



Developing the library

Between efficiency, accountability and forms of recognition

Nanna Kann-Christensen and Jack Andersen

Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine and critique the dominant new public management (NPM)-mode of thinking in library development.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors examine the Danish Library Act from 2000 and a library policy from the municipal library of Aarhus in Denmark in order to show how they respectively display new public management thinking and handle pathologies of recognition.

Findings – The Danish Library Act from 2000 reflects an economic discourse which makes it hard for libraries to develop any normatively grounded agenda. The library policy from the municipal library of Aarhus reveals that it intends to deal with handling recognition but actually does the opposite.

Research limitations/implications – The context surrounding libraries and library development is becoming more political than ever. User groups are more diverse than ever and some do not even feel as being part of society. If libraries are to cope with this situation, they must try to work with the concept of recognition as an explicit part of their library activity. Otherwise libraries stand in danger of being considered a party closed to all but a selected few which would then contribute to a lack of recognition for those who are not being invited to the party. The forms of recognition can thus be used to structure library policies and library development

Originality/value – The analyses provided in this article show that libraries should be aware of how they describe and see their activities and practices.

Keywords Public sector organizations, Library management, Public libraries, Public policy, Denmark

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In contemporary society, public institutions, both social and cultural, face pressures and challenges from various positions in society. For instance, politicians want value for money; citizens demand that these institutions justify and make clear their activity in relation to other similar activities, and the public institutions themselves try to respond to changes in cultural and social structures as part of their struggle for social and political recognition. However, if politicians demand value for money in a more explicit way, it is not because they necessarily think they do not get it. If citizens all of a sudden demand that society's social and cultural institutions should justify and explicate their activity, it is not because citizens necessarily distrust society's institutions and their *raison d'être*, and when public institutions act in response to

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changes in social and cultural contexts it is not necessarily because they believe in the changes in themselves. One may argue that such pressures and changes are taking place now because modern societies are in a state of change due to, for instance, globalization, the decline of the importance of the nation state, new means and modes of communication and new social, cultural and economic structures. From this, it follows that all society's institutions, divisions of labor, ways of working and ways of communicating knowledge must be reconsidered and maybe reconfigured. This further entails that the positions which society's institutions, divisions of labor, ways of working and ways of communicating knowledge previously inhabited are now open for discussion. In short, society and its structures are not only in a state of change but also in a state of argumentation and communication.

As all other institutions and practices in society must try to deal with current forms of social change, so must libraries. What is crucial is how libraries choose to deal with these changes. Libraries should therefore conceive of present pressures and challenges as an opportunity to deeply reconsider their function in society. We cannot reasonably claim that libraries do not do this. But it seems like they tend to take over a neo-liberal way of thinking, which in the long-run may which in the long run may lead to their own death.

Libraries are not unaware of the pressures and challenges modern society brings along. To libraries, it is not a novel approach to communicate, explicate or market its activity. What is new, however, is the way the surrounding world recognizes and expects something particular of library activity because we now have activities and practices around us that resemble traditional library activities (e.g. search engines, Amazon.com, Web 2.0 or even library cafés such as www.thelaundromatcafe.com.) Due to new media, new publics and new modes of communication, what we know for sure is that libraries and their function in society and culture are not what they used to be. How we recognize and what to expect from a library is transformed or is in a state of transformation. What we do not yet know for sure is where we are heading with libraries and their function because this is dependent on how society develops communicatively. This means that uncertainty and change become terms with which libraries have to live.

All the same, as a way of dealing with the anticipated "new" role of libraries, a view on library activity has developed that emphasizes the necessity for libraries to view their activities and services as businesses having a commodity to sell, in particular articulated by matters of efficiency and a growing focus on performance measurement. Politicians and professionals alike have increasingly focused on the efficiency of institutions. One could even argue that efficiency has become vital in terms of funding and political legitimacy. Optimizing efficiency is a favorable strategy for libraries as it is both simple to work with and it is rewarded by the political stakeholders. It is something that is common to many public institutions as there has been a persistent focus on bringing the public sector up to speed by importing control mechanisms from the private sector. Examples of this are competition for funding (see, e.g. Kann-Christensen, 2006), outsourcing of various library services, and measuring customer satisfaction with quantitative indicators (see, e.g. Pors, 2004). This is not necessarily an attempt to deny that libraries are social and cultural institutions but to make libraries see and understand their mission in terms of an economic discourse. That is, an economic discourse, in this view, is not only restricted to the markets of cars

and shoes but also applies to markets with less tangible products such as knowledge. Furthermore, the current neo-liberal way of thinking makes the library more oriented towards current demand than towards what they could and should supply in society. This can also be seen as a response to natural uncertainty in an ever-changing environment as mentioned above. Furthermore, the economic discourse presents itself in the way libraries measure themselves and are measured. It is an old discussion that the mission of libraries in society is difficult to measure (i.e. is it possible to measure the impact libraries have on local citizens' cultural awareness?). It has become vital for libraries to demonstrate to politicians that their services are being provided in a cost-efficient way. This is understandable, but it shows that the before-mentioned economic discourse operates on several levels.

In this article, we argue that in order to focus on what is important for library development in the twenty-first century; the discussion should mainly revolve around the content and the context (i.e. the mission) of libraries and not mainly around efficiency and marketing. In order to legitimize themselves and their activities, public libraries should be conscious of the importance of their ability to inform the public about what they offer in terms of the kind of institution they are and the kind of activity they perform in culture and society compared to other social and cultural institutions and practices offering similar activities. This motivates the following structure in the article.

First, we will present a short overview and critique of the economic discourse in the public sector. Second, we will analyse how the present Danish Library Act from 2000 is influenced by the economic discourse as an example of the impact of such discourse on the national and political level. This serves to show how politics in Denmark makes it even harder for public libraries to argue accountability and their mission in society. From here, we will move on to develop an argument based on the work of German social theorist Axel Honneth and his theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995). The theory of recognition calls for a change in what are seen as central social problems in modern social analysis. This is a change from addressing and understanding social problems in terms of providing spaces for rational communicative action to understanding social problems as problems of recognition and how to cope with them. Given this change, we argue, libraries must deal with problems of recognition as part of their normative grounding in society. To illustrate the argument, we provide library policy examples from the municipal library of Aarhus in Denmark. Thus, our argument will proceed through a discussion of the difference between legitimizing the library by efficiency and legitimizing the library through the promotion of and argumentation for a particular mission in society.

Arguing efficiency in the public sector

In Western societies, and therefore also in Denmark, there has been a strong focus on efficiency and economy in the public sector since the 1980s. John E. Buschman expresses this by citing S. Wolin:

[...] economics now dominates the public discourse. [It] becomes the paradigm of what public reason should be [and] prescribes the form that "problems" have to be given before the can be acted upon, the kind of "choices" that exist, and the meaning of "rationality" (Wolin, cited in Buschman (2003, p. 16)).

In this context, Buschman's thesis is an interesting point of departure. He argues that libraries and librarians lack a meaningful and consistent intellectual base, which would enable them to legitimize themselves in society. Moreover, it is Buschman's argument that librarians legitimize themselves by supporting the public sphere and democratic processes and potentials. If libraries and librarians are to accomplish their role as such, they should not justify themselves in economic terms but rather in public and democratic terms. New Public Philosophy, which is Buschman's and the above-cited Wolin's term for the current economic discourse in society, makes this difficult for libraries, as we intend to demonstrate in the following.

The new public philosophy is not just a philosophy on the overall societal level, but has sifted down all the way into the municipalities and all public offices where it is known as new public management (NPM). Concepts tied to NPM are modernization of the public sector, decentralization, reforms of budgeting procedures, development of leadership styles, contract management (some would say more control, or low-trust relations between politicians and public organizations), and the introduction of market mechanisms on a larger scale; i.e. emphasis on citizens' right to choose, outsourcing and privatization (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Klausen, 1996, 2001). The starting point for NPM is a critique of the public sector (too big, ineffective, poor ability to strategic change, too bureaucratic, inflexible, poor user-orientation and so on (Klausen, 2001). Thus, it is a point of Klausen's that the NPM-package does not have a constructive or positive starting point, but rather the opposite. In short, NPM increases focus on the relation between economic inputs and outputs. We argue that when this is applied to libraries and other public sector institutions where outputs are less tangible, it becomes problematic.

According to Klausen, NPM has the basic flaw that it wants to solve problems from one sector, using modes of thinking from another sector. NPM strongly represents the private sector because it strongly coheres with market rationales. What NPM does not take into account is that public administrators and managers, such as library directors, face conflicting pressures and that the challenges, logic and rationale in the public sector are very different from the private sector (Klausen, 1996; Kann-Christensen, 2006). Klausen (2001, p. 104) lists four dimensions that characterize the public sector context. If one transfers these to public libraries, it becomes clear why an economic discourse in the libraries is problematic.

- Public libraries exist in a political environment. In the case for both management and staff, the top level of the public hierarchy are always politicians who are elected and want to be re-elected. This means that forces that drive legitimacy are fundamentally different from other sectors. Public institutions maintained by political legitimacy. As long as an institution has legitimacy, it will survive. If it loses its legitimacy, this will affect funding.
- The public library is managed within a judicial framework. A basic condition is that all citizens should be treated equally in the public sector. Traditionally, this has been connected to a responsible and bureaucratic organization managed by laws and rules.
- Public institutions provide an elaborate product and a special obligation. The tasks the public libraries perform have a very different character than the "profit

making” of the private sector. The public sector “takes care” of citizens. This leads to the last characteristic:

- The tasks and problems the public institution face are complex and diverse. Public institutions that are obliged to “take care of citizens” in a broad sense– are likely to be subjected to wicked problems (Klausen, 2001). An example of a wicked problem can be the paradox of free access to information vs copyright issues on the internet. Wicked problems are characterized by disagreements on both means and ends. The private sector certainly faces complex problems but there is always consensus in the end; the figures on the bottom line should be as high as possible.

The economic discourse described above influences libraries in different ways. During the last 30 years, librarian’s orientation towards their users’ needs and preferences has evolved and has gradually become institutionalized. For instance, Jochumsen and Hvenegaard (2006) analyse Danish public library periodicals from 1964 up until today. They show that among librarians, a certain discourse and attitude towards users has evolved from an unambiguous (elitist) concept of quality to be presented to users towards a wish to get in touch with the public on their terms (a sort of cultural democracy). The latter attitude became consolidated during the 1990s and forward. Accordingly, by now no one in their right mind would question that public libraries should reflect their users’ preferences and needs. This discourse, or institutionalized norm, we name user-orientation. However, is user-orientation the same as the phenomenon we name a “customer satisfaction view” of library activity? That is, libraries trying to manoeuvre in a public sector dominated by the economic discourse? As hinted above, the point of departure is different. In a Danish context, libraries and their user-orientation have roots in a left-wing culture that did not want to patronize patrons. It was a reaction against an elitist (bourgeois) view of culture and enlightenment. Reactions against a paternalistic relation between users and providers can be found in many aspects of society from the 1960s and 1970s until today, i.e. doctors vs. patients, teachers (professors) vs. students and also librarians vs. patrons. The other situation stems from another trend in society: new public philosophy. How does this discourse contribute to the forming of the customer satisfaction view? When economics define the dominating meaning of rationality, public institutions have to justify themselves in terms of efficiency at the expense of their social or cultural value or the character of service more than before. In this way, users become a means to legitimize the library to politicians who under the new public philosophy regime will evaluate the library in economic terms. In other words, it becomes imperative for libraries to be able to document that they have satisfied users and that they strive to make themselves visible to all potential customers. This is what we will demonstrate in the following by examining how this way of thinking has crawled into the current Danish Library Act.

Act regarding library services, 2000

The Danish Parliament passed the Act Regarding Library Services on 17 May 2000. This Act succeeded the previous one called the Act Regarding Public Libraries.

The Act which is analysed in the following is thus only the last in a series of library Acts from 1920, where the first library Act was passed, till today. As mentioned above,

the aim of this paragraph is to show how NPM reveals itself in the Act Regarding Library Services. This does not mean that this Act is entirely built upon a neo-liberal ideology. Very often public policies are ambiguous and tend to contain elements from different ideological traditions. Act Regarding Library Services is no exception from this. There are elements from both enlightenment ideology and a more social democratic ideology, which can be found in different paragraphs in the Act. The first paragraph of the Act is concerned with the purpose of libraries. The first part of this paragraph states that “The objective of the public libraries is to promote information, education and cultural activity”. Here, we find traces from the enlightenment ideology. It is stated that the libraries should contribute to the education (in the sense of “bildung”) of the Danish people. Further on, in section 19 which states that “Loan of material from the public library and service provided in the library are free of charge for the user” we find traces from an ideology which is characterized by an equality ideology or a social democratic ideology. Thus, we find competing elements from different ways of thinking and different ideologies. Even though we are able to find different ideological traditions in the Act Regarding Library Services, we find that NPM has gained a profound impact on library policies in Denmark, which we will show in the following.

The Act Regarding Library Services which are analysed here was founded on a report from a committee by the name of UBIS, which is a Danish abbreviation for libraries in the information society. The main conclusion of this committee was that libraries ought to deal with the world of new media (UBIS, 1997) and that information and culture provided by libraries should be published on both printed and electronic media. Later this was called “media equality” in libraries. One area where the final Act did not follow the UBIS committee’s recommendations was on the subject of user fees/charges for services. Already by 1997, it had become evident that this equality of media combined with copyright issues (licences) would mean increased expenses on the libraries’ budgets for materials. The UBIS committee was parted on this subject. But the majority was of the opinion that the current legislation should be eased so that municipalities to a greater or lesser extent would be allowed to charge their users for lending (though not the lending of books). What the committee did agree on, however, was that the current regulation of the libraries should be combined with some form of economic control mechanisms. This does not only concern user fees, but can also be seen as a recommendation of contract management in the library field, something which increases the emphasis on the relation between economic inputs and outputs. The main reason for not introducing user’s fees was the fear of promoting inequality among Danish citizens. It has also been argued by Jochumsen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen (2006) that the principle of free access to knowledge and information (in the sense of free of charge) is a strong part of librarians’ and libraries’ identity.

Even though it seems that there have been forces in the Danish library field that have fought against the economic discourse, the Act Regarding Library Services contains some very strong market rationales. One of the most distinctive features is §20, which concerns commercial services rendered by the library.

With the Act Regarding Library Services, it becomes possible for libraries to charge for “special” services of a more extensive character than lending and normal use. Municipal libraries can sell knowledge obtained by the libraries in connection with ordinary tasks. The sale of these special services is not supposed to affect the attention given to the ordinary core tasks of the library. Section 20 was not just a possibility for

the library; it was actually thought that the money the libraries could make should contribute to the growing expenses that were a result of the equality of the media. It was believed that section 20 would imply an earnings of ca. 15-20 million DKK annually. Consequently, here we can see how this part of the Act is extremely influenced by NPM.

It is an important point that many of the larger libraries in Denmark tried and that none really succeeded in making a lasting programme for commercial services. This was criticized in the evaluation of the Act, and the head of the National Library Authority Jens Thorhauge (2004) wrote that this was due to “apathy on the verge of active unwillingness against commercial services among library staff”. Nevertheless, some of the largest libraries did make independent units in their organization in order to try and make it work.

Section 20 in the Act Regarding Library Services, and the Act in general, is a good example of how the economic discourse has penetrated into the library world. It is perfectly in line with NPM thinking that libraries should compete for customers and that they can spend money they have earned themselves. This and other examples show how the economic, liberal mode of thinking is influencing library activity (see, e.g. Pors and Johannsen, 2003, Pors, 2004; Brücker and Høy, 2003; Kann-Christensen, 2006; Adcroft and Willis, 2005).

In summary, NPM-philosophy clearly distances itself from any sort of normative considerations in terms of content and context. We have shown that the public libraries are based in both a social democratic and a neo-liberal ideology, but that the NPM-rationales are gaining the upper hand. But if library development in today’s modern societies is based primarily in NPM-thinking, it is very hard to gain any sort of justification at all. Why should a public library be financed by tax-payers if its activity is like any other market-oriented company selling a particular good and whose survival is dependent on market shares and surpluses? If we do not generate a counter-argument to this, it becomes very hard to convince politicians and the public that public libraries are a good social and cultural investment. Thus, in the following, we will develop a normative argument for libraries based on the theory of recognition put forward by Axel Honneth in his book, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Honneth, 1995).

Accountability and forms of recognition

It is not unusual for libraries to conceive of their essential activity as ensuring free access to information and knowledge, thereby invoking a kind of a Habermasian public sphere ideal (Habermas, 1991). Consequently, libraries typically understand their role as guardians of democracy. We may go as far as to say that libraries are founded on this ideology. We name this “the accountability view” of library activity because it recognizes that libraries have a mission that is more than fulfilling a market demand. It is fully legitimate for libraries to understand their aims and functions according to such a view. But if the surrounding society does not recognize the library as performing such an activity, how are libraries to demonstrate their significance to society and culture? How do libraries justify their activity to society and culture? Our answer, and argument, is that libraries in present times should develop strategies articulating new understandings of what it means to be a library and what it means to go to and use a library. The development of such strategies is critical because

traditional library activities are now also being challenged by similar activities on the internet. Libraries as physical institutions may not be able to compete on equal footing with search engines and like activities on the Internet. Libraries are supposed to offer much more than search facilities. Yet, the problem is that if citizens do not recognize libraries for more than that, then libraries face a problem they must deal with. Citizens may hold a view of libraries as one element among many in their everyday life that they make use of when seeking information. If this is so, then libraries should, as argued by Wiegand and Bertot (2003), understand their function in the life of the user and not the user in the life of the library; that is, libraries should not estimate their own value in terms of how particular users and user groups use the library, or what they get out of the library, but rather how libraries can make a qualitative difference to particular users and user groups in their particular social and cultural lives. Therefore, libraries must exhibit accountability by creating structures that can generate public expectations about new modes of being a library. The answer, we claim, is not to commodify library activity because that is to remove attention further away from the library as a place where, among other things, social, cultural and economic inequality dissolves. Rather, we argue that if libraries are to market themselves in the new social, cultural and media landscape it is of absolute necessity that they are able to create expectations about what kind of place they are, a kind of low-intensive meeting place as suggested by Audunson (2005) but with a more normative commitment.

We will now proceed with an analysis of libraries and their activity highlighting how libraries are and are not able to deal with cultural and social issues in modern society. As mentioned previously, libraries still seem to cling to the classic doctrine of providing free and equal access to information; it is an institutionalized norm, so to speak. This doctrine is a product of a way of thinking from when inequality in society was mainly understood in economic terms. However, according to German sociologist Axel Honneth, the social struggle going on in modern society is not one of economics only but also of recognition (Honneth, 1995). The theory of recognition offered by Axel Honneth is his suggestion for a modern critical social theory. Honneth emphasizes recognition not only as an important part but also a neglected part of social theory. Through a reading of Hegel's work on recognition, Honneth makes use of a concept with roots in ethics, social philosophy and moral philosophy. Focusing on recognition as a crucial concept in social theory, Honneth is in contrast to Habermas and his emphasis on the rational dialogue and communicative action as Honneth claims that social recognition is the normative condition for communicative action. Honneth claims that critical social theory in modern society must be concerned not with the tensions between system and life-world but with those social causes responsible for the systematic misrepresentation of the conditions of recognition. Society and its dysfunctional development are not to be explained with reference to a lack of rational conditions for communication. Rather, it is a question of the inter-subjective conditions for the development of human identity. Moreover, Honneth claims that as a normative condition for dialogue, recognition is better at explaining those socio-cultural distortions and tensions caused by social structures than Habermas' theory of communicative action. The theory of recognition seeks to explain that what constitutes the condition of possibilities of distortions and tensions is the lack of recognition and Honneth criticizes the theory of communicative action for not being capable of doing

this. Thus, Honneth argues, it is pathologies of recognition that must be central in social analysis.

But what are pathologies of recognition? In modern society the indications of such pathologies are stress, depressions and lack of self-esteem or self-consciousness among individuals. Our modern society and its struggles can be understood and conceptualized along these lines. In a classical manner, Honneth divides society into spheres: the intimate sphere, the legal sphere and the social sphere. Honneth describes them as spheres of recognition. In the intimate sphere the basic form of recognition is love. Through this form of recognition, the precondition of an individual's self-consciousness is developed and the individual's fundamental ability to enter into inter-subjective relationships is also developed. In the legal sphere, recognition is expressed through universal rights and respect of the individual. By expressing universal rights, the moral responsibility of an individual is gained, and through this the individual develops self-respect and esteem. In the social sphere, recognition is created through the relationship of an individual to a particular group or community. It is by means of such relationships the individual is recognized in terms of its unique particularity and its mode of recognizing itself. In these three spheres of recognition, the modern individual is shaped and fully individualized. Consequently, if these spheres of recognition are violated by means of, for instance, physical abuse, rape and torture (the intimate sphere), self-consciousness is destroyed. If rights are ignored in the legal sphere, self-respect is damaged. Finally, in the social sphere, if particular forms of life or ways of doing are disregarded, humiliated or not appreciated, the individual's feeling of being socially significant is seriously damaged. So, corresponding to the spheres of recognition are the consequences of a lack of recognition. These lacks of recognition are the primary social problems in modern society. In other words, marginalized groups may be poor and have social problems, but in present times the real problems arise when these groups do not feel understood, appreciated and listened to. Accordingly, the main challenge for modern social analysis is to identify patterns of recognition in society, and in particular the absence of such patterns in modern life and the implications for identity formations. The modern individual cannot function as an individual and citizen with rights and duties without a corresponding form of recognition. A lack of this will eventually end up in identity crisis. Thus, a lack of recognition for individuals and social groups is not only a problem for the individual, according to Honneth, but it is also a public problem, as it constitutes a threat to the democratic society and its structures from within.

Understood in this light, libraries in their own struggle for recognition must rethink what it means to provide free and equal access to information and for whom. Libraries must ask what, how and to what extent they can contribute to the recognition certain groups in society struggle for. Moreover, libraries will have to look at which social groups and their struggle for recognition libraries in fact do support. Whereas a stereotyped Habermasian understanding of the library would say that the library is, or should be, a place for rational communication, an instance of the public sphere, the Honneth approach allows stating that you cannot expect rational communication in the library, or motivated by the library, if the appropriate forms of recognition are not present or articulated. That is, the modern library cannot claim to make rational communication possible if it does not accept social recognition as a prerequisite. Discussing and conceptualizing the role of the library, then, is not to dismiss rational

communication as one of its socio-cultural objectives. But there is a deeper level that must be dealt with in order to achieve these objectives and this is recognition. This changes the role of the library as it should not be working with rational communication but with how to handle, articulate and produce recognition. An increased focus on recognition situates the modern library in a field of conflict, which it cannot avoid but should take as a challenge and point of departure for its activities. Thus, in order to exhibit accountability libraries must address how they handle pathologies of recognition. Reflections about libraries' mission in society should be written in library policies both on the national level as in the library Acts, and on the local level in library policies made by the local politicians.

As we see it, Honneth's theory of recognition challenges libraries and their self-understanding. However, we believe that libraries can handle the challenge and through this strengthen their position in society by dealing with recognition as part of their activity. We do not say that the library is a social institution responsible for all members of society and their wellbeing. But we do say that the library is a political institution with democratic obligations, which in some countries is legitimated by library Acts. What sort of challenges are libraries confronted with when they deal with recognition?

First of all, we are often told that a library is a place where social inequality is reduced or even dissolved. But when taking a look at what media culture libraries represent, the bottom line is that libraries clearly preference a culture of reading or writing (digital or otherwise). For those parts of the population whose experience and contact with this media culture (e.g. through school attendance) correspond to defeat, frustration, and a lack of self-confidence and self-worth, the cultural offers of the library are not appealing or tempting exactly because these groups are not in possession of, or have a low degree of, those skills that it takes to manage such a culture. Thus, it cannot be claimed that the library pays attention to these groups in terms of recognition. One means for libraries to cope with this problem is to observe the surrounding world (e.g. non-users) and through this lens see how the surrounding world observes libraries.

Honneth explains the lack of recognition in society with reference to the lack of public arenas for un-articulated utterances produced by various social classes. That is to say, for particular social classes there is not a public discourse available for them to articulate utterances and feelings. This obstructs the creation of identities, of feelings of belonging to a particular society and this constitutes a threat for democracy. This means, second, that libraries are being challenged as a democratic institution and as an institution communicating democratic culture. Libraries then must work with "converting" un-articulated utterances and feelings to public utterances and feelings. This demands the construction of a public consciousness about and expectations of what a modern library is like in the twenty-first century. The library of course represents a media culture, but the library is also a place for self-realization and human identity construction through the use of the particular remedies and space available. The library is also a place where your knowledge, attitude, opinions and beliefs can be substantiated, supported but not least invalidated. Exactly, as it happens with social technologies such as Wikipedia. In other words: libraries are not supposed to only sustain and use social technologies in the struggle for recognition. The library is in itself a social technology where users in dialogue with the library create the library and

their own identities and social relations. The three spheres of recognition represent the social realities of users and the library is supposed to manage and create space for these users. That is why the whole idea of library development can understand its activity as a sort of social technology. Libraries are supposed to observe and identify society and culture and the movements within here that may or may not articulate lack of recognition. This makes library development equivalent to development of culture and here is the true modern library activity positioned. Thus, the old library dogma about free and equal access to knowledge and information becomes free and equal access to self-realization and identity construction. In this manner, we can claim that the library handles recognition.

Third, no matter how difficult, idealistic or politically correct it may be to work with recognition, it does not remove the fact that the reality of libraries must be social reality as it is experienced by the social and cultural groups who live in it and which the activities of libraries are orienting toward. We do not claim that libraries are ignoring this. But we do say that the concept of recognition forces libraries to work with their political side as an unambiguous part of their communication activities. Because of the political focus on value-based policy in modern society, it has become difficult to differentiate between culture, forms of life and politics. Given this, libraries cannot in their self-understanding claim to be concerned with communication of culture and knowledge only because in this very activity they also communicate and make possible a democratic political culture.

Fourth, a means for libraries to act upon, or show interest in, pathologies of recognition could be to take part in the public sphere. For instance, with the help of the digital representation of their libraries (i.e. their homepages), whenever there is a debate of social interest libraries could contribute to nuancing such a debate by outlining the various positions involved and providing links to information on the topic. When the cartoon controversy hit Denmark, it was very hard to find libraries giving information about this. Why did they not use this as an opportunity to show the strength of libraries: that of providing information about all positions in the debate? If libraries are cornerstones in democracy, we should expect them to contribute to developing social and political consciousness.

Library policies are a well-suited means for articulating what kind of place a library is and what to expect of it. However, when reading library policies they tend to leave the impression that libraries still hold to a rather traditional defensive view of the role of libraries in society. For instance, the public library in Aarhus, Denmark, has formulated ten library policy objectives. All of them emphasize what libraries are supposed to do (e.g. provide free and equal access to information) and what they can offer (e.g. communication of culture using all relevant media). None of these library policy objectives say anything about how the library intends to act in the public realm or how to handle forms of recognition. When it comes to what may resemble a way of handling forms of recognition, the library in Aarhus states in one of their library policy objectives that their libraries[1] must strengthen the integration of refugees and immigrants. This objective says, among other things, that:

The social cohesion is considered to be one of the greatest assets of Danish society, but globalization, network economy, change in methods of production, rapid technological development and lack of a common set of norms cause our society to in certain ways appear increasingly non-homogeneous and fragmented compared to earlier days. This development

in addition to the growing number of Aarhus citizens with a foreign ethnic and cultural background has brought on a pressure on the social cohesion and the traditional shared core values (www.aakb.dk/sw74904.asp).

Seen from the point of view of Honneth's argument about the struggle for recognition, this objective reveals more about the library's self-understanding than its contribution to strengthening integration. Social cohesion is referred to as "...one of the greatest assets of Danish society..." However, both this asset and "...the traditional shared core values..." are under pressure from citizens "...with a foreign ethnic and cultural background..." These formulations do not say that people with a different ethnic and cultural background represent strength in society. By using such formulations, this library policy objective does not invite integration but contributes heavily to a feeling of a lack of recognition.

As for the dogma about free and equal access the same objective states further that:

The libraries are a natural place for refugees and immigrants to get to know the Danish language and culture and at the same time maintain their mother tongue and cultural background through various uses of media and services. Since the core values of the libraries embody free and equal access for everyone, they are seen as a neutral retreat by many refugees and immigrants (www.aakb.dk/sw74904.asp).

In many European countries we have during the last decade or so witnessed a growing frustration among groups of refugees and immigrants. This frustration is expressed because these groups are socially and discursively stigmatized and are in many cases considered the reason for a lack of social cohesion. Certainly, such groups do not consider libraries as "...a natural place for refugees and immigrants to get to know the Danish language and culture..." because that very same language and culture do not provide them with recognition but with feelings of malfunction and negative recognition. Furthermore, refugees and immigrant may not perceive of the library as providing free and equal access to information because that depends on what kind of information is provided. What if the culture and life-styles of refugees and immigrants and information about them are represented in a way not recognizable to refugees and immigrants and other social groups? Then, the library cannot necessarily be considered "a neutral retreat" but rather as contributing to pathology of recognition.

This is of course only one example. But if libraries are to demonstrate accountability in the way that they deal with the problem of pathologies of recognition, they should be very careful with how they formulate their library policies. Handling pathologies of recognition, we claim, represents the new content of the doctrine of providing free and equal access to information and knowledge. By active participation in the public sphere, libraries can expose (dare we say market?) themselves by creating a conception in society that a library is a discursive place where one's beliefs and attitudes can be verified, supported, or falsified. When we as citizens read about a social or political issue in the newspaper, it is often difficult to trace or follow the arguments in the debate. The library needs to be recognized as an active institution ensuring a balanced debate in society. One means to do this is of course (still) its collection (digital or physical) and the very space the library provides. Such is, we believe, the "new" library and its accountability practice.

Concluding discussion

In modern society libraries are forced to legitimize their institutional position. In this sense, one may say that libraries are caught between the demands for being “cost effective” and exhibiting accountability. Both of these may be regarded as means of marketing and legitimization. The question is whether these can go hand in hand. Obviously, libraries must exhibit rational organization and document that their funding is used accordingly. But libraries are also part of society’s total means and modes of social and cultural communication. Thus, libraries are supposed to exhibit accountability. They are supposed to perform an activity that is more normatively embedded than “just” satisfying particular groups of users.

As it is now, we have argued, libraries view the present uncertainty that comes with an ever-changing society and a constant stream of new technologies as a threat. To a large extent libraries respond to this perceived threat by trying to legitimize themselves in economic terms in order to prove their worth by being able to exhibit satisfied customers at any cost. Therefore, marketing the library becomes a question of attracting as many users as possible and giving them what they (seemingly) want. It should be emphasized that this is not necessarily the libraries’ fault that it has become to be so - the new public philosophy that encourages this strategy can be found on all levels and in all sectors in Western societies. Nevertheless, such a view of library activity has some serious flaws.

We argue that the idea of a library must be reconsidered; what it means to be a library and what a library can do in the life of users. Interpreted from the point-of-view of modern critical social theory (i.e. the theory of recognition), providing free and equal access to information and knowledge is about handling forms of recognition. That is, different people’s struggle for recognition and understanding in society must be accounted for in library activity and in library policy. Libraries must be reconsidered in such a way that different social groups feel that libraries address their life conditions and human identities. The challenge is to find out where, when and with what means different forms of recognition in different spheres are articulated and how libraries may fit in here. But the library of recognition is not a place where everybody’s wishes can become true. The library of recognition works on the borderline between customer satisfaction and the library’s normative offers and grounding. Through its activity, the library of recognition works with handling recognition towards socio-cultural groups whose public articulations have difficult conditions in social communication; that is, the library of recognition operates on the boundary between neutrality and proactive library activity.

Providing free and equal access to information is therefore not a matter of giving access to “good” literature, “satisfying” the individual customer or of showing how to become an enlightened citizen. It is a matter of how different forms of recognition are dealt with by libraries on an equal basis in the life of users. If libraries can succeed in creating such an expectation among citizens that they are a place (physical as well as digital) where free and equal access to information is dealt with in a way that corresponds to dealing with forms of recognition, then they will have successfully and effectively marketed their services and activities.

Thus, to recapitulate our argument: in order for libraries to maintain their legitimacy in society they should argue primarily for their mission in society and focus on their ability to handle recognition and aid users in developing identities and social

and political consciousness, rather than promoting efficiency. We believe that these focus-areas should be written into laws and policies regarding libraries on both the national and regional levels. As the situation in Denmark is now, we have in this article pointed to how this is not the case. Laws are of course normative. In our case, the national Act Regarding Library Services has been enlarged with the normative scope of NPM. By doing this, the Act serves to naturalize, and hence make normative, NPM as a sound way of understanding library activity. By making NPM a normative part of library activity implies that it produces an understanding of library activity as also a commercial activity, which can be seen as a contrast to another normative principle of libraries: the idea of free and equal access to knowledge. However, it is important to see the municipality of Aarhus' library policy as a step in the right direction. It is imperative for libraries that their political superiors spend time devoted to the discussion on what the local library should contribute to in the community. But our case shows that it is of vital importance that politicians and librarians take care to consider forms of recognition in this process. It is a significant point that the emphasis on NPM on the national level could make this task more difficult.

The practical implications of the analyses provided in this article are discursive; that is, libraries should be aware of how they describe and see their activities and practices. It is not a matter of trying to get out of language as we are all trapped in it. But it is a matter of not just understanding ones practices as solely a user of language but also as a producer of language. Libraries operate in a multi-cultural and political environment. It is therefore crucial that libraries are aware of how they discursively enact on the challenges and the problems this environment creates.

Note

1. There are several branch libraries affiliated with the library in Aarhus.

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Further reading

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Corresponding author

Nanna Kann-Christensen can be contacted at: nkc@db.dk