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Public Libraries in Denmark and the on-line and digital information service – what is it about?

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The Danish strategy on information society

The national strategy on the information society was adopted in 1995¹. This strategy was based on the idea of a learning society, partly focused on competitiveness, partly on general values like free access to information, solidarity, preventing creation of a gap between the information savvy and those less so. The perception of the libraries as actors in the creation of the information society was explicit, though vague, resulting in the rather late realization of a library strategy in 2000, when a new library act was adopted. The library act basically obliged all libraries to present all types of media for the users and give free Internet access. It meant an increase of the spending on public libraries by 21.5 mill. Euro over three years reaching a total spending of around 263.8 mill. Euro (2002).

Over a period of less than 10 years, the Danish Public Libraries have been able to totally reorganise their service production using information technology in the process. The drivers

of the development have been a combination of whip and carrot: Still lower budgets combined with the possibilities of new technology and Internet made obvious the need for long term strategies based on a high degree of customer self service combined with elements of outsourcing and a strong focus on staff training.

As a result of the reorganization, the libraries were able to introduce lots of Internet workstations, self-service machines, sorting robots, interactive OPAC's with reservation and requisition service and many other new services. In addition to that, more traditional media like books and newspapers have been purchased along with new media like CD-ROM, DVD's, play station games, e-books, digitised music and film for the users, lots of training courses and programmes have been presented. So how could all this happen without any additional funding?

The IT-infrastructure

An important precondition for the intense aim to create substance and services on the Internet that is that many public libraries have hooked up with networks which connects all the institutions of the municipality.

E.g. all the local libraries in Aarhus have been connected to the Aarhus Net since 1997. Currently 235 public workstations at the libraries are connected to the "red net" – a special section of the net, which is allocated to the citizens' Internet use via the libraries. Consequently, everyone can access the Internet when visiting the library. The Aarhus Net has during summer and autumn 2004 been upgraded to a band width of 100 MB, thus allowing the libraries to present services based on high quality streamed video and sound. The system has been expanded and modernised several times.

With the emergence of the Internet, an incipient amalgamation of dedicated library systems and the possibilities of the Internet has taken place in Denmark. Since 1999 it has been possible to search, to reserve and order books and other materials from most libraries OPAC via the Web. Since 2001 the Danish public and research libraries have been part of a nationwide distribution system for physical materials based on a common catalogue. This system enables the users to access the common catalogue via the Internet, place an order on any book and have it delivered to the nearest library free of charge (www.bibliotek.dk).

As has been the case in other knowledge-based organisations, the Internet signified a revolution for most libraries. It began in 1994 with the first library homepages on the Internet. Since then it has been a deliberate policy to ensure the pages are updated and to make them increasingly more relevant to the users; in short, to focus on content.

Services free of charge

The Danish public libraries provide the public with one of the most comprehensive programmes of digital Internet-based library services in Europe. More than 40 special services - all free of charge - are delivered and the number is still growing.

In Aarhus more than 140,000 individuals have pin-code to self-service machines and the Internet requisition and reservation programme. More than 60,000 users are frequently receiving e-mail notification on reserved books, on subscribed library produced e-zines, on various news, on new books and on other media.

The hit-rate on the domain of Aarhus Public Libraries is beyond 24 mill. per year. The hits are not coming only from the inhabitants in Aarhus, but nation-wide thus representing a portion of the Danish population. About 60% of the hits are search on the OPAC and reservations and requisitions. The rest are hits on various Internet-based services, some of which are described briefly below.

The Danish libraries provide PC's with Internet access including e-mail and chat facilities free of charge to the public. An aim is to reach one Internet workplace per 1,000 inhabitants which is obtained in many municipalities. E-mail and chat facilities are used mostly by children and teenagers, many of whom are immigrants. In this particular user segment, girls are dominant. The larger main libraries are often equipped with hotspots, which means the library users can bring their own laptop and access the library system, databases, Internet resources etc.

Study rooms – free for all to use - are wired and provide video screen Internet projection for the users. Free weekly Internet introductions targeted towards various user groups (e.g. elderly people and children) or people with special interests (e.g. subjects like travelling, job-hunting, health issues) are very popular. So are special training courses of longer duration – up to five days.

The Danish libraries have developed many cooperative services, so-called Net Libraries. These services are based on the fact that the libraries are not competitors on a market but allies as public governance institutions and that because of the Internet they can now work closely together. For the users it is of no consequence where the service is produced. The rationale behind such services is clearly visible in e.g. the Q&A service, where more than 50 public, university and research libraries share the workload of a service accessible 24/7 and manned most days from 8 am to 10 pm.

Among the Internet-based services is FINFO (www.finfo.dk), an information system for refugees and immigrants giving access to valuable information on society in 11 languages and evaluated links to information from 45 home countries. Now more than 70 Danish municipalities are working together on the production of this service under the auspices of the State Library.

Another service produced in co-operation between Danish public libraries is Litteratursiden (www.litteratursiden.dk). A Danish Literature Portal presenting contemporary Danish fiction authors to the public, offering subscribed news on literature: articles on new books, articles on and by authors, recommendations by librarians, debate, contact your librarian. The e-zine is published every fortnight and has more than 1,800 subscribers. Each new issue is notified to the users via e-mail with hyperlink headlines to the articles.

Services based on local history are popular among users – not only in Denmark, but also in overseas countries with a tradition of immigration from Denmark, such as USA and Canada. By the help of volunteers, the public libraries has transferred old censuses, marriage accounts and historical citizens' registrations to the net (<http://www.folketimidten.dk/>). A database of old historical photos free of copyright (www.danskebilleder.dk) is being produced in co-operation with six public libraries in Denmark.

Public Libraries are driving forces in the development of national networked library services in Denmark. As initiator, developer, producer or co-producer, many libraries find their role and engagement in services like The Public Libraries Netguide (www.fng.dk), the national library Q and A-service (www.biblioteksvagten.dk), the joint national children library netservice (www.dotbot.dk) and several other services.

An umbrella association of Networking Public Libraries has been formed. The idea is to create a body to cope with issues regarding cross- and networking municipalities, such as relation to state and government level, copyright issues etc.

Digitised short films, films of local history and educational films are streamed and distributed to public schools, high schools and libraries in the Aarhus region via the Internet free of charge and as of June 2004 also via the broadband/fibrenet: www.bibcast.dk. Digital music files were from 2004 onwards distributed via the net to library users, free of charge for the users. This national service, the so-called Libraries Netmusic, <https://www.bibliotekernesnetmusik.dk>, has more than 120,000 tracks available for the users, provided they are registered users of a library that is part of the consortium (more than 120 public libraries currently are). The interesting thing about these services is not the technical possibilities, but the major breakthrough in the negotiations with the right owners. The license fees are paid by the library.

The staff and user competences

It has been necessary for the libraries to build up IT-competences among its staff, in part to make them capable of supervising the users, in part to enable them to participate in the enrichment of information through selection, quality assessment and commenting on relevant resources on the net.

This development of competences has also included elements of building up new IT-supported internal working methods as well as a strong ambition to create self-service-based systems for the users. Thus, many libraries in Denmark have been changed thoroughly over a period of less than five years from mainly staff driven services to a self-service concept that in some cases allows more than 90 % of all issues and returns to be handled by the users using machines and sorting robots, based on intelligent induction-driven conveyor belt technology.

An important aim is to convert human capital, or the “hidden knowledge”, into structural, more usable, capital - not least in view of the expected generational change the libraries will experience in a foreseeable future. By using collaborative workspaces, shared calendars, competence mapping systems and various other project management tools on intra- and extranet it has been possible for staff in the libraries to work efficiently with colleagues inside as well as outside the organization.

Example of competence building is the distance learning courses on Internet use for Danish librarians, introduced by Aarhus Public Libraries in 1997. It became a success on a national level and these courses have been developed and translated for use in an EU-project for the Baltic countries called ‘DELCIS’ (Distance Education for Librarians: Creating an Information-Competent Society).

Another strategic element in the usage of the Internet at the libraries is the involvement of the “civilian society” in the development of resources. The users form a vital part of the services, not just as target group for the service but to a large extent as co-developers of the service. It would not, for instance, have been possible to create “Censuses on the Net” had it not been for the participation of a number of volunteers, who assisted in keying in the old censuses to a digital form.

Similarly, young volunteers, organised as group of e.g. “Netskaters” of the like, have contributed to the development of homepages for children and youngsters, just as representatives for the users have worked as active consultants in the development of “FinFo” - the electronic information system addressed to refugees and immigrants - and several other Netlibraries.

The Danish public libraries are modern public institutions with a high degree of decentralisation and self-management, governed by politically accepted aims and goals. This combined with a long tradition of project and development management, competence development and networking with others is probably the explanation why it has been possible to engage so many libraries in various development projects. The tradition of using and expanding own ‘brain-ware’ and the constant challenges might also explain why the turnover in staff is very modest in the Danish public libraries.

Denmark is often regarded as a role model in the development of modern information and knowledge-based societies. Being a rather small nation with only 5.4 million inhabitants, relatively well off in terms of economic resources and geographically placed in a calm corner of the world, Denmark would not be suspected of having major problems relating to society. Nevertheless there are! The main socio/political issue is related to the immigrants and refugees from the rest of the world that has been coming to Denmark over the last two decades. This has created quite a lot of tension in the traditionally mono-cultural nation during the transformation process toward an open multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. Legislation has become firmer and more restrictive on refugees and immigrants and the general tolerance in society towards these groups of citizens is not always good. In the process of assimilation and integration of this varied population (about 12 % of the total population in Aarhus Municipality - in densely populated neighbourhoods up to 70-80 %), the basic values of the public libraries are invaluable.

A knowledge-based society that embraces all citizens and provides access to learning and information, supporting e-literacy as well a general literacy, should of course also contribute to social inclusion and development for the citizens less fortunate than the ethnic Danes, who have been around for centuries. Staff and management of Aarhus Public Libraries certainly feel obliged to deliver cutting edge library services based on the latest in information technologies to these users. And we are fortunate to have had some success in doing so - as we have been able to attract about half of the total population of refugees and immigrants as registered users of our libraries. That means that the library use in these user groups is comparable with the rather heavy use of the libraries by "ethnic Danes".

Some important areas to focus on in the future are:

- the visibility and marketing of the idea and role of the public libraries as institutions securing free and equal access to information in a modern networked knowledge society.
- the social integration of immigrants and refugees in a complex society based on the public libraries as 'low-voiced integrators'.
- the development of the library role as open learning centre for those less fortunate that are not well educated or well off.
- the development of new library services based on Internet, mobile and broad band connectivity, thus expanding the library functionality from one primarily based on text to true multimedia functionality.

ⁱ In 1995, the policy was adopted and build into an action plan called: "Fra vision til handling - Info Samfundet 2000", (From vision to action - The Information Society 2000), <http://www.fsk.dk/fsk/publ/it95/>, but recommendations concerning the role of the libraries were put forward in a ministerial report (UBIS) only in 1997, leading to a new library act in 2000.
<http://ix.db.dk/006/opl%C3%A6g,%20noter%20m.m/ubis.doc>