

## Futures

Svend Larsen\*

# Danish Libraries between ‘Wende’ and ‘Zeitenwende’

<https://doi.org/10.1515/bfp-2024-0043>

**Abstract:** During the last 30 years great changes have taken place in the Danish library sector. Two trends are notable: the degree of digitization and the reduction in the number of library organizations and the subsequent organization of shared solutions. None of these changes are directly related to the far-reaching political changes signified by the terms ‘Wende’ and ‘Zeitenwende’. The article points to other factors behind Danish library development: digitization and in the final analysis: globalization.

**Keywords:** Library development; mergers; digitization; globalization; competition state; trust

## Dänische Bibliotheken zwischen *Wende* und *Zeitenwende*

**Zusammenfassung:** Im dänischen Bibliothekswesen haben sich in den letzten 30 Jahren große Veränderungen ergeben. Zwei Trends sind festzustellen: der Grad der Digitalisierung und die Verminderung der Zahl an Bibliotheksorganisationen und die sich daraus ergebende Organisation arbeitsteiliger Lösungen. Diese Veränderungen stehen nicht direkt in Zusammenhang mit den weitgehenden politischen Veränderungen, die durch die Begriffe *Wende* und *Zeitenwende* charakterisiert werden. Der Artikel stellt zwei andere Faktoren für die dänische Entwicklung der Bibliotheken in den Vordergrund: die Digitalisierung und letztlich die Globalisierung.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Bibliotheksentwicklung; Zusammenhänge; Digitalisierung; Globalisierung; Konkurrenz; Vertrauen

## 1 Introduction

During the more than 30 years between German reunification and the Russian invasion of Ukraine great changes have taken place in the Danish library sector. None of these changes are directly related to the far-reaching changes

signified by the terms ‘Wende’ and ‘Zeitenwende’. On a personal level many, including myself, now see the Fall of the Iron Curtain as the beginning of a Thirty Years’ Peace in Europe, to use the recent expression of historian Timothy Garton Ash.<sup>1</sup> At a professional level, the result of the ‘Wende’ was many new contacts with colleagues in the former Eastern Bloc states and in some cases joint projects. The political changes, the expansion of the European Union, and recently the admission of new members to NATO and war in Central Europe, are of course important. But factors behind library development are of a different kind. In this essay I will give my view on this.

## 2 The Danish Library Sector

The library sector has witnessed quite dramatic changes in the period dealt with here. One recent mark of the changes is the dissolution in 2023 of the association of librarians and information professionals because of declining membership. Also, in 1989, you could take a degree in librarianship, but that is no longer possible. The internationally recognized Danish School of Librarianship was shut down and became part of Copenhagen University in 2013, and today it is no longer possible to take a degree in librarianship. This may seem a quite radical change, but it is not perceived as a big problem, at least in the short term. There are still many library employees with ‘classical’ library competencies. However, there is a growing understanding that in the longer-term library employees with academic degrees in arts, science, or social science will need some form of library specific postgraduate courses and that it will be up to the libraries to organize them. It should be noted that libraries are still an object of research, Copenhagen University’s Department of Communication being the most extensive research environment.<sup>2</sup>

Quite a few of the trends in Danish library development you can find in other countries, too. However, two facts are

\*Corresponding author: Svend Larsen, sl@kb.dk.  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4048-1342>

<sup>1</sup> Ash (2023).

<sup>2</sup> <https://comm.ku.dk/research/archives-libraries-and-museums/>.

notable: the degree of digitization and the reduction in the number of library organizations and the subsequent organization of shared solutions.

## 2.1 Digitization

Denmark is one of the most digitized societies. Of the 5.8m citizens, only 293 000 have asked for exemption from digital communication with authorities of all kinds, be it your doctor, your library, or the tax authority. The foundation of this communication is the Central Personal Register (CPR). The CPR holds a complete list of all Danish citizens and people currently living in Denmark, and the Register is used as the foundation of a digital identity (MyID). The digital identity allows citizens and companies to interact electronically with each other and to pay bills, sign legal documents, etc. digitally. Today, most citizens do not have to look for letters in their mailbox, but instead pay attention to and act upon mail delivered to a personal electronic mailbox provided by government. The solution behind the digital identity is a public private partnership owned by government, regions, municipalities, and banks. The public private partnership ensures that a common identity is used by both government and companies alike. The (physical) health insurance card can still be used also as library card, but more and more use their smart phone. On your smart phone you can have your health insurance card, your driving licence, your travel card for train and buses etc. as apps, and the MyID app has now replaced identity checks involving the use of paper.

The individual digital identity is the basis for a growing number of self-service solutions developed and run by national and local government – generally popular because these solutions make citizens free of paperwork and opening hours – and they give national and local government valuable data – data-driven government is the new buzzword! As an example, you can have a digital consultation with your doctor and she or he can upload a prescription to a server so you can pick up your medicine at a place of your choice, – and the prescription server collects data to be used by health authorities. For libraries the digital identity means that citizens do not need a separate library card. Library users use their digital identity (MyID) to access eBooks and other digital material and to order, without mediation from library staff, printed material from all Danish public libraries and government-funded research libraries, and you can decide at which library branch you want to pick up the ordered material. The health insurance card, physical or digital, also gives access to unstaffed public library spaces outside regular opening hours.

This situation is the result of many years of political focus on digitization, and in this context, it is relevant to mention that the law on legal deposit effective from 2004 introduced collection of digital publications and internet material as part of cultural heritage – an early sign of the importance for society ascribed to digitization.

## 2.2 Number of Library Organizations and Shared Solutions

In 2007, the total number of Danish municipalities (local authorities) was reduced from 271 to 98, each with an obligation to run library services. This is part of a more general trend to create bigger entities to secure the basis for professional development of services and reduce the number of administrative levels (e.g., no counties). The trend is visible in all sectors, be it law courts, hospitals, police, or environmental protection. For the public library sector one consequence has been less involvement by the national government. The Ministry of Culture funds the production of the national bibliography and co-funds regional library services delivered by six public libraries across the country and administers the national transportation scheme between libraries. Other shared services are organized and run by the municipalities. Much used digital public library services are run by an association of all public libraries, The Digital Public Library. The association runs the library app, personalized to your local library with news, practical information, and presentation of new books, etc. The association also runs the access module to digital material, a shared statistics module and a digital children's library.

The public library is the most popular cultural institution, even though circulation of printed material declined by 5 % annually in the ten years till COVID-19 hit in 2020. During the same period digital use, especially audio books, has been growing and continues to grow. The physical library is still a popular place to visit and here self-service is in demand in the form of access to unstaffed local libraries in the evening.<sup>3</sup> Politically, public library services are not considered core welfare services. But there is consensus that the public library has an important role in community life. One of the biggest political issues is the question of the future role of the public library. Many public library professionals and local library politicians want to change the current library law which focuses on services based on material (printed and digital). They want the law to give a better framework to develop the library as a community centre rather than a "book place".

<sup>3</sup> Johannsen (2014).

**Table 1:** Events since 1998

1998	The two government-funded libraries, the Library for Immigrants and Refugees and the Depository Library for public libraries, are integrated into the State and University Library.
2000	The Act regarding library services comes into force (still valid). The law outlines the library service the municipalities must deliver and regulates interlibrary lending but is otherwise silent on research libraries.
2003	A Government report on the preservation of cultural heritage is published. It is followed up by a new law on legal deposit and the setting-up of shared solutions in the form a new storage facility for the State and University Library and the National Archive (2007) and a new storage facility for the Royal Library and the National Museum (2022).
2004	A new law on legal deposit comes into force (still valid). Radio and television are now included. Internet material is also included, and the Danish Net Archive is set up as a virtual organization between the Royal Library and the State and University Library.
2005	The Library for Natural and Medical Sciences (formerly part of Copenhagen University Library) is integrated into the Royal Library.
2008	The National Archive for Folklore is integrated into the Royal Library.
2016	The Minister of Culture decides to merge the Royal Library and the State and University Library. The National Art Library (the Library of the Danish Academy of Fine Arts) is also part of the merger. The name of the new library organization is the Royal Danish Library.
2017	The Government sets up a working party on the future organization of the research library sector. The ensuing report (2019) points out the possibility of further consolidation with the Royal Danish Library as a key player.
2017	The Ministry of Finance transfers the Administrative Library to the Royal Danish Library with the obligation to develop library services to central government.
2017	Library functions from the Danish Centre for Research and Information on Gender, Equality and Diversity (KVINFO) are transferred to the Royal Danish Library.
2018	Aarhus University transfers all staff from Institute and Faculty libraries to the Royal Danish Library (80 persons) and Copenhagen University also transfers library staff (30 persons).
2019	Denmark's Electronic Research Library (DEFF), a co-operative scheme between three Ministries (Culture, Education and Research) is dismantled and most of the tasks are transferred to the Royal Danish Library (negotiation of e-resources for educational and research libraries, and development of shared services).
2020	The Royal Danish Library starts using a new library system; and it is now (2024) the library system for seven of the eight Danish universities, all University Colleges (Fachhochschulen) and some Government Research Institutions.
2020	The main reading room of the National Archive is in the Black Diamond, the main Copenhagen location of the Royal Danish Library.
2022	Roskilde University transfers all library staff to the Royal Danish Library (20 persons).
2024	Nota, the Danish Library and Expertise Centre for people with print disabilities, is integrated into the Royal Danish Library.

In the research library sector, the number of libraries has also been reduced, partly due to reduction of educational and research institutions with their own library, partly due to mergers. *Consolidation* has been the keyword throughout the whole period. The driving force has been the Ministry of Culture and the main players have been the two libraries: the Royal Library (National Library and Copenhagen University Library) and the State and University Library (National Library and Aarhus University Library). It started slowly but intensified during the last decade. I have described this elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Here I will confine myself to the following chronological summary of the major events:

### 3 Consolidation

As mentioned, the keyword through these changes has been consolidation. Is that political lingo for budget reductions? In this case, it is not. The budgets of research libraries have been fluctuating as have the budgets of other government

agencies and institutions, reflecting the overall economic situation and the will of the political majority. In some cases of public sector mergers, you have seen the ministry take efficiency gains up front. This has not been the case here. There have been no budget cuts, because of the changes outlined above. Efficiency has been in focus and still is. But a strong motive behind the mergers has been the view that small public organizations are not viable in the longer term, because of the many competencies needed to operate, administrative, financial, legal, and technological. As regards research libraries, the major goal has been to secure the basis for the development of new library services to higher education and research, making the most of synergies between tasks, collections, and staff competencies. The reduction of duplication, benefits from economies of scale, while at the same time increasing impact, are seen as parts of the same 'project'. Of course, there have been discussions along the way, among library professionals and among the interested public. There have been a few protests, against closure of a library branch or closure of a departmental library but, in general, the reaction to the many changes in the Danish library sector has been subdued. In other sectors the reaction to change has been more widespread and vociferous,

<sup>4</sup> Larsen (2020).

e.g., students protesting reduction in the number of years you can receive grants from the State Education Fund. But most voters have approved of the course followed by changing government coalitions.

One word emerges when you ask why this is so, at least if you ask Danish social scientists. The word is 'trust'. Political scientist Gert Tinggaard Svendsen says "control is good, but trust is cheaper". He explains that trust, among citizens and between citizens and authorities, is probably what makes relatively smooth social transformations possible. But trust is the result of other factors: "a non-corrupt welfare state reliably providing common goods through education, redistribution and equality will engender trust" and "In welfare states, effective public institutions that limit corruption and wrongdoing and promotes education, in turn giving citizens a better understanding of their society, presumably also creates a framework that fosters trust".<sup>5</sup> Gert Tinggaard Svendsen is not blind to the fact that the control approach is slowly gaining ground and if that goes too far, it will create another kind of society. That has not happened yet, and he finishes his book with this fanfare:

If we Danes want our welfare state to survive in the long term, it is crucial that the country's government, cultural institutions, families and schools uphold essential behavioural norms and rules. These included keeping our word, and being honest, fair and equal before the law. It is just as crucial that all able-bodied citizens pitch in, and that we commend those who contribute and keep their word while chastising those who don't. This will help Denmark maintain the solid foundation of trust on which our welfare state rests.<sup>6</sup>

It may sound idealised, but I think this statement points to important factors behind the fact that changes in the library sector have happened quite peacefully: the motives behind the changes have been set out honestly, the process has been characterised by a fair balancing of considerations, professional, financial, political, and the implementation has not been characterized by excessive control from higher levels of authority. It would be an exaggeration to say that this approach is always used in the development of the Danish public sector. There are neo-liberals who see government as the problem, not part of the solution. But from 'Wende' to 'Zeitenwende' there has been a broad political consensus about the need for an up-to-date and citizen-oriented public sector and a general understanding that this requires a high degree of professional latitude.

The international security situation is now radically different from that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union,

and like other governments the Danish Government has started a massive investment in defence. At the same time, considerable new investments in welfare, especially health care, have been started. So far, these investments have not been financed by reductions in other sectors and research libraries have been compensated for the effects of inflation, like other government institutions. This is possible due to economic growth, which changing governments see as the effect of globalization.

## 4 Globalization and the Competition State

Since the 1980s, Danish governments have embraced globalization, the argument being that as a small country Denmark must be an economy open for international investment and with international trade and division of labour. That is necessary to generate the prosperity needed to preserve and develop welfare – which has been and is the mainstream political goal. There have been and are political forces critical of at least some aspects of globalization such as immigration and EU harmonization of regulations, but these forces have not been strong enough to change the course of successive governments, centre-right or centre-left. The 'Cartoon-Crisis' in 2005–2006 when a caricature of the prophet Muhammad sparked violent anti-Danish reaction across the Muslim world was a reminder that globalization has its negative aspects: you cannot separate domestic and foreign politics. But the major political parties saw the crisis more as a lesson on what to do and what not to do in such a situation, and not as a reason to make decisive changes in the globalization strategy.

Ultimately, globalization is the key to understanding what has happened in Danish research libraries! To explain that I will use the concept of 'the competition state' developed by Danish political scientist Ove K. Pedersen. He defines the competition state as follows: "It emerges when the national welfare states – their tasks, organization and governance arrangements – are reformed in a stable and permanent manner with the explicit goal of enhancing the nation's competitiveness by establishing comparative advantages for national industries and services".<sup>7</sup>

To put it briefly: investment in digitization and a focus on the development of an efficient and up-to-date public sector are some of the means with which successive Danish governments have worked to make Denmark an attractive place in which to invest and work. In public discussion, the

<sup>5</sup> Svendsen (2018) 32.

<sup>6</sup> Svendsen (2018) 58f.

<sup>7</sup> Pedersen (2019) 336.

concept ‘competition state’ has been presented as a neo-liberal ideal (or dystopia) of society as a war of everyone against everyone else. That is not the case. Ove K. Pedersen formed the concept to understand the rational basis for the profound changes in Danish society during the last decades. He formed the concept in a conscious confrontation with the view that the many changes – labour market regulation, infrastructure, far-reaching digitization and so on – constitute a betrayal of the welfare state. Ove K. Pedersen defends the view that the competition state is the way the (changing) political majority has rescued the welfare state from its impasse in the 1970s (rising taxes, declining productivity) and that this has had greater effect on Danish society (including libraries!) than the Fall of the Wall, financial crisis, COVID-19, and war in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Many historical presentations of a sector of society or a profession have been produced by a member of the profession. That is also true of library history. The American library historian Wayne Wiegand once characterized American library history as marked by blind spots and tunnel vision.<sup>9</sup> There are relevant aspects you do not see, perhaps because they are not related to the profession, and with tunnel vision you only see what is directly visible: you do not see the wider picture. It is still a relevant admonition to avoid tunnel vision and blind spots, and in describing and explaining the significant changes in Danish libraries, you need to look beyond the big political events, however much they have occupied us as citizens.

## References

- Ash, Timothy Garton (2023): *Homelands: A personal history of Europe*. London: Bodley Head.
- Johannsen, Carl Gustav (2014): Innovative public library services – staff-less or staff-intensive? In: *Library Management*, 35 (6/7), 469–80.
- Larsen, Svend (2020): Mergers and digital transformation in Danish research libraries. In: *ABI Technik*, 40 (4), 324–31.
- Pedersen, Ove K. (2019): Globalisation and the competition state. In: *Introduction to political sociology*, ed. by Benedikte Brincker. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Pedersen, Ove K. (2023): SVM illustrerer, at ideologierne er løbet tør for strøm. In: *RÅSON*, 55.
- Svendsen, Gert Tinggaard (2018): *Trust*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press. Available at <https://unipress.dk/media/17130/trust.pdf>.
- Wiegand, Wayne A. (1999): Tunnel vision and blind spots: what the past tells us about the present. Reflections on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century history of American librarianship. In: *The Library Quarterly*, 69, 1–32.



**Svend Larsen**  
Royal Danish Library  
Victor Albecks Vej 1  
DK-8000 Aarhus  
Denmark  
[sl@kb.dk](mailto:sl@kb.dk)

<sup>8</sup> Pedersen (2023) 57.

<sup>9</sup> Wiegand (1999).