

Citizens as Repositories of Knowledge: The Case of Copenhagen Public Libraries

Jakob Heide Petersen

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tv9sX_iFIAM&t=1h05m10s

The Main Mission of Copenhagen Public Libraries

According to the Danish Act Regarding Library Services, the purpose of the public libraries is to 'promote information, education and cultural activity by making available books, periodicals, talking books and other suitable materials'.¹ When the legislation was passed in 2000, it was already becoming apparent at the time that there is an imbalance between the ends (promoting information, education and cultural activity) and the means (making available a collection of materials). The means are not sufficient to achieve the ends.

- Library collection of 1 million materials
- 330 library staff
- 580,000 inhabitants, 200,000 cardholders
- 4.6 million visits, 3.1 million loans
- 5.4 million web visits
- 20 locations
- Libraries merged with 'cultural houses', school libraries or citizen service centres
- 15 Libraries open from 8-22



Fig. 1. Copenhagen Public Libraries.

Danish public libraries therefore have a long tradition of relying on a broad variety of activities in addition to the collection in order to achieve the ends stated in the legislation. Since the introduction of the internet in Danish public libraries in 1995 and the subsequent media development, the availability of a library collection has become increasingly peripheral to many library users.

1. Danish Act Regarding Library Services:

http://slks.dk/fileadmin/publikationer/publikationer_engelske/andre/Act_regarding_library_services.pdf

The shift is reflected in the library strategy of Copenhagen Public Libraries (see fig. 1), where the traditional slogan of ‘Everything imaginable’ has been supplemented by the new one, ‘We get smarter together’.² The internet has challenged the older slogan, and the new slogan is meant to signal an invitation to citizens to collaborate with library staff as equals and to suggest that learning is increasingly a social activity. In that way the slogan echoes David Lankes’ concept of libraries as places of knowledge creation and John Seeley Brown’s ideas of learning as a social activity.³ The new slogan also suggests that the mission of Copenhagen Public Libraries is still to ‘promote information, education and cultural activities’, but that this is achieved primarily by engaging citizens rather than making a collection available.

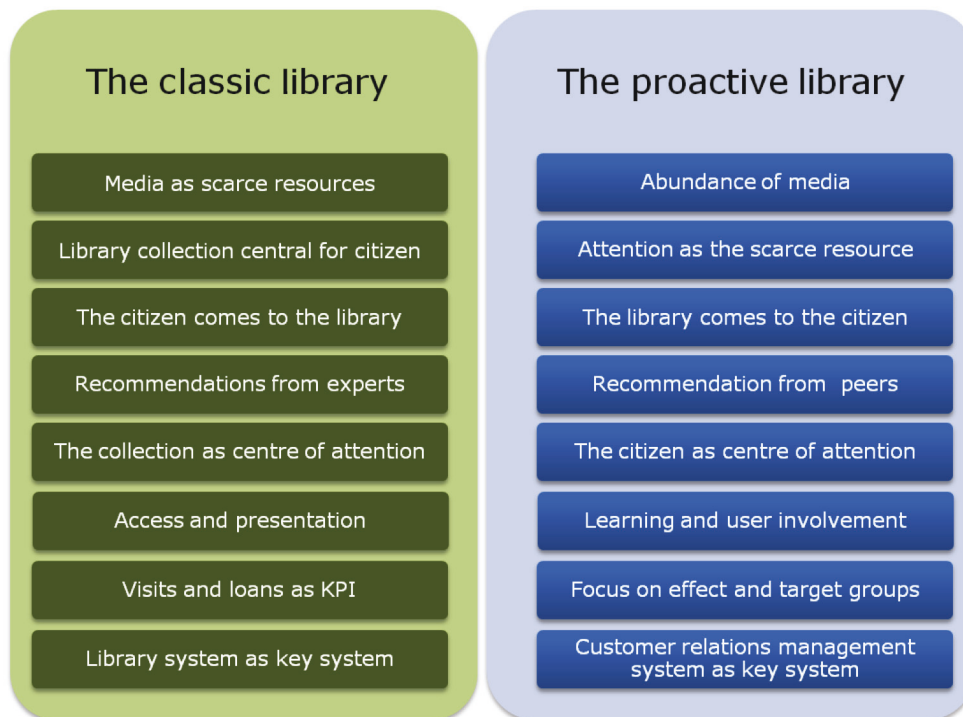


Fig. 2. The classical library versus the proactive library.

The thinking behind the strategy for Copenhagen Public Libraries is presented in figure 2 as a move from the more classical public library to a more proactive library.

The Target Users of Copenhagen Public Libraries

The target users of the Danish public libraries are the citizens of the municipality. The legislation put a special emphasis on children and on the library’s obligation to be open to all citizens free of charge. The number of visitors to the Danish public libraries is relatively stable, but there are an increasing number of non-users. The citizens of Copenhagen can be divided into three groups: one third frequent library users (several times a month), one third occasional library users (several times a year) and one third non-users.

2. Copenhagen Libraries Strategy: <https://bibliotek.kk.dk/About>

3. An example of the thinking of David Lankes can be found at: <http://quartz.syr.edu/blog/?p=1721> and of John Seeley Brown at: <http://www.newcultureoflearning.com/internetlibrarian.pdf>

The stable or for some libraries increasing number of library visits coupled with an increasing number of non-users suggest a polarisation in library use with a group of increasingly frequent library users and a growing group of non-users. The Copenhagen library strategy identifies this development as problematic because the non-users may actually need library services. It therefore suggests a more proactive role for the libraries in order to reduce the number of non-users. The public libraries are not viewed just as a capacity or infrastructure that is made available to the citizens but as an active institution that must work to fulfil the overall purpose for all citizens.

The strategy put a strong emphasis on children as a target group. This is done because such early efforts are more effective in terms of the balance between resources and results, for example in regard to literacy and reading habits. Another reason is that good library habits are created early, so the focus on children ensures future library users.

The History and Current Activity of Copenhagen Public Libraries

The public libraries in Copenhagen were established in 1885 to replace the small privately managed book collections for citizens. There were six small branches where citizens could check out one book at a time for a two-week period. In 1914 the main library opened in Copenhagen, and in 1920 the first national library legislation was passed, introducing a rapid development of the Danish public libraries. In the 1930s a focus on children’s libraries was initiated, and until the 1960s the emphasis was on information and enlightenment for both children and adults. In the 1960s there was an increased stress on the role of public libraries as cultural institutions with a stronger prominence on music in library collections. The public libraries also began showing movies and later also lending them. This development culminated in the library legislation of 2000 that emphasised the equality of media, making it obligatory for public libraries to lend out music CDs and also making movie DVDs available.

Today both music and movies are disappearing from public library collections. The increasing predominance of services such as Spotify and Netflix has resulted in a dramatic decline in loans of CDs and DVDs over the past six years (decline in loans of 55%-70%; see fig. 3). The public libraries have come full circle and are again focussing on literature and enlightenment.

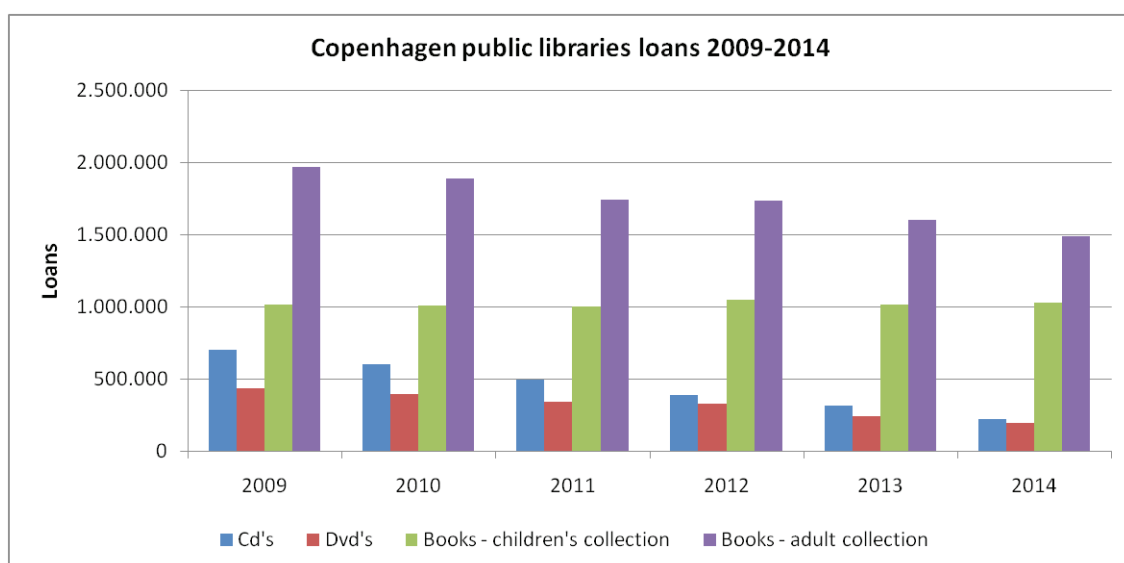


Fig. 3. Loans of different materials, 2009-2014.

The Copenhagen Public Libraries are first and foremost cultural institutions, but the library strategy puts a strong emphasis on learning. The city of Copenhagen already offers citizens many cultural activities and the abundance of commercial media and cultural offerings means that there is no shortage of cultural activity. There is, however, a shortage of informal learning and literacy among children, so those are action areas in the library strategy. The cultural activities offered by the Copenhagen libraries must ideally be something that is not delivered by others or they must reach groups of citizens that would not otherwise experience them. The activities should ideally also involve the citizens and either challenge or inspire them – they should not be mere entertainment.

Changes and Shifting Concepts at Copenhagen Public Libraries

As mentioned above, the media development has resulted in a changed role for the library collection. The collection is not an end in itself but a tool to achieve other objectives. It is viewed from the perspective of different citizen needs. Some types of literature (non-fiction books and individual journal articles) are primarily discovered through the online catalogue and reserved for check-out by students. There is less need to have large collections of this kind of literature in all branches. Other kinds of literature are relevant for exhibitions at local branches in order to inspire citizens or introduce them to literature relevant to activities at the library.

It does seem appropriate to have large collections of children's books at places where parents and children can encounter them in their daily lives. Children need to experience the physical books and become familiar with them, and parents need the opportunity to browse and skim the literature before checking them out. This way of thinking means that Copenhagen libraries are reconsidering the composition of local collections, the physical layout of libraries and the overall branch structure in the city.

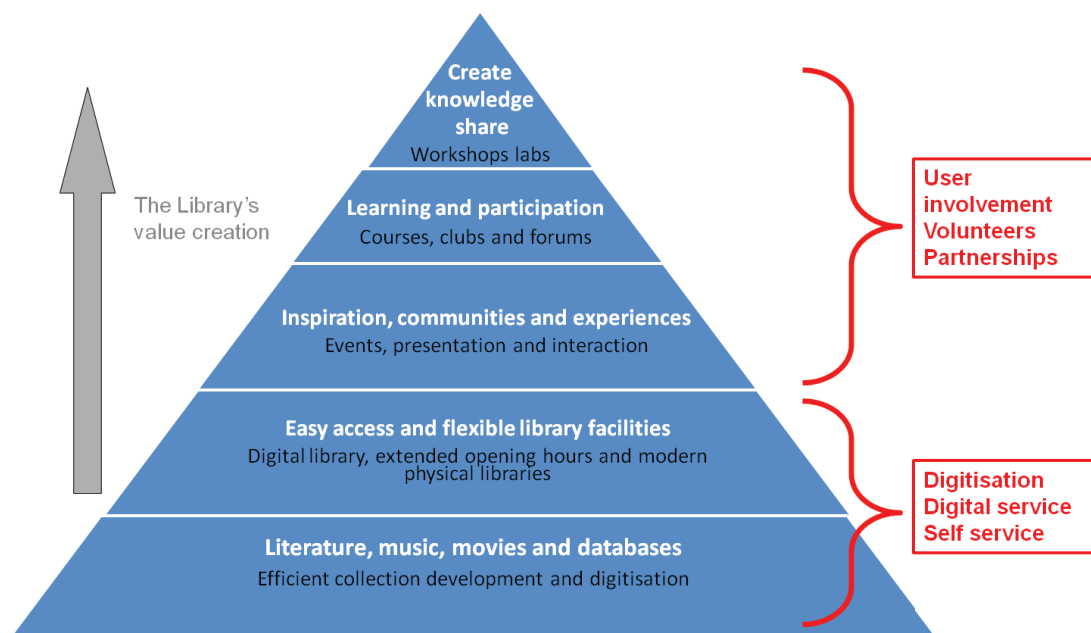


Fig. 4. Copenhagen Public Libraries strategy.

An important priority is collaboration with schools. In most Danish municipalities the public schools are under a different administration than public libraries. There have been legally mandated school libraries, but they are changing into pedagogical learning centres with less focus on the library

task. The recent comprehensive public school reform in Denmark means a shift in focus from teaching to learning and an aspiration of creating learning in new ways, for example through cultural activities. The Copenhagen Public Libraries are therefore hoping to take over some school library functions and to offer new cultural activities that can promote learning. This could entail taking over responsibility for the public schools' book collections and assisting with access to digital information resources.

Another area that is undergoing profound changes is library services. Figure 4 illustrates the library strategy of Copenhagen Public Libraries. The value creation of the library increases at each level of the pyramid.

The foundation for the library services is the collection. The collection becomes more valuable if the library has long opening hours, good physical facilities or if it is digitised. A library collection that citizens can access from 7 am to 10 pm is more valuable than one that is only accessible, for example, from 10 am to 5 pm. If the library can facilitate inspiration and new experiences based on the collection, the library value creation is even larger. If the library can engage citizens and initiate learning, it is even more valuable, and the value creation culminates if the library can get citizens to create and share knowledge.

The model has been the subject of much discussion among staff and management in Copenhagen: Isn't reading a book (at the bottom of the pyramid) as valuable as participating in a workshop at the higher levels of the pyramid? The point is that the model shows the *library's* unique value creation, and the book is created by an author and a publisher and could be provided by a bookshop or an e-book vendor. Indeed, there will be increased competition at the two lower levels of the pyramid and book loans will probably decline as DVDs and CDs have done. The pyramid is basically a value chain, and the strategy is to move towards the hotspots in the value chain. It is designed as a pyramid to reflect the way Copenhagen Public Libraries allocate their resources today. The resource allocation is largest at the bottom and the value creation is largest at the top: the pyramid should be turned upside down.

The red curly brackets suggest that the reallocation of resources will happen through digitisation, digital service and self-service at the lower levels of the pyramid and through user-involvement and partnerships at the higher levels.

This is an ongoing process and entails a very dramatic reduction in traditional services in the libraries. The objective is to move all citizen inquiries to a newly established library call centre and to use the freed-up staff for outreach services and programmed activities in the library space. Copenhagen Public Libraries have increased opening hours and have simultaneously reduced hours with access to staff at reference desks at the physical libraries by 40%.

The strategy means profound changes in the role of library staff. A number of new work roles have been designed with each staff member having a primary and a secondary role. A comprehensive competence development programme has been developed to support this shift.

A Bright or a Gloomy Future for Copenhagen Public Libraries?

The vice president of Amazon Kindle, Russell Grandinetti, in an interview with *The Guardian* summed up how digitisation is affecting the book business: 'The only really necessary people in the publishing process now are the writer and reader. Everyone who stands between those two has both risk and opportunity.'⁴ This point of view is reflected in figure 5, which is a rudimentary illustration of the value chain for the book business. The value creation is concentrated at each end of the value chain – with the authors and the readers.

4. Edward Helmore, 'Amazon's Russell Grandinetti: Kindle Champ Takes on the Books Trade', *The Guardian* (17 August 2014); accessible online at <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/aug/17/russell-grandinetti-amazon-kindle-hachette-book-war-profile>

Public libraries have opportunities both in engaging authors and readers and in facilitating new communities between them. Additionally, public libraries can focus on promoting reading, literacy and literature through new activities rather than just being a repository or a distributor of literature. In the same way as research libraries should attempt to be an integral part both of the research and the study process, public libraries should work to be a part of a citizen’s daily work and individual information universe. Poetry readings at nursing homes or library visits at day-care centres to promote literature and language development are part of that effort.

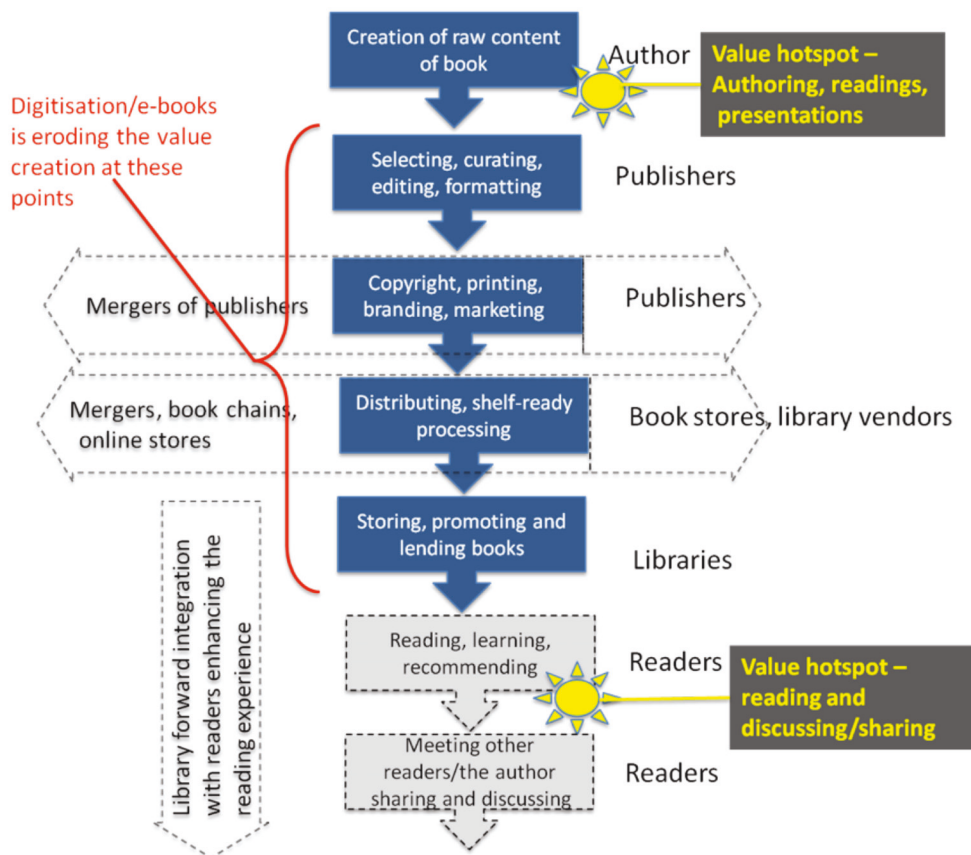


Fig. 5. Industry value chain for books.

From an optimistic perspective there is as much need for the library mission as ever before. The challenge is to persuade politicians and staff that the mission must be achieved through other means than by focussing on a book collection. Public libraries are no longer in the book business but in the people business. Another challenge is whether the libraries can handle the transition in terms of competencies, culture and organisation and provide new services that can actually help achieve the mission.

From a pessimistic point of view many public libraries may stay in the book distribution business and the downward spiral of decreasing loans. Some public libraries might think that they should concentrate on the digital book distribution business. That will be a difficult position in the long run. If they are successful in e-book loans they will be blamed for crowding out commercial activity and sales; and if the focus is on the public service role and providing what the market does not supply, they will have few loans and be blamed for wasting public money.

In the optimistic view the future public library is the physical library, and people will still want to meet. Learning will become increasingly informal, social and lifelong, and public libraries will use their customer intimacy and the citizens as resources to become platforms for citizen learning. An abundance of media and internet access does not in itself create an abundance of knowledge and learning.

In a more pessimistic view that might be a hard sell to politicians, they will have to alter a fixed conception of the library and replace it with a very different one. There could also be a significant risk of underfunding. Politicians tend to prioritise initiatives where there is a close connection between input and output both in terms of time and causality. The activities of public libraries often lack the urgency of immediate problem-solving, and there is typically little direct causality between library efforts and long-term results. Public libraries therefore risk becoming underfunded in the way much infrastructure also receives too little attention.

The basic question becomes whether public libraries can fulfil their new role as community platforms for knowledge creation and whether they are allowed to abandon their old role in time.