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# Re-examining the Values of the Public Library in Times of Uncertainty and Hardship

A Discussion of Theoretical Ideas Inspired by Axel Honneth's Observations on Social Freedom<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** A review of selected published sources on the legitimacy of the public library shows that there is a paucity of critical thinking about public libraries and their future. The paper considers ideas generated from reading German philosopher Axel Honneth's seminal work "Das Recht der Freiheit". A discussion is conducted of Honneth's theoretical perspectives, particularly the notion of social freedom, and their applicability to theory building in public librarianship.

**Keywords:** Public libraries; purpose; future; transformation; critical theory; social freedom; Axel Honneth

## Erneute Überprüfung der Werte öffentlicher Bibliotheken in Zeiten der Unsicherheit und Not

**Zusammenfassung:** Eine Erhebung ausgewählter Veröffentlichungen über das Bestehen und die Legitimität der öffentlichen Bibliothek zeigt, dass es an kritischem Denken über öffentliche Bibliotheken und ihre Zukunft fehlt. Der Beitrag setzt sich mit Ideen auseinander, die dem Lesen der bahnbrechenden Arbeit „Das Recht der Freiheit“ von Axel Honneth entstammen. Diskutiert werden Honneths theoretische Perspektiven, insbesondere der Begriff soziale Freiheit und ihre Relevanz und Verwendbarkeit für Theoriebildung im öffentlichen Bibliothekswesen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Öffentliche Bibliotheken; Ziel; Zukunft; Transformation; kritische Theorie; social freedom; Axel Honneth

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## 1 Introduction

Overall, and this applies to most countries, the public library's service environment exhibits an increasing degree of complexity and unpredictability. Public libraries are operating in a macro-level climate of aggravated competition, recession-affected economies and financial constraints and budget reductions. Add to this shifts in the library users' preferences, expectations and behavioural patterns along with the manifestation and impact of new media, platforms, formats and gadgets. The e-book is coming and, as usual, growth trends in this area in the USA are spreading to other parts of the world. Further, portable devices including smartphone, iPhone, iPad and tablets and a range of playware products create new media opportunities. Broadly, public libraries seem to be aware of developments in digitisation of information and the increasing growth of electronic networks. And they are, with greater or lesser success, seizing the

<sup>1</sup> The paper is a revised edition of a paper presented at the Anniversary Event of the Swedish School of Library and Information Science in Borås 6–7th December 2012.

opportunities of the social media for providing information resources and services for their clients and for enhancing their web visibility. However, a more fundamental problem for public libraries is the fact that, in many countries, libraries experience severe cuts in expenditure with staff being dismissed and branches closed (Woods-worth, 2011, page xi). Also, some opinion leaders, politicians and members of the general public have started questioning or debating the mere rationale of libraries. In these times, libraries cannot just lean back feeling complacent with their role as smooth information centres and cultural experiences providers in a consumerist society. This sort of cross-pressure makes it necessary for libraries to rethink their purpose and adjust their community role in the light of contemporary developments in society and on a global scale. Similarly, library theorists and researchers have a role to play in this process by re-examining the values and theoretical basis of public librarianship. In this respect, in revisiting existing conceptual frameworks in the public library field, critical ideas and theoretical perspectives drawn from other academic disciplines seem obvious.

## 2 Methodology

The study described here intends discussing the situation and challenges of the public library along with the need for new theoretical ideas in the discussion of the library's future. A review is conducted of selected published sources addressing the legitimacy of public libraries along with the efforts to rethink their future roles and chief tasks. The selected pieces analysed cover public library environments in Scandinavia, primarily Denmark, United Kingdom and the USA. Consequently, the developments, issues and dilemmas identified for discussion in this article are seen from a predominantly North European/Anglo-American perspective. This illustrative emphasis put on European and American conditions can be justified referring to the state of fairly advanced public library redefinition efforts in these countries. In Germany, Scandinavia and in the Anglo-American library world, a range of books and reports have been published that take an innovative and explorative approach to discussing the profile, identity, purpose and priorities of the public library. There are several routes to exploring problems and challenges facing public libraries in the first half of the 21st century. Some ideas, clues and views on future public library roles can be found in the published literature. Other perspectives are offered by projects, analytical work and scenarios in progress or recently completed.

However, the major issue examined in this study is the feasibility of including a specific body of theory from outside the field of Library and Information Science to enrich theoretical discussions within public librarianship. Identifying applicable ideas and conceptual perspectives developed by external theorists and transferring these to the realm of public librarianship is not an easy exercise. Nevertheless, the present author boldly ventured to carefully read prominent German contemporary philosopher and critical social theorist Axel Honneth's major theoretical work *Das Recht der Freiheit* (Honneth, 2011) from a public library perspective. Hence, what is presented here is the result of a tentative and, admittedly, a little sketchy effort to relate specific theoretical ideas derived from Honneth's work to the current debate on the viability of the public library in the 21st century. In this way, it is hoped, an illustration can be provided of how theoretical approaches and frameworks from outside the LIS domain could bring a wider perspective to the discussion on the future roles of the public library. In this sense, the present paper emphasises a critical, conceptual and even "speculative" approach more than a pragmatic and evidence-based one.

## 3 Extended literature review

There are quite a few contributions, which consider the threats, profile and major tasks as they apply to the library in the years to come. Two years ago the National Library of Sweden issued a small compact anthology entitled "Does the library exist in 20 years' time?" Included in the booklet are twelve brief estimates and predictions about public library futures and a summary of a panel discussion. In discussing the future profile of the public library, Rydell (2011) feels convinced that there will be a consolidated and thriving public library, even in 2030. Another contributor, Svensson (2011), a cultural journalist and critic, is much more pessimistic about the public library's survival opportunities in his crystal ball gazing. Coffman (2012) shares the pessimistic tone in a very thought-provoking piece on disappointed expectations for a much more visible and preponderant role for libraries in the digital revolution. In the long run new technologies and gadgets tend to out-distance libraries. The gloomy prospects for libraries in the years to come are balanced by Fiels' (2011) optimistic and myth-exploding view of the viability of libraries.

In a published study of the public library in urban development, three Danish public library researchers Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Henrik Jochumsen and Dorte Skot-Hansen (Hvenegaard Rasmussen et al., 2011, page 215–216) offer their view of future challenges to the

library. Even though it may seem to be going well within the library's four walls at the moment, there is a risk that the library in its classic form will be overtaken by the many new virtual and tangible cultural offerings. The library should not abandon its unique capabilities for organising and disseminating information, knowledge and culture. But these assets and competences should be put into play in new ways and in new contexts.

Some library theoreticians and commentators see a future for public libraries as centres for specialised services or advise libraries to define and give priority to a major area of activity. Thus, O'Beirne (2010) strongly argues that libraries should upgrade the educational part of their mission, dust off and revive the forgotten concept of learning and concentrate their energy on learning activities in the library environment, not least informal learning. In Sweden, public libraries have historically had a high profile in responding to general education needs. The educational emphasis has been continued during the last few decades with individual public libraries serving as support centres for adult education and providing services to various categories of higher education students. In framing library policy in this area, there has been an increasing awareness of such keywords as lifelong education and the knowledge society (Hansson, 2012, page 57–61).

Other contributors to the debate about the public library's future role and emphases, including some politicians, come into the open and frankly call for entrepreneurship, business-mindedness, customisation, more demand-orientation, public-private sector synergies and fee-based services. Thus, John Huber – author of *Lean Library Management* (2011) – received some attention within the library community (e.g. in Denmark and UK) upon his introduction and promotion of eleven strategies capable of making public library services efficient and competitive. According to Huber's recipe, libraries should learn from their commercial competitors. Similarly, McMenemy (2009) discusses whether public libraries could learn lessons from the retail sector. However, McMenemy states that “public library users must be seen by the profession as citizens and not consumers” (McMenemy, 2009, page 202). Greene and McMenemy (2012) offer an intriguing analysis of how neoliberal ideology, managerialism and consumerism have pervaded thinking about public libraries and librarianship in the UK during a specific period. The study provides insights into the degree to which neoliberal theories have impacted on public librarianship through the transformation of professional language. To determine this influence on professional jargon and vocabulary an examination was conducted of a corpus of public library documents using content and discourse analysis. It is demonstrated

that language is a powerful persuasive tool that can be used rhetorically to present policies that at first sight may appear to benefit the service but in the long term perspective could lead to the erosion of public space as a democratic arena. Kann-Christensen and Andersen (2009) provide a critical analysis of the neoliberal way of thinking and the way New Public Management is finding its way into Danish public library policy.

The human rights perspective is brought in by Kathleen de la Peña McCook and Katharine J. Phenix (de la Peña McCook and Phenix, 2011, page 339–360) in their chapter entitled “The Future of Public Libraries in the Twenty-First Century: Human Rights and Human Capabilities”.

In Norway, the first issue of the 2011 volume of *Bok og Bibliotek*, the chief library journal, featured the theme of libraries and the future. One of the contributors notes that slowly but surely the library is losing ground in the municipalities and he calls for self-criticism on the part of library professionals, LIS educators and LIS researchers. The library's meeting place function was explored in a milestone-type empirical study reported by Aabø, Audunson and Vårheim (2010).

Kranich (2001) explains how libraries help reduce the digital divide, increase access to government information and how they are fighting against both censorship and private interests to ensure that access to information is as free as possible.

According to Jaeger and Fleischmann (2007), public libraries appear in the public as the trusted provider of e-government access and public library service in these areas is rooted in the fundamental library-related values as defined by Gorman (2005) and expressed in the American Library Association's (ALA) Library Bill of Rights.

## 4 The variety of views on the public library's future

It appears from the above review of relevant public library sources that the library can be viewed as an extension of urban place. We are – in a metaphorical sense – seeing trends towards removing or eliminating the walls between the library as a physical entity and the community in which the library functions. In other words, the library is considered an integral part of urban life. Thus, in the age of social networking, the library could serve as a space for learning, communication, leisure and cultural activities and act as a meeting place (civic spaces). Digitisation seems unavoidable as a key feature in the ongoing and upcoming transformation process facing public libraries at

large and some LIS authors and theorists see a bright future for updated and redesigned reference services in the digital era. Significant too, according to some researchers and practitioners, is the multicultural dimension of public librarianship. Also, there is considerable emphasis on how public libraries could sharpen their profile in fostering information literacy and in supporting lifelong learning. In enhancing the communication and meeting place functions, libraries can encourage and facilitate public discourse and exchange of views on current social, political, cultural, etc. issues (offering democratic agoras). In sum, numerous ideas about and visions for the roles and central tasks of the future public library have been circulated within the library world, the LIS academic community and within the political sphere. Considerable creative energy is devoted to illustrating how existing public library resources and services could be restructured and reoriented to meet the needs of new times and developments. There are descriptions of how the public library can implement innovation initiatives and gear itself to meet the needs of new user groups (young people and citizens in a multicultural society, etc.), new formats and media and new technologies. Suggestions and ideas are offered for innovative public library roles based on analysis of community developments, socio-demographic trends and more fundamental societal changes. Fed into these processes of gearing the public library to develop innovative responses to user needs and expectations are observations on anticipated changes in the needs, preferences and behavioural patterns of population groups. But what often seem to be missing in the deliberations and reflections on the public libraries' future and new roles is articulated ideology critique. There has been less effort to examine the public library's future and possible roles on the basis of a fundamental critical analysis of developments in contemporary society and on a global scale. Today, the public library's wider external environment is characterised by financial hardship along with social, economic, environmental and climate crisis. Add to this the widening gap between haves and haves-not (recently a new book appeared in Denmark, which deals with class society and shows how the distance between the upper class and the lower classes, between the top and the bottom in the Danish society has increased in recent years). In many countries, public libraries are, and will be operating in a socio-economic context characterised by debt reduction policies, the persistence of neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) regimes, cuts in social welfare systems, increased unemployment, exclusion from the labour market and the prospects of a possible loss of youth generations because of lack of employment. Also faced is the democratic deficit, which is a

reality in many nation states, globally and within the EU. Thus, public libraries and democracy remains a vital issue, but among LIS theoreticians the analytical interest in the public library as a democratic agent seems declining. Also characterising the library's macro environment are the concentrations within the media sector and the formation of media monopolies and conglomerates that make political bias more widespread, produce more infotainment and make it harder to disseminate views and information that go against the mainstream and question the traditional political power structures and paradigm dominance. Studies of library aims and roles, scenario analysis, and projections, etc. tend to mirror conventional and mainstream ideas and visions of society including its social, economic, cultural, etc. conditions and socio-demographic factors. One gets the impression that presentations and studies sort of evade critical issues in the library's external environment and macro-sphere characterised as it is by increased turbulence, fragmentation and segregation. In a historical perspective, however, there are several examples of library criticism and alternative public library thinking.

On the other hand, over the years quite a few LIS scholars and public library theoreticians have added to the literature on public library objectives and priorities and the changing emphases characterising these. One example is Vestheim (1999) who has given some attention to the legitimacy of the public library. He analysed public library discourse and identified efforts to reconsider and adjust the mission of the public library in times of declining resources.

Outstanding contributions have been made by John Budd and John Buschman, two American LIS researchers. Budd (2008, page 147–223) explores issues in and requirements for theory building in civic librarianship. He offers an intriguing in-depth analysis of the interrelatedness and interplay between the vital concepts of social responsibility and intellectual freedom. Fairly detailed coverage is given to neoliberalism and the way this ideology has tinted current library policy-making and rhetoric. In the USA, *Progressive Librarian* provides a forum for identifying and discussing progressive perspectives on librarianship and information issues. Discussed in the journal's articles are such topics as libraries and social and cultural rights, economics of information, the concept of progressive librarianship, public versus private, public libraries in a globalised capitalist world and critical theory for LIS.

John Buschman, cited by Budd, strongly disputes one-sided economic logic, customisation-centeredness, marketplace thinking and value-for-money regimes in (public) librarianship: "The democratic public sphere roles of libraries as disseminators of rational, reasoned, and orga-



nised discourse, as a source of verifying or disputing claims, and as a space for the inclusion of alternative views of society and reality have no place in the vision of the library as the instant-satisfaction, fast-food equivalent of information” (Buschman, 2003, page 120–121).

## 5 Critical analysis of public library purpose: the paucity of approaches

As can be seen from the literature analysed above, recent years have witnessed a growth of public library research, which has resulted in a significant number of published public library studies, doctoral dissertations and anthologies containing articles on public libraries’ mission, challenges, changing tasks and their conditions now and in the future. But the growing body of research seems to include relatively few attempts at in-depth critical analysis of prevailing paradigms in the public library field in the light of changes and trends in the libraries’ external environment.

## 6 Theory building in public librarianship: Contributions from other disciplines

Quite a few academic publications in LIS reflect the application of theories, models and theoretical constructs imported from other disciplines such as hermeneutics, public sphere theory, social capital theory (Vårheim, 2008) and discourse analysis. In their chapter on “Philosophies and paradigms in Information Science”, Bawden and Robinson (2013, page 47–49) provides a compact tabulated overview of philosophies and philosophers that have been drawn upon by theorist and researchers in LIS. The table lists examples of published LIS studies that have “imported” ideas and theories developed by influential thinkers (philosophy, linguistics, social sciences, etc.). A collective volume edited by Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given and John E. Buschman provides a selection of contributions on critical theorists of relevance to critical inquiry and theory building in LIS. In his review of the book, Hjørland (2010) dwells on the problem of defining critical theory in a LIS context and raises some questions about the critical theorists singled out for presentation in the anthology, i.e. the justification of theorists and theories that have been included. A glance at the accompanying list compiled by Hjørland and forming part of his review reveals that three

German theorists have been selected for the volume: Habermas, Heidegger and Marcuse. However, other German sociologists and social philosophers of repute might have been considered in this respect. Thus, to tentatively address this challenge, an initial effort is made here to briefly introduce Axel Honneth, a prominent German left-wing thinker.

## 7 Axel Honneth briefly presented

As the leading figure within critical theory and belonging to the so-called Frankfurt School, Honneth (2011) can be said to follow in the footsteps of excellent, internationally renowned thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm and Habermas.

A brief overview of the content structure of *Das Recht der Freiheit* would be helpful here: In the introduction, key concepts and problem areas are addressed under the heading “Theory of justice as social analysis”. In this context, Honneth refers to the Hegelian “Philosophy of Right”, and sets out to discuss the central thoughts and principles in Hegel’s work so as to determine its present relevance and the potential it offers for a more detailed conceptual analysis, which, so to speak, takes the form of a “diagnosis of the present”. Also included is “morality” in the Hegelian sense. In popular terms one could say that Honneth aims at a “Hegel Revival” – an effort to “update” and clarify Hegel’s intentions. Honneth provides an in-depth study of three models of Freedom: negative, reflexive and social freedom. Social freedom constitutes the core concept of the whole analytical project and pervades the reflections of the work. Honneth provides an in-depth treatment of the concept of *social freedom*, its meanings and characteristics along with the realisation and development of social freedom within the sphere of friendship and family and within intimate relationships. The analysis moves on to consider the spheres of the market, consumers and consumption and employment. Very detailed coverage is provided of the developments and problems of the democratic public sphere and the democratic constitutional state. The summary of the book is entitled “Political culture – outlook and prospects”.

The interesting thing about the book is the attempt to make norms or habits as they are termed within Hegel’s conceptual universe, assume a stronger position than that of legal regulation, which is currently the most widely used political tool. As an alternative, Honneth seeks to identify what kind of norms are conducive to making democratic principles potent in everyday life. The focus is on how to develop tangible norms to ensure respect and

recognition. Once these standards are described and become active, it would also be possible to spell out the trends of development in society, social life, in the market sphere, etc. that can be considered erroneous or unjust. Overall, Honneth spends considerable intellectual effort in illustrating and explicating what he characterises as failures, as developments that have failed (*Fehlentwicklungen*). A recurring concept in Honneth's scholarly work is democratic morality (*Sittlichkeit*). Honneth sees the neoliberal development as a defect development. It is a derailed development where economic arbitrariness and casino capitalism can be said to eliminate democratic principles and other forms of legitimacy. Neoliberalism undermines the legitimate expectations of getting something in return for a reasonable performance. But as things are, in the neoliberal logic, performance does not match the benefit achieved. Honneth's recent work *Das Recht der Freiheit* can be read as a counterpart to Habermas' democratic theory, as it is formulated in *Faktizität und Geltung*. To Honneth the really interesting thing about Hegel's social analysis is the great attention the latter focuses on the social pathologies that arise because of the atomising and individualising tendencies that characterise the capitalist form of organisation of modern societies (Willig, 2011).

## 7.1 Axel Honneth and public library theory

In coming to grips with Honneth's theoretical considerations on social freedom and justice theory from a LIS perspective, one encounters the familiar dilemma that is very accurately pointed out by Hjørland in his review of the anthology with contributions on critical theorists (mentioned above): the delicate problem of clarifying the implications of theory elements drawn from other disciplines for theoretical discussions, conceptualisations, issues and concerns in LIS. Admittedly, the present author also faces this particular challenge. However, in setting out to determine the applicability of Honneth's analytical approaches to public library theory, the first step is to develop a sort of problem statement. It could be phrased like this: how to establish a connection between Honneth's thoughts and ideas as they are expressed in *Das Recht der Freiheit* – his analysis the concepts of freedom and the implementation and realisation of social freedom – and the public library world? How to make the two entities interact? What relevance, if any, has Honneth's theoretical ideas to public libraries that are in the process of solving practical tasks, actively serving users, keeping abreast of new developments, redefining them-

selves, finding a new identity, attracting and continuously capturing the interest of children and young people as users, etc.? Imagining that Honneth's ideas can be transferred to the public library world may seem like a breakneck enterprise. One can easily get into trouble. Admittedly, it is hardly fruitful to try to relate the entirety of Honneth's theoretical ideas to the theoretical frameworks and the set of values developed for public libraries and their activities. Clearly, some weighing and delimitation seems necessary here with the risk of being superficial and sorting out too much. There is always the risk of "berry picking" and too much eclecticism in reviewing and assessing theoretical elements that can be applied to issues, developments, policies and choices in a public library context. In other words, as a theorist you are facing a range of approaches and models when it comes to applying Honneth's ideas to issues in public library theory. One option here is to bunch a core of digested theoretical ideas and observations extracted from Honneth's work and include the elements thus selected in the problem statement. This approach was adopted for the present study resulting in the following list:

- the essence, implications and realisation of democratic morality
- the practices of mutual recognition
- the participation of individuals in institutions for mutual recognition
- problems and issues in institutionalisation of social freedom
- the essential nature of discursive mechanisms, negotiation fora and discussion spaces
- the lack of discursive instruments in specific spheres (e.g. consumer interests)
- the democratic public sphere with its deficits as well as its desirable features
- ways to developing a political culture of democratic morality
- citizens' active involvement in and contribution to political discourses

These elements are then included in the analytical approach, which aims to: (1) illustrate how fundamental ideas developed by Honneth can inform the discussion of the public library's mission and its basic values in the 21st century; (2) provide inspiration and input for a theory-based critique of specific examples of "technocrat-driven" and economically conditioned policy formulation, strategy development and initiatives and priorities, which can be said to conflict with established principles and objectives in the field of public libraries and (3) generate input on the basis of Honneth's work, which may serve to justify the formula-

tion and implementation of new public library responsibilities and priorities, new service approaches, etc.

## 7.2 Social freedom and public libraries

In examining the implications of social freedom for the discussion of the theoretical basis of the public library, the first step will be to identify issues, forces, “spheres of interest” and fields of activity within the broad realm of public libraries that exhibit features, phenomena and mechanisms, which could be studied from the perspective of social freedom and democratic principles as they apply to everyday life. In the sense of social freedom such public library-oriented issues and concerns would have connotations of distribution of essentially immaterial goods and resources in society (reading materials, media products broadly, knowledge, culture and arts related assets and experiences, entertainment etc.). This approach includes an individual and (in some cases) a collective rights’ perspective. This perspective specifically considers the aspects of access, viz. the access to various categories of information, media and reading materials along with the possibility of enjoying a variety of cultural goods. Relevant too are the regulation aspects and the existence of restrictions and barriers hampering access to goods and resources including the reasons, desirability, arguments and efforts to eliminate barriers between individuals (groups) and resources and goods and smooth away regulations. Also included here are the differing or conflicting interests in terms of access. Essential too from an individual as well as a group or collective perspective is the equality-inequality dichotomy. When delving further into the basic problems of availability and access to information, media, culture, etc., as seen from the library perspective, an array of additional topics, issues and challenges can be identified encompassing such problem areas as information ethics, freedom of information, intellectual freedom, information-rich versus information-poor and the way in which various kinds of power regimes produce and strategically use information resources for a variety of purposes. In this context some attention should also be given to the notion of “soft power”, which broadly includes such factors as knowledge and information, culture, ideas and systems. Based on this indicative listing it seems natural to point to the following key issues and areas of concern to public libraries:

- the book market
- the provision and distribution of books
- the market for non-print media such as e-books and music in digitised versions (e.g. available via streaming services)

- culture and mediation of culture
- information and communication, access to information, information channels, information resources, globally, nationally and locally, information quality as well as information ethics

In the broad information-related context, and sticking to the social freedom perspective, attention must be directed towards phenomena such as monopolisation trends in terms of information, inequality of information access, pricing structures (e-books) and fees on the use of libraries and their services, freedom of information, curtailment of freedom of information, censorship and the unfortunate and undesirable effects to the increasing pressures of commercialisation, marketisation and privatisation exercises affecting libraries in many Western societies. Common to these matters and issues, as they are enumerated here, is that they have a tinge of conflict, rivalry and clashes of interest. They signal controversies, paradoxes, contradictions, different and opposed interests and systemic failures.

## 7.3 Factors in the public library’s wider external environment

In the following, selected illustrations will be provided of how such problem-causing factors, imbalances, dysfunctional developments along with certain ideological influences affect public libraries, the climate in which they operate and their broader external environment. Thus, for instance, when it comes to library operation and management, the funding of libraries and their conditions as predominantly publicly funded institutions, it seems pertinent to focus on the library’s macro-environment. The library’s external surroundings are influenced and conditioned by prevailing economic policies (such as austerity along with neo-liberal and market-driven ideology). In this respect, it seems relevant to take a critical analytical approach to current economic policies and their effects on the public sector and publicly funded services in the areas of culture, information provision, libraries, etc. In other words, the macroeconomic sphere of the library and the overall financial conditions that affect the library’s situation. A relevant object of analysis is also the changes that the public library is undergoing and has undergone in a period characterised by certain managerial styles, especially the management regimes that have been highly popular in the political arena in recent years, where neo-liberal economic policies have prevailed. This period has witnessed cuts of public library budgets along with redefi-

dition of the service philosophy in many libraries. The obvious example is the spread of New Public Management. The milestone study authored by Greene and McMenemy (2012) shows how neoliberal ideology, managerialism and citizen-consumer rhetoric have pervaded public library thinking and policy-making in the UK during the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000. Hence, a key area in the critical analysis of public library developments in late modern society are the trends towards marketisation, businessification and customisation of services. These ideological trends can be detrimental to the public library's efforts to maintain a range of services in harmony with the purpose of being a fundamental democratic institution in the community.

#### 7.4 Public libraries and freedom of information legislation

Also, the State's attempts to censor and reduce journalists' and citizens' access to information exchanges between ministers and officials in the preparatory legislative work of national parliaments is an issue that public libraries should be concerned about. Given that public libraries believe in freedom of information and smooth and adequate information delivery, unhampered access to documents at the early stages of legislative processes can be considered an issue lying within the public library sphere of interest. And given that the lifeblood of democracy is the free flow of information, public libraries should devote close attention to the vital issue of ensuring optimal access to various types of government information for citizens and intermediaries (e.g. journalists). In Denmark, there has been a heated discussion of a new freedom of information law presented to the parliament by the government. Under the new law, some ministerial documents will no longer be available through freedom of information requests. Critics argue that even the exchange of e-mails and memos between official bodies and authorities outside the central government's ministries and the ministers' departments will be darkened. On the whole it is a central point of criticism that the more restrictive access to documents in the legislative process will darken governmental management processes. The new law might, as argued by the critics, have the effect that uncovering of abuse of power is hindered. In Denmark, the resistance to the new freedom of information law gave rise to an extensive debate in the media and caused a large number of protest signatures and demonstrations.

#### 7.5 Information resources: Inherent values, impartiality and objectivity

It could also be argued that the public library should be allowed to consider the nature of information resources in a more political perspective: what information materials, printed as well as electronic, etc. are available to citizens when they want to familiarise themselves with the various cases and social and societal issues raised in debates, when it comes to criteria such as subject-specific weight, quality, seriousness, elaborateness and reflection of inherent "paradigms", views etc. We are dealing here with the previously mentioned dichotomy between (1) the established power interests, consolidated knowledge producers and holders of expertise and (2) the producers of alternative information materials and those representing counter expertise. In other words, the focus is on an updated and present-day discussion of such key issues and values in public library policy as diversity, broadness, neutrality, equality and fairness. These issues and values need attention when discussing (1) the public library's policy defined for collection development and information services; (2) the public library's active contribution to ensuring an informed public discussion of current issues in society at large and in the local community. In other words, as a basic democratic institution, the public library should be allowed the possibility and right to highlight issues and topics in the public sphere and set an agenda for discussion. In practice, this means that discussions and meetings – conventional, physical as well as digitally mediated (e.g. through social media platforms) – and exhibitions, etc., organised by the library, should, in principle, be able to address all viewpoints and topics, including the controversial ones. To continue this line of reasoning, libraries would be alert to current political discourses on such major issues as the EU, multiculturalism, economics, climate, environment, energy, transportation, sustainability aspects, etc. as well as the nature and availability of information resources in these areas. And when it comes to information products, such as subject literature items and technical reports, the library should be allowed the possibility to contrast the approaches, views and knowledge positions of established knowledge producers and authorities to those of alternative and civic society organisations and initiatives, etc. Thus, alternative knowledge producers, knowledge repositories and intermediaries (such as NGOs and critical think-tanks) should be taken under the wing of the public library. Libraries could, upon preceding critical assessment, facilitate the spread of information on the initiatives and published analyses, etc. produced by these organisations. An "emancipatory" role could be de-



financed for the library with regard to providing and disseminating the understated, underrated, downgraded, ignored and discarded information. Obviously, this raises a question about adherence to the traditional principle of neutrality and comprehensiveness in collection building and in serving library users and how to balance this principle against the intention to pinpoint and provide access to information resources reflecting alternative or non-mainstream viewpoints and agendas.

So of course we are facing an act of balancing here, and another important question should be raised: in taking on this highlighting task, is there a risk that the library duplicates and overlaps the role and functions of e.g. the unearthing and investigative journalism? Obviously, it is essential to ensure a delimitation of tasks and responsibilities and aim at a division of work here. Clearly, libraries should not poach on the preserves of the press with its critical journalists and other specialists undertaking in-depth inquiries into specific matters. Therefore, libraries should not necessarily produce information resources on their own – in the form of alternative, complementary information – but perhaps more strive to act as intermediaries and serve as resource centres that maintain an overview of and engage in identifying alternative information. The library could also, as mentioned above, serve NGOs, citizen groups, etc. in this context. On the other hand, it should be made clear that reintroducing the dusty concept of the political library with its problematic connotations that was debated in public library communities in, for instance, Denmark and Sweden in the 1970s and early 1980s will be outmoded and inappropriate today. Library activism and critical approaches dating back to these decades cannot be taken on board uncritically. It is not about redefining or reinventing failed versions of ideologically unified or skewed institutions paralleling those that existed during defunct totalitarian regimes (e.g. the GDR) with the working class, the oppressed, marginalised and underprivileged individuals and their needs as slogans, etc. The library should not adopt a leftist profile of past. The public library should be rethought in light of actual needs and conditions in the early 21st century and not be modelled to fit a “vulgarised” emancipatory context. However, Honneth’s conception of social freedom and the resolute defence of democratic life forms in all their fragility can deliver an innovative theoretical input to the thinking about the public library and its role in the late modern society.

## 7.6 Public libraries and current political discourses

It is, however, open to debate to what extent the public library should actively set an agenda in today’s political realities. We live in a time where heavy and acute issues and problems are on the agenda (failures of economic models, recession, impoverishment of population segments, exploding youth unemployment in Europe, the challenges facing the EU and its institutions, climate collapse, etc.). In this respect, the illustrations of social pathologies and failures as explored by Honneth in his work provides an explanatory frame of reference that helps studying the heavy problems and challenges we face today in different parts of the world from a theory of justice perspective. The nature and extent of the challenges as well as the insufficient concern for or absence of willingness by politicians to formulate solutions to the urgent problems are discussed in a variety of dystopias and alarming scenarios that identify and point out hazards and risks (climate crisis, wars, conflicts, riots and uprisings, widening gaps between rich and poor, etc.). There is no paucity of scenarios and warning reports, but they are generally underplayed and toned down in the mainstream media. In a book chapter of a collective monograph, John N. Berry III (2005), for many years a profiled and respected editor of the renowned American library magazine *Library Journal*, speaks his mind and calls for a more proactive public library having its ear to the ground. Berry delves into library history and goes back to the famous Boston Public Library and the landmark background document *Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston. 1852*. Berry discusses, among other things, the American public library’s role in political election campaigns and criticises libraries for not having utilised their extensive collections of documents and their rich reservoir of information in a more offensive, aggressive and assertive manner. Libraries have not provided a firm and potent response to misinformation and information pollution on the political scene, argues Berry. He calls for an awareness of the political influences and arguments that citizens (and voters) are exposed to in political campaigns and in media coverage of social issues. What he undertakes is a showdown with the seamless, conflict-avoiding and neutrality-oriented library. In a stark, direct and rhetorically sounding concluding sequence Berry criticises the passive position of libraries and their standing on the sidelines: “If we are to survive, this passive symbolic role must change. It will not be easy to convince a profession so long accustomed to its uncontroversial, passive role as information helper and collector to become an active participant in public debate.

It will not be easy to convince the citizens that they need this uncorrupted information resource as the antidote to the poisons of bias, suppression, spin, and propaganda that could be so fatal to democracy. It will not be comfortable to provide information and viewpoints that may oppose the majority of citizens in a community. It will not be easy to convince them that truth and justice require that they allocate precious tax money to that purpose. It will not be easy to make the public library a primary tool for citizen information and democratic decision making. It will not be easy, but it must be done to insure the survival of libraries and democracy” (Berry, 2012, page 17).

## 7.7 Consultants’ reports, etc.

In taking a closer look at the nature and functions of information resources, a special focus will be given to (commissioned) consultancy reports and studies. Such reports constitute a tricky and complex issue and they often illustrate a power-play. In many cases, the reports produced by consultants and agencies can be considered a legitimising tool for the established power interests in society: government, municipalities and private organisations (industry, agriculture, business and commerce, service industries, etc.). The materials presented as technical reports and reviews, etc. typically serve to provide and enforce a basis for decision-making. These reports and evaluative studies often serve as legitimising tools for established power interests in that they supply argumentation and “rationality”. They give the “officially” desirable proposals, initiatives, decisions, outcomes, etc. a touch of necessity and rationality. The findings generated, the evidence and the conclusions produced by consultancies and the way information has been processed and presented often reflect power interests. The same goes for the balancing of trade-offs, arguments and options. Thus, in quite a few numbers of cases, consultants and report writers will be loyal to views and wishes of those commissioning the studies and consultancies. Typical examples can be found within the transportation sector, e.g. in the area of motorways construction. Often, the content and conclusions of reports and recommendations appear debatable, misleading and distorted with impartiality and versatility being compromised. A number of NGOs, citizens’ initiatives, etc. in various fields and sectors of society regularly launch protest actions; they protest against specific projects and developments initiated by political decision. In most countries, media currently report such critical citizens’ initiatives and grassroots campaigning activities. Well known is, however, that these NGOs, consumer groups and pro-

testing civil society groups do not usually possess the political conviction power, the argumentative clout, the subject expertise and the media handling skills required to match the resources held by the authorities and those in power. The public opinion has often difficult conditions: it is difficult to be heard and to make oneself heard. This presents a major problem in the social freedom perspective. And it provides an important input to the discussion of the public library as a bastion of social freedom. Admittedly, it is a sensitive topic with many facets, but in a theoretical sense, the discussion of the public library’s possibility to act and define a role for itself in this context could be linked to such fundamental concepts as information access, equity in access to information resources, removal of information barriers and the provision of alternative information and alternative expertise. Also relevant in this respect is the already mentioned discussion of the library’s adherence to and administration of an “updated”, extended or enhanced principle of comprehensiveness. The controversial aspect here is the argument and the assertion of the view that the library should play an active role with regard to balancing skewed, flawed and one-sided conclusions in cases where the information base as presented by a report is biased and distorted in a rhetoric sense. Here the somewhat problematic issue is whether libraries could justify interacting with and assisting such NGOs, citizens’ initiatives, protest groups, etc. in obtaining relevant situational information and thereby overcome information gaps and satisfy information specific needs. At the same time it is another variant of the classic problem concerning information poor and information rich. But actually it is not a totally unfamiliar task for libraries, which have been very active, not least in the UK and the United States, when it comes to the dissemination of information on social and citizen-related aspects and issues (community information) and government information. This naturally requires that the library actively engages in providing alternative information resources and expertise and expands its knowledge of and awareness of alternative information outlets and “proactive” information dissemination.

Some think tanks fulfil this role in that they provide and manage information resources of an “alternative” and complementing nature. Today, think tanks exist in most western countries. They are specialised groups, organisations, etc. concerned with goal-directed R & D, problem-solving or idea-generation activities in a special area. There are also examples of think tanks possessing alternative expertise in specialised fields. They can, some of them, play a role as independent knowledge centres with a “mainstream-challenging” aim. In this way they are able

to provide and actively convey information on views, paradigms, evidence, bodies of knowledge and research results, etc. that are not widely circulated through the media and within the general public. This applies for example to consumer education, consumer rights and consumer protection. They have affiliated experts and typically issue books and magazines and provide information services. As such, they could be regarded as obvious partners for libraries (Honneth, 2011, page 408–09).

## 7.8 Internet and cyberspace

Given the indisputable information expertise possessed by the public library and given the library's insistence on information ethical principles, it could be justified that the public library defines a role and position in relation to "pathologies" and harmful and undesirable developments within the Internet and cyberspace. Unfortunately, cheating, deception, manipulation and deliberately criminal activities form part of today's disarray in the computer world and in cyberspace. Sometimes one has the feeling that dubious, unethical and corrupt behavioural patterns spread like infectious diseases. Examples are numerous and well known: young people who are exposed to bullying and threats when they use social media (Facebook for example), identity thefts, hacking, etc. These affronts, attacks and invasions of privacy in the digital sphere violate basic principles of justice and codes of moral decency and thereby also totally ignore the notion of *Democratic Sitlichkeit* in its various aspects.

With its profile and reputation based as it is on honest and upright information handling, the public library can expand its range of tasks and roles to include that of an institution that emphasises the value of, cherishes and strives to instil good information habits in not least children and youngsters. In this way, by placing a new emphasis on information practices and the core rules *netiquette*, i.e. the ethical dimension of information in a digital universe, user education is given a new meaning.

The social pathology perspective also bears on the social, educational and age-related disparity in terms of IT-related skills and competences. Therefore, it appears central to the public library to help mitigate inequality when it comes to basic computer use and how to access and navigate the Internet. Providing citizens with requisite IT skills and qualifications has become an essential priority for many public libraries today. Libraries will hold courses, workshops and introductory sessions with focus on computers and their use and the diverse and multifaceted Internet. Many introductions and tutorials also consider digital

self-service for citizens who need to gain access to and interact with public authorities or want to make use of digital resources available (community information, government information, etc.). Libraries also offer problem-solving sessions and provide individual support for senior citizens and others who need assistance. Computer literacy and e-literacy are the key words in this context.

Also, the intention is to counter and prevent the emergence and expansion of digital divide, which can occur across generations (Bawden and Robinson, 2013, page 244). It must be expected that problems of performing and navigating in an increasingly digitised age will be more prevalent in the older part of the population, among senior citizens. Many elderly people are lagging behind in this field and encounter problems in an age characterised by the rapid spread of Smart Phones, iPhones, tablets and laptops, etc. Obviously, the situation varies from country to country.

As loosely illustrated, the deficiencies and dysfunctional features as identified and discussed by Honneth in the political sphere, in the labour market, in the market sphere, etc. represent a conceptual framework of relevance to public library theory. Hence, Honneth's present time diagnosis and his theoretical views of social freedom should be considered in the analytical work with the library's tasks and priorities in late modern, liberal democratic society. In Honneth's work, significant emphasis is placed on spelling out danger signals, threats, restrictions and reduction of social freedom as brought about by developments in the political sphere, within the market, with regard to employer-employees relations, etc. In this respect, it seems obvious to point to the essential discussion that has emerged on the dichotomy between the public library between market, consumption and demand-orientation on one side and the concept of the public library as a community centre on the other.

As already touched upon, recent years have witnessed a neoliberal political agenda, which has left its distinct stamp on public library developments and led to budget cuts, service adjustments, commercialisation, infotainment along with efforts to pander to customers' or clients' immediate needs and preferences from a citizen-consumer perspective. In aiming to satisfy library user needs, emphasis is increasingly being put on a customer's and not a citizen's optics. Reliance on user fees as a governing principle and the introduction of chargeable basic services can be said to represent a "derailment" and compromising of the values that have traditionally been defined for public libraries and to which they have adhered over the years, and which can be seen as a reflection of basic principles of justice.

## 7.9 The “Lifeworld Dimension” of the public library

In the light of the principal discussion on the profile and orientation of the public library, it could be argued that the conception of the public library as a drop-in centre or informal social space constitutes a contrast to the customised library. The view of the library as a modern “village hall” or community centre – which has become increasingly common in the Nordic countries – in many ways offers an illustration of the tangible implementation and management of social freedom in an institutional context. In Denmark, for instance, fewer people borrow books, but in spite of this trend an increasing number of visits to the library is recorded. By defining itself as a village hall and community centre, the library offers citizens a social and cultural space where people can express themselves freely, unstructured, unconstrained. Kindergarten children eat their lunches in the library where toys are available, some boys are playing chess with giant pieces, quite noisy, some people are reading newspapers, other visitors are using computers, older people learn about using computers, Internet, email, etc. The idea is that the library should host activities and the library atmosphere should radiate “life”. Children’s theatre performances, lectures and courses are among the offerings. Today, emphasis has shifted away from books towards the library’s space. The library provides a room for experience and new impressions, but knowledge acquisition is still a key feature. Thus, a space is made available where it is possible to “nurture”, stimulate and further develop the informal symbolic processes and activities falling under the concept of social freedom.

This type of activities and processes which involve citizens and library users in many contexts and situations (dialogue, group-based communication, articulation of opinion, exchange of views, cross-cultural meetings, interaction between different population segments and members of different communities, etc.) are dealt with in a variety of contexts throughout Honneth’s work. So what is seen here are the outlines of a library conceived as an open and more transparent and dynamic institution in the community, which has the potential to become an even more important institution than the library was in the old days. But of course there is always the question of the extent to which the unstructured processes and activities in the library should be balanced against other library-related goals and priorities. Overall, however, it may seem important to be vigilant about the library as a sort of refuge, as a social and cultural space with unique qualities, a space that is free from interference, control, behavioural regula-

tion, pressures from the market and commercialisation and commoditisation efforts. Or, to put it briefly, a library conceived as a non-profit cultural institution anchored in democratic values. Accordingly, this conception of the library could be viewed as a contrast to the more streamlined cultural institution influenced by neoliberal ideology as discussed by Green and McMenemy (2012) in their chapter on trends in public library policy developments in the UK.

## 8 Concluding observations

Today public libraries are faced with major problems and challenges, but in responding to current problems and new challenges, there is a lot to be said for the argument that the library should to redefine or reinvent itself by opening up to the surrounding world in new ways and by establishing new alliances and partnerships. Some professionals, scholars and library columnists and commentators see a role for the public library as a catalyst and mediator of alternative information and as a facilitator of public discourse. But it is not without problems to imagine the viability of a “platform” for the library emphasising this sort of “activist” or political orientation. Some authors speak in favour of a contrasting library model of a very customised and demand-oriented nature emphasising fees and revenue generation. This is a library where the connotations of “Business models”, “Choice”, “Differentiation”, “Citizen-consumers” and other terms from the neoliberal vocabulary do not sound odd.

A critical and reflective reading of Axel Honneth’s principal views and conceptualisations on social freedom as systematically explored in his work *Das Recht der Freiheit* could generate innovative ideas for theorising about public libraries, their situation and mission in the age of late modernity. An effort has been made here to substantiate that the concept of social freedom with its various facets and the identified social pathologies is capable of renewing the theoretical discussion of the fundamental values and principles underlying public library services in turbulent and rapidly changing environments. The analytic review of selected readings on the public library of the future, coupled with an initial exploratory approach to Axel Honneth’s work *Das Recht der Freiheit* has generated some ideas and clues. These might be of relevance to and be fed into the continued discussion on the development of the theoretical basis of public librarianship. To shed light on this issue more explorative efforts are needed.

In widening the discussion of the perspectives of trust, revisiting the notions of ethics and trust as addressed by Danish philosopher and theologian K.E. Løgstrup could be



worthwhile. Interesting too are the social implications of trust, i.e. trust as an asset and resource in inter-human relations and social contexts. Trust ensures social cohesion and smooth functioning of the welfare state and is considered a key factor to successful business and entrepreneurial development. Danish researcher Gert Tinggaard Svendsen has explored the unique practiced version of trust in Denmark along with the significance of trust to production and economic prosperity. In extending the theoretical perspective, the inclusion of elements in American political philosopher Michael J. Sandel's writings on justice and justice theory could be considered as well.

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