

The empty library – or where are the books?

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the different view points that were present in the debate and concludes that there are fundamental dichotomies regarding the expected role of the public library in the contemporary Danish society.

The debate was initiated by a December 2007 interview with the newly appointed director, Pernille Schaltz, of the main public library in Copenhagen. She stated that books need competition from the new media. The lending department of the library should not be seen as the library's stock but as a show case for the library's services (Politiken, December 28th, 2007). Soon after, the first critics entered the scene and voiced the fear that these statements meant the death of quality fiction in the public libraries. The critics relied in their arguments on the assumed truth that a library is equal to a collection of books – and that a library without books is not a library. The more librarians who argued for an inclusion of new media in the library's collection, the more writers and publishers feared for the future of books in the library – in particular for the less popular part of fiction literature. This means that the debate has revitalised a long buried debate on quality as a principle for selecting materials in the public libraries. But any discussion on what materials the public library should contain is, in fact, a discussion on what kind of library we (the society) want. Thus, the article demonstrates that the recent debate made explicit a discussion of the role, vision and legitimacy of the 21st century Danish public library.

KEYWORDS: Discourse analysis, Michel Foucault, public libraries, history, media theory.

1. Introduction

Seen from a library point of view, the year 2008 started with something remarkable as a public debate about

Danish public libraries and their social and cultural function. The debate was triggered by an interview newly appointed director, Pernille Schaltz, of the main public library in Copenhagen. In the interview, Pernille Schaltz stated among other things that the library should rethink its communication of books and other media. As a consequence, some books needed to be removed from the shelves and put in the basement because space was needed for this new communication initiative. From publishers and (fiction) authors mainly, the responses came immediately: libraries are for books only and nothings, quality fiction will suffer heavily from this initiative, libraries are not bookstores with focus on popular titles etc.

At times, the debate was rough. But it demonstrated a gap between what a larger public (or some part of it at least) expected of a library and the self-understanding libraries had (and have). In that sense, the debate was once productive and yet old. It was productive because it made the public and libraries and librarians aware of that they do not know each other anymore. This must necessarily lead to a re-consideration on both sides of what the function of public libraries is in society. However, the debate also re-articulated an 'old' debate because this clash of expectations has always been there. And this is our point in this article. The library has always been 'empty' in the sense that a library is historically and culturally contingent. The understanding of what a library is is always dependent on the social and cultural discourses giving 'content' to a library. In a Danish context for instance, during the last century, the library has been talked about as a place for enlightenment, a cultural center, an information center, a learning center and lately the experience library. All these labels demonstrate that a library is exposed to different ways of talking about and understanding them. And these different ways of talking about and understanding

libraries are a result of the many visions of libraries. But they are also a result of a number of broader social and cultural tendencies which libraries are part of. Libraries cannot ignore these tendencies but must try to cope with them. That is not the same thing as saying libraries must follow prevailing social and cultural tendencies. But it is to say that libraries must respond to these tendencies in some way or another. And this is exactly what makes the library empty.

2. What makes the empty library: the library is the message

As already stated, the notion of the empty library suggests that a given concept is not to be understood with reference to some form of essentialism. We cannot define once and for all what a library is as this would dismantle the library from the historical and cultural contingencies on which library development depends. A library is what the different historical epochs in human history make of it.

But what is the point in emphasizing this? Let us start with the reverse argument; that a library can be defined once and for all. For the sake of the argument, let us say that a library is a collection of books, no matter what history and social and human development say of it. Such an understanding of a library makes it vulnerable to media change. Looked upon from a media historical perspective, defining a library with reference to a particular medium, the book, ignores the fact that the book as a medium is a relatively new invention in human history. The medium of the book is a product of the invention of printing. But libraries existed before the advent of printing. Libraries have also collected manuscripts (cf. Andersen, 2008). And before writing, societies and cultures relied on the oral medium for the collection and circulation of knowledge and culture. Thus, libraries have an historical origin connecting them with the activity of transmitting culture. Wright (1977), for instance, argues that the first Greek libraries emerged during the transition of the Greek culture from a primary oral culture to a culture based on a written tradition. The Homeric tradition of oral transmission of culture and the library's communication of written texts are similar in informational function despite their different cultural points of departure. With this, Wright (1977) points to how an understanding of the notion of libraries as collections of written knowledge is too narrow. Transmitting culture can be done, and is being done, using different media. This is the lesson learned from the notion of the media matrix as argued by Finnemann (2001). Each epoch in human history can be understood '...according to the various sets of media available for the production and circulation of meaning and information...' (Finnemann, 2001, p. 6). Finnemann (2001, p. 6-8) makes the following media division of societies:

1. Oral cultures based mainly on speech

2. Literate cultures based on speech and writing
3. Print cultures (speech + written texts + printing)
4. Mass-media cultures: speech + written texts + print + analogue electric media
5. Second-order alphabetic cultures: speech + written texts + print + analogue electric media + digital media.

Such a media matrix "... represents a staging of history into epochs. Each new matrix can be considered as epoch-making in a number of different — and it is claimed — significant ways, not least in respect to social and cultural paradigms, to communicative genres, and to dominating paradigms of knowledge" (Finnemann, 2001, p. 9). What is interesting about this media matrix is that any media is not replaced by the emergence of a new medium. Rather, different media stabilize according to their invariant characteristics.

Besides this, the media matrix also demonstrates the growing complexity in production and circulation of meaning and knowledge. And the library as a function and institution must be understood precisely with reference to this. In fact, one can go as far as to say that when looked upon in this way, the reason why it is not sufficient, or even satisfactorily, to understand a library as a collection of books only, is that such an understanding ignores the larger media-historical picture constituting any library. For instance, libraries do not only communicate forms of media. Libraries also use media (e.g. online catalog) for storing and communicating other media. Thus, like the content of any medium is always other media (McLuhan, 1964), and media develop, shape and are shaped by, other media (Finnemann, 2001). So it is with libraries. They are sensitive to media development as libraries shape, are shaped by, and communicate various forms of media.

Thus, understanding libraries in light of media makes it impossible to say what a library definitively is. However, given that the content of a library is other media (books, magazines, digital media etc.), it makes us able to say that, paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan's (1964) old dictum that 'the medium is the message', the library is the message. In other words, what constitutes a library is dependent on the various forms of media used in and communicated by a library. These forms of media emerge, develop and change, and the uses media are put to, as a result of social and cultural development.

In the public debate about the role of Danish public libraries, the debate was essentially boiled down to a question of discourses on media: the book versus digital media. This unproductive dichotomy itself draws attention to how different understandings of libraries are a product of, on the one hand, what a library communicates and, on the other hand, what means a library apply to store and communicate knowledge and meaning. The following part of our paper will analyze

these discourse positions and their respective views on media and the library.

3. Discourse analysis – a Foucauldian approach

We found our analysis of the Danish debate on the role for the public library in a discourse analytic approach inspired by the thoughts of the French theorist, Michel Foucault. Foucault identifies a discourse as historical and cultural given rules that define what we do and think. This means that a discourse is a kind of a social practise and that it interacts with other practises, institutions and with social and political relations (Foucault, 2001, p. 74 and 114). Foucault identifies the statement as the atom of discourse – it is not the text, the document or the work. With his discourse analytic approach, an analysis only focuses on the very existence of the statement in order to map the regularities between statements, which then define the discourse (Foucault, 2001, p. 80-83).

Consequently, the discourse analytic approach focuses on language and linguistic elements and not on the individuals. The discourse defines a regime of truth that governs by combining power and knowledge. Thus, the transformation of discourses gives rise to new regimes of truth that govern our understanding of – in this case – public libraries. At the same time a discourse tends to exclude other discourses as an undesired opposition. This is what could be termed “the other”.

The individual is characterised by subject positions that fragmentize the individual (Foucault, 2000, p. 22). The individual is thus not the driving force of change, history or evolution. For our analysis this implies that the debaters that took part in the debate on the book vs. the new digital media are able to represent different and even disparate positions. In the debate we have thus focused on primarily two different subject positions: *the author position* or the self-defined book-lover on the one hand and on the other hand *the librarian position* or the self-defined advocate of postmodern times. Without any doubt, the author position would be reckoned as the most powerful of the two which was frequently stressed by the many remarks on librarians’ non-existing academic knowledge on literature (Nyeng, January 19th, 2008)). In this way, the author position in fact denied the librarians the right to discuss the role of the qualitatively good fiction in the library.

4. The library as the museum of books

The main object of the many discourses is then the media in the public library: the book versus the variety of digital media – or more specifically the role of the good novel, poetry and other high brow literature vs. trash novels and computer games of all kinds. Behind this is the notion of the book as the only medium that is able to qualify knowledge and entertainment (Editorial, January 6th, 2008). Here it is quite interesting to see that the author position strongly emphasises that the public library provides fiction. There is no doubt that fiction always has

played a major role in public libraries. However, it was the provision of non-fiction that was the prime argument for those advocating for a public library system in Denmark at the beginning of the 20th century (Skouvig, 2004).

The main strategy from the author position is to link the high brow literature to the field of cultural policy in Denmark (Andersen, 2007b, December 28th). As an instrument of cultural policy, it is then the obligation of the public library to provide the population with good literature. This ideological claim has however some interesting economic aspects. The ‘good’ literature is largely associated with literature that does not sell well in bookstores. The hidden assumption is that this literature is so important to Danish national identity that it has to be accessible for everybody now and in the future. Thus, the library is connected to a unique understanding of Danish cultural policy where it functions primarily as a repository for this literature. In this respect, the library also serves as a social security organisation for those authors whose books do not sell well. Those authors whose books do sell well do not need the libraries to provide their literature and the author position then points to the library as a correction to the market (Rønno-Jessen, 2008, January 10th). However, this economic strategy is concealed behind a profound anxiety on behalf of the fragility of the good literature that, so the author position requires attention and special care. Thus, the author position was strengthened by the advantageous position of protecting (some) parts of Danish culture that would all too easily be forgotten if pure market forces were to run the library. Moreover, the author position thus speaks within a discourse framed by the Danish welfare state system.

The discursive link to the Danish welfare state system allows us more specifically to identify the concepts that describe the public library. However, it is important to stress that this discursive formation is clearly defined by a strong sense of history. The library that is designated by the author position is situated in the classic public library. But it is not just classical: it is the “crown jewel” and “cornerstone of the Danish welfare state” (Lavrsen, January 19th-20th, 2008). It is “...the flagship of the efforts in Denmark to distribute education and culture to the population...” (Bjørnkjær, December 31st, 2007). In this respect, it is emphasised that the public library gives everybody free access to information regardless of class. Thus, the public library is conceived of as a keystone in Danish democracy.

The notion of the classic Danish public library implies a strong focus on books. Visually and physically it is characterised by books – many debaters describe their own childhood experiences in the library and how amazing it was to grass among the bookshelves. They recall the “...sweet smell of paper...” (Andersen & Kassebeer, 2008, January 12th, p. 5) and miss the

possibility of silence and contemplation. The public library is associated with a cathedral emphasising the code of silence. In a huge article “Once upon a time there was a public library” (Andersen and Kassebeer, January 12th 2008), the introduction is an extensive quote from a 1930 description of the public libraries as sanatoriums for the sick mind of the city. Both metaphors underline the secluded position of the library as the “temple of knowledge” (Dahlkild, 2006).

The conception of the library as a sanctuary for the books is underlined by the frequent use of the translation of the word ‘library’: “As we all know, library means a collection of books...” (Rønnov-Jensen, January 10th, 2008). In this way, the public library is associated with a function of being a museum: “...the libraries are our cultural memory...” In order to accentuate the library as a museum of books, the pledge is raised that the public library is one of the oldest cultural institutions dating it to the establishment of the University Library in Copenhagen in 1482 (Andersen and Kassebeer, January 12th 2008). Consequently, there is no distinction between the function of an academic library and the function of a public library. It could of course be argued that academic libraries in Denmark are accessible to the public (especially through the public libraries). But it does show a major gap between librarians’ knowledge on the Danish library system (there is a huge difference between the purpose of academic and public libraries) and the public’s view on libraries (it is a library regardless of its function as academic or public library). It is obvious that the inclusion of academic libraries confused the discussion on the new media in the public library because the national library in particular serves as a book museum. However, there is still a major clash in the expectations to libraries as the academic libraries in some respects are far more digitized than the public libraries.

Accordingly, from the perspective of the author position, there is no need for changing the public library. Or rather – the public library should revitalise traditional values for promoting fiction. The role of public libraries is in that case to stimulate the world of reading and this implies that the local public library has to represent a variety of fiction. It is not enough that one can get to all literature in Denmark by a click with the mouse (Laugesen, P. 2008, January 5th). Even the smallest local library should include Kirkegaard’s “The Seducer’s Diary” in its collection (Vinn Nielsen, January 19th-20th, 2008).

The librarians should then focus on promoting the literature that the users do not find themselves, bringing them new insight and the possibility of changing their lives (Henriksen, 2008, January 8th). Consequently, the public libraries should not focus on attracting the non-users (Winge, 2008, January 5th and Kühlmann, March 3rd, 2008). If somebody deselects the public library it is their own choice and at their disadvantage (Henriksen, 2008, January 8th). If the author position is not that specific concerning how libraries should promote

literature it is very explicit concerning the visions that librarians have for the (post)modern library. The author position is relying on a discourse of fear for a cultural loss when it describes this postmodern library as an after school care and functions as media centres (Kassebeer, 2008, January 19th, 12). In this way, the author position conceives of the librarians’ visions for changing the library as “the other” – which nobody should talk about.

5. “The book needs resistance”

What is it then that forced debaters into a quite conservative position defending a public library system that is conceived of as a treasure of the welfare state? The debate was initiated by an interview with the newly appointed director of the main public library in Copenhagen. In the interview she argued for the controversial view that a substantial amount of books had to be weeded from the library’s collection in order to create place for promoting the newest books and presenting digital media (Andersen, 2007a, December 28th). From a librarian position, there is nothing new with this: libraries weed out their collections regularly under observance of more or less accepted rules. Furthermore, librarians work with new ways of promoting literature in order to excite users to read for them unknown literature. Thus, the librarian position in the debate was characterised by attempts to position the public library in contemporary society.

The huge focus on history presented by the author position is somewhat ambiguous to the librarian position. The way that the librarian position described the public library is founded in a professionalization discourse. In this discourse the librarian needs to oppose to what basically is the librarian stereotype: the unmarried elderly woman with a bun, wearing glasses and who especially does not welcome users into the library. This librarian is defined as a bookworm who is guarding the books and does not fancy of borrowing them to the users (Skouvig, 2004). In this debate it is interesting to see that the librarian position characterises the traditional library as old-fashioned and fears the librarian who “...just takes care of long rows of books...” (Lavrsen, 2008, January 19th-20th). “The other” for the librarian position is the conception of the library as a museum of books for researchers (Jørgensen, 2008, January 12th). On the other side, the librarian position involved history as documentation when arguing that the promotion of literature always has been and will be a part of the library function. Furthermore, using history the librarian position wants to underline that digital media in no respect is a break with traditional librarian work. Digital media are simply new forms for e.g. communication and information searching almost but not entirely superseding the traditional media for such activities (Lavrsen, 2008, January 19th-20th). Librarians do not just conceive of computers, internet and digital media as sexy. They simply just adopt new technologies for improving the work in ways librarians always have done.

When arguing for new digital media in the library, the librarian position relies on a powerful connection to the Danish Act on Libraries from 2000. First of all, this act defines the purpose of the libraries as "...putting books, journals, audio books and other suitable materials ... at the disposal of the Danish population." (Lov om Biblioteksvirksomhed §1). Other suitable materials are among other things defined as electronic information resources including Internet and multimedia. In this respect, the librarian position argues that libraries are legally obliged to promote digital media. However, it is not only a question of the legal obligation. It is from the librarian position also a question of generating a new cultural ideal that adapts to contemporary society. The libraries are thus centres for qualifying the population (especially the youth) to navigate with new media and make them able to interpret these media (Lavrsen, January 19th-20th 2008). Libraries are supposed to "...appeal to a critical awareness, sense of quality, aesthetics and integrity." (Kassebeer, 2008, January 19th, p. 13). Therefore, it is necessary to place digital media on equal footing with the traditional books. Within the legal discourse, the librarian position points to the first paragraph in the Act on Libraries where it is stated that the purpose of public libraries is to "...advance enlightenment, education and cultural activity..." (Lov om Biblioteksvirksomhed, 2000, §1). In order to do so, library collections are to reflect topicality, variety and quality (Lov om Biblioteksvirksomhed, 2000, §2). Together, these two paragraphs are the keystone for the activities in the library. From the librarian point of view, this would be linked to the understanding that the library has to change when society changes.

The most powerful ideology from the history of libraries is the discourse on emancipation. Within this discourse the library is defined as a place for empowerment. From the very beginning, libraries focused on engaging the entire population in reading and thus empower all citizens with the ability of improving their lives through education. At the outset, this meant that non-fiction (as mentioned above) was at the centre of attention. Secondly, it meant a democratisation of high brow culture (Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Jochumsen, p. 101). Throughout the 20th century this focal point changed: democratising culture meant respecting the different cultures represented by the users in the library (Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Jochumsen, p 124ff). Relying on this history, the librarian position argues that it is not just a question of putting high brow culture in long rows at the disposal of the users. It is a question of promoting literature actively and of organising knowledge using different media (Andersen, 2007a December 28th).

6. Concluding

In the context of the debate on the book vs. the new digital media in Danish public libraries it seems as if the

major gap lies in the assumption that the public library in Denmark is a transcendental category. By this we mean that the author position claims knowledge on what a library is and that libraries do not change. The main question is though if the library claimed by the author position to be the essence of the public library has existed at all?

The librarian position tends to acknowledge that libraries reflect the surrounding society. However, the librarian position did not succeed in communicating this in the debate. The reason for this could be found in librarians' antipathy towards their own history. This antipathy is probably based in the fear of the librarian stereotype. Recollecting history would from this point of view also recollect exactly the library that the librarian position wants to change. Nevertheless, the librarian position missed the opportunity for asking the essential questions: What is a library? Or in other words: if we imagine a situation today where we should try to define an institution as the public library how do we then argue for a library?

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