The libraries’ role in the development of democratic societies

Introduction

The other day, one of my colleagues, who used to teach at the different schools of librarianship in Sweden, was telling me how last spring he had asked some of his students what in fact they thought about libraries. Are they really more important than other social institutions? The answer was yes, of course, this was the case. Why? Because libraries have to support literacy and reading in all its forms and ensure access to information. My colleague continued the discussion and asked why this was so particularly important. Are libraries really more important than health services, home-help services, care of the elderly? At this point the students began to hesitate but very slowly the discussion passed on to the function of libraries in our democratic system - the libraries as a guarantee of free and general public access to information.

With this example, I want to show that in recent years many librarians, perhaps primarily those who have worked at the scientific libraries, have somehow forgotten this important fundamental task. It has been pushed to the back for the benefit of all the immediately demanding technical innovations, and the young librarian-to-be is almost entirely unaware of it. On the other hand, I would like to maintain that in the public library domain this tradition has been stronger. A central task of these libraries has always been to promote reading habits, stimulate the search for knowledge and to give citizens access to language, albeit less clearly formulated in the 1980s and 1990s. Is an awareness of this important function perhaps on its way back?

I venture also to say that this awareness has existed among prominent representatives of Swedish libraries ever since the breakthrough of democracy early this century. In a recently published doctoral thesis “Att analysera genombrottet för de moderna folkbiblioteksidéerna” (Analysing the breakthrough of modern public library ideas), Magnus Torstensson shows that several of the actors and debaters of that time understood there was such a connection, chiefly perhaps the far-sighted pioneer, Valfrid Palmgren. In her view, access to information is a democratic right. I am gratified to be able to say that Mrs Palmgren spent her apprenticeship years at the Royal Library in Stockholm and that the then National Librarian, EW Dahlgren, wholeheartedly supported his gifted pupil. Mrs Palmgren was one of the few who also realised at an early stage that librarians needed professional training - alongside their scientific qualifications - and, under the auspices of the Royal Library, initiated the first embryo of the school of librarianship in 1908.

Of course, Valfrid Palmgren got many of her ideas from study visits to the United States and Germany. But many people would argue that it was not until in the dreadful wake of the Second World War, in which disinformation and lies had played a major part, that the importance of libraries as progressive tools in a democratic system was understood at the international and decision-making policy levels.

Freedom of information

In her thesis which discusses, among other things, the history of the library’s function, the Dutch library ideologist, Marian Koren, ascribes the concept of freedom of information to the
American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Towards the end of the Second World War he considered that there was only one path to follow if a lasting peaceful world order was to be sought in the future, and that path was via enlightenment and knowledge. Freedom of information. Roosevelt defined the concept as both freedom to give and supply information and the right to be informed, to find out how matters stand. In his view, reliable and objective knowledge about other people and foreign social conditions enhances understanding of other cultures and lifestyles and promotes freedom.

The newly established United Nations was influenced at an early stage by the American President and adopted as one of its first declarations a number of policy decisions in the same spirit:

"Freedom of information is a ground-stone of all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated. It implies the right to gather, transmit and publish news anywhere and everywhere without fear."

Libraries were to be the social institution that should primarily safeguard freedom of information. Here again Ms Koren considers that this is particularly important today when many actors attempt to come between the author and his/her reader. The libraries defend the right of the private individual to seek information. For these reasons, the libraries are financed through taxes and not through fees. This order is accepted by the majority of democracies. Everyone enjoys the same right irrespective of financial status and geographic location. Libraries are cultural institutions and not part of the entertainment industry, Ms Koren concludes.

The first clause of the policy statement that is the basis for the new library in Linköping to be built on the ruins of the old one, reads: “Access to information is a question of democracy.” I somehow have the feeling that an awareness of this is becoming increasingly apparent among representatives of the profession - a kind of rebirth - despite the students’ uncertain attitudes. One of my former colleagues at the Royal Library, Harry Järv, was particularly clear and lucid on this matter. Rather alone on the barricades in the early 1980s, he said that charges for library services were an abomination that limited freedom of information. You can’t pay twice for the same service. Libraries are not shops that buy and sell goods, they should devote themselves to their main task, library work. He had many adversaries. The tendency in the 1980s was to make costs “visible”, that is to say, charge for the services the libraries perform. To show what you are capable of and to be appreciated for what you do, you must put a price on your services, it was said. Particularly regarding external use.

New libraries, a new function

"Provide a service. Charge for it!” This was the message to the libraries from the then Minister of Education and Science in Sweden, Per Unckel, at a library conference in Borås in 1992. The pendulum has now swung in the other direction. In the wake of the so-called Adult Education Initiative with tens of thousands of university college places, the libraries have been assigned a crucial task. The public libraries will be important knowledge nodes in expanding distance education. The medium-sized university colleges, Örebro, Växjö, Mid-Sweden University College and Karlstad are now applying for university status (and three of them will also get the status in 1999), and the quality of the library function is a crucial assessment factor. New university college libraries have been built in Jönköping, Halmstad,
Örebro and Växjö. The university college in Malmö is beginning to take architectural shape. When it is ready the new library will be centrally situated and directly accessible from the city tunnel. The library will be the first sight that catches the visitor’s eye. And the library is also what people approaching the new university college in Visby on Gotland from the sea, will see first.

Sometimes it can be difficult to define a library’s tasks and working methods in an open democratic society. It may be interesting and give food for thought to compare the ambitions we have for our own libraries with libraries and their function in a dictatorship. We don’t need go far to find good material for comparison. It would be sufficient to take the ferry across the Baltic Sea. In Russia and the countries around the Baltic Sea, enormous book collections were built up over 50 years that are sometimes irrelevant and of little interest today. National identity was consistently suppressed in favour of books and information approved by the Soviet censorship. The result was very large libraries, often with almost a thousand staff members taking care of books few wanted and there are now great problems in retrieving what was lost.

The few books remaining from the time before the occupation in the wake of the Second World War were hidden away in the murky corners of locked basements and it was totally prohibited to study them until today. These books are now being triumphantly brought out into the daylight.

The libraries served the prevailing order. Freedom of information did not exist. These library institutions today have not a high status, quite low wages, and a staff turnover and great problems with their premises.

On the eve of his 85th birthday in 1997, the old intellectual Swedish communist member of parliament, John Takman, at ease in his armchair surrounded by his rich and varied library, said to the largest daily newspaper in Sweden, Dagens Nyheter, that he deeply regretted developments in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1989. He longed to go back. He can never have set his foot in the university library in St Petersburg, for example, and seen the catastrophic situation that prevails there. The best thing would be to forget everything that was and start again from scratch. If Mr Takman had lived his life in St Petersburg, his own library would have been very different and much poorer.

His views are very contradictory to what I heard in Prague the other day from the President of the Parliament of the Check Republic, Petr Pithart. He told the national librarians of Europe how he risked his life to bring books across the Iron Curtain, to the intellectuals in the former East. The books were made as small as possible to take as little place as possible. Books were the most dearest things.

Technology and change

However, there are serious threats to our libraries today. Threats that are perhaps not attributable to political decisions and absolutism, but are based above all on the new opportunities offered these days by new technology. With its aid, it is easy to restrict access to information in different ways. We sometimes discuss ingenuously but perfectly seriously how we can best limit the scope of those interested to study relevant information. Not in terms of prohibitions but on the basis of financial arguments. We pay careful attention to the interests
of the author but forget the user. Each screen spread should cost a certain amount of money and if the resources are not available, "forget it", so to speak.

The libraries cannot be party to such a development. The main task of the libraries today, as it was previously, is to endorse and support our democratic social structure. Through a joint assignment - financed from our tax system - we should now utilize the technical innovations and contribute to the development of freedom of information in the sense that anyone, irrespective of financial circumstances and geographic location shall have a right to study and spread information. The libraries must safeguard the consumers' interests. The situation must not deteriorate now just because we are choosing new technical forms of expression and replacing books and periodicals on paper with electronics. The new must not be inferior to the old.

It is interesting to establish that at one library conference after another, attention is now being given to the role of libraries in the democratic process. Ethical issues are enjoying a renaissance. Several lectures were given on this theme at the IFLA meetings in Copenhagen 1997 and Amsterdam 1998 - that is to say the libraries’ joint world conferences. For example the retiring president Robert Wedgeworth spoke on this theme in his farewell speech in 1997. He considered that “legal barriers and political pressures are very big threats to the concept of service that librarians and libraries espouse...National and international efforts to enact more restrictive copywrite and intellectual property laws and treaties, tend to ignore the interests of the public, the user. We have to protect the authors and publishers rights, but we also have to recognize the necessity to ensure reasonable access.”

And Ms Koren expressed more or less the same ideas as follows: “another aspect of the right to information is its essential role in the process of democratisation. Better informed people make better choices. This goes for practical and political issues... The position of librarians is not to take sides, but to be engaged in and show concern for the human development of the community by offering appropriate means for democratic communication.”

In connection with the inauguration of the new Royal Library in the spring of 1997, I listed a number of issues that were expected to become important for the work of the Royal Library in the future - supporting our democratic social order will definitely be one of the most important.

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