

Public libraries digital services and sustainability issues

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to study how Swedish local politicians perceive the impact of public library digital services on public libraries and to discuss how this can affect the sustainable development of public libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with local politicians from 19 different Swedish municipalities. Data were treated to qualitative content analysis and discussed based on the concept of sustainable organization.

Findings – According to local politicians, public library digital services may affect public libraries through changes to libraries' physical spaces, librarians' tasks and competencies and libraries' economic situations. Based on these findings, public library digital services can both strengthen and weaken public library sustainability through, for example, increased access and expenditures, the latter of which may threaten public library sustainability.

Research limitations/implications – Interviews did not focus specifically on the politicians' views on public library digital services but dealt generally with their views on public libraries. To identify reasons for variations in views on this topic, follow-up interviews should be done. Data on views from public library managers would also be of use to determine the degree to which they are shared with local politicians.

Originality/value – When sustainability and public libraries are discussed, the focus is generally on the library's contribution to a sustainable society. Here, the focus is instead on the sustainability of the public library itself.

Keywords Sustainability, Public libraries, Digital library, Library development, Local politicians

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is commonly used but difficult to define. According to [Parkin et al. \(2003\)](#), more than 200 definitions of this term can be found. At the same time, there is a basic understanding that sustainable development “is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” ([World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987](#), p. 41). Meeting the prevailing needs in a society without jeopardizing future generations is the foundation of the library idea ([IFLA, 1995](#)). At the same time, societies do not exist in a constant state; rather the conditions and thus the prevailing needs in a society are always changing.

Over the past decades, the following huge changes have affected both the Western society and the public libraries in it: digital development, globalization, the emergence of a multicultural society and ideological changes ([Evjen and Audunson, 2009](#)). An

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ever-present issue for libraries is to identify needs and meet them. The problem may be that libraries sometimes tend to do too much in their efforts to respond to identified needs, meaning that they sometimes go beyond the libraries' mission (Veil and Bishop, 2014). If services are excessively extended, a risk could be future diluted and weakened public libraries that are not able to meet the needs of future generations.

Public libraries provide a wide range of services (McMenemy, 2012), which are beneficial for community inhabitants. It is important to ask not only whether the public benefits from the services but also how the libraries themselves are affected by the provision of these services. Whether, and in what way, striving toward a sustainable society affects the sustainability of public libraries is the central question of securing the sustainable development of public libraries. Public libraries are there to serve the public, but not at the expense of the libraries themselves, as this will, not in the least, harm future generations' opportunities to make use of them.

With the constantly ongoing development of what is today referred to as the digital society, new practices of information, new information literacy and new information needs have emerged. To respond to this, libraries provide a great variety of different digital services (McClure and Jaeger, 2009). The possibilities for users are many, yet as these services may imply some challenges for public libraries, it should be asked how the public libraries themselves might be affected by these new services in the end.

In this article, this question is answered from the perspective of Swedish local politicians responsible for public library political issues. As in many other countries, the issue of public library digital services is highly topical in Sweden and of increasing interest for public libraries. According to a current report, written on behalf of the Swedish Library Association (2014), users expect digital services to an increasing extent. Such development requires both specific skills and technical solutions that may require special funds. Furthermore, responsibility for public libraries is at the municipal level. Therefore, the local politicians' perspective is important, as they are responsible for the budget and for the formulation of goals for municipal activities, including public libraries.

The purpose of this article is to study how Swedish local politicians perceive the impact of digital services provided by public libraries on public libraries and to discuss how these stated impacts can be said to affect the sustainable development of public libraries. This purpose is met by answering the following two questions:

- Q1. According to Swedish local politicians, how do public library digital services affect public libraries?
- Q2. Based on these findings, how may the sustainability of public libraries be perceived to be affected by public library digital services?

2. Point of departure

When speaking about libraries and sustainable development, the so-called "green libraries" are brought up. This means libraries which work for an environmentally sustainable development through library activities, library services and library buildings being designed in a way that minimizes negative impacts on the environment. But other meanings can also be found. In their review of literature on this subject, Jankowska and Marcum (2010) write that sustainability in libraries can be about

preserving information for future generations. As mentioned above, in this article, the focus is on the sustainability of public libraries themselves.

According to a model presented by Coblenz (2002), three equally important aspects contribute to the sustainability of organizations, in this case, the public libraries: having a clear mission, living up to the customers' expectations and being financially literate. In this article, these aspects are referred to as Aspects 1, 2 and 3. A part of this article's purpose is answering *how*, based on the perceptions of local politicians, public library digital services can be perceived to affect public library sustainability. This is done by reasoning about which ways these three aspects can be said to be affected by the provided public library digital services.

2.1 Aspect 1

According to Coblenz (2002), a prerequisite for a sustainable organization is that it has a mission which includes a clear "definition of why the organization exists and what it hopes to achieve" (Coblenz, 2002, p. 2). If an organization is not operating in accordance with its stated mission, there is a risk that even if the organization in question manages to meet the needs of today, the organization may lose its way and will thus not be able to meet the needs of the future, which can jeopardize the organization's sustainability.

The mission of the public library is to endorse a democratic, diverse and equal society (IFLA, 1995). But how this should be concretely carried out and which methods should be used by library staff, can vary depending on the prevailing needs and possibilities in society. Today, a lot of discussions regard how new technology not only creates new needs but also provides new challenges and possibilities to public libraries. Discussions focusing on how the current society situation affects public library roles are nothing new. Examples can be found in the 1920s when the new media of film and radio were regarded by some in the library world as a threat and by others as possible opportunities to be used by librarians in their efforts to fulfill the public library mission (Preer, 2006).

2.2 Aspect 2

According to Coblenz (2002), the second prerequisite for a sustainable organization is that the staff is committed to the mission of the organization and that work morale is high among staff. Coblenz (2002) also highlights that staff should act in a way that is considered as ethical by the customers, or specifically in this case, the library users. But what does ethical mean? In the case of this article, I perceive that public library sustainability is dependent on whether public library staff acts in a way that is perceived as correct by library users. This can mean that if the public library staff acts contradictorily to users' expectations, there is a risk that public libraries will eventually become non-sustainable. Service from the library staff is something that is highly valued by library users, who expect a kind service (Pors, 2010). Further, the librarians' task is to facilitate free and equal access to information (Kargbo, 2014), which may require adaptation to the technological developments that need new librarianship skills to fulfill the given tasks (Huvila *et al.*, 2013).

2.3 Aspect 3

According to Coblenz (2002, p. 3), the third prerequisite for a sustainable organization is that it knows:

[...] what financial resources it is able to generate through its own income, what it has on hand at any given time, what it needs over the long, medium and short-term to carry out its activities, how it will gather the resources it needs from other sources of funding, and what those other sources could be.

In short, a financially sustainable organization is an organization that has insight into and control over its financial resources.

The development and provision of digital services also entails increased costs for libraries which means that decisions have to be made regarding which services should be provided (Koehn and Hawamdeh, 2010). In Sweden, much of the discussions about public library digital services concern the expenditures incurred by the provision of e-books. E-books are provided by Swedish public libraries through an agreement with four major publishers. Economically, this agreement means that public libraries pay about €2 for each completed loan. If a title is popular and loaned by many users, this causes large expenditures for libraries. Today, this agreement is under renegotiation to a new suggestion that the cost for each loan should depend on the book's publishing year: the newer the book, the larger the cost. However, the average cost for each loan will still be about €2.

Public libraries are publically funded organizations. That means that if they are not used by the community members or considered legitimate by the politicians who set the budget, there is the risk of receiving less financial support (Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004). The politicians interviewed for this study are responsible for specific political issues; sometimes, they focus solely on cultural issues and sometimes on cultural issues along with others, as the political organization and thus the responsibilities of local politicians vary from municipality to municipality. The interviewed politicians are responsible for budget allocation regarding the areas for which they have responsibility and are well aware of the costs that e-books accrue. It is politicians higher up in the political organizations at the municipal level who determine the size of the budget, which the politicians responsible for culture can then allocate to various activities; in other words, the interviewed politicians must work within a finite budget. Therefore, the disposition of funds for public libraries lies outside the scope of this paper.

3. Method

The analysis performed in this article is based on data collected in the spring of 2013 through semi-structured interviews with 19 politicians from 19 different municipalities chosen from the 290 municipalities across Sweden. To be able to describe a variety of contexts, the municipalities were chosen with consideration to the size of their public library budget; the percentage of e-book loans; and the respective proportion of digital and physical user visits. However, this last variation is complicated by there being municipalities which share Web sites, meaning that public library users in different municipalities use the same Web site with a common catalog and common information. In such scenarios, it is not possible to see how many users from a specific municipality have visited the library digitally.

The interviews consisted of previously formulated questions which were open-ended and covered a variety of different areas, such as the local politicians' views on the main public library tasks in the community, the importance of a physical library and the ongoing development of public library digital services. Depending on respondents' answers, follow-up questions were asked. During these interviews, the conversation

dealt both with what public library digital services mean for community members and what public library digital services mean for public libraries themselves, i.e. how public library digital services may affect the libraries. The latter data are the focus of this article.

The interviews were performed via phone, recorded and transcribed. The empirical data then underwent qualitative content analysis: the data were read several times, and then, based on the content in the empirical data, three main themes were identified. These are presented in the next section. Here, the respondents are referred to as “local politicians” or “respondents”.

4. Findings

Even if local politicians, in general, promote the significance of the physical public library and stress that digital services cannot replace physical ones, they, nevertheless, have, on the whole, a positive attitude toward public library digital services and perceive as important the public libraries’ keeping up with society’s ongoing digital development. At the same time, they see that public library digital services may affect public libraries in three different ways:

- (1) effects on the use of public library physical space;
- (2) changes to librarians’ work situation; and
- (3) effects on the economic situation of public libraries.

4.1 Impact on the use of the physical library space

During the interviews, respondents said that the development of digital services at the libraries increases access to possibilities that may affect the use of the physical library space in two different ways. First, the development of digital services creates opportunities for community members to access books and library collections without having to visit the physical library. As a consequence, the importance and use of the physical space is diminished. One of the respondents fears that this will eventually lead to an empty physical library space:

Again, the new technology what will it entail? Will it be empty on the shelves in the future since people acquire tablets[...]? What will this entail for our libraries and our whole cultural center? I see this as a risk (R12).

Second, statements can also be found indicating the belief that the development of digital services can make the physical library space more accessible, in that one does not have to physically visit the physical library space to take part in the activities which happen there:

Respondent: But I also think that, when we have been talking about the virtual, that the development should go to, that even if I can’t go to the library to attend an author evening or an interesting lecture or so, I could do it through the website, maybe.

Interviewer: Through some internet connection?

Respondent: Webcast or yes, exactly (R17).

Based on this first finding, how can public library sustainability be affected? The mission of the public library is to endorse a democratic, diverse and equal society. In

this, the physical public library space plays an important role. Audunson (2005) distinguishes between the so-called high- and low-intensive meeting places. The first implies that you meet like-minded people; the second implies that you meet a variety of different groups of people. Examples of the former are clubs of different kinds; examples of the latter are (physical) public libraries. Audunson (2005) argues that to preserve a tolerant and democratic society, it is important that we meet people with different views and not just those that are like-minded. A dismantling of the physical library space, as exemplified in the first case, means that opportunities for spontaneous meetings with different people will be diminished and thus also the libraries' opportunity to contribute to a democratic society, which is an element that is included in the library mission. This means, in the terminology of Coblenz (2002), that Aspect 1 regarding the importance of working toward a clear mission may be weakened as a consequence of this development and, ultimately, lead to a non-sustainable library.

The question is if digital access to the physical library space, as described in the second example, could serve as an opportunity for social interaction: as a low-intensity meeting place. The advantage of such a solution is that access to the physical public library space would be more convenient, a factor which is promoting more visitors (Choy, 2011). But, at the same time, it is important to question how this low-intensity meeting place would really be if digitally accessed. There is a risk that the user, when visiting the physical library digitally, would only visit the library on the occasions when the event in question is given and therefore not interact with others. This could instead develop the library into a high-intensive meeting place, which is quite apart from the given library mission and would counteract a sustainable development of the public library. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the respondent in question does not intend for this possibility to visit the physical library space digitally to replace ordinary physical visits, just to complement them. By extension, this could provide an additional opportunity to attract more people and thus to provide information, literature and culture to more, thereby promoting the public library mission and having a strengthening effect on Aspect 1, at least if digital services do not completely replace the physical use of the physical library space.

4.2 Digital services' impact on public library staff

According to the respondents, the development of digital services at public libraries may affect the librarians' situation. In the empirical data, three different ways in which this could occur were identified:

First, the development of public library digital services facilitates the work of librarians, as thanks to these services, they have more opportunities to reach out to community members who do not visit the physical library and could be difficult to reach.

Second, according to some respondents, the development of digital services will create more requirements for librarians regarding time commitment and competencies. Time commitment concerns the increase in tasks caused by digital services and a time-pressured work situation for the staff:

Yes, it is clear that it [the fact that the public library provides digital services] is a burden for the staff [...]. They [the staff] shall provide services, it takes time and if you have low staffing levels, then it is clear that it requires a lot from them (R2).

Competencies requirements come up as the provision of digital services will require digital service competencies among the public library staff: “it is important that the staff can handle it [the digital services] and can assist with that” (R11). The development of these competencies may be at the expense of other competencies, i.e. that the librarian profession develops knowledge related to digital services, but loses, at the same time, knowledge which is related to other types of library services:

The librarians should be well versed in social media, I have understood that this is the case, and that they are very used to searching on the internet [...]. But maybe, I would also wish that they had their own broad life experience [...] [the respondent continued by describing that when she earlier worked as a school director and interviewed applicants for the school library she realised that] they were well prepared in terms of the technical stuff, but their knowledge of books was not as wide. It bothered me a little (R5).

Third, there are also respondents who believe that the provision of digital services will instead reduce the tasks and duties of public library staff as library users, due to the introduction of digital services, will be able to a greater extent cope on their own while the librarians can focus on traditional tasks, such as the promotion of books. The fact that the staff, due to the provided digital services, will be able to concentrate on other tasks may also have an impact on the librarians’ competencies:

You can say that this with the digitalization of services and all this will mean that the staff which is here will be primarily be needed for [...] being experts on library knowledge, the local library, literature. The staff will be more specialized in library knowledge and literature (R9).

Based on this second finding, how can public library sustainability be affected? If the three identified ways regarding how the library staff may be affected by the public library digital services are summarized, it can be said that digital services may affect the library staff by bringing new working tools and new competencies, i.e. the concrete librarian tasks and working methods may change. The converse may also occur if library staff is brought back to traditional library work as users can supposedly manage themselves via digital possibilities.

It is simultaneously important to keep in mind that with the digital development in the Western society, new needs have emerged that the libraries have to meet. For example, it could be seen as a part of the library mission to bridge the so-called digital gap through not just provision of information but also concrete help and training from the library staff (Aabø, 2005; Russell and Huang, 2009). To be able to meet these new needs, new librarian competencies are required (Huvila *et al.*, 2013).

If users do not receive help and support from librarians due to limited competencies, this may reduce confidence in librarians causing the perception that librarians seem not to work as users expect and thus weakening Aspect 2 (Coblentz, 2002) regarding staff morale and common goals. As a result, sustainability of the organization in question can be reduced. At the same time, it is important that these new competencies are required and implemented smoothly, so that librarians do not perceive this as a requirement instituted from above, a situation that also may have a negative impact on Aspect 2 (Coblentz, 2002). But here it is necessary not to be dazzled by new opportunities and thus adopt new competencies at the expense of the former, as respondent R5 warns. If librarians usurp new competencies without developing them from the so-called traditional librarian skills, there is a risk that the librarians will work in a way which will not be considered as the “right one” in the eyes of the users, which may eventually,

according to the model presented by Coblenz (2002), have a negative impact on the public library sustainability.

4.3 Digital services' impact on the economy

In Sweden, the cost of e-books is something that is much discussed when speaking about public library digital services, and it came up as a significant problem during the interviews when digital services were discussed:

The e-books are very costly for us: each book loan costs us 20 crowns. How will we meet this in the future? E-book lending is increasing and so are its costs. We are at a small breaking point: on the one side the traditional, on the other side the e-system and e-books and the increased needs and the increased costs there (R19).

Several respondents emphasized this problem, which one of them formulated as: "Should we reduce the printed book and invest more in e-readers or how should we do? Because the library allocation is not sufficient for digital use" (R7).

According to the model being used (Coblenz, 2002), high expenditures are not a threat in themselves as long as the financial situation can be controlled. In many municipalities, this is accomplished by restrictions on how many e-books each user may borrow each week. According to one of the respondents in the study, the problem is that it is too easy to borrow e-books compared to printed books, which results in significant expenditures for the libraries and therefore a restriction is needed:

If you go to an ordinary public library, you go there every three weeks and carry some books back and forth, but if you sit at home and pick on yourself [...] it turns into a terrible cost that I don't have in my budget and not the library either, how we are going to handle it, I don't know (R7).

Based on this third finding, how can public library sustainability be affected? Here one can see a possible clash between the effort to be open to all and to provide free information for all community members to contribute to a democratic society (Kargbo, 2014) and the necessity of restricting access due to budgetary constraints or the necessity of shifting prioritization from other library activities. It should be stressed that, in Sweden, this is not a very large problem yet, as e-books are borrowed to a much smaller degree compared to printed books (Bergström and Höglund, 2014). In the future, however, if the use of the e-books continues to grow and as new generations grow up, this can develop into a much larger problem regarding expenditures. It remains to be seen which services will be prioritized in the end, the digital or the physical, and which will prove to be most sustainable in the long run.

5. Conclusion

It is important to stress that there is a variation among the local politicians in how public library digital services are thought to affect public libraries. There is an overall commonality that digital services promote, in some way, library access and that it entails a cost that must be addressed in some way even if a permanent solution is unclear. Nevertheless, there is variation, which can be exemplified by statements such as that digital services enable librarians to concentrate on traditional library services such as book promotion and statements such as that digital services require new competencies among librarians. Likely, this depends on what is meant when the term digital service is used.

According to respondents, Swedish local politicians seem to believe that public libraries may be affected in three ways by the provided digital services: the physical space, the library staff and the library economy. How can these be considered to affect the sustainability of public libraries?

First, whether work toward the library's mission is promoted or hindered depends on how much room is given to digital services. If digital services are used as a complement to the physical library space, there is a possibility of including more local citizens in the public library's work toward the library mission, which strengthens the sustainability of the library. However, if the digital services begin to replace the function of the physical space, there is a risk from the local politicians' perspectives that the library mission will instead be limited; this also constitutes a negative impact on the public library sustainability. A similar kind of balancing act occurs in the context of librarians' competencies. To provide the functions and support that users expect, it is important that librarians embrace new technological competencies. Meanwhile, it is important not to lose earlier knowledge, but to develop the new competencies based on the old ones.

Finally, the efforts to control expenditures due to digital services may collide with the basic concept of public libraries: to provide free information for everyone. This can be seen as an example of a situation where there is a clash between what creates a sustainable society (an open and democratic society which is built on free access to information for everyone) and what creates a sustainable public library (in this case, restricted expenditures).

Yet, this is not the task of local politicians, but of the administrators who are the library managers. By examining the politicians' views in this article, possible opportunities for and threats toward public libraries have been seen. However, library staff must determine how this should be handled by choosing which uses of digital services are most rewarding and lie within the budget and the politically formulated goals for the public library activity with the ever-present goal of addressing the public library mission: a democratic, diverse and equal society. Further, this should be done in such a way as to lead to both of two outcomes: a sustainable society and a sustainable public library.

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