How libraries can promote reading through Internet-based activities

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Abstract [Resum] [Resumen]

This article describes ways to create user-oriented services aimed to promote reading and knowledge transfer by favouring cooperation between municipal funded public libraries in Denmark and setting up joint net libraries or subject portals under the supervision of library staff. The process of cooperation and the distribution and use of the products are made possible by the presence of a well-developed Internet infrastructure. A key element for promoting reading is the Internet portal litteratursiden.dk,1 which enables authors to meet readers on the web and promotes events in the physical space of the library such as "Meet the Author", presentations, discussions, and literary cafés.

By making access to physical books easier and more appealing through Internet-based self-service activities embedded in the library web site – e.g. holds and reservations, personalised recommendation services, ranking and tagging in the OPAC2 – users’ reading opportunities can be significantly increased. Here we describe experiences in making the choice of reading material more appealing through book presentations on the web and mobile phone portals and the possibilities of making user-based literature reading circles through the Internet. We also mention the potential of embracing web 2.0 ideologies and practices of peer-to-peer promotion and content creation, and briefly discuss the possibility of bringing together the web and the physical space of the library by creating "brands" or "universes" able to constitute a framework for inculcating the values of reading and literature among different audiences.

Public Libraries

Public libraries in Denmark and most other societies in western Europe and the US are based upon an ideological rationale that derives from the historical period of Enlightenment and the industrialised age. In Denmark, the earliest legislation on public libraries was passed in 1920. The public libraries of the industrial age have been a tremendous success, and have supported democracy by supplying information and knowledge in printed format to a broad section of the population; in fact, around two-thirds of Danish citizens are library users. The lending of books provides strong back-up to the formal education system by helping students to find additional material for use in connection with their studies, and library activities as a whole have played a key role in promoting and sustaining the cultural heritage.

Now, when most western societies have moved into an information- and knowledge-based mode and digitisation has been on the agenda for almost two decades, the role and the practices of the public libraries are rapidly changing. One of the challenges for the emerging knowledge-based society, at least for Denmark, is the social divide which, to a certain extent, has been reproduced in the form of a digital divide. The socially excluded continue to represent a high proportion of the population; some estimates report that up to 15-20% are unable to read, a figure that is probably quite similar in most comparable societies. As regards Internet, recent studies in Denmark have shown that although its penetration is very high,3 many people in fact have extremely limited Internet access. In Europe in general, it is estimated that more than a third of the population lack basic digital competences.4

The challenges facing the public libraries are both economic and technological. The rapid change in traditional information production and retrieval from analog to digital format has put enormous pressure on the libraries’ ability to adapt to society's needs and political will. The political acknowledgement of the idea
and purpose of public libraries is increasingly being challenged by the fact that access to more digital content is becoming available to ever more users at ever lower cost. For the last decade or so, the public library sector in Denmark has been working on a strategy for the creation of a hybrid library model, composed of four elements: 1) the physical space; 2) access to physical digital media (CDs, DVDs etc.) and physical analog media (books, newspapers, magazines); 3) access to net-based media on the www in the library as well as in the home/workspace of the users; 4) help, guidance and value-added services.

This simple model of the hybrid library has brought with it a substantial number of developments in the libraries regarding new digital services on the Internet and new services based on the idea of the library as a space – that is, as the physical library. Here, we will concentrate on examples of Internet-based services which have the potential of promoting reading among the users.

**Databases, e-books and e-zines**

Since the mid-1990s, all Danish public libraries have had access to an ever-increasing portfolio of web-based databases and electronic magazines that are available to the users. Depending on the kind of licence, these materials can sometimes only be accessed through computers in the library; sometimes they can be accessed via Internet at the user’s convenience outside the library, e.g. at home or at the place of work or study. The number of e-resources available for the user is limited by the local municipal funding of the library – i.e., how much the library can afford to spend on licences. Supported by the Danish Library Agency, Danish public libraries have formed consortia to negotiate and implement licences for relevant content on a national level. This has relieved the economic pressure, and made it easier to secure broader access for users based in less economically privileged municipalities. The set-up makes it possible for every municipal library to decide whether a certain service should be purchased for the benefit of their users. Types of licenses include Encyclopedia Britannica, e-brary on-line, Ebsco magazines and databases, Grove Music, the Danish national Encyclopedia, Library PressDisplay, Oxford Reference on-line and many others.

**Bibliotek.dk**

Bibliotek.dk is a national web-based search and ordering facility that allows users anywhere in Denmark access to physical media, books, CDs, DVDs, or magazines delivered from any library to a library in his/her neighbourhood. The system is based on a joint catalogue containing all holdings in Danish public and research libraries, combined with a daily transportation system comprising lorries operated by haulage contractors. The costs of running and developing the web system and the holding and transportation databases are put to tender and paid for by the Danish Library Agency. The media are transported between ten distribution centres spanning the entire country, in combination with regional transport systems, put to tender by county libraries, but financed by the state.

The web-based user interface has many features, including Flash video user instruction, connection to local libraries library automation systems and OPAC’s, e-mail notification when material is ready for collection, and a substantial number of e-books and e-texts for direct download.

**Net libraries**

A wide range of "virtual libraries" or subject portals emerged in the mid- and late 1990s in Denmark. Front running municipal public libraries initiated these cooperative services which created totally new working procedures for staff at many libraries. The idea was to make use of the technological lead that the public libraries possessed, at least compared with the rest of the public sector organisations, deriving from the late 1980s and early 1990s when automation systems were implemented in every public library. These systems were generally run on local Unix servers and required local technical skills as well as a managerial focus and local understanding of the possibilities of information technology. In contrast to most other sectors, the libraries involved in this local approach to a technology challenge managed to create a knowledge base that proved valuable for the emerging Internet era. At first, the production method was organised informally, based on the ties between colleagues and a common ideological basis in the values of the public library. Colleagues typically had a start up meeting, where the idea was presented and participants would divide tasks. Then, a web site was produced, sometimes by library staff, sometime purchased from private sector companies. Later, the running production of content, metadata and so one was done by librarians from several public libraries; sometimes, more than a hundred librarians from all over Denmark were involved. The rationale for the local municipal library was obvious: by having one library staff member work for maybe ten hours a week on a net library, the users of the library services benefited from the joint effort of 100 librarians in the portal. The business model was and still is simple; everything is free to users, each
municipality decides how much dedication should be expected from the library, and the legal entity behind the net libraries is always an association formed by the municipal libraries participating. In almost every case, the state, through the Danish Library Agency, has supported the formation of a net library by supplying additional funds from a special pool for library development. Among the requirements for state support for net libraries are: they must be based on open source ideology and technology; they must be nationally accessible, and they must meet the requirements of “Best on the Net”.

The most popular of these net libraries have developed considerably over the years and are acquiring an ever-growing audience and user base. One of them is Biblioteksvagten.dk, an on-line question and answer service operated by librarians from 71 public and research libraries. Biblioteksvagten.dk has long daily opening hours where users can chat with librarians and obtain answers to any question on almost any topic from the collections and e-resources in the libraries. The task of providing staff for the opening hours is divided between the participating libraries; for example, Aarhus Public Library is responsible for Sunday afternoon and Tuesday evening. Operations run through various channels of communication, such as phone, e-mail, structured semi-automated systems embedded in the web portal and the take-over of users’ screens to point out relevant Internet based e-resources. There are several other net libraries available to the Danish public, among them Finfo, which provides multi-lingual information about Danish society for new citizens and immigrant communities; Juraportal.dk, a subject gateway to law, criminology and related subject areas; “The Libraries Net Music”11, which is not by definition a net library, but a library service that enables registered library users to download more than a million music tracks in MP3 format. The period of loan is either one day or seven days, after which the music will be erased unless the user decides to buy it. In this case the system automatically directs the user request through to the vendor's distribution system. A children's portal is currently under total reconstruction and a new one will be launched by October 2009. A question and answer service for children, called “Ask Olivia”, presents various relation-based possibilities for interaction including games and reading recommendations.

A net library that is closely related to the topic of promoting reading is the literature portal Litteratursiden.dk. This net library was set up in 2000 in Aarhus with the amalgamation of three different projects. Its aim is to promote contemporary fiction and literature from both Denmark and abroad. The main editor is based at Aarhus Public Libraries, but the consortium consists of public libraries representing 79 municipalities. Each of these libraries carries out some sort of production work for the site. The facilities of the portal include an e-zine with e-mail notification with more than 3000 subscribers, a number of mainly self-organised readers’ clubs, counselling, recommendations, articles, a database of contemporary Danish authors including video and audio clips, biographies and bibliographies, the possibility of placing holds and requests through bibliotek.dk, the possibility for the participation libraries to embed content (for example, recommendations) automatically in their own OPAC through what are known as web service technologies. The site has formed a partnership with a Danish public television broadcasting company and has 3.6 million visits annually.

Library web sites and OPACS

The Danish public library web sites have evolved a great deal since the first one was launched in the early 1990s. At that time they were quite static, just publicising information on opening hours, location of physical libraries, and rules and regulations, and giving very few options for interactive user communication. Over time, however, they have become increasingly interactive and have now developed into a powerful tool for promoting locally based arrangements, programmes and media in the libraries. They also provide access to a variety of services such as e-mail notifications on holds and overdue books, web payment of fees and fines, subscribed notification before loans expire, subscribed personalized subject lists on newly accessed media, RSS feeds and SMS services on special media.

The OPAC has book front pages embedded through the web service technology. The Danish Library Centre (DBC) delivers copyright-cleared digital front pages to the library OPACs regardless of the type of library automation system. A more interesting system based on collaborative filtering and statistical data on loan patterns has been developed as part of joint project between a small number of leading public libraries. The idea was to exploit the “wisdom of the crowds” and create a recommendation facility somewhat similar to the well-known recommendations provided by commercial web sites such as Amazon.com. The service is based on frequently updated loan statistics from six major public library systems. The data are put in a common pool and all connections between the persons that have lent the material and the actual material are automatically removed; the connection is only between the loans. This provides a recommendation on each Marc format record that the user receives as a result when searching in the OPAC with the pre-text: “Others who borrowed this book also borrowed these” – and five suggestions appear in order, ranked according to the books most frequently lent after the one in the search result. The technologies used to embed the results of these statistical data in the local OPAC are the same as those of the Danish public television broadcasting company and has 3.6 million visits annually.
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used to embed various pieces of content from the net libraries in the OPAC. This is a technical
decconstruction of the net libraries or subject portals into small pieces of relevant information which are later
reconstructed automatically in the OPAC. The primary sources for these services are the Literature site, the
Libraries Net music, and DBC's Authors Portraits.

An ever-increasing number of sound books in MP3 format are becoming available through the library
OPAC. When performing a search the user will obtain a result consisting of Marc records on books in the
library, on e-books for immediate download and on sound books in MP3 format.

**Mobile portal**

A relatively new service in Aarhus Public Libraries is the mobile portal in which the library provides access
for Internet-connected mobile phones. The service provides facilities ranging from opening hours and
information on the physical library, over status on borrowed materials with the chance to place or cancel
orders and holds on desired books, renew loans and pay fees or fines, to obtaining news on programs and
receiving reading suggestions and recommendations through the portal. There are currently plans for
including poetry by locally based young authors via the portal.

**Web 2.0**

Web 2.0 is a development driven by a combination of technology and ideology. The technological drivers
are the web format change from the static HTML to the dynamic XML. The ideology driver is based on
democratic, social and user-centred values, moving away from expert rule and foregrounding the
knowledge and opinions of ordinary people. In an age of declining trust, Web 2.0 represents an opportunity
for organisations to interact on a peer-to-peer level with users, and to transform them from being passive
consumers of information to active producers. Social technologies are on-line tools used to enable people
to share opinions and experiences in the shape of text, photos, images, videos and sound. Popular social
technologies are wikis, blogs, social bookmarking, and podcasts. For libraries and librarians this has meant
a radical change of mindset; we are getting there slowly, but surely. Net libraries are changing and are
being enhanced by social technologies. The literature site is currently under reconstruction; even more of
the possibilities we have described will be embedded, including making users visible in the site, receiving
users' recommendations, comments, tagging, voting and ranking, and letting users form temporary
communities based on tastes and preferences. The same developments are underway in the OPAC: user
tagging, ranking, commenting and recommending are just starting out on a journey that might not involve a
large percentage of users as producers, but will certainly affect all users as consumers, hopefully in a
useful and inspirational way.

**Combining the library as place with Internet based services**

A new tendency is emerging in Denmark. It has to do with the fact that the net-based services of the library
have seldom been connected to the physical space in a way that really could increase the brand or
marketing value of library activities. Aarhus Public Libraries have carried out a development project called
"Mindspot"¹⁹, which tries to combine a space in the library with certain youth-oriented activities and net-
based activities using a distinct overall design, with a high degree of user involvement, by informally
recruiting young students to work with us as expert networkers and showing us where rigid rules and
regulations have to be broken if necessary. This project has been quite successful and has proved to be
one of the many ways that the library can devote its efforts to promoting reading.

**Conclusion on the subject of reading**

Reading is an extremely important competence in a knowledge-based society. But, in my opinion, reading
not only involves decoding strings of letters or being able to enjoy poetry, novels and factual information in
the format of books or e-text. In fact, “literacy” is probably a better word for the crucial competences in
knowledge-based societies. The broader term “information literacy” covers decoding letters, sound bites,
still or moving images, whether they are delivered through physical tangible media like books, newspapers,
photo, videos, DVD’s, CD’s or via Internet-based media like web sites, portals, wikis, blogs, e-books, flash
and video clips. Information literacy involves the ability to use and be critical of information technology, and
to turn information into useful knowledge, inspiration, and experiences that basically will improve our lives.
Information literacy is what libraries must promote, no matter what types of media are currently prevalent in
society. In this regard, I feel that libraries should be leaders in the use of new Internet-based social
technologies in order to raise the level of understanding and use of the democratic and participatory
potential of information literacy in other public sector areas.

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Notes

1 <http://www.litteratursiden.dk/>.

2 OPAC: Open Public Access Catalogue.

3 About 85% of the population has access to Internet. As of March 2008, Denmark has the world’s highest broadband connectivity, reaching 36.5% of the population: <http://www.investindk.com/viSNyhed.asp?artikelID=19321>.


5 Danish public body, under the ministry of culture.

6 <http://bibliotek.dk/>.

7 An EU evaluation and benchmark of the quality of public websites. In Denmark it is performed by the National Danish IT and Telecom Agency.

8 <http://www.biblioteksvagten.dk/>.

9 <http://www.finfo.dk/>.

10 <http://juraportal.dk/>.

11 <https://www.netmusik.dk/>.

12 MP3 is a digital audio encoding format.

13 A DRM (Digital Right Management) system is implemented.

14 <http://www.spoergolivia.dk/>.

15 <http://www.litteratursiden.dk>.

16 RSS is a web format used to publish frequently updated works in a standardized format.

17 DBC (Danish Library Centre) is jointly owned by the state and the municipalities.

18 Machine-Readable Cataloguing - is a format standard for the storage and exchange of bibliographic records and related information in machine-readable form.

19 <http://www.mindspot.dk/>.