

Proceedings from the Document Academy

Volume 11
Issue 2 *Proceedings from the 2024 Annual
Meeting of the Document Academy*

Article 9

2024

The Norwegian Public Library of the Future – What are the Challenges to Meet?

Roswitha Skare
University of Tromsø, roswitha.skare@uit.no

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Skare, Roswitha (2024) "The Norwegian Public Library of the Future – What are the Challenges to Meet?," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/11/2/9>

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol11/iss2/9>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by University of Akron Press Managed at IdeaExchange@Uakron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Proceedings from the Document Academy* by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@Uakron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Introduction and background

Norway has had a Public Library Act since 1986. According to the act, all municipalities – there are currently 356 – shall have a public library. Section 1 of the Act focuses on, among other topics, active dissemination, free access to everyone living in the country, and that public libraries should function as independent meeting places and arenas for public discussion and debate. While “free access [...] to everyone living in the country” has been a guiding principle since the very beginning of the public library system in Norway, “active dissemination,” and the public library as meeting place and arena for public debate, were new aspects added when the law was revised in 2014 (Folkebibliotekloven, 2014).

As a result of these changes in the law, a library strategy was formulated that was valid from 2015 to 2018. Project and development funds were intended to strengthen public libraries as independent meeting places and digital arenas.

Norway collects numbers about the use of the public libraries. The proportion of the population using the library is measured in a national census conducted by Statistics Norway approximately every ten years. A survey in 2018 showed that 54 per cent of the population had visited a public library in the preceding year. Although this was the highest number ever measured, and is a high number compared to other Nordic and European countries, still almost half of the population had not visited a library during the last year. To attract new users, including those who do not visit libraries, was therefore one important goal of the new national strategy for libraries presented by the Norwegian government in autumn 2019, before the pandemic (Folkebibliotekloven, 2019). The strategy aimed to “further develop libraries as relevant and important knowledge organizations that contribute to public enlightenment and education for the population” (Folkebibliotekloven, 2019, p. 10). The role of libraries as essential democratic spaces that contribute to education, cultural enrichment, and community engagement was highlighted. The strategy aims to ensure that libraries continue to serve as vital community hubs that support lifelong learning and access to information for all citizens. Other priority areas were to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and to increase the libraries’ digital collections.

During the Covid pandemic, public libraries, just like other institutions with public interaction, were closed for extended periods and their activities were limited. This naturally led to fewer visits and loans, but especially to an impact on the libraries’ social missions (Evjen et al., 2021).

The report *The Public Library Act – What Did It Lead To?* (Græsby & Stabell, 2023) evaluates the impacts and outcomes of the changes in the Public Library Act in 2014. It examines how the law has influenced library services and their role in communities. Key findings include improvements in library accessibility and service quality, an increase in the use of libraries as cultural and educational centers, and enhanced digital offerings. The report also discusses ongoing challenges such as funding and the need for continuous adaptation to technological advancements. Overall, the Public Library Act has

significantly contributed to the development and modernization of libraries across Norway, reinforcing their importance as democratic institutions and community hubs.

One could argue that Norwegian public libraries have been successful in implementing the changes in the law and have managed to evolve in step with societal development. At the same time, we see that Norwegian public libraries also face a number of challenges associated with the societal changes that have occurred and are about to happen. I will in the following discuss some of these challenges.

Users and programming

As mentioned above about 54 percent of the Norwegian population had used the public library in 2018. Although visitor numbers have increased from 2013 until the pandemic, a large portion of these are during extended opening hours, that is, outside the regular opening hours with librarians present. If we only look at the normal opening hours, the visitor numbers have actually decreased. When it comes to the borrowing of physical books, the numbers are stable, but here too we see a disturbing change where more loans of children's books compensate for fewer loans of adult books.

Self-service and access to digital resources could explain why the numbers for visits and physical loans actually have decreased. This in itself is not alarming, but considering that many Norwegian municipalities are already under financial strain, which is likely not to improve in the future, there is a concern that technological solutions might not only be used to offer new services but also to save money, for example, by reducing opening hours and staff numbers. At the same time, knowing that the Norwegian population is aging and that there are groups who, for various reasons, lack digital competence or need help to navigate a digital everyday life, we can foresee the consequences for libraries. An aging population not only poses challenges in terms of pension systems and healthcare services but also challenges libraries, which today focus primarily on children and youth. One might ask whether libraries in the future will need to focus as much or more on the elderly and their needs. This could involve everything from facilitating access to library premises and furniture suitable for the elderly to adapting the library's offerings to the interests and needs of this group. Libraries will also need to accommodate the fact that more and more people, for example, will develop dementia, and therefore will need to train staff and also adapt the premises accordingly (Grønnestad, 2024).

At the same time, better accommodating one specific group does not mean that other groups will be neglected. The Norwegian population is becoming more and more heterogeneous, which will lead to a need for new attitudes and, not least, communication and cultural skills.

Loneliness, social inequality, and exclusion

Nearly 11 percent of the Norwegian population has a low income¹ and continuously rising living costs lead to increased social disparities. In the long term, low income can also lead to poverty and exclusion, as well as a variety of health conditions.

Many libraries are already engaged in activities about mental and physical health, often in co-operation with organizations and interest groups for mental health, suicide prevention, and similar issues. So-called hiking and outdoor libraries are trying to establish a combination between reading/books and outdoor activities, but there is still a long way to go for Norwegian public libraries to expand their role in public health by offering programs related to wellness, mental health, and physical health, including yoga classes, meditation sessions, and health literacy workshops (Skare & Lenstra, 2022).

In addition to this, it seems that many libraries struggle to reach non-users who may not even be aware of the existing services and that these are free. To the extent that libraries are used, they can help level social inequalities, for example, libraries purchase video games so that children without access at home can feel included in their class or group of friends. Libraries also have the potential to assist immigrants and refugees with integration needs (Johnston et al., 2024). Many libraries, in collaboration with the Red Cross and other volunteers, organize language cafes, and many libraries can offer literature in various languages. Digital exclusion can be a problem for several groups, including immigrants and refugees, but also the elderly or people with low income and education who will need help, not just with the library's digital offerings, but also with digital everyday life (Olsen et al., 2020).

Community development and resilience

Libraries are considered institutions that can contribute substantially to community and cultural resilience by acting as trusted, accessible places advancing social capital, preserving heritage, and promoting local identity (Vårheim, 2017). Both digital literacy and access can be seen as part of the ability of a local community to withstand and recover from adverse situations, such as economic downturns, pandemics, natural disasters, or social disruptions. While Norway has largely been spared from major natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shutdown of libraries have left their mark. On one hand, the number of digital offerings has grown (Skare, 2021) and the competence of the population has increased, but on the other hand, libraries and other cultural institutions see the need to reacquaint the public with leaving their homes to attend physical events.² Libraries too must be prepared for the unexpected; new pandemics or other events may force us to work in new

¹ <https://www.ssb.no/inntekt-og-forbruk/inntekt-og-formue/artikler/hvor-mange-er-fattige-i-norge>, accessed 22.11.2024.

² Although there has been a general increase in Norwegians' cultural engagement after the pandemic, theaters and cinemas, for example, are experiencing declining attendance numbers (Bennetzen, 2024).

ways, and new groups may come to local communities and libraries with new needs and challenges.

Sustainability

Libraries contribute to sustainability by making books and other media freely available to everyone, thus leading to less individual consumption. There have also been various other initiatives where tools and equipment are lent out so that users can repair or make their own clothes, furniture, etc., but this primarily happens in the largest libraries (Jochumsen et al., 2023). Libraries might serve as good examples, but can also act as change agents by motivating users to consume less and to produce some of their own food. Seed libraries and courses in vegetable cultivation and cooking are examples also to be found in smaller libraries. In addition to sustainability these activities also contribute to greater self-sufficiency in food and maybe healthier diaries.

Reading and different forms of literacy

According to the Norwegian Public Library Act, public libraries' tasks are promoting enlightenment, education, and other cultural activities through the dissemination of information and by making books and other suitable materials freely available to everyone residing in the country. Other suitable materials can include games, films, and music, but books—and with them literature and reading—still constitute a large part of what libraries consider their core activities. There are many good reasons for this, including studies showing that reading skills among Norwegian children continue to decline (PIRLS 2021). Youth and adults are also reading less frequently than before, and interest in book reading is declining. Over the last ten years, young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 have spent increasingly less time reading books in their free time, including both paper books and e-books. Older individuals still read twice as many minutes per day as children, but also among women, often considered the ones reading most, the proportion who read a paper book on an average day has dropped drastically: from 27 percent in 2019 to 14 percent in 2020 for younger women ages 16-24 (Statistics Norway, 2020, p. 5).

The intense competition from other, often digital, media is one of the reasons why large parts of the Norwegian population spend less time reading books. In addition to potentially affecting reading skills, interacting with digital media also requires a new form of literacy. Misinformation, fake news and AI are just some of the keywords in the discussion. How can libraries contribute to providing good training opportunities tailored to different user groups to be able to distinguish between good and less good information? How can libraries on the one hand teach to use AI as a tool in a critical and reflective manner, and on the other hand, figure out how AI can take over library routine tasks, thereby freeing up time for other activities.

Teaching information and digital literacy includes digital help and assistance to groups like refugees, aging adults and people with special needs.

Libraries are not only access points for technical equipment, but should also be providers of workshops and classes about coding and DIY maker spaces.

Meeting places and third places

Since the legislative change in 2014,³ there has been significant development in Norwegian public libraries regarding their role as meeting places. Libraries offer their users a large number of events for different age groups and with various content. However, research shows (Golten, 2022) that whether the library functions as a meeting place also depends on how events are planned and whether it is possible, for example, to make contact with others before and after the event, and possibly also during, over a cup of coffee or tea. Additionally, one must argue that libraries are not only meeting places in connection with planned and announced events, but that the library space as a whole invites informal meetings between acquaintances and strangers. Being able to stay at the library without the requirement to participate or interact, but surrounded by other people, can already help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Being able to meet and see each other across generations, educational backgrounds, social status, etc., is therefore an important start. The design and furnishing of the library space can not only invite but also facilitate social contact, which is perceived positively by many. The library, as a third place – neither work or school nor home – can also become a free space where we do not need to adhere to the expectations that colleagues, classmates, and family usually have of us.

Public libraries under pressure

Public libraries are among the cultural institutions with the highest number of visits. Yet, they are often where municipalities with strained finances choose to make cuts. Such cuts can affect opening hours, staffing, and also professional development among the employees. Studies and reports show a close correlation between staffing and quality, and between staffing, opening hours, and the number of visits (see for instance Græsby, 2024).

The Library Act (Folkebibliotekloven, 2019) clearly states that libraries should have good offerings for everyone. In Norway, as of today, there are 357 municipalities, each with its own public library. 137 of the municipalities have libraries with less than two full-time equivalent staff. This has consequences for opening hours, number of staff and services. Providing good services to everyone, including individuals and groups who may be more resource-demanding, thus also becomes a question of economics and whether the municipality is willing to invest in the library or not. A survey conducted in 2024 shows that “the overall resource situation is very challenging and that there are large differences between municipalities” (Græsby, 2024, p. 21) in Norway.

³ The Norwegian Public Library Act was revised in 2014 (Folkebibliotekloven, 2014). The public library as meeting place and arena for public debate were new and important aspects added to the law in 2014.

At the same time, societal challenges in the municipalities are increasing and libraries are continually being assigned new tasks. The importance of physical meeting places that are low-threshold and accessible to everyone has become clear, not least after the Covid pandemic. Libraries must demonstrate that they are relevant and useful to their users, but also to the authorities that provide funding. Libraries are often mentioned in political framework documents and in ceremonial speeches, but this generally does not lead to significant transfers of resources.

Conclusion

From an international perspective we might conclude that public libraries often play a crucial role in communities by providing free access to information, fostering lifelong learning, and serving as community hubs. They democratize knowledge, offering resources that span books, digital media, and internet access, which are essential for education, employment, and personal development. Libraries also host diverse programs that promote literacy, cultural awareness, and community engagement, making them vital in supporting social cohesion and inclusivity.

Looking ahead, the future of public libraries amidst changing legislation, economic pressures, and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) appears both challenging and promising. Legislative changes that recognize and support the multifaceted roles of libraries are crucial. Economically, libraries face funding challenges, yet they are increasingly proving their value as educational and community centers. The integration of AI and other technologies offers opportunities to enhance library services, from personalized reading recommendations to automated information management.

In summary, public libraries are indispensable to community vitality and individual growth. Their ability to adapt to legislative, economic, and technological changes will likely dictate their ongoing relevance and ability to serve future generations.

References

- Bennetzen, J. (2024). *Stor økning i kulturbruk etter pandemien*. <https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/kultur/statistikk/norsk-kulturbarometer/artikler/stor-okning-i-kulturbruk-etter-pandemien>
- Evjen, S., Colbjørnsen, T., Bøyum, I., Tallerås, K., & Olsen, H. K. (2021). Samfunnsoppdrag under press: Erfaringer og vurderinger i norske bibliotek under Covid-19. *Nordic Journal of Library and Information Studies*, 2(1), 17-37. <https://doi.org/10.7146/njlis.v2i1.125251>
- Folkebibliotekloven. (2014). Lov om folkebibliotek (LOV-1985-12-20-108). Lovdata. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1985-12-20-108>
- Golten, E. (2022). *Folkebiblioteket som uavhengig møtestad og arena for offentlig samtale og debatt i ei digital tid*. OsloMet avhandling 26. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3037065>

- Grønnestad, K. (2024). Nå treffer eldrebølgen bibliotekene. *Bok og bibliotek*. <https://www.bokogbibliotek.no/aktuelt/na-treffer-eldrebolgen-bibliotekene/208910>
- Græsby, M., Stabell, Ø. (2023). *Folkebibliotekloven – hva førte den til?* Statistikkrapport. <https://innlandetfylke.no/f/p1/i5797a231-837f-41ec-a531-ee23897e428a/folkebibliotekloven-2014-hva-for-te-den-til.pdf>
- Græsby, M. (2024). *Folkebibliotekene i Norge 2024*. Statusrapport om bemanning og kvalitet. <https://innlandetfylke.no/f/p1/iece7ca95-0dc5-4d19-9399-a4f58f1f8cf3/folkebibliotekene-i-norge-2024-statusrapport-om-bemanning-og-kvalitet.pdf>
- Jochumsen, H., Julsrud, T. E., Mathiasson, M., Eigil Barratt-Due Solum, E. E., Guillen-Royo, M., Førde, A., & Bakkevoll, S. E. (2023). UPSCALE: Upscaling Sustainable Collaborative Consumption Using Public Libraries. *Nordic Journal of Library and Information Studies*, 4(1), 94–105. <https://doi.org/10.7146/njlis.v4i1.138194>
- Johnston, J., Mierzecka, A., Tóth, M., Paul, M., Kisilowska-Szurmińska, M., Khosrowjerdi, M., Vårheim, A., Rydbeck, K., Jochumsen, H., Hvenegaard Rasmussen, C., Pálsdóttir, Á., Olson, A., Skare, R., & Mathiasson, M. H. (2024). Public libraries' role in supporting Ukrainian refugees: A focus on Hungary and Poland. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09610006241259490>
- Norway. The Ministry of Culture, The Ministry of Education and Research. (2019). *A space for democracy and self-cultivation. National strategy for libraries 2020-2023*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/18da5840678046c1ba74fe565f72be3d/rom-for-demokrati-og-dannelse-nasjonal-biblioteksstrategi-2020-2023-engelsk.pdf>
- Olsen, H. K., Skare, R., Vårheim, A. (2020). Digital hjelp på biblioteket. I S. Evjen, H. K. Olsen & Å. K. Tveit (Ed.). *Rød mix: Ragnar Audunson som forsker og nettverksbygger* (pp. 145-160). ABM-media AS. <https://hdl.handle.net/10037/24856>
- PIRLS (2021). *Norske tiåringsers leseforståelse*. Kortrapport. https://www.uis.no/sites/default/files/2023-05/20230515_PIRLS_rapport_2021_nettersjon.pdf
- Skare, R. (2021). Public Libraries in Norway and the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Proceedings from the Document Academy*, 8(2), article 2. <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/8/2/2>
- Skare, R. & Lenstra, N. (2022). Public Libraries in Norway and the U.S.: Looking Outside During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Proceedings from the Document Academy*, 9(2), article 4. <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/9/2/4>
- Statistics Norway. (2020). *Norsk mediebarometer*. <https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/attachment/452390?ts=17ddc9dbda8>

Vårheim, A. (2017). Public libraries, community resilience, and social capital. *Information Research*, 22(1), CoLIS paper 1642. Retrieved from <http://InformationR.net/ir/22-1/colis/colis1642.html>