



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 181-113-E
Division Number: VII
Professional Group: Reading
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 113
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Reading research in Sweden - a short survey

Catharina Stenberg

Senior lecturer, Swedish School of Library and Information Studies,
University College of Borås in connection with Gothenburg University
Sweden

The library, deeply involved in a democratic process, where reading and reading promotion can serve as a springboard, has been an important institution for Swedish reading research. In the early twentieth century young people, fighting for right to learn and for social equality, created their own libraries. These popular movements are goals for reading research. And today reading researchers want to know how libraries buy, promote, disperse and borrow literature – not all of them but many.

I would like to start this short survey about Swedish reading research with some figures recently published by the national Council for Cultural Affairs (statens kulturråd). There is a study carried out by the National Statistics Office of Sweden. The goal was to get an image of the cultural habits of the population.

A sample of persons from 9 to 79 years of age was chosen. This sample covered the entire country. In this study, published under the name of Cultural Barometer 2000 (Kulturbarometern 2000), one of the findings is that book reading and library visits are the main cultural occupations of the Swedish people.

- More than 80 percent have read a book for pleasure at least once a year.
- During the year 2000 about 70 percent in the ages mentioned above visited a library.
- In all parts of the country working class people and employees mainly go to public libraries.
- Women in Sweden read more than men, highly educated people more than less educated.
- People read more in big cities than in the country as a whole.
- Reading among elder people has increased.

This type of "official" research on cultural habits and reading is done every 5th year in Sweden as required by the National Council for Cultural Affairs, who also – among other thing – has to handle the state financial support for dispersing of literature.

Popular movements a hundred years ago

The interest for research on reading has deep roots in the Swedish society. It goes back at least to reading habits in the popular movements a hundred years ago. The university institution that especially publishes doctoral studies on Sociology of Literature is the Section for the Sociology of literature at the university of Uppsala. Since the middle of the sixties this institution in Uppsala has chosen to work with reading research deeply connected with social movements.

The founder of this well-known institution is professor Lars Furuland, now emeritus, but followed by a worthy successor, professor Johan Svedjedal, also once educated as a librarian – and now in the forefront of world research about how the web is used for literary publishing and print on demand.

My aim here is to show a sort of red line from the beginning of the century 1900 until now in Swedish literary policy and reading research. Examples of this type of research will here simply be given by mentioning some dissertations. Others could also have been mentioned as examples of research about how reading was used for education, pleasure, solidarity and a longing to change the society.

One dissertation chosen from the Uppsala literary sociologists shows the obvious desire in the early Swedish popular movement to use reading as an instrument to reach equality with the middle class or the bourgeois society around. Here in this aim to get equality – both in cultural habits and reading needs – you also find the embryo to the cultural policy called *literary policy*, extending all over the country, that will be more and more discussed and profiled as a main Swedish political goal from the late Sixties.

The dissertation written by Kerstin Rydbeck, called *Sober Reading. The Swedish Good Templar movement and literature 1896 – 1925*, analyses reading habits and specific reading methods inside the temperance movement, such as reading as a sort of political act. The reading and discussion in group gave language resources and selfconfidence enough to participate in a social debate but also this thirst for learning.

But there also already at this time seems to be a lot of reading for pleasure and for personal development. The result shows that the individuals in this early temperance movement not only chose titles about good drinking habits – but also ”normal” bourgeois classics. Among the international authors read I notice such writers as Bertha von Suttner and Leo Tolstoi..

The ambitious dissertation also – in line with the methods of the institution at Uppsala university - covers reading habits about press, temperance movement reviews and editors. As in other Swedish social movements where the work was done in study circles – there is a rich access to protocols, lists of members and learning activities – which gives a diversified and detailed image of the importance of people’s reading about a hundred years ago.

This also gives the embryo to what you can call a big *adult education movement*, where reading in group with others creates new and broader perspectives for the individual.

Lars Furuland has chosen the expression ”mediated reading” for this type of reading in glaring contrast to more superficial or browsing reading. As he also points out – the costs of energy – was one essential factor putting obstacles to reading. More than a hundred years ago, lighting up while reading was luxurious and only for the elite in the society. Readers without economical resources only had daylight or candles as sources of light. Therefore it is seen as a sort of reading revolution when it became possible to read by oil lamps. Earlier I mentioned that the seed of an Swedish literary policy was already planted at the beginning of the twentieth century. People in Sweden learned, early and actively, to evaluate literature of a certain quality – and the fighting spirit in the circles gave them inspiration to make choices.

1910 – ”dirty literature” from the United States

About 1910 there occurred in Sweden the first outbreak of an active fight against what young socialists of that time call "dirty literature". This literature came from the United States, packed as comic strips. There was first of all Nick Carter – who was considered a risk to turn the heads of young workers. The Nick Carter booklets were sold at tobacconists- also new and challenging .

The fight against the Nick Carter booklets attempted to start young workers reading what later on will be mentioned *literature of value*. Professor Ulf Boëthius of the Stockholm university has written an essential thesis, which gives a better understanding of the reading aims in the broad mass of the people, including better cultural conditions on an equal level with the middle class. You can see later on in this paper that this early aim of equality will be significant during a hundred years fight for reading habits in Sweden.

Huge Investigation report on literature

As an embryo of an early reading policy in Sweden I can also mention as a "starting point" 1905, when there was the first financial support from the state to public libraries. But we have to wait until the late sixties before the Ministry of Education and Science ordered a huge research work, an investigation called Litteraturutredningen (Investigation report on literature) which resulted in thousands and thousands of pages – five separate volumes. The purpose of the whole study was- in the abstract bureaucratic language- to *suggest methods for consumption, distribution and production of literature in Sweden*. In reality the study is among other things a big mapping about book- and reading habits in Sweden. Here I will show only one small part of the report – written by professor Maj Klasson –for many years my colleague in Borås – but at that time researcher at the Lund university. Together with a colleague she made a research study about *all* public libraries in Sweden and their book acquisitions during a whole year – 1970. She made an analysis according to *target groups, subject field, book prices, editors*. Fiction value questions were important – and the researchers had to make their own quality scales. This study was ordered by the Ministry of Education and Science to get basic data from the whole country about how public libraries work with acquisitions.

Seventies – crises in the Swedish book market

During the seventies the Swedish book market changed dramatically. The fiction publications decreased and the book prices rose. The booksales fell. In this dramatic period the Swedish discussion tries to find fresh solutions for the reading dilemma. One part of the discussion turns to what is called a Norwegian model. In Norway at this time there was already a system where the state gives economic guarantee to distribute fiction titles to the public libraries free. This system however was not chosen in Sweden in 1970 – giving books to the public libraries without any costs to facilitate the desirable widespread quality reading. Instead Sweden goes the opposite way - introduces free prices on books – earlier bookselling was protected by special decisions. Now the book became an article among others, free for price concurrence. These decisions lead to a lot of fear and opposition.

There were protests against unregulated book prices. The editors feared for a concentration to big publishing houses – and death of small ones. The literary choice would diminish – and the Swedish National Librarian (head of the Royal Library in Stockholm) was afraid of cultural impoverishment. The enormous agreement at this time on the book market led to new efforts: commercial quality bookclubs appeared – which could sell a novel for half of the normal bookstore price. This phenomenon was certainly not only Swedish. But five years later – in 1975 - the Swedish state offers a special financial support to the publication of different categories of "quality" fiction. This was a type of firebrigade activity from the Swedish state – which would be permanent – all in the aim to try to spread "quality" reading to as many people as possible. The Swedish libraries still had to buy all books – nothing was freely distributed – but the costs became lower.

About five years later it was time for a new big investigation work, called Folkbiblioteksutredningen, the Public library investigation study. The government employees researchers to make studies about different types of library work. Again the quality and dispersion of Fiction interests the Ministry of Education and Science. This time I myself was employed by the Ministry to work with a research study on 24 public libraries about Fiction acquisition and borrowing. The immediate reason for this was that journalists and authors for years had bombarded public libraries with accusations about the deteriorating quality of the fiction collections.

After years of work with quality categories about 3000 titles, where every title should have a reason for the category chosen, the investigation secretariat could give a lot of answers about how public libraries in Sweden handle adult fiction. All the material was statistically treated by specialists. The fiction categories were chosen to eliminate the risk that fiction as work of art was treated in terms of good or bad – therefore we chose to categorise after how much each title was considered to be borrowed. For these considerations we also took help from experienced librarians. One of the most important findings was at that time that the public libraries do not give priority of acquisitions to popular entertainment literature – but that up to 75 percent of the circulating public library fiction material could be of this character. We could convincingly prove that the accusations against the public libraries for rapidly deteriorating the artistic quality of the collections were false. The results of the study got an important breakthrough in medias – and this type of accusations did not appear again.

Both these studies mentioned above – that by Maj Klasson and that by myself – I used later on for a thesis. As free studies ordered by the Ministry of Education and Science they both became essential as basic research to give results about public libraries way of handling fiction- important for the literature- and reading policy, which grew slowly in the Swedish society.

From the late sixties- with its roots 60 years earlier- a main idea is : ”How to manage a dispersion of literature of value to as many individuals as possible?”. This means that the society with its libraries all over the country is expected to fight for equality in the access to fiction literature of value, no matter what the social background or economic resources are. But there are obstacles for this expected reading policy: the Swedish municipalities are free to do what they want with their libraries. They can prefer other main profiles than reading mediation.

As I show through my example in the beginning with the figures about reading in Sweden there is still a difference in reading habits according to education. Then you can assume that there still is a class difference in access to reading – despite a cultural policy where the government has for many years given financial support to fiction.

The latest ” reading research ” ordered by the government appeared in 1997 – with the title ” Boken I Tiden ” – a joke in the middle of the title who points out a new age: the book in the age of the web. This however – is not the most essential with this – small – most recent investigation, ordered by the Ministry of Culture – and the minister Marita Ulvskog from the social democratic party. As a result of this investigation Sweden got a library law – about this law I have spoken in the IFLA conference in Copenhagen 1997. It is now required that a municipality offer a public library to the citizens. In this new law reading and reading promotion is mentioned as one of the most essential library commissions.

And a bit amusing is that – after twentyfive years of hesitation- the Norwegian model with free copies of ” literature of value” distributed to all Swedish public libraries now is chosen as main idea for giving a new form of state economic support to fiction promotion. There is a researcher, Erik Peurell, also with roots in the Uppsala group of sociologists of literature, who is working on a research material with

evaluation about who public libraries have chosen to handle these free titles (titles without costs for the library), distributed to all public libraries. No money is distributed, only books.

Again the actor is the Swedish Cultural Council, which also works with a category classification of recent fiction books which could be chosen for distribution to the public libraries. Finally every chosen title is the subject of a battery of considerations.

The process is complicated – like many other complicated results only briefly mentioned here.

As a curiosity in relation to the latest events on reading research in Sweden I can mention that a new literary guru is a professor of the Commercial High School at Jönköping who uses reading as a method for getting his students educated and cultivated. He found that they were illiterate- and bad readers – and invites them to read 120 fiction titles during the studies for Master of Business Administration – while at the same time most of the Swedish library educational programmes diminish fiction reading.

But not only a professor of a Commercial High School is worried about reading going down in Sweden.

Growing Reading Movement today

During the last years there is a growing Reading Movement (Läsrörelsen), supported by hundreds of organisations from public libraries, from the Swedish Royal Library to a lot of publishers, editors and popular education movements. Reading in Sweden is more and more a class distinctive. Among young people leaving the nineyear school there is 20 percent who haven't knowledge enough to read or write well. This lack becomes a threat against democracy – despite the long tradition of a really education oriented reading policy.

This new reading movement effects thousands of actions to stimulate reading all over the country. But there is not yet done any research about this important work.

Actually it is once more professor Johan Svedjedal in Uppsala that effects the most interesting reading research. He now handles the pattern of change in the age of the web – with titles as *The Literaty Web* and *The Last Book*. Here I would like only to give a few glimpses from one chapter of "The last book". An idea mentioned and called a dream of libraries has always been to control all the information contents of books: to combine and chain so that books indeed are not really needed. Johan Svedjedal means, that this type of dream often is born in libraries which have to fight with an abundance of books. The Internet seems to give the possibilities to realise the dream. He is joking by talking about a situation where all book pages have been stored in an enormous textstrip – an with all readers of a block down on their knees reading the strip.... Will that situation appear in the future? No, that situation would probably not exist – and the paperback would not disappear....

The technological revolution involves another risk. The possibility of digital home publishing gives on the contrary a danger for a sort of environmental disaster of the printing culture. It is easier to write, to publish, to sell .. to print your own book at home, to print on demand, to reprint old titles..

How will this situation influence reading policy? How will it influence reading research? These important questions have to be discussed over and over again – together with all the "old" questions on reading research and reading promotion. Therefore IFLA Reading section has decided in Boston, in August 2001, to go on with a programme on New Book Policy with examples from different countries and with a workshop on Reading Promotion – in Glasgow 2002. In Berlin 2003 the theme of the sections programme will be The impact of Internet on reading.