Shared Challenges: Defining a New Library Role Supported by Stakeholders

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Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6WwGfuJF_E&t=28m10s

The five categories of libraries represented in the Conference have some tasks and objectives in common, but they also have some marked differences. Both similarities and differences provide good starting points for learning and collaboration.

The main difference among the library types is perhaps the extent to which they focus on the collection. Some library types are more collection-centric and less influenced by changing user needs than others. Both collection-centric and more customer-centric libraries will, however, probably have to adopt a more strategic and flexible approach to development as a consequence of the general media development. Such an approach could mean a reappraisal of the basic mission of the library model or fundamental changes in the way the mission is achieved.

Thoughts on the Future of the Library Models Presented by the Other Participants

Media development is challenging the different library models by introducing competition in the servicing of the target user groups and in some instances by contesting the basic mission. An increase in access to media can for instance challenge a library model that relies on creating value by providing access.

Following Mark Moore, it is therefore my view that all the library models share a challenge that is similar for most public sector institutions: they have to formulate a longer-term organisational strategy. A good starting point for that strategy development is 'The Unique Competing Space Framework' developed by George Tovstiga (see fig. 1).[1]

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1. G. Tovstiga, *Strategy in Practise: A Practioner's Guide to Strategic Thinking*, Chichester: Wiley, [2]2013, p. 104.
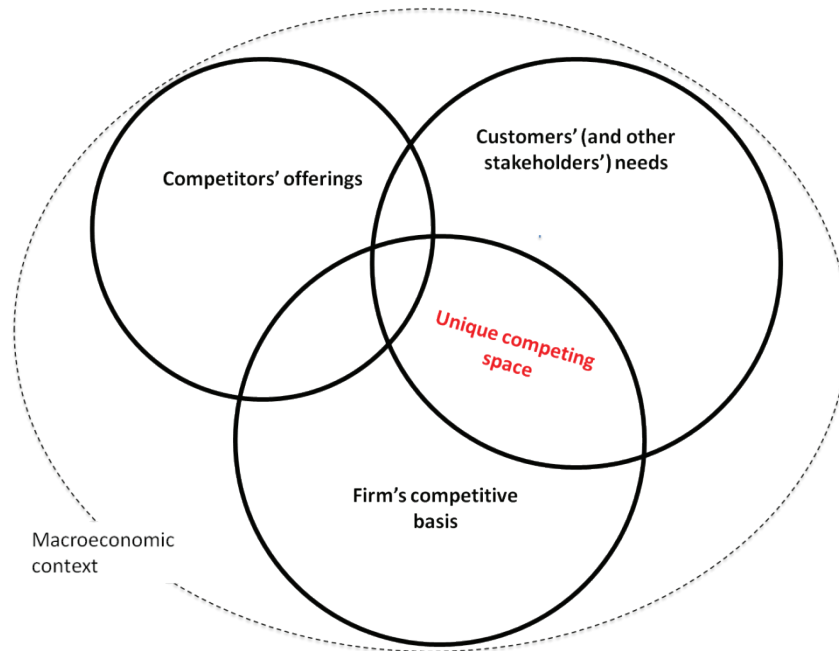
Fig. 1. The Unique Competing Space Framework (Tovstiga 2013).

This model encourages management to identify competitors' offerings, customers' need and those internal resources and capabilities of the organisation that are relevant to meeting the needs of customers. The focus of the analysis is the organisation's unique competing space and how to enlarge it. That can be done by increasing the organisation's relevant capabilities, by identifying new customer needs or by defending it against competition. The relevance of the framework for library development is that it encourages a critical view on current capabilities (for instance, staff competencies and the collection) from the perspective of stakeholders. It also emphasises the role of potential competitors (such as Google or Amazon) and makes it possible to map the organisation's specific services and identity possibilities and threats.

According to Moore, public sector institutions differ from commercial enterprises in the way they generate value and in the role of competitors. Moore's framework, the strategic triangle (see fig. 2), therefore has a boarder definition of value and a focus on legitimacy and support rather than just customer needs.[2]

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2. M. H. Moore, 'Managing for Value: Organizational Strategy in For-profit, Nonprofit, and Governmental Organizations' *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29/1 (2000), pp. 183-204, here p. 197.
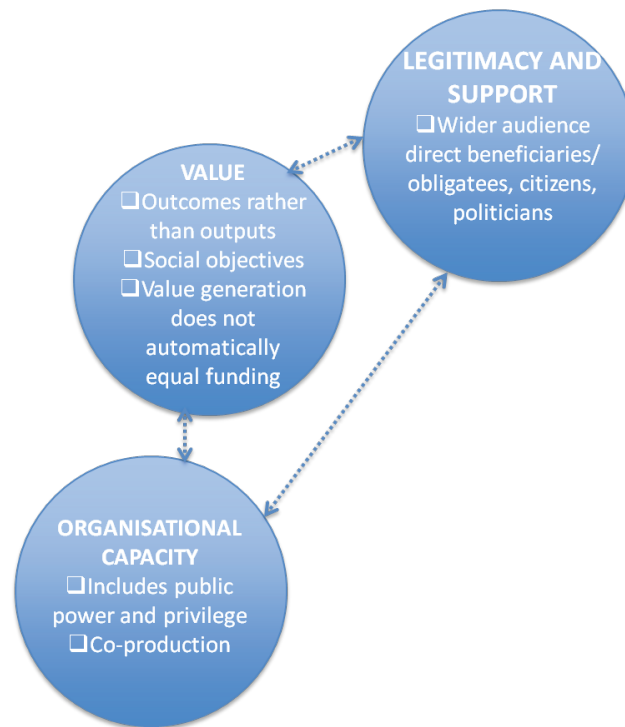
Fig. 2. Strategic triangle (Moore 2000).

The important point is the linkages between the elements: organisational capacity creates value, which generates support, which again produces resources for organisational capacity. Another important point is that the organisational capacity must generate value in the form of outcome (e.g. increased literacy) rather than just outputs (e.g. the number of loans). The value of a police department should, for example, perhaps be measured by the incidence of crime rather than the number of patrols.[3]

Public sector institutions do compete for funding the same way companies compete for investment, but the link between performance / value creation and support / funding is less direct. Value generation does not necessarily equal funding. In the case of libraries it does, however, seem relevant to include competitors in a strategic framework. This can be done by combining the two models. Figure 3 shows 'The Unique Competing Space Framework' with the strategic triangle superimposed.

Public sector institutions produce value for a wider audience and not just for the direct recipients of the service. The general public can have views on how schools or libraries should fulfil their goals even when the individual citizen is not a user of the institution. An important consequence is that some public sector institutions such as libraries have less strategic room for manoeuvre. The unique competing space [UCS] is limited by a political mandate and need for legitimate support for the libraries' mission. Moore talked of mission stickiness to indicate a public sector institution that sticks to its mission despite a changing environment.[4] He juxtaposed this to mission creep / drift, where the institution adapts to the environment – perhaps through a new interpretation of the political mandate. In figure 2 that might entail moving away from the UCS towards the stakeholders.

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3. J. Alford, 'The Implications of "Publicness" for Strategic Management Theory', in G. Johnson and K. Scholes, *Exploring Public Sector Strategy*, Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2001, pp. 1-16, here p. 6.

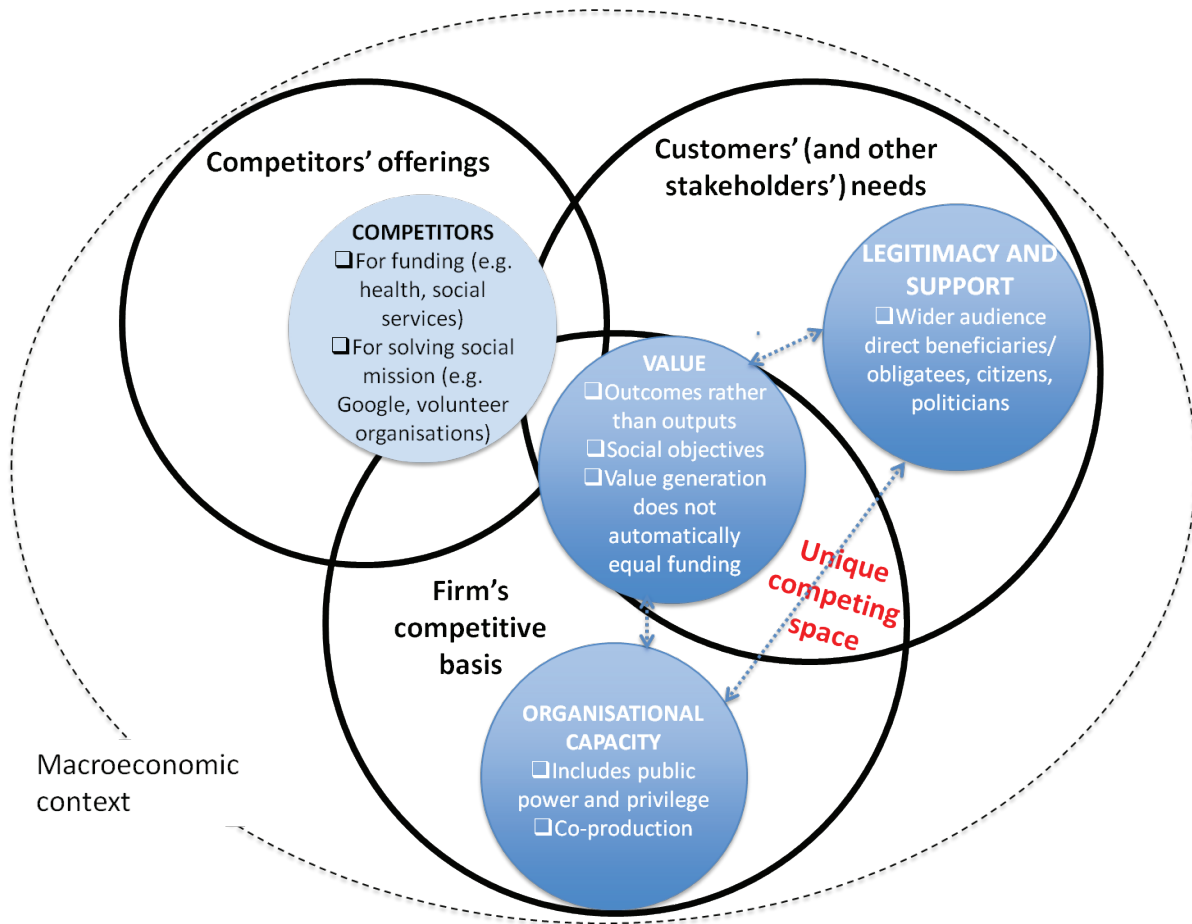4. Moore, 'Managing for Value', p. 192.

Fig. 3. UCS Framework with adapted strategic triangle superimposed (Tovstiga 2013 and Moore 2000).

The challenge for many libraries is precisely whether to 'reinvent' themselves as learning centres, IT functions, community centres, fab-labs or to insist on a more traditional role and mandate. Another important challenge is to strengthen the links between organisational capacity, value creation and support from stakeholders. Most of the contributions (including the one from Copenhagen) have a focus on organisational capacity and outputs, and libraries in general are perhaps not sufficiently skilled in translating their activities into outcomes and in focussing on generating support. That could explain the emphasis on new library key performance indicators and library advocacy at many library conferences. It also highlights why many libraries and some of the contributions to this Conference point to increased budgetary pressures. In my view, the strategic task for each of the library models is to define the unique competing space and find ways to expand it. Figure 4 is an illustration of how that might be done for a public library.
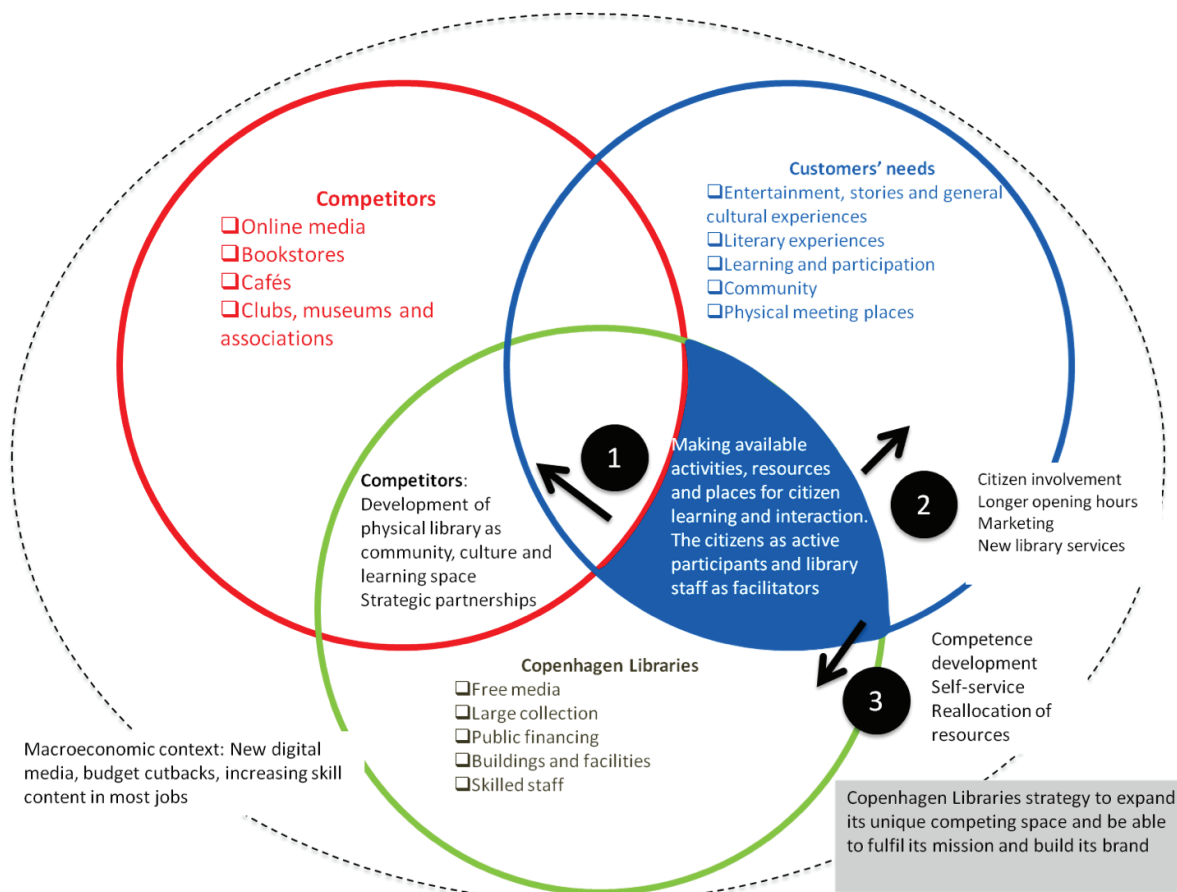
Competitors
- Online media
- Bookstores
- Cafés
- Clubs, museums and associations

Customers' needs
- Entertainment, stories and general cultural experiences
- Literary experiences
- Learning and participation
- Community
- Physical meeting places

Competitors:
Development of physical library as community, culture and learning space
Strategic partnerships

Making available activities, resources and places for citizen learning and interaction. The citizens as active participants and library staff as facilitators

Citizen involvement
Longer opening hours
Marketing
New library services

Competence development
Self-service
Reallocation of resources

Copenhagen Libraries
- Free media
- Large collection
- Public financing
- Buildings and facilities
- Skilled staff

Macroeconomic context: New digital media, budget cutbacks, increasing skill content in most jobs

Copenhagen Libraries strategy to expand its unique competing space and be able to fulfil its mission and build its brand

Fig. 4. Defining the UCS for a library.

Existing Collaboration

For Danish public libraries, the most important collaboration with other library models is through interlibrary loans. That is particularly important because the Danish library legislation places a strong emphasis on collaboration between public libraries and research libraries. There is, furthermore, a strong demand for interlibrary loans from research libraries as a larger part of the general population engages in lifelong learning facilitated by public libraries. Ideally, digitisation of materials could support this collaboration, but in reality interlibrary lending of digital materials is difficult due to copyright restrictions.

Expected and Potential Synergies

A very important potential synergy between public libraries and, for instance, national libraries could be the promotion and presentation of (parts of) the national collection to the general public. Danish public libraries have a wide audience and a strong focus on children and learning, which could be supported by access to and promotion of the national cultural heritage held by the National Library.

Public libraries can also learn a lot about alternative forms of presentation and exhibitions from museums and museum libraries. From research libraries such as UCL, public libraries can find inspiration for learning activities and the design of learning spaces. Many public libraries help citizens use public IT solutions and make use of data from Open Data initiatives or smart city initiatives. In that context, closer collaboration with digital libraries such as OpenAIRE might become increasingly relevant.

Suggestions and Insights on the Improvement of Library Management and Function

A major challenge for management in all library models is to communicate the value created by the library. That means explaining and perhaps reformulating the basic mission in regard to key stakeholders. It also means focussing more on the outcome of specific library services than on traditional output measures, such as loans and visits.

For a public library a narrow focus on traditional output measures would suggest buying a lot of bestsellers and making them available for a short loan period. That would increase the number of visits to the library website (for searching and reserving items), visits to the physical library (collecting and returning) and, of course, the circulation statistics. Such a policy might, however, undermine book production and local bookshops.

Instead, many public libraries use resources on children's reading clubs, which are more labour intensive, demand a longer stay on the library premises and do not boost traditional output measures much. Nevertheless, the reading clubs support the library mission better.

For most library models the challenge is for the library to remain or become a relevant part of the information environment of the target users. In the case of research libraries that might mean being a part of the workflow of researchers and students, and for public libraries it might mean engaging parents and schools in order to support literacy and reading among children.

In the words of Patrick Losinski of Columbus Metropolitan Libraries, one can distinguish between the library business and the business of the library.[5] The former is about formulating a relevant library mission in a way that resonates with stakeholders. The latter is about identifying and enlarging the unique competing space and acting much like a commercial entity.

For library managers the challenge is to form consensus among key stakeholders, such as staff and funding authorities, on the specific library mission and the way that is achieved – and that is no small task, as both will change rapidly in the years to come.

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5. Presentation by Patrick Losinski at an informal meeting with Danish politicians during an IFLA conference, 18 August 2016.