

# How do Politicians and Central Decision-Makers View Public Libraries? The case of Norway

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## The Problem

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What do politicians think about public libraries? Since politicians are in control of the budgetary means libraries are dependent upon and since their decisions on how to dispose of those budgetary means probably depend upon how they perceive the political relevance of different institutions, that is a question of overriding importance. In this article we analyse how Norwegian parliamentarians and central decision-makers from the governmental apparatus view public libraries. This analysis, which is based upon qualitative interviews, will be supplemented with data from a survey research among a statistically representative sample of Norwegian local government politicians and qualified librarians working in Norwegian public libraries which this author undertook approximately 5 years ago.

Public librarians are striving to make themselves relevant with regard to some of the major challenges that today's multicultural and digital society is facing, e.g. lifelong learning, information literacy and the digital divide and giving access to information in the digital knowledge society. Do such ambitions correspond to the images politicians have of the public library's role, or are the politicians' perceptions of what public libraries should do more traditional? That is one important question we will try to discuss and which necessarily must affect the strategy of public librarians when trying to communicate the potential role of libraries to politicians.

Although responsibility for providing public library services in Norway lies with local government, the state level, in the last instance the Parliament, is responsible for the library law, which makes it compulsory for every local community to have a public library, alone or in cooperation with other local governments, and for every county to have a county library. The law also lays down the general purpose of public libraries and states that the head of the local government library shall have a bachelor's degree in library and information science. The state is also responsible for some specific public library services, e.g. library services in prisons, library services for the Sami and the development of collections for ethnic minorities. Such services are performed by local government libraries but financed via the state budget. Since 1949 a State Directorate for Public Libraries has been the state's professional body in public library matters. The Minister of Culture is the politically responsible member of government.

At the time when the interviewing took place, issues relating to public libraries were relatively high up on the political agenda, something that is quite unusual. On 1 January 2003, the State Directorate was dissolved and integrated into a new advisory body for archives, libraries and museums. Simultaneously the Ministry put forward a proposal to change the library law. The Ministry

proposed, for example, to take away the paragraph making it mandatory for local governments to employ library directors with professional qualifications in LIS. The proposal was also regarded by many – the Ministry denied this – as making it voluntary, not mandatory, for local governments to uphold a local library service. After a relatively intense public debate, the Ministry in the end proposed to Parliament not to implement these changes at present, a proposal which the Parliament adopted.

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### Interviewing and Selection of Respondents

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The qualitative interviews on which this article is based were undertaken in the Spring of 2003. Eleven respondents were selected. Of these, seven were politicians, three were high-ranking bureaucrats with responsibilities for public libraries and one was a trustee in the Norwegian Library Association. Among the politicians, five were members of the committee for cultural matters in the Parliament and one was a member of the committee for education and research. The Minister of Culture was also interviewed. The politicians covered the whole political spectrum from the Socialist Left Party to the right-wing Progressive Party. The only party not represented among the respondents is the Conservative Party, which is the senior partner in the present Norwegian government. The two other parties forming the coalition government together with the conservatives – the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party – are, however, well represented. The Christian Democratic Party has the Minister in charge of public libraries as well as the spokesman on library matters in Parliament.

The survey research among local government politicians was undertaken in 1999. A random sample of every 20th member of Norwegian local governments was drawn. The response rate was 61 percent. An identical questionnaire was distributed to all qualified librarians in Norwegian public libraries, also with a response rate of 61 percent.

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### The Role and Importance of Public Libraries and their Political Importance and Relevance

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The respondents in the qualitative research among Members of Parliament and high-ranking

bureaucrats were asked which tasks they consider to be the most important for public libraries, and the importance of the institution within the policy area for which they are responsible. The question on the tasks of the libraries invited the respondents to reflect upon the role of the institution.

In the 1999 survey among representative Norwegian local government politicians and educated librarians in Norwegian public libraries, politicians and librarians were asked identical questions concerning the role of public libraries. First they were presented with a comprehensive and relatively exhaustive list of public services and were asked to rank the three most important. Then they were presented with a list of possible mission statements and were asked to select one which, according to their opinion, should be at the top of the hierarchy of goals in a strategic plan for the local public library. Both groups gave top priority to the libraries' educational role, whereas initiatives aiming at reaching ethnic minorities, for example, were given lower priority. When asked about the fundamental reason for using scarce public resources on public libraries, i.e. the mission statement, the most important reason referred to by local politicians as well as librarians was the role of libraries in promoting the literary and cultural heritage. Forty-three percent of the politicians considered that to be the single most important reason for using scarce funds on public libraries. Librarians also tended to give high priority to the library's role in promoting democracy and preventing social cleavages due to unequal access to information. It is worth mentioning also that every fifth local politician referred to democracy and social equality as the most important reason for spending money on public libraries. The libraries' role as a meeting place in the community was given low priority (Audunson, 2002). Do we find the same tendencies in our qualitative interviews with politicians and leaders at the national level?

There seems to be a difference between the respondents with a political background and those coming from the Ministry of Culture and from the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority, in that the former group refer more frequently than the latter to the importance of the traditional book and the literary and cultural heritage. Politicians from the right as well as the left refer to "preserving the cultural heritage as the single most important task" (politician from the right wing

Progressive Party) and “being a preserver and promoter of the common knowledge and cultural heritage that we have in Norway” (politician representing the Social Democrats).

In a society that is becoming increasingly multicultural, references to the national cultural heritage and our common culture might be problematic.

Those politicians who do not explicitly use words such as ‘cultural or literary heritage’ tend to refer to the importance of promoting the traditional book and the importance of promoting reading. “The book is the main thing – to promote a drive for and a pleasure in reading”, as the Minister of Culture put it. Two of the seven politicians make reference to the literary and cultural heritage whereas three refer to the importance of the traditional book and the promotion of book reading. By promoting books the library can create a drive to read among young people. Such a drive will increase reading, which in turn will improve literacy. That is the logic presented by many. In this chain of logic, reading and literature are seen as instrumental to another purpose, i.e. literacy and reading capabilities. Those referring to the common literary heritage of the nation, on the other hand, can be interpreted as regarding the library as an instrument for promoting social and national integration around a literary and cultural canon.

In general, then, the picture we found among local government politicians 5 years ago, where libraries were seen first and foremost as an educational tool and an instrument for promoting the literary and cultural canon, seems to be valid also for parliamentarians responsible for public library issues today.

Only one out of seven politicians refers explicitly to libraries and new technologies and the role of libraries in helping people find their way in the jungle of information. It must be added, then, that one of the politicians not mentioning ICT when talking about the role and tasks of libraries does so when elaborating his own personal experiences with libraries. And several mention the informational role of libraries. One of the politicians is obviously wavering between the literary and cultural role on the one hand and the informational role on the other.

As pointed out above, the library’s role as a meeting place in the community came low in priority when politicians and librarians were

invited to identify the single most important reason for investing in public libraries. One has to bear in mind, however, that the respondents were allowed to select only one mission statement. In the qualitative interviews with Members of Parliament and high-ranking bureaucrats, the respondents were invited to present as many arguments and motives as they wanted. In that situation, two out of the seven politicians explicitly refer to the library’s role as a meeting place in society, whereas another uses the term ‘arena’, which can be interpreted as being closely related to the term ‘meeting place’. This politician speaks of the library as “a cultural arena in the community” and as “an arena for experience”. Commenting on his personal experiences with using the public library, a politician from the right wing Progressive Party also stressed the library’s role as a meeting place for the whole community.

If we define ‘arena’ as a space where people meet and where they act or experience something in common, then it is reasonable to interpret this also as a reference to the library’s role as a meeting place. This element in the public library’s role, then, seems to occupy a stronger place in the politicians’ reasoning on public libraries than among local government politicians.

Our interviews were undertaken shortly after a relatively intense public discussion on the library law, in which the principle of free borrowing is a mainstay, and not long after the most important reform in Norwegian public librarianship for decades: the supplanting of the old library-specific institutions at the national level with the Norwegian Authority for Archives, Libraries and Museums. The idea is that policies in the field shall be based upon one common perspective integrating archives, libraries and museums – the so-called ‘memory institutions’ of society. These issues were not reflected to any substantial degree in the politicians’ responses. Two respondents refer explicitly to the principle of free borrowing; both are in favour of defending that principle. None, however, refers to tasks stemming from the new policy. It might be regarded as paradoxical that a policy on public libraries adopted by Parliament does not reflect itself in the politicians’ view on the tasks and role of that very institution.

Librarians often portray libraries as a bulwark against social cleavages due to unequal access to information and knowledge and as guardians of

democracy. The responses from our politicians do not, at least explicitly, see libraries in such a broad and heroic social and political context, although one out of our seven politicians refers to inequalities in access to information as a main source of future social cleavages. This finding deviates somewhat from what we found among local government politicians. As mentioned above, every fifth one of them chose this role when asked to select the most important mission statement for their local library.

The politicians agree that libraries are important, but many of them regret that libraries are invisible and not on the agenda of the media and other influential circles in society. The following statement is typical:

The importance of public libraries is maybe underestimated. With a worsening local government economy, branches close down and bookmobiles disappear . . . It is only when the service disappears or opening hours are reduced that people feel the importance of public libraries . . . Much more attention is being paid to the performing arts than to libraries . . . But we politicians take the library seriously. We take it seriously, but libraries are no issue for the media. (Member of Parliament, Center Party).

Or another one:

As for content, it is very important. But within the large field of culture, it tends to disappear, maybe because responsibility lies at the local government level. (Member of Parliament, Social Democratic Party).

The main impression, then, concerning the politicians view of the tasks and role of libraries, can be summed up in the following points:

- The traditional role related to book, reading and the promotion of culture is still strong.
- The library is seen as instrumental in relation to safeguarding and promoting the nation's literary heritage, thus promoting social integration, and in relation to promoting reading capabilities. This corresponds very well to what we found among local politicians 5 years ago.
- Libraries as instruments for giving the people access to ICT are apparently not in the forefront of the politicians' thinking about the role and tasks of the institution.
- Tasks related to the library-related reform recently adopted by the politicians, the

Norwegian Authority for Archives, Libraries and Museums reform, seem to be absent in the politicians' perceptions of the tasks and role of public libraries.

- Libraries are seen as important by the politicians who are, however, of the opinion that they are invisible and not regarded as important by other actors, in particular the media.

What, then, if we compare the politicians' perceptions with those of the bureaucrats responsible for public libraries? In the survey among local politicians and public librarians we found some basic similarities – both groups gave priority to services supporting education and both groups ranked highly the mission statement focusing on transmitting the literary and cultural canon. We did, however, also find some differences:

- the public librarians gave a higher priority to services supporting the modern concept of lifelong learning than did the politicians
- a considerably higher proportion of librarians than of politicians selected the mission of promoting democracy and equality as the most important mission of public libraries.

Do we find similar differences when comparing bureaucrats working with public library issues with Members of Parliament?

Those working with public libraries in the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority and the Library Association tend to link the tasks and role to broad social challenges. As the head of that authority formulates it:

If we take as our point of departure that libraries are societal institutions, then we have to look around us and see what the main challenges to be found are. And it seems especially pertinent to point at challenges related to the information society and the education society.

He then goes on to elaborate on problems related to children's learning outside the classroom and the importance of information access for the prospects of today's children:

The Web has no source control, so guidance in using information sources is needed. The role of libraries will change from finding books into being guides in navigating in the information society.

This respondent also brings in the multicultural

dimension, which, surprisingly enough, was totally absent in the responses from the politicians. The public library, he maintains, must tell the stories of cultural minorities – those with a long history in Norway such as the Sami people, as well as the newcomers; it must give the minorities access to their own cultural traditions as well as information about the Norwegian society at large, and it must provide a meeting place between different cultural and ethnic groups. It is a striking difference between this perspective and the perspective that we found had a strong position among the politicians, stressing the importance of promoting the national cultural heritage. The public library can also play a vital role in creating viable local communities, he states. The perception of the public libraries' tasks and role found here is complex and multifaceted.

The other two respondents with close link to the public library sector – one bureaucrat and one elected trustee in the Library Association – also see the tasks and role of libraries in a broad social and political context. One is tempted to use the term 'heroic' to describe the role they give the library. Libraries are seen as prerequisites to promoting democracy – nothing less:

. . . and the most important function is, in fact, related to democracy. It is a big word that too, but that we have a society where we give free access to information, where it is easy to learn, where everyone can search the information they want. (Leader in the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority).

Or the elected trustee from the Library Association:

The development of public libraries should be seen as a part of the democratic infrastructure. Securing the freedom of information is central.

This respondent also refers to the importance of developing services that are adequate in relation to technological development and to the importance of defending the principle of free borrowing. The two leaders from the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority do not refer explicitly to this principle.

When moving from the bureaucrats in the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority up one level to the Ministry of Culture, we find a

difference in the sense that the top bureaucrat from the Ministry does not refer to the same broad social and political contexts as those coming from the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority. Keeping pace with technological developments and the traditional role of promoting literature and culture are the two elements referred to by this respondent. He seems to be more related to the politicians in stressing the traditional literary and cultural role of the library than to the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority bureaucrats, seeing the library in a broad social and political context. There seems, then, to be a difference between those with a direct professional relation to the field of public librarianship and those with more indirect links – the politicians and the bureaucrat in the Ministry of Culture. Those with the most direct links to the profession tend to give the libraries a heroic role related to broad and fundamental social and political challenges, whereas those with more remote and indirect links focus more narrowly upon the traditional role of libraries related to the book and literature.

It is interesting to compare the answers to the question on the importance of public libraries. We have seen above that the politicians declare that they perceive the library as important. They are, however, not so sure that other groups hold a similar perception, due to the invisibility of libraries. The cultural and library bureaucrats and the elected trustee in the Library Association are less unanimous on this issue. The Library Association representative refuses to answer this question: one can easily fall into the use of empty clichés when answering such a question, he maintains. The top bureaucrat from the Ministry of Culture measures importance in the amount of time he has to dedicate to library matters in his daily work. Based on such a measure, public libraries were more important than usual in the Spring of 2003, due to the fact that the Ministry was preparing a revision of the library law for the Parliament. The head of the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority is also unwilling to give a specific answer to the question. Libraries are important, he maintains, but being responsible for promoting and developing the whole archives, libraries and museums sector, he is not willing to rank their importance. Only one of the four non-politicians interviewed – the second respondent from the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority – is willing to answer the question in a relatively specific manner. One might easily get the

impression that the non-politicians are more tactical – more political, if one prefers – than the politicians on this specific issue.

Summing up, then, we do find differences similar to those we found among local government politicians and public librarians. Those working professionally with public libraries tend to see the institution in a broader social context, linking it to democracy or to the empowerment of hitherto marginalized and silenced groups.

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### The Role of the Public Library

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Our respondents in the qualitative interviews were asked to reflect and comment upon a number of statements concerning the role of public libraries. The statements dealt with the public library as a public good, its contribution in realizing the government's policy objectives, its role in underpinning education and promoting social inclusion, public libraries as an essential part of a democratic society, its role in promoting freedom of information, its capacity to make a difference in the community it operates and, finally, the question of introducing charges on book loans.

Our respondents agreed unanimously to the statement saying that public libraries represent an essential public good. Judged on the basis of the arguments and reflections in the answer, this attitude seems to be strong. Many used formulations such as “agree without doubt”. The reasons given varied. Some commented that the content which libraries are distributing – knowledge and information – corresponds to the formal, economic definition of a public good: “Information and knowledge are goods that are not being diminished by being shared” (Member of Parliament, Social Democratic Party). Among those who went further than just saying “absolutely yes”, all referred to substantial parts of the content of the public libraries' role, not only the formal definition of a public good. No differences between politicians and bureaucrats and between politicians belonging to different political camps can be identified. To quote two respondents coming from parties representing opposite ideologies – the left wing Socialist Left Party and the right wing and liberal Progressive Party:

Completely agree. That all have access to good literature, have a place where they can meet, can receive instruction – that is an

unconditional good. It is a public good which we must take care of and develop further. We must not come to a point where such a service is charged for. It is important that services of this kind are free of charge. That underlines the importance of the service. (Member of Parliament, Socialist Left Party)

Yes, I agree. The public libraries manage such central parts of our cultural heritage that we need a network of public libraries spread throughout the whole country. In addition we need good central services. (Member of Parliament, Progressive Party)

The unanimous agreement across partisan lines is interesting. Also the representative of the most liberal party views the library as a common good. It corresponds very well to what Aabø (2005) found in a national sample of the Norwegian population: 96 percent declared that they regarded the public library as a democratic right to which they were entitled.

The respondents also generally agree to the statement that public libraries contribute to government's policy objectives. Here, however, the differences are somewhat greater compared to the issue of public libraries as an essential public good. First, there seems to be a difference between those with the closest relations to the library field and the rest. The director in the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority, coming from the library sector, stresses the importance of public libraries' being relatively independent from the government. Therefore one cannot unanimously say that public libraries are instruments for governmental policies “because the public libraries shall have a free position and give access to information whether it supports the authorities or not”. A librarian, thus, is in many respects more similar to an editor, who has to be independent from authorities and interest groups to fulfil his role, than to an employee whose primary task it is to be loyal to his or her employer. This can be interpreted as focusing upon the value-based legitimacy and rationality of the library as opposed to the instrumental.

A similar viewpoint is formulated by the President of the Library Association. The libraries shall give access to that which he terms ‘counter-information’. His main reaction to this statement, however, is that it might very well represent the truth in other countries, but the

Norwegian government has a weak or non-existent library policy and shows little interest in library issues. Therefore librarians have to carry the burden alone:

That is artificial and peculiar for the library field. When social policy or health policy is being discussed, the debate is not dominated by nurses and doctors.

His viewpoints seem to be supported by at least two politicians: “Does the government have policies?” the Member of Parliament from the Socialist Left Party asks rhetorically. Apparently he is thinking of a conscious library policy, not policy in general. The respondent from the Centre Party (Agrarian Party) asks if “we”, i.e. the politicians, are capable of following up the goals they have formulated with relation to public libraries, e.g. realizing the goal of broadband in all public libraries. In general, however, the overall impression is that the politicians seem to be satisfied with the public libraries’ capability of being instrumental in implementing governmental policies. And they tend to regard libraries as relevant over a broad spectrum of policy areas: “Yes, in the field of culture, education, democracy, quality of life” (Member of Parliament, Social Democratic Party). “Yes, both as for literary and cultural goals, education and information” (Minister of Culture). The most critical of the libraries’ – or rather, librarians’ – capability in this respect is the head of the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority, who experiences a certain “inertia” among public librarians and complain that the profession tends to lag behind as far as being change-oriented is concerned.

As for the libraries’ contribution to education and social integration, the evaluations are generally positive. Some maintain, however, that although libraries are important in supporting education, there is still “room for a lot more to be done”, as for coordinating public libraries and schools. But the following formulation from a Member of Parliament representing the Christian Democratic Party might sum up the overall conclusion: “Education without libraries is like a wagon with one wheel”.

The statement of which the politicians are most sceptical is that saying that libraries are essential to democracy. One politician (Progressive Party) rejects the idea that libraries play any role whatsoever in this respect. The rest of the politicians seem to be of the opinion that they contribute,

some even admit that their contribution is important, but reject the idea that their role is essential. The bureaucrats interviewed and the President of the Library Association, on the other hand, tend to agree to the statement that libraries are essential for democracy, although, as one of them commented, “these are big words”.

The respondents were also asked to comment upon the statement “libraries should promote freedom of information”. At least on the surface we seem to find agreement. All respondents, with the exception of one politician worried about the cost of giving everyone access to everything, agree to this statement. However, there are qualifications indicating that there might be hidden disagreements. Those with the closest links to the library field state that “it would be hopeless if the librarians started filtering” (leader from the Archives, Libraries and Museums authority with a background in the library field) and that one of the roles of libraries is to give access to ‘counter-information’ (President of the Library Association). The remaining bureaucrats and the politicians, however, tend to modify their adherence by qualifications such as “yes, as long as we are within the limits of Norwegian law”; “yes, but not freedom that has negative consequences for other people”; “yes, but not violence”, etc. One politician explicitly states that giving freedom of access to information must be paralleled by the librarians’ providing guidance in its use, so that users can separate real information from rubbish.

There is one statement to which all our respondents agree unanimously: that saying that charges on book loans should be introduced. All our respondents, bureaucrats as well as politicians covering the whole political spectrum, say ‘no’ to charges. Many, however, are open to charging for other kinds of material, e.g. videos, and so-called ‘tailor-made’ services.

In sum, then, we seem to find agreement covering the whole political spectrum concerning the public libraries as an essential public good and their contribution to promoting the government’s political goals in general and policy goals related to education, integration and freedom of information in particular. The politicians, unlike the cultural bureaucrats with responsibility for libraries, are sceptical of the idea of libraries as an essential prerequisite for democracy. They are, however, of the opinion that libraries contribute to democracy. Charging for book loans is unanimously rejected.

### Who Influences Decision-Making on Issues on Library Policy?

The interview guide contains a section focusing upon the influence of different sources and lobbyists when decisions on issues regarding public libraries are made. The sources of influence specified were: civil servants and governmental bureaucracy; professional associations; individual professionals; norms, standards and guidelines from IFLA and other professional bodies; public opinion; and, last but not least, ideology. We shall not go into this question in detail in this context. It is, however, interesting to comment upon the way professional associations within the field of librarianship in general and IFLA in particular are evaluated. The role of professional associations is a bit dubious. One respondent regards them as important because they are more creative than the objective and neutral civil service. Others have a double view. The following formulation might be representative:

Yes, we listen to them, but I am always aware of the following: Are they concerned with higher salaries and better working conditions for themselves, or are they concerned with the users. . . . We have an excellent dialogue with many professional organizations, but with the civil service it is different – more objective maybe? I have greater confidence in advice from the civil service. (Member of Parliament, Progressive Party)

Norms, standards and guidelines on public libraries, for example from IFLA, play virtually no role at all. In fact, the majority, if not all, of the politicians have never heard about IFLA. It is possible, however, that such professional norms have the potential of playing a role. One politician puts it like this:

I have never heard about IFLA. But if international standards exist, they will be of a reasonably high importance. Yes, that I would pay great attention to. (Member of Parliament, Progressive Party)

The profession, then, apparently has a marketing job to do. The fact that politicians with responsibility for library issues have not heard about IFLA only two years before the organization, with substantial financial support from the government, will have its conference in Oslo, also underscores the need for marketing.

### Conclusions

Which general conclusions can be drawn?

- Public libraries have a strong position among parliamentary politicians. They are seen as an essential public good and no one seems to challenge the principle of free borrowing.
- The role of libraries is related first and foremost to education, to the promotion of reading and to the promotion of the literary and cultural canon. The Members of Parliament agree with the local government politicians in this respect.
- The politicians do not see libraries as essential for democracy and equality in society, although the Members of Parliament might differ somewhat from the local politicians here: 20 percent of the local politicians regarded this as the most important mission of the library. Bureaucrats responsible for public library issues tend to see libraries in a broader social and political context than the politicians, for example as vital for democracy and instrumental in empowering and giving a voice to oppressed and marginalized groups.
- In view of the preceding point, those responsible for library politics on a professional basis maintain that libraries and librarians in their capacity as providers of information have to be independent from government authorities and interest groups. Although the politicians, with some modifications, are also preoccupied with the librarians' role as guardians of free access to information, this independence is not explicitly mentioned by any of them.
- Two years before Oslo is going to host the World Library and Information Congress, IFLA is literally invisible among politicians responsible for public library issues.

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