

# **Public libraries as public sphere institutions: A comparative study of perceptions of the public library's role in six European countries<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of public libraries as institutions underpinning a democratic public sphere as reasons legitimizing libraries compared to reasons that are more traditional and the actual use of libraries as public sphere arenas.

### *Design and methodology*

A survey of representative samples of the adult population in six countries – Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Hungary and Switzerland was undertaken.

### *Findings*

Legitimations related to the libraries role as a meeting place and arena for public debate are ranked as the three least important out of twelve possible legitimations for upholding a public library service. Libraries are, however, used extensively by the users to access citizenship information and to participate in public sphere relevant meetings.

### *Originality/value*

Few studies have empirically analyzed the role of libraries in upholding a democratic and sustainable public sphere. This study contributes in filling that gap.

### *Keywords*

Public libraries; democracy; public sphere; community meeting place; citizenship information

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<sup>1</sup> The research on which this article is based is a part of the ALMPUB project financed by the Norwegian Research Council's Kulmedia-program. The goal of the project is to study the role of archives, libraries and museums as an infrastructure for a sustainable public sphere in a digital age.

## 1. Introduction and research questions

A central part of the legitimacy of public libraries is rooted in their role as institutions underpinning democracy and a rational public discourse and their role related to building communities. This is far from a new role, but it has received increased attention in recent years, possibly due to the challenges related to upholding a sustainable public sphere that result from digitization and globalization. This increased attention is reflected in public library legislation. Library legislation in Sweden and Norway was revised in 2013. In the mission statements of the library laws in both countries, the library's role as a meeting place and an arena for an enlightened public discourse (Norway) and as an institution supporting democracy and the free formation of opinion (Sweden) is stressed. Finland got a new library act in 2016, also focusing upon citizenship and democracy.

The library laws may emphasize the library's role as an institution supporting democracy and public discourse, however, Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot & Sarin argue that "public libraries continue to rely upon assertions and rhetorical claims when seeking support through the political process rather than bringing forth evidence or data to make the case for their democratic contributions and for the increasing level of support granted to these contributions"(Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot & Sarin, 2013, p. 369).

The aim of the research on which this article is based is to contribute in closing this gap by providing empirical data regarding the role public libraries play as public sphere institutions. This article will elicit the following research questions based on survey data from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland:

- Which perceptions do our respondents have when it comes to the legitimacy of keeping up a public library service in the community and how is the library's role as a meeting place and an arena for public discourse ranked in relation to other legitimations?
- In Scandinavia as well as the other Nordic countries, one has had over the last 10-15 years a distinct focus on public libraries as community meeting places and arenas for democratic discourse. As stated above, this focus is reflected in recent changes in Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish library legislation. Is the Scandinavian focus upon libraries as meeting places and institutions underpinning democracy reflected in the Scandinavian public's perceptions and attitudes regarding the role of public libraries? Do the Scandinavian respondents put a greater weight on these dimensions of the social role of public libraries than respondents from our three Central European countries, where the focus on the libraries' role as meeting places and institutions underpinning democracy has been less strong?
- Are public libraries in fact used as public sphere institutions, and, if yes, in what ways?

## 2. Literature review

Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot & Sarin, (2013, op.cit) state there is little empirical evidence that public libraries support democracy, although their role as democratic champions are central in the field's self-perception (Wiegand, 2015). The British sociologist Frank Webster argues in his book *Theories of the Information Society* that the public library network is "the closes we come to a developed public sphere". (Webster, 2014). Anne Goulding's empirical study of British public libraries and community engagement, concluding that "the public library is positioned not just as a place to borrow or read books or even to access digital material, but as a key community resource and facility which can act as a venue for community events and as

an access point connecting individuals with one another, connecting people with their local communities, and connecting communities with wider society, supports Webster's argument regarding the library network as a developed public sphere. (Goulding, 2009, p. 47). There are some evidence that libraries promote the generation of trust and social capital, which usually is regarded as a precondition for a sustainable democracy. Widdersheim & Koizumi have made important contributions in conceptualizing libraries as public sphere institutions (Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2015; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2017), yet they also lament the lack of empirical work related to libraries as public sphere institutions, with the exception of research done within the framework of the PLACE- project and its off-springs. (Aabø, Audunson & Vårheim, 2010; Audunson, Essmat & Aabø, 2011; Aabø and Audunson, 2012; Johnston & Audunson, 2017; Vårheim, 2007; Vårheim, Steinmo & Ide, 2008; Vårheim, 2011; Vårheim 2014a; Vårheim 2014b; Vårheim 2017). The PLACE research referred to above together with the research of Catherine Johnson (Johnson, 2010; Johnson & Griffis, 2013; Griffis & Johnson 2013) indicate that libraries might play a role in generating trust and social capital, usually seen as a precondition for a sustainable democracy. In addition, Wiegand (Wiegand, op.cit; Wiegand 2015) asserts that in spite of mission statements, there is little evidence that public libraries have, for example, been instrumental in promoting democracy by giving us a more informed citizenry.

John Buschman is a pioneer in the Anglo American LIS-environment in relating public sphere theory to libraries. (Buschman, 2003; Buschman, 2005). In two recent articles Buschman argues that democracy does not only take place in the formal settings for political discourse and decision-making, but also in various on the ground arenas where people gather and communicate (Buschman 2018a and 2018b) – that which Klinenberg (2018) calls the social infrastructure. Buschman uses the changing attitude towards smoking in public and same sex-marriage as examples. These changing attitudes are rooted in on the ground arenas, he argues. Buschman calls for a renewed understanding of the relationship between democracy and the library: “Democracy takes place directly and indirectly in venues not commonly thought of as sites for it, but where everyday life is negotiated and played out (e.g. libraries), thereby constructing the culture”. (Buschman, 2018 a, p.34). This is a perspective not contradicting a public sphere approach, but going beyond it and supplementing it. Being together and communicating in libraries and other places belonging to the social infrastructure have a civilizing effect and also affects public opinion. This comes in addition to the library as an arena underpinning rational discourse.

In a study comparing the outcomes of public libraries in Finland, Norway and the Netherlands (Vakkari, Aabø, Audunson, Huysmans & Oomes, 2014), representative samples of the population in the three countries were asked if they perceive the library as useful in their personal lives. Of the 22 items in the questionnaire aiming at eliciting the perceived usefulness of libraries, two were related to libraries as public sphere institutions: one was the library has been useful in supporting the respondent's interest in history and society and the other was the library has been useful in underpinning participation in and following societal discussions. In all the three countries, few respondents perceived the library as important when it came to participating and following societal discussions. In Finland, which had the highest score, 17 per cent reported that the library had been important often (2 per cent) or sometimes (15 per cent) regarding participating and following societal discussion. In Norway and Finland the corresponding figures were just 11 (Norway) and 2-3 per cent (the Netherlands). The proportion reporting that the library has been useful often or sometimes is considerably higher when it comes to supporting interest in history and society: 37 per cent in Finland, 20 per cent in Norway and 15 per cent in the Netherlands. It seems, then, that the

library's position as a public sphere institution is very weak when it comes to stimulating direct participation in societal debates.

Wiegand, however, in his historical expose of American public libraries from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until now clearly documents that public libraries were used intensely by civil society as meeting places and places for public discourse from as early as the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Public meetings arranged by a variety of civic and political organizations proliferated in American public libraries (Wiegand, 2015).

Söderström and Nolin (2015) argue that, after a period in the 1990s when focus was on (digital) access, the focus has shifted and is now in the 2000's on physical meeting places, which has resulted in libraries striving to adapt to local needs by offering non-traditional services and materials, e.g. the lending of tools. They argue that the role of the library as a local institution is changing from that of the local library as a node in a national and international network of libraries into that of the local library as a node in a network of local institutions.

Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen (2014 and 2017) describes and analyses with the development of the so-called four-space model how we since the turn of the century have been witnessing an increased focus on the physical library. This includes design and arranging of the library as a meeting place and as a performative space supporting user-involvement, co-creation and the overall relationship between the library and the local community.

Audunson (2001) did a survey with a representative sample of the adult Norwegian population, a representative sample of elected representatives in Norwegian local government councils and a representative sample of librarians in Norwegian public libraries. The respondents were presented a list of possible reasons for using scarce public resources on public libraries and were asked to select the one they perceived as most important. He found differences between the three groups: The public tended to give priority to practical reasons: The library provides us with information we need in our everyday lives. Librarians tended to give priority to the library as an institution promoting equality and democracy, whereas local politicians tended to give priority to the Bildung-function: The library promotes literature that everyone living in the country should know and have access to, i.e. high quality fiction, history, philosophy etc. The library's role as a meeting place in their communities came very low in this survey, where the respondents were allowed to select only one reason.

D'Elia undertook a study in 1994, which methodologically is very similar to Audunson's 2001 study and the study reported in this article. D'Elia presented a representative sample of the adult population (N=1001) and a sample of community leaders (N=300) with ten reasons for upholding a community library service. Both groups of respondents perceived the library's role as an educational resource for the community as well as for individual learners as the most important reasons for upholding a library.

In spite of scattered empirical research, we agree with Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot & Sarin. We do have an extensive literature giving practical advice and summarizing best practice as to how the library can turn into a community activity center reflecting the specific culture of their community and how they can underpin local public spheres. There is, however, limited research proving or disproving the role of public libraries as arenas supporting the public sphere. This project aims at contribute in bridging that gap.

### 3. Design and methodology

The study was undertaken by the professional survey organization Sentio Research as a web panel survey based upon a probability sample. Web panels are increasingly used in survey research as they are cost effective and open up for accessing large and diverse samples quickly. They are, however, not without challenges. There is a distinction between probability based and non-probability based (convenience) samples (Hays, Liu & Kapteyn, 2015; Svensson, 2013;). Representativity might be affected by differences in Internet access, recruitment procedures and the element of self-selection, which are inherent in the procedure. Svensson (op.cit) argues that due to this, probability samples tend to end up as non-probability samples. Chang & Krosnick (2009) did an experiment where they administered the same questionnaire using telephone interviewing, an Internet probability panel<sup>1</sup> and a nonprobability sample where people volunteered to do surveys for money and compared the outcomes. When comparing errors in the two Internet panels regarding demographic variables with real life figures, they found that the average errors were modest, although larger for the convenience panel than for the probability panel and largest for both when it came to education and income. The experience, which the panel members gain, improves performance. Their conclusion is that “the results from the national field experiment suggest that the Internet offers a viable means of survey data collection and has advantages over telephone interviewing in terms of response quality.

The questionnaire elicited, in addition to standard demographic variables, the following independent variables:

1. Digital embeddedness, which we have measured via two variables: First, *Internet embeddedness*, measured via a battery of questions asking the respondents about their frequency of using a set of different Internet services. Second, access to digital platforms, measured by asking the respondents if they have access at home to digital platforms such as smartphones, tablets, wifi, wearables etc.). The rationale is that partly the growth of the Internet is seen as a development threatening the traditional role of libraries (Nicholas, 2012), at the same time as research indicates a positive relationship between the use of Internet and the use of and valuation of libraries as community institutions (Pew research, 2014).
2. Social capital, using standard questions such as generalized trust and trust in institutions. As shown in the literature review, research indicates a positive relationship between library use and social capital and that trust and social capital are probably preconditions for democracy and a functioning public sphere. We have measured social capital in two ways: First, the standard question of generalized trust and secondly via a battery of questions measuring trust in social and political institutions.
3. Community activity. The public library is a local community institution. In the models developed by Zweizig and Dervin (1977) and D’Elia (1980) to predict use of non-use of the public library, the degree of involvement in the local community correlated significantly with use/non-use of the library. In this study, embeddedness and integration in the local community are measured by asking the respondents of their frequency of taking part in organized and unorganized activities in the community, as well as how frequently they use libraries.

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<sup>1</sup> Those who were contacted and asked to join the probability panel were offered the necessary technological equipment free of charge if they did not already have it.

The dependent variables in this article are:

1. The valuation of the importance of different meeting places in the community, among them the local public library.
2. The effect of digitization on the importance of libraries (and museums) as meeting places.
3. The reason for using scarce public funds for upholding a local library service. The respondents were presented a series of statements and were asked to state how important they consider each of them to be, among them some statements related to the library as a public sphere institution and a meeting place in the community.
4. The factual use of libraries as a public sphere institution and meeting place.

#### **4. The sample**

The survey was undertaken in the first half of June 2017. The national samples vary from 1002 respondents up to 1021. Altogether, we have 6050 respondents.

Are there biases in our samples?

*Table 1 in here*

In the Norwegian and particularly in the Hungarian sample those with compulsory school as their highest education are strongly underrepresented, whereas education at university level is overrepresented. In the adult Norwegian population, 24 percent have compulsory school as their highest education and 33 percent have education at university level. In the Hungarian population the corresponding numbers are 45 for compulsory education and 21 for university level. In Sweden, only 12 percent of the population have compulsory school as their highest education and more than one out of four has education at university level. Although there is a relatively modest, bias towards those with secondary and university level education, the Swedish distribution is satisfactory compared to the real life figures.

The Swiss sample comes closest to the real life situation as far as education is concerned. Fifteen per cent of the Swiss respondents have compulsory school as their highest education compared to 13 in real life, 49 per have secondary education as their highest compared to 46 in real life and 35 report university level as their highest education compared to 41 in reality. As for employment status, 58 per cent of our respondents report that they are employed. The Danish sample has a significantly higher proportion of retired than the other five countries, with 33 per cent pensioners as compared to 20 in the sample as a whole. Of those employed, 31 percent work in the public sector. Here there is a significant difference between the Scandinavian countries and Hungary on one side, Germany, and Switzerland on the other. In Germany and Switzerland the proportion of the employed working within the public sector, is 17 and 22 percent respectively. Whereas the proportion of public employees in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Hungary vary between 36 and 39.

*Table 2. in here*

The age distribution between the six countries in the study are basically very similar. We see that Norway and particularly Denmark have a higher proportion of 60+ and Switzerland has a higher proportion between 50 and 59 than the other countries. If we compare the data in our samples with the real life situation (the figures in brackets) correspond satisfactory with real life statistics.

*Table 3. in here*

It seems as if our respondents are relatively heavily biased towards library users. Taking Norway as an example, most user studies result in a proportion of users from ranging from 45 up to 52-53. The proportion using a museum is also higher than in most other surveys. According to the so-called Cultural barometer published by the Statistics Norway (SSB 2017), 46 per cent of the population visited a library in 2016, whereas 44 per cent visited a museum. However, the proportion of Norwegian library users in the Norwegian sample compared to users of museums, with libraries a few points ahead of the museums, corresponds very well with official cultural statistics. The pattern of library use compared to use of museums differ significantly between the Scandinavian countries on one the side and Germany, Switzerland and, to some extent Hungary, on the other. In all the Scandinavian countries, libraries attract more users than museums. In Germany Switzerland and Hungary, we find the opposite situation, particularly in Germany and Switzerland, where the proportion of museum users are significantly higher than the proportion of library users.

All our respondents are necessarily Internet users and earlier research indicates that there is a strong positive correlation between Internet use and use of public libraries. (Pew Research, 2014; Vakkari, 2010). That might be a reason why we have a bias towards library users.

## **5. Basic figures – differences in library policies and resources spent on public libraries**

There are some important differences between our six countries regarding library policies and public library structure, which might be of importance when interpreting our findings:

- Four of our countries, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Hungary have public library legislation, whereas Germany and Switzerland do not have such legislation.
- There are relatively large differences in public resources invested in public libraries. Denmark has the highest yearly running costs with 66 Euro per capita in 2015, followed by Sweden (44) and Norway (26). Germany is at the bottom with only 12 Euro per capita, whereas Hungary, considering its relatively low GNP, is impressingly close to for example Norway with 19 Euro per inhabitant. The figures for Switzerland are very uncertain. Comparing the three Scandinavian countries and Germany, which are relatively close in GNP per capita, we find the yearly running costs in Norwegian public libraries were only 39 per cent of the Danish running and the German running costs only 18 per cent of the Danish. We doubt that we will find such large differences in other policy areas, e.g. education and health.
- Number of library visits per capita seems to reflect differences in running costs, with the highest number of visits in Denmark followed by Sweden and Norway with Germany at the bottom.

## **6. Findings**

### *6.1. Which library roles are most important in legitimizing the local public library?*

We asked our respondents to evaluate 12 statements legitimizing the use of scarce public funds for public libraries on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that the reason in question is of no importance and 10 means very important. The statements covered the following legitimations for using scarce public funds on libraries: Libraries are important because they: a) provide people with information they need in their everyday lives, b) provide information people need to be active citizens in their communities, c) are local arenas for debate, d) are important meeting places in their communities, e) support learning, f) promote equal access to knowledge and culture, g) promotes digital equality, h) promote contemporary literature of

quality, i) promote innovation and creativity, j) promote the cultural heritage, k) offer their users a meaningful leisure time, and l) promote integration.

The mean values allotted to each of the different reasons for upholding a community library are presented in table 7.2.3.below.

The traditional reasons for upholding a library - their role as cultural heritage institutions, their role in providing equal access to knowledge and literature and their role as arenas for learning – are the three legitimations for upholding a library service, which receive the highest score in all the six countries. In addition, the libraries' role in promoting contemporary literature of quality and providing their users with a meaningful leisure time come high in the ranking. The roles of promoting creativity and innovation (maker space), being a community meeting place and an arena for public debate are ranked on the three last places in all the six countries.

*Table 4 in here*

Library users have a higher than average score on all reasons for upholding a library service compared to the sample as a whole with non-users included. The legitimation with highest average score among the users has a score of 7.47 (promoting the cultural heritage) and the lowest (being an arena for public debate) has a score of 6.64, i.e. a distance of 0.83. For the sample as a whole the distance is 1.27 and for the non-users the distance between the highest ranked reason (promoting the cultural heritage with an average score of 5.76) and the lowest ranked reason (being an arena for public debate, with a score of 4.42) is 1.34. Among the non-users, half of the reasons (information promoting, active citizenship, everyday life information, integration, creativity and innovation, being a meeting place and being an arena for public debate) have scores below 5, indicating that they are seen as relatively unimportant. Non-users distinguish more clearly than users between unimportant and important roles.

Three of the twelve reasons can be interpreted as direct operationalization of libraries as public sphere institutions in a narrow sense: the library as an institution promoting access to information one needs to be an active citizen, the library as a community meeting place and the library as an arena for debate. Of these, the library as a provider of information and knowledge one needs to be an active citizen is closely related to the traditional role of libraries as providers of document-based information. This role is valued significantly higher than the meeting place and public debate roles as a role legitimizing the use of scarce public resources for upholding a library service, particularly so in the Scandinavian countries. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the library as a provider of information and knowledge one needs to be an active citizen is ranked higher than for example the library as an institution providing its users with a meaningful leisure time by providing entertaining an popular literature.

Legitimizing libraries by referring to their role as meeting places and arenas for public debate can be subsumed under the category of “House of Literature paragraph”. This term is related to the success which the so called houses of literature have had in Norway since the first one was established in Oslo in 2007. The success of the houses of literature as meeting places and arenas for public debate, which has inspired many libraries, was probably one of the reasons lying behind the amendments to the Norwegian library law adopted by Parliament in 2013, thus the nickname “House of Literature paragraph”. However, preoccupation with libraries as meeting places and the focus upon arrangements, events and meetings in libraries are by no means a Norwegian phenomenon. It is an international trend reflected in library practice, as well as in research. We have calculated a new variable summarizing the scores on the two statements focusing upon this role. The values on this new variable will vary between 0 if

both reasons are deemed of very low importance and 20 if both are evaluated as highly important reasons for upholding a public library service.

Table 5 in here

The mean scores in our six countries are strikingly similar, with the exception of Switzerland, which scores a bit lower than the other countries. Norway, where these roles have been stated in the library law for the last five years, does not score higher than the other countries.

*Table 6 in here*

There is, as we see clearly from table 6, a significant difference between non-users and users. The German respondents, non-users as well as users, tend to evaluate this legitimation for upholding a library service higher than non-users and users from the other five countries. The similarities in scores across the six national samples are, however, more striking than the differences.

*Table 7 in here*

Our six-step regression model was implemented on “the House of Literature” legitimation for upholding a community library service. The model explains altogether 28.6 per cent of the variance. Once again, we see the strong effect of step three, (institutional) trust<sup>2</sup>, which brings up explained variance up from 4 to 22 per cent. Community involvement and Internet embeddedness add together another 3 per cent and frequency of using the library adds 6 per cent and brings explained variance up to 30 per cent.

A particularly interesting finding from the regression model analysis is that women belonging to older age cohorts with relatively low income and education who trust public institutions and who use the Internet frequently and are frequent users of the public library tend to regard the House of Literature legitimation as an important reason for upholding a public library service.

In table 8 below, we have summarized the effect of our regression model in predicting the importance of the House of Literature legitimation country by country. Looking at each of our six countries, however, the pattern is strikingly similar. The predictive power of the model, however, varies. It is highest in Denmark and Norway with 35 per cent in both countries. Then follows Sweden with 31 per cent, whereas Hungary and Germany have 29 and 28 per cent. Switzerland is lowest with 23 per cent. There a similar structure in all our six countries: A decisive leap in explained variance comes when trust, i.e. institutional trust, is introduced and then a new step when frequency of library use is introduced. In spite of some – but not

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<sup>2</sup> Institutional trust is a compound measure consisting of altogether 13 items measuring the respondents’ trust in for example local government, the parliament, the police, the judiciary, the school etc. Public libraries, archives and museums are among the institutions to which we invited the respondents to express their degree of trust. Is the effect of institutional trust an effect of our respondents’ trust in libraries or libraries, archives and museums? We have tested that by taking trust in libraries institutions out of the compound measure. It reduces explained variance to 26 per cent. Explained variance still increases significantly with 17 per cent when we introduce trust without trust in libraries and institutional trust still is significant at the 99 per cent level.

dramatic - differences regarding the predictive power of the model, this pattern is stable in all the six countries.

*Table 8 in here*

### *6.2. Factual use of libraries as a public sphere institution and meeting place*

The actual use of libraries as a public sphere institution was measured via two sets of questions: First, we asked our respondents if they have used the public library to access four kinds of information relevant to their role as citizens: 1. Information on their rights and obligations as citizens. 2. To keep generally updated and informed as a citizen. 3. To inform themselves on specific issues they are engaged in as citizens. 4. To make decisions as citizens, e.g. in connection with elections. The scale used on each of these questions had four values: Never, seldom, sometimes and often. The other set of questions measured activities our respondents reported to have done in the public library, among them attended meetings and events and found information on local issues they are interested in as citizens. In this article we will focus upon using the library to find citizenship information.

*Table 9 in here*

The proportion of library users reporting that they have found citizen relevant information in the library often or sometimes is relatively high. There are some interesting differences between the countries. In general, the central European countries, Germany, Switzerland and Hungary have a higher score than the Scandinavian countries. Germany has the highest score on three out of the four types of citizenship information (information on rights and duties, information on specific issues one is engaged in as a citizen and information related to making decisions as a citizen). Germany also has high proportions reporting that they often have found citizen relevant information in the library. Nineteen per cent of the German library users report for example that they often have used to library to access information to keep generally informed and updated as a citizen. The corresponding figures for Denmark, Sweden and Norway are 14 per cent, 12 per cent and 9 per cent. In Germany, 16 per cent of the users report that they often have used the library to find information they need to make decisions as citizens. That is the case for 10 per cent in Denmark, 12 in Sweden and 9 in Norway.

*Table 10 in here*

Based on the four questions measuring the use of libraries to find citizen information an index was constructed. The respondents were given the value 1 for every time s/he answered that s/he has used the library often or sometimes to find such information. The respondent was given the value 0 every time s/he answered seldom or never. The score on this index variable, then, can vary between 0 and 4.

We see that Germany has the highest average score and that the Scandinavian countries lag somewhat behind the countries from continental Europe, with Norway and Denmark at the bottom. This is a rather surprising finding given the high focus the Scandinavian countries have had on libraries as public sphere institutions, which is reflected for instance by the mission statement in the new Swedish library law stating that libraries shall promote democracy and the free formation of opinion by providing access to knowledge. But is it, in practice, the German library users who are most aware of this part of the library's role?

We also tested the predictive power of our regression model against using the library as a source for citizenship information. Compared to the model's predictive power related to perceptions of the library's role as a community meeting place and the perceptions regarding reasons for upholding a public library service, the predictive power is considerably lower. For

the sample as a whole it explains 13 per cent of the variance, ranging from 9 per cent in the Swedish sample to 17 per cent in the German sample.

Institutionalized trust and frequency of using the library were the variables, which primarily resulted in an increase in explained variance in relation to the perceived importance of libraries as meeting places and arenas for debate as reasons legitimizing libraries. This changes when it comes to using the library for accessing citizen relevant information. The effect of gender, institutional trust, Internet embeddedness, and frequency of using the library, although visible in the sample as a whole, tend to weaken considerably in the national samples. Whereas institutional trust led to a decisive leap in explained variance when it comes to perceptions of reasons for upholding a library and community activity plays that decisive role when it comes to using the public library to access citizen relevant information. This is the case in all the national samples. Frequency of using the library has significant regression coefficients only in Denmark and Norway and the sample as a whole, whereas Internet embeddedness has significant coefficients in Denmark, Norway and Switzerland and Hungary. Local community activity only has a significant regression coefficient in Denmark and Germany.

We also measured the library's actual role as a meeting place and public sphere institution by asking a battery of questions related to what kind of meetings, encounters and social activities people have experienced in the public library. These meeting, encounters and social activities were:

- Bumping accidentally into friends and neighbors in the library
- Visiting the library with friends, family or colleagues in connection with a joint project or interest
- Attending organized meetings and events in the library
- Going to the library to find information on community issues the respondent is engaged in
- Visiting a café in the library
- Finding information in the library on community activities of interest.
- Having used the library's ICT-equipment for social purposes
- Entering into conversation with strangers
- Entering into conversation with people different from oneself, e.g. with people belonging to a cultural, generational or ethnic group different from their own

*Table 11 in here*

The results document that libraries do represent a varied meeting place. They function as a community square/third place (accidentally bumping into friends and neighbors, finding information on community activities and visiting a café in the library). Fifty-nine per cent report having experienced one of these activities. It functions as a public sphere in a narrow sense – a place where the users frequent organized meetings and a place for informing oneself on community issues, both of which almost every third user reports having done. In addition, 46 per cent of the library users have either frequented meetings in the library, informed themselves on local issues or done both. These figures also indicate that the library is a place for bonding, visiting with friends and family while attending joint activities, and connecting with new people, which is indicated by the high proportion of users who report having entered into conversation with strangers of whom may belong to a cultural, generational or ethnic group different from their own.

On most of the meetings and encounters, with the exception of participation in organized meetings, the Scandinavian countries score significantly higher than Germany and Switzerland, a fact that might be traced back to the high focus on libraries as meeting places in the Scandinavian countries. There is also a discrepancy between the relatively low ranking of libraries as community meeting places and the apparently broad use of them as exactly that.

We tested the explanatory power of our regression model on the public sphere dimension of meetings and encounters in the library, i.e. taking part in organized meetings and finding information on local issues. For the sample as a whole, explained variance is 18. For four of our six countries, explained variance varies around 20 per cent – 24 for Hungary, 22 for Denmark, 21 for Sweden and 18 for Norway. Germany and Switzerland deviate significantly from this Scandinavian – Hungarian pattern. Explained variance in Switzerland is only 8 per cent and in Germany 12. The predictive power of the model, then, is significantly higher for attending public sphere meetings in libraries compared to using the library to access citizenship relevant information for the Scandinavian countries and Hungary, but not for Germany and Switzerland.

*Table 12 in here*

In line with what we found for using the library to find citizen relevant information, local community activity is the variable with the highest predictive power in the sample as a whole, as well as in all the national samples. If we look only at attending meetings in the library, which is the activity closest to what we have called the House of Literature-role, it is interesting that the correlation coefficient for education is significant at the 99 per cent level in the sample as a whole and in three of the countries – Norway, Sweden and Hungary. The correlation is positive, meaning that those with education at university level tend to frequent meetings more than those with education at compulsory or secondary level.

## **7. Discussion**

We started out with three research questions: 1. What legitimizes the use of scarce public resources to uphold a public library service and how are legitimations related to libraries as meeting places and arenas for democratic discourse evaluated compared to other legitimations? 2. Are the public libraries in the Scandinavian countries, where the focus on libraries as meeting places and arenas for public debate has been higher compared to the three other partner countries, more positive to reasons for upholding a library service related to these roles? 3. Are, and in what ways, public libraries used as public sphere institutions.

We find that legitimations related to the “new” roles of libraries, i.e. the library as a meeting place, as an arena for public debate, and as a makerspace, are ranked lowest of the 12 reasons legitimizing a library service that we presented to our respondents. This finding is consistent in all our six countries. Makerspace is ranked as the 10<sup>th</sup> most important reason for upholding a library, being a meeting place as the 11<sup>th</sup> most important reason and being an arena for public debate as the 12<sup>th</sup> most important. This is quite interesting taking into consideration that the “new” development is actually not that new. Thus, the increased focus on the library as meeting place as well as the development of different kinds of makerspaces in the public library has been part of the agenda during the last decade. This is reflected in the so-called four-space model which emphasize the library as both a meeting space and a performative space and which has been influential on library development both inside and outside the Nordic countries (Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen, 2012 and 2017)

Traditional legitimations such as promoting the cultural heritage, being an arena for learning, giving equal access to literature and culture, promoting contemporary literature of quality and providing people with a meaningful leisure time come on the top. The legitimation related to libraries as public sphere institutions with the highest score was one closely related to the traditional role of libraries: Providing access to information people need to be active citizens. These findings are very much in line with what D'Elia found in 1994 and Audunson in 2001. (D'Elia, 1994, op.cit; Audunson, 2001, op.cit.)

It also evident that the focus, which the Scandinavian countries, particularly Norway through its amendment to the library law, have had on libraries as meeting places and arenas for public debate, are not reflected in the attitudes we find among citizens when it comes to reasons for legitimizing a local community library service. The ranking in Denmark, Sweden and Norway does not deviate from what we find in Germany, Switzerland and Hungary. Apparently, there are strong institutionalized images of what roles a public library plays, which seem to be similar across countries. Changing those images is a time consuming process. Changes in library legislation in Norway and Sweden occurred three year before we undertook our study, yet this does not seem to have resulted in changing those institutionalized images.

We do find, however, important differences between non-users and users of the public library. They have the same ranking, but different scores. Looking at the library as an arena for public discourse, the non-users are distributed throughout the 10-point scale. We find 28 per cent at the bottom, giving this role a value of 0, 1 or 2, 15 per cent using the high values of 7, 8, 9 or 10 and the majority, then, concentrating on the values between 3 and 6. The users, with the same ranking, are much more concentrated on the upper half of the scale.

Institutional trust and frequency of using the public library are the two strongest variables when it comes to predicting a positive attitude towards the library as a meeting place and arena for debate as reasons for upholding a public library. Also gender (being female), age (belonging to older age cohorts), institutional trust (but not general trust), degree of Internet use (but not access to digital platforms) are significantly correlated to the library as a meeting place and arena for debate in all the countries. The consistent pattern we find in our six countries when it comes to attitudes and perceptions related to the reasons for upholding a library service in general and the library's role as meeting place and arena for debate in particular, is one of our major findings.

There are some fears that if libraries focus upon the role as an arena for public debate, that will be just another service used by the elite, i.e. well educated people from the middle class. The typical person perceiving this role as important is, however, a woman belonging to the older age cohorts with education below university level, with a relatively low income, who has a high trust in institutions and authorities, who uses the Internet frequently but who does not have access to many digital platforms and who is a frequent library user. That is not necessarily the characteristics of a member of the elite.

When it comes to the actual use of libraries as meeting places, the pattern changes. First, the library users in fact use libraries extensively as public sphere institutions and meeting places. A surprisingly high percentage in all the countries report having used the library to access different types of citizenship information. In Germany, 60 percent of the library users report having used the library to keep updated and informed as a citizen – almost every fifth respondent reports having done that often. Thirty-one percent of the whole sample report having been at meetings in the library. This corresponds to 21 percent of the whole sample. Parallel with the low evaluation and low priority of libraries as meeting places and arenas for

debate, the actual use of libraries related to that role is high. Again, the similarity from country to country is high.

The pattern we found related to perceptions and attitudes with institutional trust and frequency of library use as the most important independent variables and with gender, age and intensity of Internet use as significantly related to attitudes and perceptions, changes when it comes to actual use. The effect of institutional trust disappears more or less. Local community activity takes the place of institutional trust as the variable with the highest predictive power.

When analyzing the perceived importance of different legitimations for upholding a library, the similarities between our six partner countries are striking. The hypotheses that legitimations related to libraries as meeting places and arenas for public debate would have a stronger position in the Scandinavian countries due to the focus on these roles reflected in recent changes to the library laws was not confirmed. This changed, however, when it came to the actual use of libraries as public sphere institutions, particularly participation in public sphere related meetings in the library. A higher proportion of Scandinavian library users report having participated in public sphere meetings compared to German and Swiss users. The Hungarian library users are more similar to their Scandinavian colleagues than to their Central European counterparts. When it comes to actual use, the expectation that the Scandinavian focus on libraries as meeting places and as arenas for public discourse has had an effect on the public's behavior seems to be supported.

## **8. Conclusions**

Our major conclusions, then, can be summarized as follows:

1. The public in our six countries have very similar perceptions of the reasons legitimizing the upholding of a public library in their communities. The legitimations regarded as the most important focus upon the traditional role of libraries, not on the libraries as meeting places, arenas for debate and makerspaces. A positive evaluation of the libraries' role as meeting place and arena for debate is related to institutional trust and frequency of using the library.
2. The actual use of libraries as public sphere institutions, i.e. the proportion of users using the library to access citizen relevant information and participating in public sphere meetings in libraries is high. Whereas positive perceptions of libraries as meeting places and arenas for debate are related to institutional trust and frequency of library use and the actual use of libraries as public sphere institutions is related to local community activity and frequency of library use. There are, however, significant differences between the Scandinavian countries on one side and Germany and Switzerland on the other when it comes to actual use of the library as a meeting place.
3. The findings indicate that public libraries play an actual role in providing its users with information they need to be well-informed and active citizens and that it plays an actual role as a meeting place for public debate. The findings of this study, thus, serve to fill the gap regarding evidence needed to make the case for their democratic contribution pointed at by Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot & Sarin (Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot & Sarin, op.cit) although being far from filling it. More research is needed. Two interesting directions for future research are: 1. Comparative studies of how policies related to libraries as democratic spaces and public sphere institutions have developed historically from the birth of modern public libraries in beginning of the 20th. Century until now. How are the dynamics between international professional trends within librarianship and differing national policies and developments? 2. In depth studies of

the role libraries play as public spaces and public sphere institutions for different groups of citizens, e.g. different age groups, different social group, immigrants etc.

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## Tables

*Table 4.1. Highest level of education (N = 6050)*

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Germany	Switzerland	Hungary
Compulsory	9	8	17	23	15	4
Secondary	39	52	47	45	49	60
University	50	39	34	30	35	36

*Table 4.2. Proportion of respondents in different age cohorts (N = 6050)*

	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Switzerland	Hungary
18-29	18(17)	20	21(19) <sup>1</sup>	16	15 (18)	18 (18)
30-39	15(15)	20	16(19)	16	17 (17)	20 (17)
40-49	18(18)	19	19(20)	19	16 (18)	20 (19)
50-59	18(18)	19	16(18)	23	27 (18)	17 (15)
60+	32(32)	22	29(25)	25	25 (29)	24 (31)

*Table 4.3. Use of libraries, museums and archives. Proportion having used a library, a museum or an archive at least once the last 12 months<sup>2</sup> (N = 6050)*

	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Switzerland	Hungary
Library	71	70	60	48	48	67
Museum	61	62	57	59	60	72
Archive	24	23	17	21	18	21

*Table 6.1.1. Average evaluation of the importance of 12 reasons for upholding a public library service (N = 6050)*

	Denmark	Sweden	Norway	Germany	Switzerland	Hungary	Total
Everyday life information	5.74	6.18	6.13	6.10	5.67	6.10	5.99
Citizen information	6.23	6.34	6.40	5.99	5.65	6.22	6.14
Arenas for debate	5.63	5.74	5.57	5.66	5.09	5.60	5.55
Meeting places	5.51	5.96	5.76	5.84	5.36	5.59	5.67
Learning	6.53	6.68	6.84	6.29	5.98	6.85	6.53
Equal access to knowledge/culture	6.54	6.49	6.83	6.68	6.42	6.97	6.65
Digital equality	5.97	6.12	6.33	6.19	5.76	6.64	6.17
Contemporary literature	6.06	6.53	6.68	6.12	5.87	6.73	6.33
Creativity and innovation	5.70	5.91	5.76	5.67	5.39	6.35	5.79
Cultural heritage	6.75	6.51	7.13	6.66	6.28	6.88	6.82
Meaningful leisure time	6.17	6.09	6.26	6.66	6.28	6.88	6.39
Integration	5.70	5.97	6.29	5.83	5.58	6.34	5.95

<sup>1</sup> 19 is the proportion between 20 and 29 according to Norwegian statistics. If we include those between 18 and 20, we will be even closer to 21, which is the proportion of the 18 to 29 cohort in our sample.

<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian and Hungarian figures are weighted to correct for the underrepresentation of those with compulsory school as their highest education. In the Norwegian sample, this brought the proportion of users down from 64 to 60. In the Hungarian sample, it has practically no effect.

Table 6.1.2.Meeting place and public debate as reason for upholding a public library service (N = 6050)

Country	Mean
Denmark	11.1444
Sweden	11.6995
Norway	11.3242
Germany	11.5034
Switzerland	10.4441
Hungary	11.1898
Total	11.2188

Table 6.1.3. Mean evaluation meeting place and Arena for public debate as legitimation – non-users and users (N = 6050)

Country	Non-users	Users
Denmark	8.4286	12.2315
Sweden	8.6080	13.0213
Norway	8.3030	12.9909
Germany	9.7752	13.3476
Switzerland	8.7224	12.3466
Hungary	8.8746	12.2727
Total	8.8647	12.6841

Table 6.1.4. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting House of Literature legitimation (N = 5773)

	B	SE B	$\beta$	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	F $\Delta R^2$
1 Gender	1.432	.143	.131	.000	.175	.031	.030	.031	45.514**
Year of birth	-.035	.004	-.103	.000					
Education	.787	.146	.070	.000					
Income	-.143	.053	-.035	.007					
2 Gender	1.440	.143	.132	.000	.180	.032	.032	.002	10.428*
Year of birth	-.036	.004	-.107	.000					
Education	.753	.147	.067	.000					
Income	-.133	.053	-.033	.012					
Being immigrant	.899	.278	.042	.001					
3 Gender	1.355	.129	.124	.000	.452	.205	.204	.172	624.387**
Year of birth	-.027	.004	-.080	.000					
Education	.101	.135	.009	.453					
Income	-.312	.049	-.077	.000					
Being immigrant	.681	.253	.032	.007					
Generalized trust	.025	.027	.012	.352					
Institutional trust	.083	.003	.417	.000					
4 Gender	1.465	.128	.134	.000	.473	.224	.223	.019	141.566**
Year of birth	-.037	.004	-.108	.000					
Education	-.092	.135	-.008	.495					
Income	-.326	.048	-.080	.000					
Being immigrant	.596	.250	.028	.017					
Generalized trust	-.008	.027	-.004	.758					
Institutional trust	.077	.003	.387	.000					
Community activity	.093	.008	.149	.000					
5 Gender	1.506	.128	.138	.000	.481	.231	.230	.007	28.013**
Year of birth	-.047	.004	-.137	.000					
Education	-.220	.136	-.020	.105					
Income	-.296	.048	-.073	.000					
Being immigrant	.478	.249	.022	.055					

	Generalized trust	-.010	.027	-.005	.700				
	Institutional trust	.076	.003	.380	.000				
	Community activity	.069	.008	.111	.000				
	Digital embeddedness	.781	.105	.107	.000				
	Access to digital platforms	-.057	.052	-.014	.272				
6	Gender	1.150	.124	.105	.000	.534	.286	.284	.054 438.998**
	Year of birth	-.043	.004	-.126	.000				
	Education	-.504	.132	-.045	.000				
	Income	-.215	.046	-.053	.000				
	Being immigrant	.306	.240	.014	.203				
	Generalized trust	-.039	.026	-.019	.134				
	Institutional trust	.072	.003	.363	.000				
	Community activity	.029	.008	.046	.001				
	Access to digital platforms	.658	.102	.090	.000				
	Digital embeddedness	-.113	.050	-.027	.024				
	Frequency of library use	1.146	.055	.254	.000				

Note.

B: unstandardized regression coefficient; SE B: standard error of B;  $\beta$ : standardized regression coefficient; Gender was represented as dummy variable (female = 1); Being immigrant was represented as dummy variable (immigrant = 1).

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 6.1.5. . Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Importance of House of Literature-legitimation – country by country

		Model					
		1 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>b</sup>	3 <sup>c</sup>	4 <sup>d</sup>	5 <sup>e</sup>	6 <sup>f</sup>
Denmark	R <sup>2</sup>	.056	.059	.278	.298	.299	.347
(N = 951)	$\Delta R^2$	.056**	.002	.219**	.020**	.001	.048**
Sweden	R <sup>2</sup>	.033	.034	.241	.248	.251	.308
(N = 956)	$\Delta R^2$	.033**	.001	.207**	.007*	.003	.058**
Norway	R <sup>2</sup>	.062	.066	.261	.271	.275	.351
(N = 960)	$\Delta R^2$	.062**	.004*	.195**	.009*	.005*	.075**
Germany	R <sup>2</sup>	.016	.017	.190	.215	.228	.279
(N = 956)	$\Delta R^2$	.016*	.001	.172**	.025**	.013**	.051**
Switzerland	R <sup>2</sup>	.015	.017	.171	.194	.200	.234
(N = 965)	$\Delta R^2$	.015*	.002	.154**	.023**	.006*	.034**
Hungary	R <sup>2</sup>	.050	.050	.215	.235	.253	.294
(N = 985)	$\Delta R^2$	.050**	.000	.165**	.020**	.017**	.042**
All samples	R <sup>2</sup>	.031	.032	.205	.224	.231	.286
(N = 5773)	$\Delta R^2$	.031**	.002*	.172**	.019**	.007**	.054**

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Predictors: (constant), Gender<sup>†</sup>, Year of birth, Education, Income;

<sup>b</sup> Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status<sup>‡</sup>;

<sup>c</sup> Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust;

<sup>d</sup> Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust, Community activity;

<sup>e</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust, Community activity, Digital embeddedness Access to digital platforms;  
<sup>f</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust, Community activity, Digital embeddedness Access to digital platforms; Frequency of library use.

g. Dependent Variable: *Legitimation of Libraries*;

<sup>¥</sup> Gender was represented as dummy variable (female = 1);  
<sup>£</sup> Immigration status was represented as dummy variable (immigrant = 1);  
<sup>\*</sup>*p* < .05. <sup>\*\*</sup>*p* < .001.

*Table 6.2.1 Public libraries as a source of citizen relevant information (proportion library users reporting that they have often or sometimes found citizen information in the library)*

Country	Rights and duties	Keep updated	Specific issues	Make decisions
Denmark (N=717)	47	50	44	39
Sweden (N=701)	51	54	50	48
Norway (N=658)	40	48	49	42
Germany (N=488)	58	60	56	54
Switzerland (N=476)	49	52	50	49
Hungary (N=679)	57	61	51	55
Total (N=3719)	50	54	50	47

*Table 6.2.2. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting citizenship information index – country by country*

		Model					
		1 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>b</sup>	3 <sup>c</sup>	4 <sup>d</sup>	5 <sup>e</sup>	6 <sup>f</sup>
Denmark	R <sup>2</sup>	.017	.023	.037	.105	.133	.159
(N = 717)	Sig.	.017	.008	.000	.000	.000	.000
Sweden	R <sup>2</sup>	.012	.015	.030	.085	.097	.103
(N = 701)	Sig.	.096	.063	.004	.000	.000	.000
Norway	R <sup>2</sup>	.013	.034	.046	.110	.126	.150
(N = 658)	Sig.	.085	.001	.000	.000	.000	.000
Germany	R <sup>2</sup>	.036	.038	.055	.145	.174	.185
(N = 488)	Sig.	.002	.003	.000	.000	.000	.000
Switzerland	R <sup>2</sup>	.022	.022	.023	.082	.139	.139
(N = 476)	Sig.	.036	.065	.156	.000	.000	.000
Hungary	R <sup>2</sup>	.032	.033	.060	.103	.134	.140
(N = 679)	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
All samples	R <sup>2</sup>	.009	.012	.019	.092	.120	.130
(N = 3719)	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Notes:

<sup>a</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender<sup>¥</sup>, Year of birth, Education, Income;

<sup>b</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status<sup>£</sup>;

<sup>c</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust;



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Notes:

- <sup>a</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender<sup>¥</sup>, Year of birth, Education, Income;
- <sup>b</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status<sup>£</sup>;
- <sup>c</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust;
- <sup>d</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust, Community activity;
- <sup>e</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust, Community activity, Digital embeddedness Access to digital platforms;
- <sup>f</sup>. Predictors: (constant), Gender, Year of birth, Education, Income, Immigration status, Generalized trust, Institutional trust, Community activity, Digital embeddedness Access to digital platforms; Frequency of library use.

g. Dependent Variable: *:participation public sphere meetings* ;

<sup>¥</sup>. Gender was represented as dummy variable (female = 1);

<sup>£</sup>. Immigration status was represented as dummy variable (immigrant = 1).

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