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Social reading and the public sphere in Nordic public libraries: a comparative study

Kerstin Rydbeck, Jamie Johnston, Ágústa Pálsdóttir, Mahmood Khosrowjerdi, Andreas Vårheim, Ragnar Audunson, Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, and Henrik Jochumsen

Introduction. This paper presents research on how public librarians in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden view the importance of social reading and related professional roles.
Method. Previous research findings from a questionnaire administered to public librarians are analysed in depth in order to identify trends that can be further investigated in a subsequent qualitative study.
Analysis.The previous findings broadly show variation in the importance of social reading activities and related professional roles at the country level. A detailed understanding of the variations is elicited through a more comprehensive analysis at the country and community levels.
Results.Social reading plays a more important role in Danish and Icelandic libraries than in Norwegian and Swedish libraries, however it is more important in larger communities in Iceland and Sweden and smaller communities in Denmark and Norway. The role of literary mediator appears to correspond highly to librarians' professional role across all countries and community sizes whereas that of a literary critic somewhat less.
Conclusions. The results establish a need for further research on social reading in public libraries, especially concerning the types and nature of activities generally included in social reading and the extent digital solutions are used.

Introduction

Reading promotion and the provision of literature have been core roles of public libraries, however, literary mediation and reading promotion work has changed and developed in relation to broader societal developments and the expansion of the library's social role (Rydbeck, 2020). In a multi-country comparative study of public librarians' perceptions of their professional role and the library's role in supporting the public sphere, the promotion of equality by giving access to knowledge resources and literary and cultural experiences ranked first in Denmark, Iceland and Norway as a reason for upholding a library service. In Sweden, it ranked third and the promotion of contemporary literature and cultural expressions of high quality ranked first. Additionally, over half of the study's respondents indicated that they offer social reading activities, yet there was a considerable degree of variation across the countries (Johnston et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the expanding social role of public libraries, the previous results from the multi-country comparative study show that providing access to and promoting literature are still central reasons librarians give for upholding a library service. However, the variation in responses, particularly those concerning social reading, suggests that activities related to literature are prioritized and carried out differently in each of the countries and across communities. Therefore, this article aims to gain a more in depth understanding of how public librarians in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden view the importance of social reading. Consideration will be given to the provision and distribution of social reading activities at the country and community levels as well as to how librarians perceive their professional role related to the mediation and critique of literary works; two professional competencies relevant to social reading. The aim is to identify trends related to social reading that can be further investigated in a follow-up qualitative study.

In this study, social reading is considered to be any activity where readers meet and read together or communicate about literature and reading experiences, face-to-face and/or virtually. However, there is a great diversity in social reading practices. Common social reading practices in public libraries include reading communities, such as book discussion groups, reading groups or book clubs as they are often called. Other social reading practices are public reading events, author visits, book bingo, literary salons, book talks and book cafés. Social reading activities outside the library include such things as literature walks or literature camps.

The attention given to social reading activities has waxed and waned over time. A common portrayal of reading or a reader is that of a single reader immersed in a book while sitting in quiet solitude; however, historically, only a small stratum of privileged readers has had this opportunity. Books have been expensive and difficult to obtain, and therefore, reading has been mostly practiced as a social activity (Long, 2003). This is likely why modern public libraries, when they were first established in the Nordic countries during the 20th Century as part of the welfare state, focused on meeting the need for solitary reading in their literary mediation and reading promotion work. Offering a broad range of books to library users that they could take home and read in solitude became an expression of society's economic well- being. Thus, reading communities and other social reading activities have been minimal in Nordic public libraries. This appears to be changing. As will be discussed in the findings, there are now separate categories in Danish and Swedish library statistics for reading communities and these statistics show that social reading in public libraries has increased dramatically over the last two decades.

Despite the increased activity in this area, previous research on social reading in Nordic public libraries is sparse; however, there are a few studies of particular relevance to this study. Pálsdóttir's (1999) findings show that reading as a social activity within Icelandic families is key for fostering children's interest in reading. Lund (2006) discusses the growing interest in reading communities in Danish public libraries and emphasizes the need to reflect on the purpose of these activities and on the role that librarians should play. Balling et al. (2008) reflect on the importance that a Danish project on digital reading communities in public libraries had for strengthening librarians' digital competencies and for the development of new dialogue- and network-based reading promotion strategies. Rydbeck (2016) reports on the findings from a Swedish survey on reading communities in public libraries and alerts that groups organized and led by librarians are negatively impacted when libraries are hit by financial cuts. However, her findings indicate that many groups manage on their own and that they mainly use the library as their meeting place.

Another type of social reading that is gaining in popularity is Shared Reading, which is a specific method that was developed in Great Britain for group discussions of literary texts. Norwegian, Swedish and Danish

public libraries have shown increased interest in the method in recent years and there is now a growing body of research on it. Three recent studies from Norway are of particular relevance to this study. Skjerdingstad and Tangerås (2019) present results from a Shared Reading group at a Norwegian public library and conclude that this method helps readers, especially those who normally find poetry difficult, to engage with it and deepen their understanding of it. Fagerlid (2020) analyses democratic coexistence in Norwegian public libraries by focusing on different social activities, including a traditional book club and a Shared Reading group. She concludes that the discussions in the Shared Reading group focus more on the psychological dimensions of social relationships than in the book club. Naper (2020) studies the role of the library in a Norwegian women's prison. According to the Norwegian public library law there should be public libraries for everyone, including prisoners, and one the objectives of the library is to offer discussions and debates. Naper analyses the discussions in a Shared Reading group organized by the prison library and concludes that the female prisoners' most important definition of literary quality is that the literature should be able to use as a tool for understanding and managing life.

Research Questions

To identify trends pertaining to social reading activities and gain insight into librarians' views on the importance of social reading, the following questions will be explored:

> RQ1: How common is the provision of social reading activities in public libraries?
> RQ2: How concentrated or dispersed is the use of social reading activities across the countries and do they play an important role in library services?
> RQ3: How do librarians perceive their professional role related to the mediation and critique of literary works?

This article is presenting research in progress and the aim is to establish the need and direction for further research. The findings, both current and future, will be of interest for policy makers in the library and culture sectors as well as for politicians and other stakeholders at the municipal level, such as those working with reading promotion in schools. The findings will also be of interest for library leaders and professionals as the analysis provides insight into the broader trends in the field.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of the public sphere is the theoretical lens used for the research. Habermas (1989) theorized that the public sphere is a realm of our lives in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed; an arena in which citizens behave as a public body by conferring in an unrestricted fashion. Social reading groups and other activities can be seen as forming arenas where participants are able to discuss matters of personal importance relevant to their identities, interests and needs.

Also considered is Söderholm and Nolin's (2015) assertion that libraries have had to adapt to two profound environmental change processes: the digital and social turns. The digital turn pertains to the digital extension of libraries and the social turn pertains to libraries serving as places of social interaction and engagement. The digital turn, as it relates to social reading, might include such things as e-books and use of online platforms for meetings. The social turn includes the various social aspects of the meetings. Furthermore, social reading services and programs, such as book club kits and book clubs, can also be seen as part of the participatory turn because they support the formation of arenas where attendees co-author the meaning of art (Hvenegaard Rasmussen, 2016). Therefore, the three turns will be used to gain a more nuanced understanding of how social reading can support the formation of the public sphere. As will be discussed, these turns will be utilized to a greater extent in a follow-up qualitative study.

Data and Methods

This study was part of the three-year research project titled The ALM-Field, Digitalization and the Public Sphere (ALMPUB) that was financed by the Norwegian Research Council's KULMEDIA Program. The partner institutions were in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary and further research collaborations were done with institutions in Poland and Iceland.

This article further analyses results from an online questionnaire that was administered to public librarians in 2018 as part of the ALMPUB project and was reported in Johnston et al. (2021). This is also where the research methods for the research are presented in detail. The focus of this article's analysis will be limited to the findings from Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and specifically those related to social reading. The analysis focuses on the importance given to social reading activities and related professional roles at the country and community levels.

National statistics on social reading communities in Danish and Swedish libraries are also analysed. These statistics elaborate the findings from the ALMPUB questionnaire as they show the broader trends in social reading at public libraries in the two countries. This analysis is presented at the beginning of the findings.

A librarian is defined in this study as any employee working in a public library with a diploma in librarianship or any employee, no matter the educational background, with professional responsibility for developing and mediating library services to the public, however legal requirements for working as a librarian vary across the countries.

Response Rates

The vast majority of questionnaire respondents are female, forty-seven is the average age and most have an educational background in library and information science (Table 1).

Table 1: Total number of responses and estimated percentage of
librarians in parenthesis *
*This data is an excerpt of the original data (Johnston et al.,2021)

Country	Denmark	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Total
Response (percentage)	811(41)	78(39)	331(20)	633(21)	1853(30)

Findings

Social reading is undoubtedly common in Nordic public libraries, however of the countries included in this study, only Denmark and Sweden have national statistics showing the exact figures. The statistics from these countries show a striking increase in social reading activities. In 2007, when the statistics were first collected in Sweden, public libraries in 48% of the country's 290 municipalities arranged reading communities, however by 2019 it had risen to 85% (*Kulturen i siffror 2008#3*, 2008; Tabeller bibliotek 2019, 2020). Based on the figures in Table 2, it appears that the number of reading communities at Danish public libraries increased about 28-fold in a span of 10 years and the number of reading community meetings in Swedish libraries increased about five-fold between 2007 and 2019. Insights from the field indicate that social reading activities are also increasing in Norwegian and Icelandic libraries, although the Norwegian statistics do not include data about reading communities. Iceland unfortunately stopped collecting national library statistics in 2008 due to cuts in funding that resulted from the economic crisis.

Table 2: Reading communities in Danish and Swedish public libraries 2007–2019*
***Sources, Denmark:** Biblioteksbarometer for folkebiblioteker 2012* (2013); *Folkebiblioteker i tal 2013*
(2014); *Folkebiblioteker i tal 2016* (2017); *Folkebiblioteker i tal 2019* (2020);
Sources, Sweden: *Bibliotek 2013* (2014), *Bibliotek 2019* (2020).

Year	Total number of reading communities in Danish public libraries	Total number of closed reading community meetings in Swedish public libraries
2019	3,087	10,770
2016	1,430	8,765
2013	1,135	6,497
2012	848	5,989
2009	108	3,968
2007	No figures	1,868

Interestingly, although there is increased activity related to social reading, its perceived importance by librarians varies significantly. According to the findings (Figure 1), over three- fourths of ALMPUB-questionnaire respondents in Denmark and Iceland indicate that social reading plays an important role in their library services compared to Norway and Sweden where only a little over a third indicate that it does. The Swedish figures show that even if social reading activities are offered in the majority of the municipalities, they are often not perceived by librarians to play an important role in the library's range of activities. According to the Norwegian figures, a third of the Norwegian librarians indicate that no social reading activities are offered in their libraries.
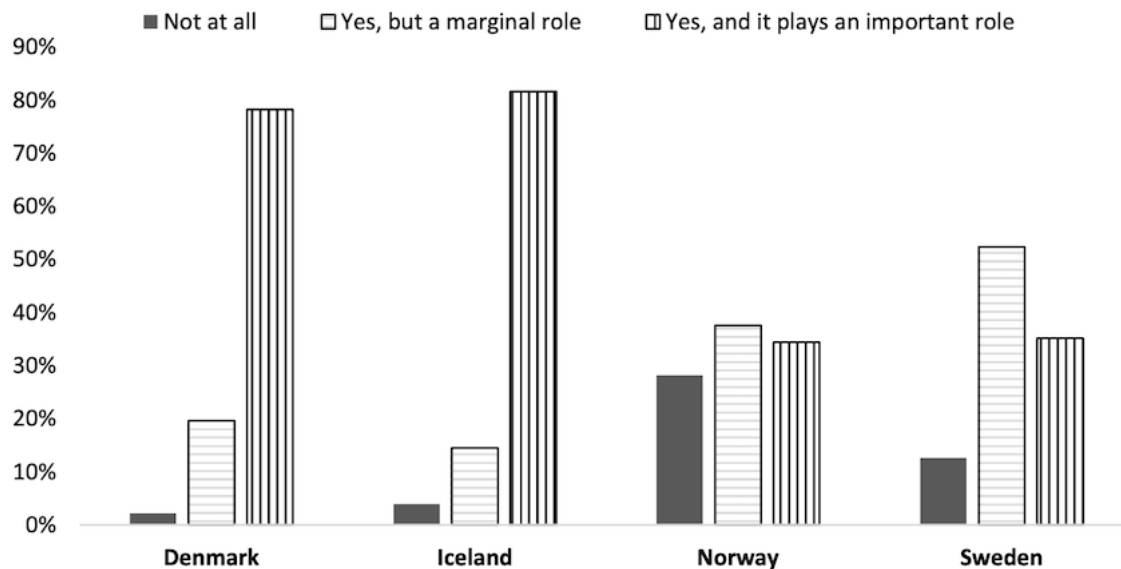

Figure 1: Services the library offers apart from providing access to traditional media: social reading, reading groups, one book – one city, etc. (N = 1612)

Highly varied patterns emerge by analysing librarians' perception of the importance of social reading activities and librarians' perceptions of their professional roles according to country and community size respectively. Figure 2 presents the percentage of respondents according to country and community size who indicated that social reading plays an important role in their library service and Figure 3 presents librarians' responses to how similar they perceive their role as a library professional to the roles of literary mediator and critic. Analysis for each country will be given following the two figures.

Concerning the professional roles, librarians were asked how they perceive their role as professionals in their local community. They were given a list of 25 roles and asked to indicate on a scale from 0 (very little) to 5 (very high) the degree to which each of the roles corresponded to their work. Literary mediator and literary critic are the two roles of the 25 that are most relevant to social reading. They were not further defined in the survey, but mediator or counsellor is broadly about the librarian's role, using various methods, in helping users to find literature that could interest them. Literary critic refers to the librarians' role in assessing literary quality related to literacy and reading promotion. Varied patterns emerge by analysing the responses according to country and community size (Figure 3).
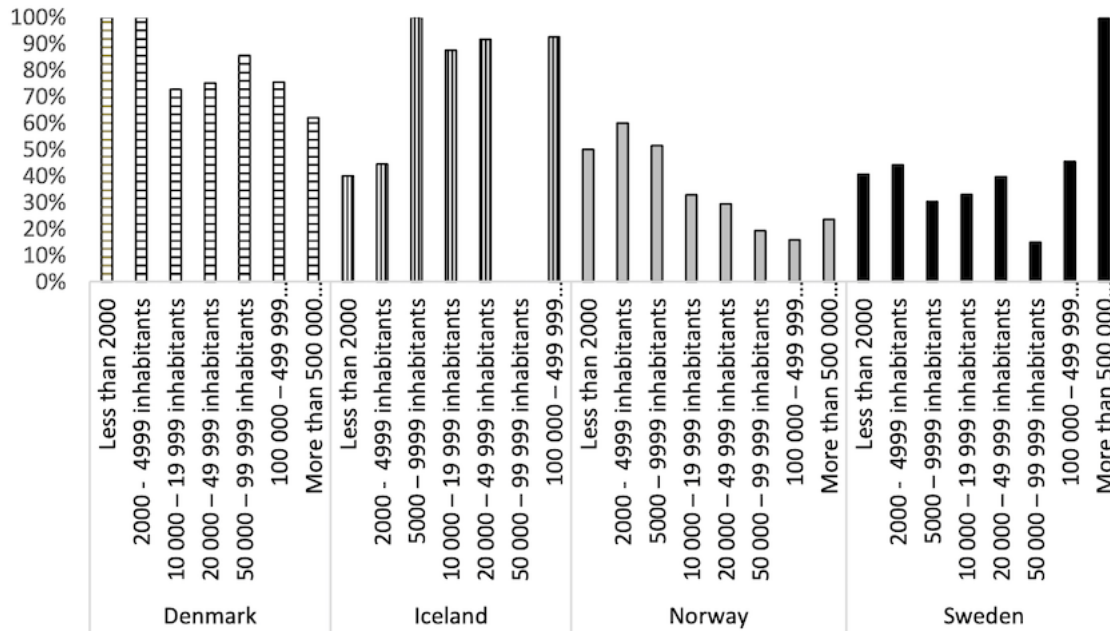
Figure 2: "Yes, social reading plays an important role" (in percentages, N=1612)
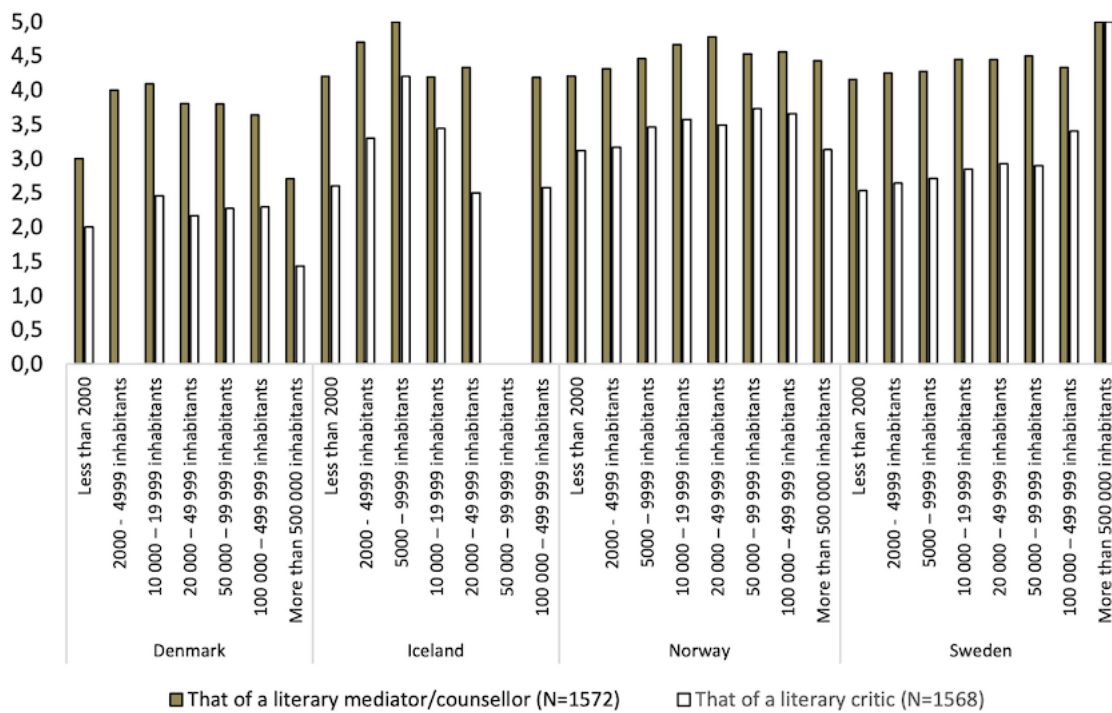

Figure 3: "How similar do you perceive your role as a library professional in the community you work to the roles listed below" (Mean scores on a scale from 0 to 5).

Denmark is the country where most respondents indicated that social reading plays an important role in their library service, which was at least 60% regardless of community size. However, the highest percentages were in the smallest communities, those with up to 5,000 inhabitants, where all respondents in those categories indicate that social reading plays an important role. The lowest percentages are in the metropolitan areas. This is an opposite pattern to Iceland and to some extent also to Sweden, however the percentages are generally much higher in Denmark than in Sweden (Figure 2). Nevertheless, Denmark has the lowest rankings when it comes to estimating the degrees that the roles of literary mediator or literary critic correspond with their work (Figure 3). One explanation to that could be that many social reading activities are being initiated and organized by library users with less involvement from librarians. The Danish statistics

show that 54% of the reading communities were participant-driven in 2019 (*Folkebiblioteker i tal 2019*, [2020](#)).

The findings from Iceland show that a higher percentage of respondents in larger communities indicate that social reading plays an important role in their library service than the percentage of respondents in smaller communities. The percentage decreases in communities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (Figure 2). There are no towns in Iceland in the 50,000 to 99,999 range or over 500,000 range, which explains the lack of responses in these ranges. Nonetheless, the findings show that librarians in relatively smaller communities rank the mediation of literature and serving as literary critics corresponding to their professional role equal to or higher than those in larger communities and the capital. Mediating literature more closely corresponds to respondents' professional role across all community sizes than does literary criticism (Figure 3). There are a few possible explanations for these findings. The reduced importance given to library-facilitated social reading in towns with less than 5,000 inhabitants may simply be an issue of limited library resources, staffing, opening hours and/or long distances, which could result in librarians tending to help individual readers to find literature rather than to organize social reading activities. However, if bridging distances is the main reason for fewer social reading activities, this is an area that could potentially be changing with the more widespread use of digital platforms (e.g., online reading groups).

A higher percentage of respondents in smaller communities in Norway indicate that social reading plays an important role in their library service than respondents in larger communities. Overall, percentages are more moderate across all community sizes in comparison to the other countries (Figure 2). However, literary mediation and criticism appear to highly correspond to Norwegian librarians' professional role, more so than in the other countries, and are scored relatively evenly across communities. Literary mediation appears to correspond to a higher degree to Norwegian librarians' professional role than does literary criticism (Figure 3). A possible explanation for the more moderate responses could be that the interest in social reading activities developed later in Norway than in Denmark and Iceland. The lack of national library statistics on social reading may reflect that. It is also possible that other roles or activities have taken precedence, such as libraries serving as meeting places and arenas for discussion and debate as is mandated in the Norwegian library act (Lov om folkebibliotek, [2013](#)). However, social reading activities could be developing in response to the current Norwegian library strategy's goal for libraries to promote literature and reading to new user groups (Kulturdepartementet og Kunnskapsdepartementet, [2019](#)).

Social reading appears to be of less importance in Swedish libraries than in Danish and Icelandic libraries, but the findings show that Sweden is similar to Iceland in that all or nearly all of the respondents from the largest communities indicate that social reading has an important role in their library service. This is seen in Swedish communities with over 500,000 inhabitants. However, there is a noticeable decline seen in respondents indicating that it plays an important role in communities with 100,000–499,000 inhabitants (45%) and an even greater decline in communities with 50,000–99,999 (15%). This suggests that social reading is more of a metropolitan phenomenon in Sweden. However, in the smallest communities, the scores increase to about 40–45%, which shows a similar trend to the Danish and Norwegian results where social reading is given the highest importance in small communities (Figure 2). Swedish librarians, regardless of community size, consider the role of a literary mediator to correspond highly to their professional role (Figure 3). This is interesting in relation to the relatively low percentages in communities outside of the larger metropolitan areas indicating that social reading plays an important role in the library service, especially because the Swedish library act emphasizes literature promotion (Bibliotekslag, [2013](#)) and the Swedish government has stressed the importance of reading promotion in libraries and schools (Läsa för livet, [2013](#)). A possible explanation could be that Swedish librarians focus mostly on reading promotion activities that do not include social reading, possibly more on literacy and individual readers.

Discussion

There is a sparsity of research on social reading and public libraries in the Nordic countries, however statistics and insights from the field suggest that library-facilitated social reading is increasing. The existing research emphasizes the need for librarians to consider how active they want to be in their role as mediators when working with reading communities since it has implications for the design of the activities (Lund [2006](#); Rydbeck [2016](#)). The research has also shown that work with social reading in digital media develops librarians' competence in several ways (Balling et al., [2008](#)) and that different ways of organizing reading

communities create different types of discussions (Fagerlid 2020; Naper 2020; Skjerdingstad and Tangerås, 2019). Different strategies in these respects could explain the differences in how librarians in the four countries perceive their work with social reading.

Danish and Icelandic respondents consider social reading to play an important role in their library services to a much greater extent than Norwegian and Swedish respondents, although most of the respondents in Sweden and Norway do have social reading activities in their libraries. Denmark has the most extensive national statistics that include the number of reading communities as well as the percentage of communities that are participant-driven. Interestingly, highly varied patterns emerge by analysing the responses by country and community size. The results show that the percentage of respondents who indicate that social reading plays an important role in their library service is higher in larger communities in Iceland and Sweden whereas the percentage is higher in smaller communities in Denmark and Norway. Literary mediation appears to be central to librarians' professional role across all countries and community sizes. However, the percentages are somewhat lower in Denmark. Literary criticism also appears to correspond to librarians' professional role but somewhat less than literary mediation.

These findings offer insights concerning how libraries support the formation of the public sphere. Broadly, the provision of social reading activities can be seen to support the formation of discursive arenas where participants can discuss matters of personal importance. The increasing provision of social reading activities indicates that libraries are adapting to the social turn, yet the findings do not indicate how libraries are adapting to the digital turn, such as by use of online platforms or e-books for social reading activities. Furthermore, social reading can be based on a range of activities, but the current research does not provide an understanding of the types of activities and the degree of participants' involvement, except for the fact that the majority of reading communities in Danish public libraries are participant- driven. Thus, it is quite unclear the nature and quality of libraries' adaption to the social turn and, moreover, the extent to which they are adopting the participatory turn.

Further research is needed concerning the types of activities social reading generally includes and their purpose, the extent to which they are organized as digital activities and the roles that library staff and users assume. Further insights are also needed concerning the role and use as well as nature of social reading activities in smaller versus larger communities. How are libraries serving as public sphere institutions through the use of social reading activities in these contexts and who are the target groups and who participates?

Conclusion

Public libraries' focus on social reading has increased in the four Nordic countries in recent years, however the differences are quite large between the countries and between communities of different sizes in regard to how much importance librarians attribute to these activities. These findings establish a need for further research on social reading in public libraries and provide a basis and direction for continued research. Firstly, a more in-depth understanding is needed of the types and nature of activities generally included in social reading and of the extent to which digital solutions are used. Research focused on these aspects of social reading activities will provide important insights into the differences between the countries and possibly reveal variations in the role of these activities in different contexts. Secondly, further consideration is needed on how libraries are aligning social reading activities with the social and digital turns and adopting participatory approaches. This will provide a more complete and nuanced understanding of how libraries are supporting the formation of the public sphere and how their role is changing and developing within the societies.

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About the authors

Kerstin Rydbeck is a professor of Information Studies at Uppsala University, Department of ALM, Box 625, SE-75126 Uppsala, Sweden. She holds a Ph.D. in Literature and her research interests focus mainly on reading practices from a historical and sociological perspective, and in relation to popular education and contemporary public library practices. She can be contacted at Kerstin.rydbeck@abm.uu.se.

Jamie Johnston is an Associate Professor of Library and Information Science at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), P.O. Box 4 St. Olavs plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway. She holds a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science from the same university and her research interests are in the area of public library practices related to the fostering of inclusion, citizenship, and democracy with particular focus on how libraries facilitate intercultural encounters and dialogue. She can be contacted at jamijo@oslomet.no.

Ágústa Pálsdóttir is a Professor of Information Science at University of Iceland, School of Social Sciences, Oddi v/Sturlugötu, 101 Reykjavík Iceland. She received her Ph.D. in Information Studies from the Department of Information Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Her main research interest is information behaviour, information literacy, and library activities. She can be contacted at agustap@hi.is

Mahmood Khosrowjerdi is a Senior Academic Librarian at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Department of Research, Postboks 400, 2418 Elverum, Norway. He received his Ph.D. in Library and Information Science from Oslo Metropolitan University and his research interests are in the relationships of sociocultural factors and information behaviour. He can be contacted at Mahmood.Khosrowjerdi@inn.no.

Andreas Vårheim is a Professor of Media and Documentation Studies in the Department of Language and Culture, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Postboks 6050 Langnes, 9037 Tromsø, Norway. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Tromsø, and his research interests are in the societal roles of LAM-institutions and institutional development. He can be contacted at andreas.varheim@uit.no.

Ragnar Audunson is a Professor Emeritus of Library and Information Science at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), P.O. Box 4 St. Olavs plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway. Over the last 25 years he has done extensive research on the social role of public libraries. He holds a doctoral degree in Political Science from the University of Oslo. He can be contacted at ragnar@oslomet.no.

Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen is an Associate Professor of Library and Information Science at University of Copenhagen, Department of Communication/Section of Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM), Karen Blixen Vej 8, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark. He received his Ph.D. from The Artic University of Norway in Tromsø and his research interests covers cultural policy, public libraries and outreach strategies. He can be contacted at Henrik Jochumsen is an Associated Professor at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Communication/Section of Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM), Karen Blixen Vej 8, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark. He has done extensive research on public libraries including library spaces, partnerships between the library and the surrounding community and development of new competencies among librarians. He has written several books and articles on the public library and often participates as a consultant in connection with library-projects and new library buildings. He can be contacted at hjo@hum.ku.dk.

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