

Implications of the Web 2.0 Technologies for Public Libraries Intending to Facilitate Alternative Public Discourse

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Abstract. Social networking facilities such as blogs, chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube clearly impacts the nature and conditions of public library services. Also affected is the public library's societal role and institutional identity. Further, the massive digitization of information resources, the proliferation and popularity of search engines, in particular Google, and the booming technologies of Web 2.0 public libraries challenge traditional library service offerings. In fact, the easy-to-use technologies of Web 2.0 challenge the basic principles of information services provision undertaken by libraries. The new digital information environment and social software tools such as blogs, wikies and social networking sites have contributed new perspectives to the discussion of the future of public libraries as information providers. After all there seems to be a need for public libraries to reorient their aims and objectives and to redefine their service identity. In discussing the survival of public libraries and updating the role of libraries in the age of Google and social media, attention should be given to fleshing out a new vision for the public library as a provider of alternative information and as an institution supporting information democracy. In coming to grips with information democracy, attention is given to public libraries as democratic spaces and the role public libraries can play in hosting and organizing electronic discussion forums on, among other things, current political issues. In exploring the opportunities of public libraries as spaces of e-discussion, a handful of Danish projects concerned with involvement of citizens in political and community-related e-discussions are reviewed including a project pursued by the Aarhus Municipal Libraries (Denmark). Also revisited is the dated concept of *the political library*. Based on observations emerging from the analysis a revised role is outlined for public libraries in the era of digital information and Web 2.0 with a special focus on information democracy and the library's function as a neutral information provider in a Google-dominated commoditized information world.

Keywords: collective intelligence, information democracy, public libraries, Web 2.0, social media, democratic agoras

1 Introduction

In the present age of neoliberalism, late globalisation, down economies, retrenchments and New Public Management regimes, current discussion on public library roles seems far away from library debates and librarians' thinking in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Within the public library community of that time, a considerable amount of interest was focused on political and social priorities. Over the years, the social and political tone became less outspoken and finally it almost disappeared. Now, in the first decades of 21st century with severe problems and challenges facing the world - famine, climate change and the risk of future climate collapse, the repercussions of global financial crisis, the balance between recession and economic upturn, corrupt media conglomerates (e.g. the Rupert Murdoch Scandal), increasing disparity between rich and poor, revolts and disorder, migration pressures, etc. - the need for public libraries to re-examine their role in society and to reconsider their social responsibilities and the nature and scope of their information services has not become less relevant. Add to this the developments closer to the public library's service environment: shifts in the library users' preferences, expectations and behavioral patterns along with the manifestation and impact of new media, platforms, formats and gadgets. Thus, the e-book is coming - as usual growth trends in this area in the USA are spreading to other parts of the world including Scandinavia - and portable devices including smartphone, iPhone, iPad and a range of playware products create new media opportunities. Thus, libraries have to operate and find an identity in a dynamic and ever-changing Web 2.0 World with new services and networking forums such as the social media giant Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube and social tagging. Broadly, public libraries seem to be aware of developments in digitization of

information and the increasing growth of electronic networks. They are, with greater or lesser success, seizing the opportunities of the social media for providing information resources and services for their clients and for enhancing their web visibility. In embracing the booming social media, many libraries have set up profiles on Facebook. However, on the whole, libraries seem complacent with their role as smooth information centres and cultural experiences providers in a consumerist society. There is only little evidence that libraries have responded to the social media revolution by rethinking their purpose and adjusting their community role. A revised role for the library in the age of social networking could be one of giving more attention to acting as an institution in support of democracy and, to accordingly, encouraging and facilitating public discourse and exchange of views on current social, political, cultural, etc. issues.

2 Methodology

The study presented here aims to present and discuss ways in which public libraries can strengthen their survival capacity by drawing upon the new Web 2.0 technologies available and develop new community-oriented roles including that of serving as a resource centre for democratic processes. A pre-analysis is conducted of 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 the analysis, a revised role is outlined for public libraries in the era of digital information and Web 2.0 with a special focus on democracy sustenance and 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.

3 Literature Review

The theoretical framework provided for the present study draws on inspiration from Doctor's piece on justice and social equity in cyberspace (Doctor, 1994). This article was published in the early days of the Internet characterised as they were 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. An example of a library-driven social media effort is the launching of a project to set up a social network targeted to senior citizens (those +50) in Denmark and (2011). This age-specific social forum on the web shares some of the features of Facebook, but in some respects it differs from Facebook; for instance, no disturbing commercials and banners are included. The name of the site is Ageforce.dk. and the development of the project was funded by grant money. Ageforce.dk is based at Roskilde Library and three libraries are involved in the pilot run, but the intention is to increase the number of libraries involved. Hence, a toolbox with materials on user instruction, PR and promotion as well as the conduct of meetings and joint activities for site users, etc. is available to libraries deciding to embark on this social site project intended for mature people. Those setting up profiles on Ageforce.dk can do blogging and participate in discussions with other registered users on various issues and matters raised. However, the site cannot qualify as an initiative on the part of libraries towards initiating/prompting public and community-

wide e-discussion on specific topics and issues identified and presented by a specific library or a group of libraries.

Also, social network media can be used to highlight and boost public library services and make the library more visible to existing and potential users. In addition, public library presence on Facebook provides a branding opportunity along with a possibility for the library to adjust its public profile. A perfect example of this outgoing and market-oriented approach is the stream of infotainment-like news spread by many libraries in trying to capture the interest of users and those registering as friends or fans of the library on Facebook.

However, there are signs that a more critical awareness of Web 2.0 phenomena is beginning to gain ground. Brabazon (2006) has some serious reservations about the whole ideology behind and the peer production practices of Wikipedia and she is very concerned about what Google does to students in pursuing projects and assignments. In a very thoughtful piece, Waller (2009) takes a close look at the relations between Google and public libraries and explores similarities and differences. It is concluded that the commercial firm and the public agency simply want to 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 the 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 manipulating potentials and how they make expert knowledge and expert performance erode and gradually bring about de-professionalization in some respects. Professionals have been replaced by noble amateurs. Keen explores the seamy side of blogs and blogging and addresses the problem of tricksters and fraudulent behaviour. He provides examples of dubious editorial practices characterizing Wikipedia and the mediocrity of content provided by contributors. Above all he laments on 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 an informed selection 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 Specter (2010). The dubious and faulty nature of much web-available information is also touched upon by Vincent F. Hendricks (Lerche 2011). He points to the well-known paradox that for quite a few years it has been said that we live in the information society in that it has never been so easy for individuals to get information as it is now. And the amount of information is larger than ever. But in spite of the abundance of information, even if we have more than enough information, people are not necessarily more enlightened. In illustrating his point, Hendricks indicates that the portals most visited in 2010 was Google, Facebook and YouTube with the two last mentioned being almost exclusively synonymous with pure vanity and entertainment.

The published literature on public libraries is very sparse on the implications of Web 2.0 and social networking for the community involvement of public libraries. 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 with Lionel McColvin, UK as one of the leading figures. McCabe (2001, pp:78-79) in his monograph on *Civic Librarianship* 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 since the book appeared in 2001 there is no treatment of the challenges of e.g. social networking technologies and the way people communicate and organize information-related activities *outside* the library context after the advent of the social web revolution. The author's insistence on civic dialogue and social interaction is also of relevance when discussing and defining the role of the public library in times of web 2.0.

Kranich (2001, pp:83-95) explains how libraries help reduce the digital divide, increase access to government information and are fighting 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 thinks is a very important democratic function as a supplement to information-related and education-centred tasks. In their joint article Canadian library researchers Alstad and Curry (2003) describe how squares and other public spaces are increasingly replaced by company-owned areas such as shopping malls, where people can no longer act as citizens, but are primarily consumers. In order that libraries are to support democracy and serve as public space they should, among other things, change their objectives so that they provide for libraries moving towards a more proactive stance thus 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 one of their concluding observations on public library questionnaire responses received on cultural activities, exhibitions, lectures, debates, events, author readings, etc. Skot-Hansen and Andersson note that activities and events arranged for adult users tend to be a bit too "nice", harmless and uncontroversial. Also revealed by the responses are the paucity of true debate sessions with potential for challenging public opinion (pp:227-228). In a contribution in the anthology entitled *Libraries and Democracy: the Corner Stone of Liberty* Durrance and others (2001, pp:49-59) explore several American library projects that address web-based community information, which are considered to help strengthen civil society.

Issues in and requirements for theory building in civic librarianship are also addressed by John Budd (2008, pp: 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 to come to grips with democracy as an entity. In carrying on with this mapping exercise, Budd focuses special attention on the notion of deliberative democracy, which has a parallel on Danish ground in that Danish theologian, professor and folk high school principal Hal Koch can be said to be the founding father of a conception of democracy termed *samtale demokrati* ("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 it is actually relied on in 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 and his painstaking analysis of the democracy-sustenance and supporting role of librarianship is very refreshing and stimulating and is matched by very few contributions in our latitudes.

John Buschman (2003, pp: 120-121), cited by Budd, strongly disputes one-sided economic logic, customisation-centeredness, marketplace thinking and value-for-money regimes in (public) librarianship. Reservations about the risky elements of this rhetoric strategy 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".

4 The Political Library: Revival of a Concept?

In her thesis on the Political Library with the subtitle "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 public library context in the mid-1970s. The author observes that the political library deserves to be taken out of oblivion of mainly two reasons. First, it is an idea that is quite radical (in the general sense of the word!) by today's standards, and it should therefore serve as fuel for a renewed discussion of library ideology and democracy issues, in the field 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 to offer a historical perspective to today's library debate. 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, democracy problems 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 needed brush-up implies an awareness of the opportunities of web 2.0 tools and applications. But adopting the role of a library that keeps an active eye on developments in the local community and is determined to take steps to raise awareness of issues on the current political agenda is not without risks. Thus, at a Nordic research seminar concerned with

European public libraries today and in an historical context held in December 2010 a colleague from Sweden observed that, on Swedish ground, the concept of the political library and the notion of a library that deliberately and actively provides sessions and meetings, alternative viewpoints and info packs about controversial societal/community-centred issues and concerns could run into trouble. A recent example from a Danish library (Lyngby) illustrates that library-driven discussion sessions, etc. featuring politically loaded issues can lead to controversy. Such a simple thing as organizing and announcing a public meeting on the war in Afghanistan enraged the Lord Mayor of the Municipality of Lyngby-Taarbæk who did not like the posters and the announcement on the library homepage informing about the upcoming debate meeting.

5 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. For the time being the Western railway, a local railway line in the Western part of Denmark, is in risk of being closed down in that a majority of Regional Council Members want to eliminate the line because it is considered loss-making; it is argued 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 has 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 is the setting up of an exhibition featuring the railway and its history. The Western Railway protection citizens' initiative represents an interesting case illustrating how Facebook is relied on by politically articulated individuals and groups. There are ten 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 are developed, individuals get involved and become 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 various bodies of expertise and those who maintain grassroots initiatives. And last 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 is supposed to provide balanced subject-specific input for discussions progressing in social network media of the Web 2.0 type. You can have people debating current and crucial topics and issues on the Web. But the prerequisite is that you prepare solid background information and that you dare bring up controversies, tender subject and sensitive issues for discussion. Also, you should be ready to go for interaction with other media. On the whole, libraries could adopt a more active democratic role.

6 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 Buur Rasmussen (2009), last year's municipal elections in Denmark provided another 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 recorded 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 mode 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 tender subjects and sensitive issues for discussion. If you dare not put something on the line and raise a controversy in areas and issues people are very eager about 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 for and 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. But public libraries could take a role in creating an active democratic communication 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 campaigning material (flyers, brochures, etc.). It is much more than that. Libraries must dare to act as initiators and those taking the lead. What must not be forgotten in this respect is the interaction with other media. Consideration should 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 you cannot say that it is better to discuss on the web than relying on conventional discussion pieces and 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 making citizens making an informed decision when casting their votes. At the same time it is 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/library is primarily that of a mediator.

Also using the 2009 Municipal Election as context, the Vejle Libraries conducted a project entitled *Debate that has effect: the library as a democratic greenhouse* (2011). The Libraries decided to highlight democratic values and brought up the major themes of art and politics for discussion by arranging a series of workshops leading up to the Municipal Election. Each of the six political youth parties invited to participate selected a specific democratic value and at the same time six artists created works of art that interpreted the values selected by the young politicians. Within the urban space, six selected places provided the location for public debates based on the democratic values selected and the works of art that came into existence within the conceptual framework represented by the democratic values selected. In this way the artists' contributions challenged the values and a high level of discussion was recorded. Project experiences provided the Libraries with new inspiration of relevance to the variety of intermediary roles performed and to the initiation of public discussion sessions that serve to enhance participants' insights into and understanding of the issues being addressed.

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 should 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 efforts provided through a democratic (physical and virtual) space from a reactive and communication-centred role towards a proactive, front-edge and staging role. In taking on its new role, the library should establish and facilitate interactive, independent and direct channels of communication between citizens and their political representatives. In doing so, the library should support free opinion building and active citizenship. The library staff's competences in terms of serving as trendspotters 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 the Aarhus University. The intention is to create a forum for Aarhus as a whole. Modelled on the concept of reading clubs tried out for quite a few years a range of debate clubs will 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 whereas content will be provided by others, but the library system could support and qualify debates on varying themes, local as well as national, regularly brought up for discussion. 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, is entitled "The Library as a Democratic Agora" and has as one of its objectives to explore the role of the public library as a "third place (space)" and as one of the cornerstones in Danish democracy. In examining and developing this role, which includes facilitating democratic discourse, a challenging and slightly provocative approach would 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 this year (2010). The report is structured in five parts under the following main 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 a specific issue, 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.

7 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 elsewhere in this paper - in some countries there has been a tradition that public libraries committed themselves to making information resources available in connection with community action and citizens' group-based initiatives of various kinds. And by hosting discussions and meetings. In this context it is worth referring to the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, which indicates 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 on 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 the 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 very interesting issue here is: can the public library redefine its mission and will politicians and decision-makers be willing to blueprint a shift in this direction? The analytic review of selected readings on Web 2.0 and social media, the role of libraries in enhancing and consolidating democracy and the need for relaunching the political library has generated some ideas and clues that might be of relevance to the discussion on a changed 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 the light of Web 2.0.

For public libraries, it is largely a question about library policy and priorities and a readiness to offer proactive library services. It is about showing the other side of the coin by actively and timely providing alternative viewpoints on social and political, etc. topics and supplying references to alternative and non-mainstream information resources. And it is about stimulating public discourse. This is where the social media come in. Libraries can exploit the potentials of the social networking sites for the above purposes. But they could also rely on social media mainly for increasing institutional visibility in line with the prevailing market demand-orientation and New Public Management requirements. However, in strictly adhering to the principle of "neutrality" in the conventional sense and in maintaining harmless an inoffensive profile externally, the library's educational and empowerment functions may suffer.

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 the times of booming web technologies and social media and commercialization of information and knowledge there is a need for an agency of neutrality and credibility that sort of helps users find out and unmask the increasing amount of bias, distortion, fraud, misuse, cheating and manipulation within the fancy new world of new web-based media and assist them in navigating in 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 sense 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 and cruel political leader styles with injustices and oppression. Suddenly, however, a point is reached where time is ripe for resistance and revolts and the long term sufferings and accumulated frustration of the masses and whole populations are turned into collective action with quite unexpected consequences. The obvious example here is The Arabian Spring, which at the same time provides clear evidence on the role of the social networking media in demonstrations and protest activities aimed at articulating resistance against existing autocratic regimes and established politically repressive orders and hegemonies. It seems widely agreed that social-media sites were instrumental in fuelling the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. But western democracies with their persistent and irremovable power structures, spin doctor-driven politics and infotainment are not faultless either. Power structures are opaque and various sorts of extra-parliamentary opposition groups, NGOs and grassroots initiatives in specific areas face barriers and difficulties in having their message 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 COP 15 in Copenhagen on the risks and dangers of climate change and global warming and the scanty progress achieved at COP 16 in Cancun, Mexico last year are very illustrative of the powerlessness of those outside the sphere of power wanting a say in this crucial matter.

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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