



NLW
115,9/10

What threatens public libraries? The viewpoints of library directors in Sweden

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Received 1 April 2014
Revised 8 May 2014
Accepted 17 May 2014

Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to identify threats perceived by Swedish public library directors as the most prominent.

Design/methodology/approach – A web questionnaire was sent to public library directors in all of the Swedish municipalities. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Findings – The findings reveal that the main threat was considered to be the tension between the current activities of the public library and the expectations of the public, or of local decision makers. One reason for the lack of correspondence between activities and expectations is that public library managers regard the expectations on the public library as unrealistic. Another reason is that lack of resources prevent public library staff from meeting many of these expectations. Public libraries are thus prevented by both ideological and practical barriers in fulfilling expectations.

Originality/value – A central issue in current public library research concerns how change in Western society affects public libraries. Many of these studies are either theoretical or based on interviews with politicians. Few researchers investigate how public library directors perceive the situation of public libraries today. Therefore, this article identifies perceptions made by public library directors.

Keywords Public library, Public library directors, Public library managers,
Threats towards public libraries

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A recurring discussion in the field of public library research in the Western world is the changing role of the institution of the public library. From a historical perspective, the idea of the public library has developed together with the emergence of a modern Western society. The latter has entailed dramatic changes during the past three decades through, for example, the rapid development of communication and information technologies, political and economic changes and globalisation processes. Change has led to the creation of new work tasks and working methods, new roles and new areas for the public library and, consequently, to new expectations regarding the public library (Audunson, 1996; Evjen and Audunson, 2009; Kann-Christensen and Andersen, 2009; Pors, 2010; Rooney-Browne and McMenemy, 2010; Jochumsen *et al.*, 2012). If the public library is unable to keep up with societal changes and developments by meeting the public's needs and the expectations of local politicians, there is a risk that the public library will lose its legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the public and the local politicians. A decrease in library use by the public is, in turn, likely to lead to reductions in public funding



(Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004). The issue of the legitimacy of the public library and how it is threatened is therefore examined in this article.

This article is a part of a larger study in which the expectations of local politicians with regard to public libraries, and public library directors' perceptions of these expectations, are studied. The purpose of this article is to map the factors which, according to the public library directors, can imply threats to the public library, and to discuss what the consequences of such threats might entail for the situation of the public library. The aim is therefore twofold: first, to examine how public library directors view the situation of the public library by describing their perceptions of the threats facing public libraries. Second, previous research has highlighted that a general threat to the public library as an institution is that it will no longer be considered as relevant and legitimate by the public and local politicians. Therefore, by using a sociological neo-institutional analysis of the perceived threats, the purpose is also to identify factors which may reduce the legitimacy of the public library. To fulfil this aim, the following research questions are posed:

- Which are the greatest threats to the public library according to the public library directors?
- In what way is the legitimacy of the public library put in question?

Thus, threats to the public library, as perceived by public library directors, are in focus in this text. The article does not consider how these threats are met. This does not mean that public library directors are passive and choose not to respond to the threats they identify, only that a study of their reactions to threats does not lie within the scope of this article.

2. Previous research and theoretical point of departure

As a result of changes occurring in the Western society, the external expectations on the public library are also undergoing change. These changes relate to the rise of new communication and information technology, globalisation and political – economic changes, which have led to the emergence of market-driven thinking and behaviours. It is no longer taken for granted that the mission of libraries is to provide an equal and free access to knowledge or that they should work for the enlightenment of the public. One prevailing expectation today is that public libraries' stock holdings should be developed through user requests and not by library staff choice based on quality and diversity (Audunson, 1996, 2005; Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004; Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007; Evjen and Audunson, 2009; Jochumsen *et al.*, 2012).

The requirements of relevance and legitimacy are formulated by not only external agents but also by internal agents – the public library staff, public library directors and members of associations engaged in public library issues. Individual public libraries also have to meet expectations formulated within their own institution and the public library world (Vestheim and Kangas, 2010). The issue of defining the purpose of the public library and how it is to meet different expectations in its struggle for legitimacy is, of course, not new (Waller, 2008).

Institutions can be described as a set of norms, rules, procedures and understandings. By forming structures, these indicate to the members of the institution what behaviors are considered appropriate. The members of the institution, in this case, the public library staff and directors, are therefore not rationally and instrumentally driven. In

most cases, they act in a way which is considered to be the most appropriate in the situation in question. (March and Olsen, 1989; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2012). Structures indicate what is appropriate to do, they surround and affect the members of the institution; at the same time, the members affect, reproduce or produce the prevailing structures and, therefore, the institution, through their actions. The structures can be formal or informal. Institutions are ongoing (Harty, 2005; Vestheim and Kangas, 2010) and should not be regarded as static – they change but slowly (Hansson, 2010).

The difference between an institution and an organisation can be defined in different ways. Vestheim and Kangas (2010) describe the institution as a social system, which contains organisations that are parts of the institution. In this definition institutions are described as something general and abstract, while an organisation is something specific and concrete. The following quote is crucial to my own definition of an organisation:

An organisation is a social and empirical representation or realisation of the concept of institution. Organisations can also be defined as “materialised expressions” of the general concept of institution (Vestheim and Kangas, 2010, p. 270).

I understand this to mean that an organisation is a realisation of the prevailing structures and the actions of the members of the institution. In this article, organisations consist of the individual public libraries, which are included in the public library institution. The prevailing organisation, the individual public library and its activities and form, are the concrete results of the actions of the public library directors/staff and the prevailing structures of the public library institution. Further, in this article, I define humans as institutional members, that is, individuals such as the public library directors and the public library staff.

According to the neo-institutional perspective, one central concept is that the organisation is regarded as relevant and legitimate by external agents, as well as by the internal agents, the members of the institution in which the organisation is included. If the members of the institution are aligned with prevailing structures and do not ensure that the organisation, in its activities and form, lives up to demands concerning its relevance and legitimacy, there is a risk that it will be considered out-of-date and irrelevant by different external groups as local politicians and the public. Ultimately, this may threaten its continuing existence. At the same time, the individual public library must also take basic public library values and norms into account to remain legitimate in the public library field and profession. (Meyer and Rowan, 1991; Audunson, 1999; Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004).

So how are requirements for relevance and legitimacy formulated? Partly through the expectations of external agents such as the public and local politicians. Meyer and Rowan (1991) discuss the notion of rational myths, which can be described as the current expectations of external agents which are projected onto groups, organisations or professions. To be considered relevant by the external agents, the members have to ensure that the groups, organisations or professions live up to these myths. In this article, the internal agents include public library directors. The external agents are a heterogeneous group with different needs and therefore have different expectations on, and perceptions of, public libraries. To ensure relevancy and legitimacy in the local community, it is important that the internal agents ensure that the public library organisation and its activities can meet the prevailing myths concerning these

expectations and perceptions of the public library (Audunson, 1996; Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004), taking into account that these are not static but change over time. However, some studies point out that organisations, in this case, public organisations, do not necessarily adapt automatically to expectations in their environment, but choose instead to use specific strategies depending on what they see as important (Fernández-Alles and Llamas-Sánchez, 2008).

3. Method

The empirical data were collected through a web questionnaire sent to the public library directors of all the Swedish municipalities in November 2011[1]. Although these data were collected in 2011, there have not been any major changes on the municipal level concerning public libraries in Sweden. Neither have there been any political elections, municipal reforms nor economical regressions since 2011. A new Library Act was implemented in January 2014, and although it differs from the previous act, it is formulated in general terms and does not particularly affect public library activities in the individual municipality. It is therefore likely that the empirical material is as relevant today as it was in November 2011.

The aim of the questionnaire was to map the general situation of Swedish public libraries. It includes 23 questions that involved different areas including the public library's external partnerships, contact with local politicians and perceived challenges. The following open survey question is in focus in this article: "What threats do you see as the greatest to the library/libraries you are responsible for?" The empirical data were analysed using an inductive qualitative content analysis – the empirical material was reviewed, and coding units were drafted based on the content of the empirical material. From these units, suitable categories were formulated such as:

- "economic situation";
- "situation in society"; and
- "views of the library".

The empirical material was then coded according to these categories. To ensure the quality of the encoding, it was carried out twice on two separate occasions by the same person. When the coding was completed, the perceived threats to the public libraries were identified. By using the earlier presented theoretical point of departure and earlier research, the different ways in which the legitimacy of the public libraries can be questioned were discussed within the research group. The discussion was based on the incoming answers from the public library directors and therefore from the perspectives of this group.

The variation between the clarity, content and scope of the responses was huge. Some of the responses were very short, which complicated the coding process. Since the data were collected through a questionnaire, it was not possible to ask supplementary questions. There were, for example, some cases in which it was difficult to discern the threat itself from the reason for the threat as can be illustrated in the following answer: "That the staff cannot cope with increasing demands, given the small resources that we have" – so what is the threat in this case? The staff's lack of capacity or the insufficient resources? During the coding process, the focus was to identify threats which were described as principal by the respondents – in this specific case, the interpretation was that the main threat is not insufficient resources but that the staff are unable to deal with

the prevailing situation. As can be seen in the example, the way in which the response is formulated affects the coding process, and the coding process is influenced by the interpretations of the researcher. It should be emphasised that the example given above was one of the most difficult cases during the coding process – in most cases, there were no doubt as to what the respondent meant.

Most municipalities use a public library director, who is responsible for all the public libraries in the municipality in question. However, in some municipalities, this responsibility is shared. In consequence, some municipalities are represented in the questionnaire by one respondent while other municipalities are represented by two or more. In cases where the municipalities are represented by two or more respondents, these respondents' answers have been aggregated. This has been done so that if a respondent from a certain municipality has identified a threat to the public library as decreasing public interest, while another respondent from the same municipality has identified local politicians' lack of awareness of the potential of the public library as a threat, then these two answers have been treated as two perceived threats for this municipality. This means that each municipality is represented once in the empirical data. The results of the questionnaire are presented at the municipal level, and the answers are, therefore, valid for the whole municipality in question, but not necessarily for all the public libraries in these municipalities. In this questionnaire, 251 or 86.6 per cent of the municipalities of the 290 Swedish municipalities are represented.

Among the respondents in this study, 12 per cent are librarians and 50 per cent are entitled "library chief", translated directly from Swedish. In the Swedish context, this title indicates that the respondents have a background in library and information science (LIS). Even if the empirical data do not divulge if they work as librarians today, the respondent group is still quite similar with respect to the background. It is likely that responses would have been somewhat different if the public library directors had a background in the business world. At this point, it is also important to stress that there is great variation between the Swedish municipalities when it comes to factors such as economy, demography and political organisation.

4. Various threats to the public library as described by library directors

In this section, I present the different perceived threats mentioned by the respondents. I have translated the quotes below from Swedish.

In the empirical data, I have identified seven types of threats:

- (1) the economy;
- (2) social change;
- (3) the external view of the public library;
- (4) a reduction in the use of the public library;
- (5) the (library) policy;
- (6) the public library; and
- (7) its activities and the public library staff and its competence.

Further, the mentioned threats can be divided into two groups: external threats and internal threats. It should be mentioned that there are seven respondents who have answered that they do not perceive any threats at all.

4.1 *External threats*

External threats are defined as threats due to external factors not associated with public library activities.

4.1.1 The economy. Respondents from 57 per cent of the municipalities in this study raised economic issues as a threat, making it the most frequently mentioned. The economic situation in the different Swedish municipalities forces local politicians and officials to cut costs, which leads to reduced budgets for public institutions, including the public library. Sometimes other public activities and organisations are given economic priority over the public library:

The threat is that there is no funding for library activity because the library is placed under the “Welfare Committee” which has school and healthcare and social services under the same umbrella (R185).

4.1.2 Social change. According to the public library directors, social change in the community could threaten the public library. Among the external threats, this category is the second most common and is formulated in 17 per cent of the municipalities in this study. Social change is referred to in various ways. For example, directors refer to the decreasing public interest in reading and literacy:

A generation which is growing up without contact with books, joy of reading, a “non-reading generation” (R232).

Or they refer to technological development and how ongoing digitalisation processes are changing the conditions for public libraries:

The ever-increasing availability of digital media like the internet, e-readers, mobile phones etc. that people use in private (R123).

The development of new media. How long will we have printed books? (R62).

Another example refers to people’s increasing lack of time and mounting stress.

An increasingly clear stress factor in society, both at work and in leisure (R4).

4.1.3 The external view of the public library. In this category, threats concern lack of awareness of public library activities and what the library has to offer. This is true for 14 per cent of the municipalities in this study. It is particularly the local politicians’ lack of understanding of the library as a resource and ignorance of the conditions which are necessary for providing a “good” library that are referred to:

That the competence and the respect for my co-workers’ knowledge is not considered (“anyone can work at the library regardless of education”) [...] (R3).

The lack of interest and knowledge about the importance of libraries from the political sphere, library issues are drowning among the school and healthcare issues (R113).

It also concerns the public’s lack of awareness of the advantages of a public library and its activities:

People think that libraries are superfluous when there is the internet (R168).

4.1.4 A reduction in the use of the public library. Respondents from 4 per cent of the municipalities in this study suggested that the greatest threat to public library is that fewer people use the library and its services. They fear that the consequence may reduce

library budgets, as public library funds are often based on library statistics for the number of visits and loans:

The declining loan figures, since so much of the libraries' existence is based on statistics, and primarily on lending (R189).

4.1.5 The (library) policy. In this category, statements from 2 per cent of the municipalities in this study are about library policy, in particular, at the local level, but also at the national level. The view that emerges is that current policy undermines the position of public library as other political issues are prioritised. The lack of a strong Library Act protecting the public library from, for example, budget cuts, and the absence of a national library policy are also referred to:

The toothless library act (R58).

There is a lack of a clear, explicit national library policy (R206).

4.2 Internal threats

This type of threat includes threats from the public library organisation and the reactions of library staff to local situations.

4.2.1 The public library and its activities. In the empirical material in the case of 18 per cent of the municipalities in this study, threats are seen to emerge when public library activities are unable to keep up with developments in (local) society and fail to provide the services needed. This threat is often linked to threats that are based on economic factors, on societal change and on the external view of the public library:

We can't offer or develop services/activities that make us attractive both physically and digitally (R144).

In this category a threat can also be seen in the fact that the public library staff does not manage to inform local people about the potential of, and activities in, the library:

[...] we have to somehow convey to our politicians that the promotion of reading and democracy is not a luxury that can be swept away when taxes are dramatically reduced, but that we really are bearers of culture (R133).

If the public library staff fails to offer the services or activities that the users require or to inform people in the community about the services provided by the public library, the consequence may be that potential users will choose other solutions:

We don't have a sufficiently attractive selection of media and services so we don't reach our users. One threat might be that we don't have a digital services that are good enough, large enough and easy enough to use, and that causes users to choose other providers (R11).

4.2.2 The public library staff and its competence. Responses from 12 per cent of the municipalities in this study concern this category of threats. Two kinds of threats emerge: first, threats based on the fact that public libraries have too few staff members. This threat is connected with the economic threat: economic cuts result in a reduced workforce:

we want too much with a too small a staff (R215).

Second, threats are associated with the competence of the staff, meaning that the public library staff does not always possess the skills and qualifications necessary to develop the public library as a dynamic and responsive institution:

We need qualified and competent personnel when recruiting (R154).

5. Discussion

Threats to the public library identified in the material can be divided in two different categories. First, threats can be sorted into threats which are *generally oriented* and threats which are *specifically oriented*. Threats which are of a general nature complicate circumstances for all, or many, organisations in society. These threats are economically grounded and concern a general deterioration of the financial situation in the municipality in question, which means that everyone has to save – thus it is not only the public library which is affected. The specifically oriented threats are threats that concern the public library in particular – examples of these are the fact the public library has fewer visits or that the public library receives less financial support.

Second, as mentioned previously, threats can be sorted into *external* and *internal threats*. The former consists of changes in local circumstances and external expectations on, and thoughts about, the public library. The latter concerns the public library's inability to fulfil the requirements and expectations placed on it. These two threats can be connected by external expectations generating new requirements on the public library, which the library staff cannot fulfil.

Thus, both *generally* and *specifically oriented* threats and *internal* and *external threats*, directly or indirectly, can be said to be based on the current or the changing local situation. In previous research, it was emphasised that changing circumstances change the conditions for the public library and its activities:

[...]just as the task of the public library once was to qualify the individual to live in the modern age, the task today must be to somehow provide a foundation for the individual to live in a late modern or postmodern age (Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Jochumsen, 2007, p. 46).

In earlier research, changes in society are categorised as instigated in different ways: through the emergence of new technology, new approaches to information, globalisation and through political and economic changes. In the empirical material, threats emphasised by respondents seem to be due to these changes in society. However, there is one exception. In my empirical data, I have not found threats that can be interpreted as being grounded in societal changes as a consequence of the emergence of a global society. The explanation for this may be that the respondents in this study do not perceive these changes as a threat. Immigrants are, according to the Swedish Library Act, a prioritised group, and the public library is considered as an important arena for integration and as a meeting place for people with different cultural and ethnical backgrounds (Audunson, 2005). Therefore, the explanation could be that public library directors do not see change due to globalisation processes as a threat but consider many of their new commitments as part of the mission of the public library – so it is fairly easy to include this type of change in the prevailing structure of the public library institution. This is my explanation, I have no empirical data that could verify or contradict this because no survey question has been specifically asked about it.

Ongoing change in society today may have given rise to new expectations with regard to the public library in Western society. Compared to three decades ago, other

factors affect whether a public library is regarded as relevant or not by its local community and politicians. For example, today, organisations whose impact can be measured are considered to be of greater relevance by politicians and the public. This can complicate the situation for the public library as it, unlike many other organisations, does not produce a specific product (Audunson, 1996), instead services are produced which can be harder to promote, evaluate and measure in quantitative terms.

Using Meyer and Rowan's (1991) terminology, the following can be said about how the relevance of the public library is being questioned in the Swedish society, seen from the public library directors' point of view. Based on the response of public library directors, the legitimacy of the public library can be questioned either in relation to the rational myths about the public library and which are considered false by public library directors, or related to the fear that public library staff is unable to live up to prevailing rational myths.

The first scenario, according to the public library directors, is due to the fact that the public and/or local politicians are unaware of the public library and its activities and of what the library can provide. In the case of the local politicians, there can also be a lack of awareness of the real needs of the public library. Therefore, according to the public library directors, the expectations of these groups on the public library are incompatible with the public library staff's own vision concerning the potential of the public library, which are considered as real by the public library directors. In other words, external and internal expectations tend to clash.

The second scenario is a consequence of the fact that, according to the public library directors, the public library staff is unable to act in accordance with expectations from the public and local politicians due to a lack of skills, time and resources.

From a neo-institutional perspective, what impact can these two kinds of identified approaches towards the rational myths have on the public library institution? If external expectations are considered incompatible with the values of the institution, there is a major risk that the members of the institution will react negatively to expressed expectations (Audunson, 1999). When rational myths fail to correspond with prevailing visions of the public library institution, there is a risk that the members of this institution will regard such myths negatively, thus rendering adaptation unlikely. In the long run, this may mean that the public libraries will become less relevant to their communities. At the same time, these rational myths can prevent changes that are promoted from within the public library institution, when members feel forced to adapt to the rational myths for fear of losing in legitimacy. Here the question is what happens if external expectations clash with internal visions. Which path will the members of the institution follow? If the members adhere to internal requirements, there is a risk that the public library will lose legitimacy in the local community. If members try to meet external requirements, there is a risk that the idea of the public library will be eroded in the long run when the definition of a public library is reformulated by external agents. The survival of the public library is therefore about maintaining a balance.

Because the questionnaire did not aim to elicit the descriptions of the activities of public library directors but to map the situation of public libraries, no question has been asked about what public library directors and staff could do to meet these threats. However, two potential strategies can be discerned in the responses. Public library directors and staff can either react by accepting and trying to make the best of the prevailing situation or by attempting to alter these external expectations by, for

example, trying to influence the local politicians' views. This has to be examined further in future studies.

When the public library staff cannot live up to rational myths due to a lack of resources, the situation is different. Here one could say that it is possible to adapt, for example, by developing staff skills and competences but this adaptation is prevented due to financial cuts, and a lack of time and competence rather than ideological causes.

However, the feeling that the public library is threatened does not automatically mean that the public library's legitimacy is questioned. For this to happen, the threat has to be specifically directed towards the public library. This is not the case in situations where threats are general, for instance, threats arising from a municipality's weak economy, which would affect a number of organisations. I would like to stress that it is reasonable to believe that in the long term, not all organisations are affected in the same ways by a generally weak economy; some organisations will suffer more than others and mostly those which are considered less legitimate in the (local) community. The fact that my respondents describe threats on different levels, as either general or specific, can be due to the large heterogeneity that exists between different municipalities, which entails that Swedish public libraries face different conditions.

The need to take the particular context into account when speaking about threats to libraries is relevant; the empirical data on which this article is based have shown that there are major differences between the frequency of the different threat categories – the dominant category in this article are threats which have a connection to economic issues. This is not surprising, as the respondents are financially responsible for their libraries. At the same time, the municipal contexts, in which they work, are very different. According to national statistics, presented by Statistics Sweden, the economic situation of Swedish municipalities varies widely. Additionally, the economic threats described can be caused by different factors according to the data; a generally poor municipal economy, a lack of political interest or a lack of financial resources for developments at the library. So even if this category is the most common, it should be used cautiously as economic threats are caused by very different factors. This also applies to the other categories: another example that emerges from the data is that in small municipalities less public interest in public libraries can be due to population decline, while in larger municipalities, this might be caused by competition over users.

Contextualising threats is particularly important when discussing, as a researcher or practitioner, ways in which public library legitimacy is challenged, how legitimacy demands are formulated, as well as the ways in which public libraries chose to adjust to expectations. In short, response strategies should be chosen according to the cause of the threat and not according to the actual threat itself.

6. Conclusion

First, descriptions of threats to the public library do not automatically mean that the legitimacy of the library is threatened. Changes and circumstances in local communities affect several organisations in the same ways. Further, threats are described in different ways which can be due to the local or personal context. Therefore, there is a need for further studies on the ways in which rational myths harboured by local politicians in selected municipalities influence public library and how public library directors perceive these rational myths.

Adaptations to rational myths are met by ideological and practical barriers. In theory, the practical are easier to adjust to. The ideological are more complicated, as the public library will be pulled between expectations from the community and demands from within the public library institution. Based on the response of the public library directors, the public library appears to be threatened both by external and internal factors. A purely reactive approach to local expectations risks losing legitimacy in the eyes of the public library institution. If public library directors and staff focus on the demands of internal agents, there is a risk that the public library will lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the community. It would seem, therefore, that the public library should be open toward the public and their rational myths but in moderation. To conclude, in relation to both the external and internal context, the public library needs to become aware of and reflect over its priorities if it do not want to end up in a vacuum.

Note

1. The study presented in this article is a part of a larger project, in which other studies are included. Due to the structure of this project, some of them had to be prioritized and therefore this article is written only now.

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