# Libraries as a support of informed citizens – the balancing act between library's good quality and austerity measures

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**Abstract.** In a time of rapidly expanding information possibilities, including "fake news", libraries as guardians of the quality of information have become even more important. In our era, however, it is the guardians of confirmed information themselves and information literate citizens that must be enabled to decide what facts to rely on. At the same time, new public management (NPM) is changing the way libraries, both public and academic, are allowed to act in their local communities. The effect of the "age of austerity" with libraries being closed due to an ongoing economic crisis must also be taken into account. The changing circumstances call for new leadership, new competences and new tasks in libraries. In this paper the authors will present results of European studies on changes in libraries as a result of implementing NPM. While it is evident that the environment and the libraries are changing, it is, however, not clear that the changes are going in only one direction, or how they actually will be impacting the need for more information literate citizens.

**Keywords:** Finland, Germany, information literacy, leadership style, management style, new public management, Norway.

## 1 Introduction

Librarians and libraries as guardians of quality information are more important than ever before. Librarians also play an important role in the support of citizens becoming information literate and thus able to decide what facts to rely on, within a society where the amount of information available is explodeing: "Data is growing faster than ever before and by the year 2020, about 1.7 megabytes of new information will be created every second for every human being on the planet" [1]. At the same time the libraries are under pressure by many forces including the impact of new public management (NPM) on public organisations. In this paper the impact of new public management on how the libraries can act within their local communities, especially with regards to their role as a support for information literate citizens, will be analysed. After an overview of some earlier research on NPM and libraries, a pilot study in three countries will be presented. In this study, academic and public library leaders have been interviewed to find their thoughts on libraries supporting the informed citizens while under the pressure from NPM, and the austerity measures following from the ongoing economic crisis.

## 2    NPM and libraries – some earlier research

New public management emerged as a part of a broader neoliberal focus on policy and public administration taking place all over the world, and NPM-inspired reforms have become widespread from the 1990's onward. Despite national variations in the scope and depth of changes, NPM reforms originate from similar economic theories and normative values, placing economic efficiency and budgetary control as priorities for government.

The often-stated aims of these reforms are to enhance the responsiveness of government to citizens, to stretch the effectiveness of scarce public resources and to move decision-making closer to the constituents of the public sector. Devolution of responsibility and decision power to lower levels of government is a core feature in NPM programs. By transferring power to managers, NPM reforms aim to streamline functions and reduce redundancy and waste [2].

For activities considered to be best implemented directly by the private sector, outsourcing has emerged as a core policy goal: specific services and functions (such as maintenance, control, and advice) are contracted out to private companies in the belief that specialisation and competition encourage cost cutting and economic efficiency, and thus enhances the use of public resources [2]. Achieving greater efficiency in public-service provision and administration has brought into attention some unintended and unanticipated consequences, many now well-documented in the literature.

True political decentralisation to democratically elected lower level representatives or civic society stakeholders has seldom been a priority when weighed against the contrary goal of increased decision-making efficiency. As one critic of NPM has stated, ''Market-driven managerialism can run counter to self-governance, as it is structured around the idea of happy consumers rather than involved citizens'' [3, p. 35], [4].

It is important to acknowledge that similarities in the direction and characteristics of administrative reforms adopted during the 1980s and 1990s define NPM better than any well-defined doctrine or suite of adoption administrative tools. While generalizations about the policy reforms associated with NPM are possible, their adoption always reflects local institutional histories, cultures and policy goals. While NPM is well documented within the overall public sector, not a lot research has been done on implementing the NPM practices in libraries.

In the library environment NPM includes the need to develop strategies, plan budgets based on the strategies, and ensure that the goals are met. Customer satisfaction is seen as the most important goal. Libraries also have had to implement accounting of cost and activities, and performance-measurement with an emphasis on output and outcome instead of input, as well as benchmarking to compare the library's processes, cost and activities with those of other libraries [5, p. 163]. Summarized by Pors and Johannsen [6, p. 52]: "NPM is a movement that tries to transfer principles from private sector into the public sphere" and with this into libraries. In libraries NPM manifested itself as

supporting a transition towards product-orientation, improving the quality of library service delivery, delvelop output-orientation and to ensure market and consumer-oriented behaviors. There has also been an attempt to change from bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations to more modern flexible and leaner forms of management [6, p. 52].

NPM can therefore be said to make libraries want to transform their organizational identity from a public service organization into a more business-like identity [7, p. 251], and NPM at times may also lead to an overemphasis on the financial aspects instead of the societal added value, leaving less possibilities for potentially financial risky creative or innovative activities. Also, there may be less opportunities for a participative management style, as negotiations and agreements may lead to additional costs [8, p. 9].

Library leaders need to improve their strategic management competences, as Vallet [8, p. 12] has shown from the Flemish library world. Düren [5, p. 163] agrees: "the management has to develop a strategy with vision, mission and strategic goals. It has to plan annual programme budgets based on cost and activity accounting to show how efficient and effective their work is.[..]Consequently, public [as well as academic] libraries have to leave their professional comfort-zone behind, or as a public library director said '…we have to leave familiar grounds'" [8, p. 14].

However, the introduction of NPM in libraries is not necessarily in conflict with library core values but can be interpreted as tools for library management. A Danish study shows that librarian "identity" can both be in conflict and in harmony with NPM logics. Kann-Christensen shows that both at field level and organizational level the librarian logic, regarding user contact and promotion of information, and culture are crucial issues. Furthermore it is shown that the librarian as profession in principle is not opposed to either pressure for efficiency nor continuous change of the library. However one can identify a resistance towards changes in the library that take away the possibility for the librarians to influence their organization and work [9, p. 217].

Düren [5] has demonstrated how a German academic library can use the Balanced Scorecard to develop and implement a strategy, as a result of growing pressure from NPM-inspired reforms in the German public sector, and Saarti and Juntunen [10] showed the benefits of a quality management system in merging university libraries in Finland. Kann-Christensen and Andersen investigated a Danish county library and found that libraries are caugth between the demands of being cost-effective and accountable to the needs and whishes of the patrons. This means that user satisfaction is seen as very important for legitimizing the library's excistence [11].

Apart from these international studies from Denmark, Belgium, Germany and Finland one will see that within the field of library research, NPM has not been thoroughly investigated. The authors believe that a comparative perspective will provide library leaders and researchers with new insights.

The main research questions of this study are:

1.	To what extent are library leaders equipped to provide the library sector with a new leadership and management style?

2.	How can the libraries, in a squeeze between the demands for better service and less money, find a way to train citizens in information literacy?

# 3 Methodological issues

To answer the two research questions the authors conducted a pilot study in Germany, Finland and Norway, interviewing academic and public library leaders to find out how NPM and the resulting austerity measures impact the citizens' training in information literacy and what can be done to ensure a good support of informed citizens.

For the qualitative expert interviews the library directors, one from a public library and one from an academic library in each country, were contacted and asked the following:

1.      Libraries should nowadays be guardians of confirmed information and of information literacy as a tool for citizens to be able to decide for themselves what facts to rely on. At the same time, New Public Management is changing the way libraries, both public and academic, are allowed to act in their local communities. These changing circumstances call for new leadership and new leader roles in the libraries. To what extent are you as a library leader equipped to do this? (e. g. management skills, leadership skills, budget for skill enhancement / education, cooperation)

2.      How does your library in a squeeze between the demands for better service and less money find a way to train citizens in information literacy?

Especially interesting is to see what is expected from libraries in different European countries and how they are supported through resources for this new task.

The content analysis of the interviews were conducted based on the questions and compared in order to find similarities and dissimilitaries between the library sectors and countires.

# 4 Research results

Table 1 shows some details about the library leaders interviewed for this pilot study and their library.

**Table 1.** l Libraries that participated in this pilot study

| Type of libary / country | Full time equivalent (FTE) 2017 | Leader of this library since |
|---|---|---|
| public library / Germany | 5.25 | 1997 |
| academic libarary / Germany | 20.5 | 2006 |
| public library / Finland | 197.5 | 2014 |
| academic library / Finland | 50 | 2015 |
| public library / Norway | 106 | 2011 |
| academic library / Norway | 110 | 2015 |

*Germany*

The director of the public library in Germany mentioned that some of the aspects of the NPM, such as quarterly reports and a specific report about public and academic libaries in Germany (the BIX – Bibliotheksindex) have ceased to exist. Those were relevant methods to show the activities of this library, even if the relatively extensive tasks relating to providing information literacy competences only have been depicted on the brink. Since 2000 the then reduced amount of staff has been the same, which means that this library only has 80 percent of its needed personnel capacity. Through the impementation of the RFID-technology at least the opening hours could be kept. Known deficits that need attention in information and digital literacy cannot be resolved and programs to support this cannot be implemented. Also some support programs like "Lesen macht stark: Lesen und digitale Medien" ("Reading makes strong: reading and digital media") are extensively bureaucratic and the library cannot participate. At least there is a well-thought-of municipal professional training program, in which the library's staff can participate and keep their professional competences up to date. Also helpful is that this library has a good reputation and with this can choose its spheres of activity as well as its cooperation partners relatively freely.

At the moment this library tries to modernise its guaranteed offers for schools through the realtively easy application for state funds to buy a carrying case for iPads. With this the classic guided tour for school classes shall be replaced through an action bound rally. The library's digital services and ressources will thus be communicated in a transparent and modern way. On the other hand some programs needed to be stopped (at least temporarily) because they are too time-consuming and need too many of the limited resources, such as the "Kinder- und Jugendbuchwochen Schleswig-Holstein", an annual event in November in which over 500 school classes and groups from nurseries are invited into libaries and schools as a project for the promotion of literacy. To have the chance to at least once in a while be able to plan and execute activities such as gaming actions or information about topics such as child-proof locks of smartphones and child protection in the internet, the library needs cooperation partners. Often the library is not the protagonist of these activities, but only offers the environment in which it can take place. The library director wishes the library could be more active in offering its own activities. This coooperations help create more ties to the community and raise recognition. To be able to be more active in this field of activity they try to unleash more personnel hours through more digitalization, including the methods of payment in

the library, through constant reviewing the library's processes, through outsourcing tasks and through optimizing the library's cataloug to reduce questions of users. Nevertheless, for the older pupils as well as adults information literacy programs can only be executed on request and if the resources are free at that moment and not as part of a regular program.

The director of the German acadmic library who was interviewed for this pilot study makes clear that nobody asked his library formally or informally to be a guardian of confirmed information literacy as a tool for citizens. He thinks that libraries can contribute to this, but that maybe the university's decision makers are not aware of this possibility. For most people libraries are still only places to store books. And therefore this library is not equipped for this task.
Nevertheless, this library tries to fulfill its role as guardian of confirmed information and of information literacy for its students, and for this they have established a part-time position that helps professors in all of the university's departments through teaching "Information competence", which some of the departments demand regularly..As this library has no resources for this task nor a mandate to act as guardians of confirmed information and of information literacy as a tool for citizens, they only fulfill this for their students as stated above.

*Finland*

The public libary director mentioned that these new evolving services are a very important part of the new tasks the libraries must include in their sevices. The director is also very active in improving theses services, attends courses and includes the staff in strategic discussions. The director had a long working and management history, that seemed to definitely help in focus on the new and emerging service changes.
Also in this library there have been some budgetary cuts, but according to the director not as drastic as in some other public libraries in Finland. This has meant resource allocation to the strategically important tasks and the teaching and empowerment of users in information literacy issues is one of these strategic choices in their library. In addition they have been able to use automation in removing routines from the library staff to the computers.

The director of the Finnish academic library had not received any formal training from his own university. Instead the director had a lot of previous managerial and financial education and experience from previous tasks, including entrepreneurship. Also the active updating of one's knowledge from the professional field (internet discussion and professional papers) was important.
The information literacy charge was seen as one of the main function in the library: "Although the staff has been reduced radically we have not cut back the tuition in the same proportion; we have been reorganizing so that the level of the teaching could be maintained and even enhanced/developed." Some minor adjustements have been done, including increasing the group sizes and diminishing contact teaching. But the director mentioned that if more staff cutbacks are going to happen this will also effect the teaching provided by the library.

*Norway*

How are changing circumstances related to NPM influencing library leadership in Norway? The library directors that were interviewed in Norway are uncertain of what the effects of NPM are in the Norwegian library world. They both see the call for plans and controls as supportive of development. Both find that there is a certain amount of freedom in "framework budgeting". However, if they want to develop, funding has to be found through external project funding. At the same time, changes in the skillset of the library employees are possible, but require more time and a lot of patience. Both felt that they have the necessary skills for leading their libraries, skills that have been acquired through further education and practices. The public library leader has worked in other library leadership positions before, and in central library organisations for decades. The academic library leader worked in other mid-level management positions in the library for several years.

The library in a squeeze between demands for better service and less money needs to prioritize, and to be active in applying for funding for development projects. The public library prioritizes to train refugees and immigrants, children and seniors in computer skills and languages. The upper secondary schools in the municipality have quite good libraries themselves now, so the pupils from there are no longer a primary target group. Information literacy is not yet well developed in the public library, however the librarians are up-skilling themselves for this task.

The university library director sees her staff being more actively involved in trying to embed themselves in the academic departments, anticipating needs and being proactive. They wish to offer information literacy as student services, and also to help the departments fulfill their obligation to deliver transferable skills to the students as part of the learning goals.
The Norwegian library leaders see collaboration between different groups of libraries as a necessary way forward.


The library leaders that participated in this pilot study are generally equipped to provide the library sector with a new leadership and management style (research queston number 1). They know about the importance of strategic planning and (re)allocation of ressources, the need of process optimisation, to find cooperation partners and to constantly educate oneself and their memebers of staff to hold their professional competences up to date.

This leads to reasearch question number 2, as leaders have to prioritize what they can do – considering the few resources they have - to fulfill their library's task as guardians of quality information , as can be seen in the public library in Germany, in which only children from nurseries and young pupils are in the focus of the programs for information literacy, or in Norway, where the public library is specialized in programs

for refugees and immigrants, children and seniors. They find ways to train citizens in information literacy through reorganising their libraries, outsourcing as well as cooperations. And they are aware that they need to find ways to avoid further cutbacks.

# 4      Conclusions and further research

As this pilot study only shows the opinions and experience of six library leaders one must be careful when drawing conclusions. The aim was to generate a broad point-of-view which will lead to further research. Following this pilot study more qualitative interviews must be conducted, to be able to develop concrete hypotheses which then can be tested through a representative quantitative research.

But one can state based on findings here that the NPM has definetely had an effect on the management of the libraries. The directors are more aware of the policies and economic pressures that are affecting the public sector, including the libraries. It also seems that if the library director is active in strategic work and can influence the decision makers, the library can also gain when being able to present its value for the community. It also seems that the NPM policies are effecting the strategic work of the libraries pointing it to the direction discussed earlier in chapter 2, especially towards economic efficiency. There also seems to be a limit from budget cutbacks after which the service production is not anymore possible at an agreeable level.

In Finland information literacy is seen as a strategic and important task for both academic and public libraries and it seems that it is also seen as one of the tasks that the libraries want to prioritize. This can be interpreted that the library can also make strategic decisions on the issues that are important for the libraries, but it seems that the experience and education of the director has an effect especially on the strategic work and how one succeeds in it.

In Germany the academic library is not seen as an institution that has the competences and should see as one of its tasks to be guardians of confirmed information and of information literacy as a tool for citizens. And even to support students in this, the library has has only minimum resources, not nearly enough In the public library information literacy is seen as an improtant task, but resources are only made available for children and young pupils, and even those are not adequate. Older pupils and adults are not in the focus of implementing programs for information literacy.

In Norway the public library prioritizes to train refugees and immigrants, children and seniors in computer skills and languages. The adults "in between" are left out. The university library has the skills and the mandate to aid the academic departments in supplying transferable skills to the students, and information literacy is considered one of these skills.

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