role for public libraries, it seems obvious to conduct an empirical study that might be approached as interview-based analysis. For example, a study could be designed that aims to identify selected librarians' views of public library roles in light of Web 2.0.

In discussing new roles for the public library, there are classic library virtues that should be safeguarded including the library's position as a recognized and trusted repository of information and public knowledge. In times of booming web technologies, social media, and commercialization of information and knowledge, there is a need for an agency of neutrality and credibility that helps users discover and unmask the increasing amount of bias, distortion, fraud, misuse, cheating and manipulation within the complex world of new web-based media, and assists them in navigating today's information universe, which may be less smooth than imagined. A new user educational perspective would certainly be relevant here.

In analysing the conditions and opportunities for information democracy in the context of Web 2.0, explorative studies are needed to map politically-related information universes, information transfer, and information use. The Digital Age with its new social media invites political engagement,

but the era of digitization is also an age of despotic political leadership styles, persistent and entrenched power structures, spin doctor-driven politics and infotainment. These features seem a growing part of the reality in many countries. Power structures are opaque and various sorts of extra-parliamentary opposition groups, NGOs, and grassroots initiatives in specific areas face barriers and difficulties having their messages heard. As is well known, because of failures, backlashes and disappointed expectations, situations arise that eventually lead to frustration and apathy. The more than meagre results of the United Nations' Climate Change Conference 2009 (COP 15) in Copenhagen on the risks and dangers of climate change and global warming, and the predictable failure of COP 16 in Cancun, Mexico, are illustrative of the powerlessness of those outside the sphere of power wanting a say in these crucial matters.

Thus, libraries need to rethink their role and mission in a democratic society and the way they support and catalyse democratic processes.

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