

# Lund Critical Library Studies – A New Research Group

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**Abstract.** We argue that there is a need for a more elaborate and sophisticated discussion of if, and then how, the public library fulfils its social role to contribute to democracy. Therefore, we have formed the Lund Critical Library Studies group with a shared interest of contributing to a more nuanced and rich discussion about public libraries. This allows us to engage in discussions on how the library can be a space where diverse people come together and debate dissimilar views on shared matters. We advocate the public library not by indiscriminately embracing it, but by critically examining how it is performed and discussing alternatives. In this paper, we will indicate some pathways that we previously have followed and also point out future directions that we want to pursue.

**Keywords:** Public Libraries, Critical Library Studies, Critical Theory.

## 1 Introduction

Social and economic gaps, climate catastrophe and disinformation (as well as accusations of disinformation) are transforming the globe, society and ourselves. At the same time, we are contributing to inequalities in society, the climate change and the news ecology. We consider the public library to have a role in addressing all these matters. Nonetheless, the library is not a neutral golden key we can apply to solve problems. The rhetoric surrounding public libraries is forceful. It can be found in international policy documents, such as the “IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto” and IFLAs recently published “International Advocacy Program”, aiming at promoting and supporting libraries’ role in implementing the Agenda 2030 goals. Libraries are here put forth as being important democratic places promoting social inclusion. This discourse, in which the democratic role is neither specified nor scrutinised, is often present also within library and information science. We argue that there is a need for a more elaborate and sophisticated discussion of if, and then how, the public library fulfils its social role to contribute to democracy. Therefore, we have formed the Lund Critical Library Studies group with a shared interest of contributing to a more nuanced and rich discussion about public libraries. We advocate the public library not by indiscriminately embracing it, but by critically examining how it is performed and discussing alternatives. In the following, we will indicate some pathways that we previously have followed and point out future directions that we want to pursue.

## 2 Current Critical Issues

Social sustainability has been considered an often overlooked aspect of sustainability, but nowadays it is emphasized in cultural policies as well as in society in general, partly as a result of the UN's Agenda 2030 (Engström & Rivano Eckerdal 2019; Olsson Dahlquist 2019). Within library and information science, as well as in the professional discussion, the library is considered a crucial cultural institution contributing to social cohesiveness and sustainability. Accordingly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Affiliations propagates for the library's key role in achieving the goals of the Agenda (IFLA 2018). The public library as an open, public and non-commercial place is essential in this context, and research points at the diversity of users accessing the library, making the library a place that facilitates the interaction of people of different ages, backgrounds and interests (see e.g. Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Buschman & Leckie, 2007; Hillenbrand 2013; Hvenegaard Rasmussen et al, 2017; Scott 2011). Thus, there is a strong research tradition discussing the public library as a meeting place where people come together, increasing mutual trust and strengthening democracy. When society calls for an answer to segregation and low social sustainability, the library is consequently portrayed as part of the solution, both in research and in Swedish cultural policy documents, including the Swedish Library Act (Engström & Olsson Dahlquist 2019).

Previous research investigating the library as a meeting place often draws on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere (e.g. Aabø, Audunson & Vårheim 2010; Audunson 2005; Buschman 2007; Buschman & Leckie, 2007). That is to say, the public library is analysed as a free and open place in society where people can meet and exchange ideas and, therefore, an important democratic institution. Since we consider it important to further analyse the question of power and whose voices really can be heard through the library as a social institution, we find Nancy Fraser's critical perspective of *the post bourgeois public sphere* to be a fruitful starting point for a broader discussion on the library's democratic role in contemporary society. Fraser (1990, 2014) puts forward the question of who is awarded a discursive space in society, regardless of whether or not there are places that are formally open to all, such as the public library. Aspects such as gender, ethnicity and class need to be taken into consideration and bring to the fore questions of social equality and how the library can contribute to an expanded and pluralistic public sphere consisting of several interacting public spheres (cf. Fraser 1990, 2014). This also relates to questions regarding transnationalism and globalization, that is to say, a perspective on the public sphere that goes beyond the nation state.

The public library is generally considered an important prerequisite for the functioning and fulfilment of democracy. The lack of theoretical discussion and awareness of democracy within library and information science has been noted previously (Buschman 2007). During recent years, this seems to be changing (Budd 2015; Buschman 2018), a development we have been part of and aim to carry on in the future. Frasers' critical perspective has been used in an ethnographic study that explore how public libraries' in Sweden work to create conditions for civic participation through different learning initiatives and through the library as a place. The study

shows that this can be done on several levels when the library (its human and material resources) contribute to widening people's communicative space of action and thereby the possibilities to partake in social matters on one's own terms (Olsson Dahlquist 2019).

When the library as a place where people of diverse backgrounds interact is discussed, the notion of the library as a safe and open public space is often taken for granted. However, public spaces are not context-free and "totally open" (Listerborn 2005). Neither is the library always experienced as a safe place by all users and staff. This is evident in articles reporting threats and disruptive behaviour in Swedish news media (see e.g. Expressen 2017; Hoflin 2017; Vanhainen 2018) and in reports conducted by the Swedish union for librarians (Hamberg & DIK, 2017; Alm Dahlin & DIK 2019). This should not come as a surprise, since libraries are integral parts of society where disturbances, vandalism and other incidents occasionally occur. Even so, these examples illuminate the fact that safety is constructed and managed and experiences of both safety and unsafety, trust and mistrust, are possible; the library is not a "self-evidently" or "naturally" safe place. When the library is explored as a public space, the actual use and experiences of this use must therefore be analysed (cf. Listerborn 2005) and we need to ask the question of who experiences this. *How* libraries handle risk and manage safety and trust is therefore a question we want to investigate further, and therefore we are launching the research project *LibRisk: Libraries handling risk – to manage safety and enable trust* to explore those issues.

In this context, we also want to explore the library as a place dedicated to serving the whole population and accommodating a variety of functions for diverse users. We anticipate how trust and safety often is associated with *sameness* and *shared moral dispositions* (Seligman 2011, p. 346), in line with how Walzer (1983) in an influential and revived text compares states with clubs and stresses the right to refuse someone access (see e.g. Östbring 2019). Meanwhile, there is a tendency in society in general to strive for strengthened in-group trust by creating "safe places" by means of fortifying techniques, including fences, camera surveillance and enclosed areas (Don 2013). Relating to this embracement of homogeneity in the public debate in Sweden, the mere prevalence of people who are perceived as "strangers" is described as generating feelings of unsafety or unease (see e.g. Arpi 2019; Dovstad 2019). Inspired by Nancy Fraser (2014), mentioned above, Chantal Mouffe, mentioned below, and others, we are interested in taking another part of departure and exploring how *difference* and *dissimilar experience* may enable not only tolerance, but also trust and democratic possibilities.

Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistics offers another perspective that is productive for exploring the democratic role of public libraries (Rivano Eckerdal 2017; 2018). Starting with the idea of antagonism (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) – the notion that we live in a pluralistic world in which conflicts are unavoidable – democracy is not viewed as an endpoint but as a conflictive process (Mouffe 2013). Since conflicts are unavoidable, room must be made for them within the democratic institutions and conflicts need to be solved as struggles between adversaries, *agonisms*, and not between enemies, *agonistics* (Mouffe 2013, p 7). Democratic institutions are important for

making this transformation possible. The public library has the potential to be such an institution (Rivano Eckerdal 2017; 2018).

We argue that another of the tenets within the argument mentioned above is in need of scrutiny: the essential role of libraries in a democracy to provide free information to all. The argument is that library users' use of information in free discussions favours the establishment of a rational consensus. We question the possibility of reaching anything but a consensus in practice (Mouffe 2013). In relation to the library as a provider and intermediary of information for all, we also find it important to further elaborate on the concept of *information literacy* and to highlight a more reflective and critical approach to the concept that takes into consideration the political potential of information practices for increasing social equality (Hall 2010; Rivano Eckerdal 2017; Samek 2007). In relation to the library's role to promote a sustainable digital society, a critical information literacy perspective also involves aspects of how libraries handle issues such as integrity, online security and knowledge of how algorithms effect digital information flows (Haider & Sundin 2019; Olsson Dahlquist 2019). Furthermore, we consider imagination and fiction to be as important as information when investigating the library's role for democracy. Libraries can be places that enable users to reflect and to transcend boundaries (Engström 2019). In this context, Nussbaum's (1997) concept of *imagination* can be used to explore how libraries enable users to fantasize, play and express themselves and thereby strengthen democratic qualities of reflection, trust and deliberation.

### 3 A New Platform for Critical Library Studies

By forming the Lund Critical Library Studies group, we establish a platform for critical library studies, exploring, investigating and engaging in the library from different perspectives. This allows us to engage in discussions on how the library can be a space where diverse people come together and debate dissimilar views on shared matters (Mouffe 2005; Jonsson 2019). To do this, we want to take on an *oblique angle* and challenge the public library as a democratic institution, without demonizing it or disparaging its potential (cf. Bhabha 2003, p. 29). This provides means for us to investigate potential internal conflicts of inclusion and exclusion, accessibility and inaccessibility. We are interested in exploring if and how the library can contribute to democratic practices by facilitating culture and enabling aesthetic experiences. Starting off by considering imagination to be as important as information when investigating the library's role for democracy, we will use our platform to analyse how fiction and culture may allow individuals to transcend boundaries and communicate across proclaimed differences.

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