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The Public Library's Role in the Danish Information Society: demand for new competencies?

Bodil Wöhnert

Central Library in Esbjerg
Union of Danish Librarians
Interest Group on Reference Work
Esbjerk, Denmark

Abstract:

The new Danish act regarding library service has initiated several projects in order to promote the libraries and experience the library staffs in using the internet to communicate with the end users. Most public Danish information is according to the national information policy to be found on the official web sites and there is a tendency to publish online versions in stead of printed. This is a challenge to the reference librarians. In March this year the Interest Group on Reference Work arranged a conference on the future for the reference work when virtual tools take over. In Denmark we expect that the public library will continue to be a local centre for culture and knowledge where people also get together. But there is no doubt that the virtual library will be a matter especially for reference work.

According to the new library act¹ the virtual library is THE new item especially for the public libraries, where the use of information technology until recently was not so well established.

So the government has initiated several projects in order to promote the public libraries as local information centres, and to experience the library staffs in using the internet to communicate with the end users.

In October 2000 a new national service to the public was opened: *bibliotek.dk* - financed by the government. It is an online catalogue where you can search amongst all the Danish libraries' - public libraries as well as

research libraries - books, CDs, articles, CD-ROMs, videos, reviews, talking books and research reports. You can order what you want and collect it at the library of your preference. All you need is an internet access and a borrower's number to the library where you want to collect. You can order what you wish from your home PC or from any internet access. If your own library has not got what you need, your library can get it from another library in the interlending network. This database is based on the national professional online catalogue DanBib, which still serves as the national bibliographic interlending tool.

Still the work on *bibliotek.dk* is in progress. The principal goal is to simplify the complexity of a professional database for the benefit of the non-professional user. For example a title should only be shown once though the libraries may have different principles of registration. The public libraries use the national classifications system (DK5) where the research libraries use Dewey. Also *bibliotek.dk* should only show material, that can be lend. According to the plans *bibliotek.dk* will continue to improve. Search facilities will be extended, and the interface to the end user will go on being developed. A future intention is that it will be possible to be told immediately if there is any waiting time. You also should be able to have the material sent to you if you pay for it, and if you want to buy a book, the site will link to online and local book shops. However *bibliotek.dk* is not only at database, where you can order from - it is also a portal to other internet services and web sites developed by the Danish libraries:

You can put your questions to *biblioteksvagten.dk* at any time of day or night, and you will receive an answer within 24 hours. Biblioteksvagten (=ask a librarian) is a network between 18 libraries (for the moment), and 49 librarians all over the country are engaged in the service. Biblioteksvagten's librarians can help with literature references or sources on the internet. And you can chat with a librarian during the opening hours.

The web address *fng.dk* is a guide to the prime web sites on the internet. The sites are chosen by a group of 90 librarians from different public libraries and there is access to 3500 web sites, covering subjects like sport, diseases, all the countries in the world, new jobs etc. Via e-mail you can get information about the latest links.

Also the children's library is on the internet: *dotbot.dk* is a net guide for children and young adults. The guide gives access to links on the internet which have been chosen according to the same guidelines as those the librarians normally apply when selecting material for children and young adults. It includes the database "Kloge Åge" (=Wise Åge), music reviews for - and by children and a net guide for the very young.

Global information for ethnic minorities is offered at: *finfo.dk* It is a global guide with links to the countries particularly relevant to ethnic minorities in Denmark. You can also get general information about the rights, obligations and possibilities of ethnic minorities in the Danish society.

In autumn 2001 a music site for the public libraries is planned to open: *musikbibliotek.dk*

Denmark's Electronic Research Library - DEF - is found at the adress: *deff.dk* This project offers a virtual library for researchers, students, lecturers and other users of Danish research institutions. It is still under construction but among the functioning parts of the project are: *bizigate.dk* a portal for marketing, economics and statistics, and "The Virtual Music Library" (*def-musikportal.dk*) a portal to music resources such as contemporary Danish music and Danish artists and composers.

In addition most public Danish information according to the national information policy is to be found on the official web sites and there is a tendency to publish online versions in stead of printed. Regarding reference material the DEF-project has initiated projects for research libraries and for public libraries to get licenses to databases and reference material with relevance for the local users. This of course is a challenge to the

reference librarians and time has come to consider whether we can quit the past and the good old reference sources. Or does the public library still have a role not only on the internet but also as a physical place with a personal contact and at least some books to be seen on the shelves? In March this year the Interest Group on Reference Work arranged a conference on this subject. More than 60 reference librarians and librarians from public libraries all over the country took part in the discussion.

The conclusions from the conference point in the virtual direction - especially when the topic is reference and information management, but we also have to consider that we still have users, who are not familiar with IT, and that some of our services still will be better delivered in a personal encounter at the library. However there is no doubt that time has come to improve the librarians' competencies in being "virtual librarians". Skills in handling desk top facilities, downloading and file handling is still not "common knowledge" among the middle aged librarians (and we are a lot of middle aged Danish librarians!).

Also it is obvious, that the public libraries have competitors in delivering information via the internet, and that people often help themselves searching and finding via the most popular search engines. For the users it must make a difference to ask a librarian: you must get correct and sufficient information on time. The Danish libraries have skilled workers and competence to deliver information even to specific groups of users - but this is often a secret to the public!

An explanation in many libraries will be that we have not got the time, the experience and other resources for marketing our services.

The public library is well established in peoples' minds and our statistics show that we are busy and that the number of users is increasing - especially when it comes to the education area.

So it is easy to forget, that there actually is a much bigger market for information in the local area among professionals as well as amateurs: businesspeople, lawyers, doctors, people looking for jobs, genealogists and people dealing with local history.

Through the years the libraries have built up competencies and resources to serve the local areas with proper information; in a near future these investments will be changed into virtual services delivered from as well small as big public libraries - the only tool you need is access to the internet. According to our first experiences with *bibliotek.dk* and *biblioteksvagten.dk* this will attract new categories of users, and in addition to the traditional interview at the reference desk the librarian also must develop skills in being "the librarian on the internet". In Denmark we still imagine that the public library will continue to be a local centre for culture and knowledge where people also get together. But there is no doubt that the virtual library will be a matter especially for the reference work. The tendency to spread out the reference work in the organisation in many small libraries should maybe be reconsidered and so should the whole organisation of the library according to the papers from this conference published in Danish in "Bibliotekspresen"² and "Referencen"³

In many aspects the reference work in the Danish libraries must go back to basics if the library service shall make the difference for the user. And marketing (direct and general) must be priority. It is necessary that the service offered is accessible: there must be someone there to answer the phone and chat. For many years we have kept on taking up new tasks - now is the time to look back and find out if services are no longer needed. It is obvious that we cannot go on compiling new activities and services - we simply have not got the resources for that. We have noticed, that the users' needs are changing. Many users still come to the library for leisure, but the number of students and people searching for lifelong learning is growing and their demands are becoming more sophisticated. We can expect that our quick reference service will change into information management and document delivering and that the librarian will have to deal with more complicated subjects on an expert basis. We also expect that our users want access to the library virtually as

well as physically 24 hours round the clock. From the statistics on the use of *bibliotek.dk* we can see that most people order their books around midnight, when it is cheap to use the internet. This access to the library is of course also a question about resources - and for the moment the online library service on *biblioteksvagten.dk* runs from 10 a.m. to 22 p.m.

Another conclusion from the conference is that in addition to the portals mentioned above we also need to develop a virtual reference desk if possible on a local basis. Having the reference sources online makes them invisible - especially to the users frequenting the physical library. We need experiences in presenting the online reference tools to the end user. Hopefully this will be an essential topic in the teaching on the Royal School of Librarianship - but still we also need re-education for the staff already active in the libraries.

As a result of our conference the Interest Group on Reference Work plans to initiate projects in marketing the libraries' reference service to the Danish users and in creating the virtual reference desk. The aim is not to make a national reference desk - why compete with already existing portals.

We want to keep up the good Danish traditions of serving the local areas with services relevant for them: services for the elderly, ethnic minorities, local business people, the farmers, fishermen, local historians and genealogists or whoever and whatever influences on the local area. Therefore the Interest Group on reference Work finds it important to create standards, which can be worked out to more special services offered to the local users. This also could be of help for librarians who are not so skilled in using computer technology and making homepages!

Notes:

1

An English version of The Act Regarding Library Service can be found on The Danish National Library Authority's homepage at: <http://www.bs.dk/index.ihtml>

2

Lisbet Elkær: Profiler og markedsføring af referenceområdet.
Bibliotekspressen 2001:8 p. 216-218

3

Vera Daugaard: BiblioteksVagten - og samarbejdet om dette tilbud
Referencen 2001:2

Tove Bang: Omstilling til nye opgaver og nye arbejdsmetoder
Referencen 2001:2

Bodil Wöhnert: Fremtidens læsesal - fremtidens kompetencer
Referencen 2001:2

Web addresses mentioned in this paper:

BIBLIOTEK.DK	www.bibliotek.dk
BIBLIOTEKSVAGTEN	www.biblioteksvagten.dk
FNG	www.fng.dk

DODBOT	www.dodbot.dk
FINFO	www.finfo.dk
DEFF	www.deff.dk
BIZIGATE	www.bizigate.dk
THE VIRTUAL MUSIC LIBRARY	www.def-musikportal.dk
MUSIKBIBLIOTEK.DK	www.musikbibliotek.dk (opens autumn 2001)