

# Are We Experiencing the End of the Library as We Know it? Speculating on the Future of Libraries as “Space of Flows”

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**Abstract:** *Social networking facilities alongside the massive digitization of information resources and popularity of search engines clearly impact on the nature and conditions of public library services. This has also affected the public library's societal role and institutional identity. The new digital information environment and social software tools such as blogs, wikis and social networking sites have contributed new perspectives to discussion of the future of public libraries as information providers. Within the profession, in LIS academic environments and in the wider media, varying views of the public library's future have been presented. Whereas some professionals, library directors and LIS academics see a bright future for the public libraries, believing in their flexibility and pointing to their potential for survival, there are analysts and commentators who are much more pessimistic about the need for public libraries in the next 20-30 years. But however uncertain their future, there does seem to be a need for public libraries to critically review their aims and objectives and consider redefining their service identity. In discussing the survival of public libraries in the digital age, a range of visions have been proselytised while ways of widening and enhancing the role of libraries have been indicated. Some emphasis has been given to exploring the public library as “space of flows”, a term proposed by Manuel Castells. By analysing key papers reflecting on the public library as a space for communication and networking, this paper intends to examine the nature of the communications dimension of the public library in a phase of reorientation and struggle for survival. Included in this analysis is the library's role as a democratic agora and as a hybrid learning space. The library can thus host conventional face-to-face meetings and seminars and actively initiate e-discussions that aim to involve citizens in discussions of cultural, political and community-related issues. In contributing to the development of a conceptual basis for the study of communication and networking activities in public library settings, the paper presents an analytical approach that is structured around Manuel Castells' spatial division of “space of flows” and “space of place”.*

**Keywords:** *Communication hubs, democratic agoras, Manuel Castells, meeting places, public libraries, space of flows, network society*

## Introduction

The first decade of the century is behind us and the challenges facing the world have not become less acute: famine, climate change and the risk of future climate collapse, pressure on energy resources, the repercussions of the global financial crisis, the discontinuity between recession and economic upturn, the gloomy prospects for Europe including threats to the eurozone's financial stability, corrupt media conglomerates (e.g. the phonehacking scandal), increasing disparity between rich and poor, revolts and riots, migration pressures, erosion of democracy in many parts of the world, etc. These major geopolitical factors constitute the public library's external environment. Although global phenomena like demographic trends, meteorological hazards, media monopolisation, the volatility of financial markets and energy scarcity do not directly affect the existence and service provision role of public libraries, it seems obvious for libraries to review and reflect upon the current status of their global conditions. In other words, libraries need to re-examine their role in society and reconsider their responsibilities and priorities. In determining their future function and in identifying future user needs and services, libraries can apply scenario analysis. Overall (and this applies to most countries) the public library's service environment exhibits an increasing degree of complexity and unpredictability: shifts in library users' preferences, expectations and behavioral patterns alongside the emergence of new media, platforms, formats and gadgets which offer you not only thousands of songs but also your documents, your books and your life paraphernalia, rematerialised and stored in the “clouds”. The e-book has arrived - as usual, its growth trends in the USA are spreading to other parts of the world including Scandinavia - and mobile devices: smartphones, iPhones, iPads and different playware products create new media opportunities. Broadly, public libraries seem to be aware of developments in the digitization of information and the increasing growth of electronic networks. And they are, to a greater or lesser degree, seizing the potential of social media to provide information resources and services for their clients and for enhancing their web visibility. However, a more fundamental problem

for libraries is the fact that, in many countries, public libraries are experiencing severe cuts in expenditure with staff being dismissed and branches closed. Further, some opinion leaders, politicians and members of the general public have started questioning or debating the actual rationale of libraries. In these times, libraries cannot afford to be complacent about their role as convenient information centres and cultural experience providers in a consumerist society. Libraries have to remediate and reorient their community role. Similarly, library theorists and researchers have a role to play in this process by re-examining the theoretical basis of public librarianship. In this respect, in reviewing existing conceptual frameworks in the public library world, it is worth appropriating ideas and perspectives drawn from other academic disciplines.

## Methodology

The study described here intends to discuss the modern manifestation of the public library and the future role of the library. The emphasis is on survival strategies for public libraries in an environment where the justification for the public library's existence is increasingly being challenged. In most countries, public libraries are operating in a climate of aggravated competition, recession-affected economies and budget reductions. In considering survival strategies for the public library and revisiting the mission of the library, a review is being conducted of selected published sources addressing the reorientation and rethinking of public libraries along with the future roles and major tasks of public libraries. The literature analysed covers public library environments in Scandinavia, primarily Denmark, United Kingdom and the USA. This language-related, cultural and academic "bias" - the illustrative emphasis put on these countries - can be justified by referring to the state of fairly advanced public library reform projects in these countries. In Scandinavia and in the Anglo-American library world, a range of books and reports have been published that take an innovative and exploratory approach to determining the identity, purpose and priorities of the public library.

The other analytic approach adopted for delineating the options and alternatives relevant to the public library in a transition phase considers a few selected projects, completed as well as ongoing, that are concerned with public discourse in public library settings. Some of the issues and perspectives not covered by the monographs and journal papers selected for analysis have been illustrated by a handful of projects funded by Danish bodies and agencies including the Danish Agency for Culture and its Centre for Libraries and Media and for Digitalization and IT.

In attempting to envisage the future challenges for public libraries, various scenarios can be imagined. Some of these developments and emerging roles are identified within the framework of the present study and outlined in this paper. There are several routes to exploring both the challenges and opportunities facing public libraries in the first half of the 21st century. Some hints and suggestions can be found in the published literature. But as mentioned, other perspectives are offered by projects and analyses in progress or already completed.

A third educative approach incorporated in this study is the inclusion of bodies of theory from outside the field of information science. Admittedly, external theorists do not necessarily offer answers that can be regarded as definitive. But in our view, valuable elements of theory and perspectives can be drawn from Manuel Castells' seminal theoretical construct on the space of flows and the space of places in his book *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000). We seek to relate specific observations and ideas derived from Castells' theoretical works to current challenges and transformation processes affecting the public library. Our central aim is to illuminate how these external theoretical approaches and perspectives can be relied upon to identify possible options, priorities, future roles and identities etc. In this respect, the present paper emphasises a critical and conceptual approach more than a pragmatic and evidence-based one.

## Extended Literature Review

There are quite a few proposals which address the profile and priorities of future public libraries in addition to the challenges facing the library in the years to come. In his imposing and magnificent work on Danish library buildings via a historical and architectural perspective, Dahlkild (2011, p. 320) observes that a library should be viewed and experienced as an extension of urban space. In this sense, the library is an institution that does not confine its sphere of activities to specific functional and service spaces but also forms part of urban life. Last year the National Library of Sweden issued a small compact anthology entitled "Will the library exist in 20 years' time?" Included in the booklet are twelve brief estimates and predictions about public library futures and a summary of a panel discussion. In discussing the future profile of the public library, Rydell (2011, pp. 43-47) feels convinced that there will be a consolidated and thriving public library even in 2030 and she adheres to the view that the library will act as a "knowledge broker" whereas, somewhat surprisingly, the function of the library as a physical meeting place will be less important. Another contributor, Svensson (2011, pp. 56-60), a cultural journalist and critic, is much more

pessimistic about the public library's survival opportunities. He predicts that most libraries will have disappeared and those still existing will have been relegated into monasteries for fringe bookworms.

In a published study of the public library in urban development, three Danish public library researchers Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Henrik Jochumsen and Dorte Skot-Hansen (2011, pp. 215-216) offer their view of future challenges to the library. Their view is based on results of studies of visible and innovative libraries in Nordic countries as well as the rest of Europe and North America. In their studies the three researchers highlight the role the library can play in urban development today and how the library can strengthen its contribution to users' experience, creativity and innovation. In quite a few library systems, citizens are most satisfied with libraries that are similar to those they have always known, and libraries generally boast very high scores in satisfaction measurement surveys. But even though everything may seem to be going well within the library's four walls at the moment, there is a risk that the library in its classic form will be overtaken by the multiplicity of new virtual and tangible cultural offerings. Competition is fierce in a cultural and media environment that is constantly changing, and in an urban policy context in which global competition requires visibility and success. The library is not an island, and it must make a much more determined effort to adapt itself to a rapidly changing cultural and urban existence. Here the authors see three main challenges. Firstly, the library should not perceive itself as an independent culture/knowledge-oriented institution, but consider itself as being part of a broader strategy for the urban development occurring in the library's local area and interact with this process in formulating its own future expansion plans. Secondly, the library should not think in terms of "borders" but closely cooperate with cultural and urban planners in order to enhance the municipal environment as public domain and experience space. Thirdly, it is advisable to think less in terms of "library", i.e. materials, functions, services and offerings but rather place more emphasis on processes, interaction and synergy in relation to its broader network. Hence the space of flows. In this respect, the library can be modernised by entering into new relationships and partnerships and may contribute to the synergy that can arise in the boundaries between different institutions, cultural forms and user clienteles. This means that the library has to be conscious of its own values and competences while respecting those represented by other players, partners, communities, user groups, etc. According to our analysis, the library should not be amorphous, nor should it abandon its unique capabilities for organizing and disseminating information, knowledge and culture. But these assets and competences must be manifested through new channels and in new contexts if the library is to retain its support from a new generation of digital natives.

It appears that libraries are being beleaguered by both budgetary constraints and technological advancements. Dorte Skot-Hansen has become a member of a steering committee for a development project concerned with the public library of the future and funded by the Danish Agency for Culture. The title of the project is "Model Programme for Public Libraries". This Danish public library researcher has also entered into collaboration with a local public library system (Gentofte, Greater Copenhagen) under the heading of "From Model to Project" focusing on the development of a new conceptual framework for the public library. Underlying this grant-assisted collaborative development activity is the recognition that, as an institution, the public library is facing several challenges and there is no single solution to these. Various options for artistic, cultural and social experiences, often customized, are widely available to urban residents and the library is finding it increasingly difficult to justify its role and services. At the very least, young people should feel at home and be offered the possibility of seeking a place where their knowledge is being challenged and where they can be inspired to express their creativity.

Some library analysts see a future for public libraries as centres for specialized services or advise libraries to define and highlight a major speciality. O'Beirne (2010) strongly argues that libraries should upgrade the educational part of their mission, revive the forgotten ideal of learning and concentrate their energy on learning activities in the library environment. O'Beirne asserts that the ability of libraries to support informal learning is their greatest asset. It is time to consider the reorientation and redefinition of the library's prime purpose: "With its recent emphasis on entertainment, the learning aspect of public library activity has become less well served and less well understood" (O'Beirne 2010, p. 158).

Other contributors to the debate about the public library's future role, including some politicians, have openly called for entrepreneurship, commercialization, customization, more demand-orientation, public-private sector synergies and fee-based services. Recently, for instance, John Huber - author of *Lean Library Management* (2011) - has received some attention within the library community (e.g. in Denmark and UK) for his introduction and promotion of eleven strategies to make public library services efficient and competitive. According to Huber's recommendations, libraries should learn from their commercial competitors; they should compare and measure their performance against rivals like Google and Amazon. Similarly, McMenemy (2009) discusses whether public libraries could learn lessons from the retail sector. He also calls for more debate and discussion within the library profession to clarify to what extent the private sector can actually influence public libraries in a constructive and helpful manner. Rightly, however, McMenemy states "public library users must be seen by the profession as citizens and not consumers" (2009, p. 202).

The human rights perspective is brought in by Kathleen de la Peña McCook and Katharine J. Phenix (2011) in their chapter entitled "The Future of Public Libraries in the Twenty-First Century: Human Rights and Human Capabilities". McCook and Phenix (2011) predict that library professionals in the USA in the 21st Century will start developing conceptual frameworks and service models relying on a vocabulary reflecting universal human rights values.

Aabø, Audunson and Vårheim (2010, pp. 16-26) reported a milestone-type empirical study exploring how public libraries are used as meeting places and by whom. Based on the analysis of survey data, six categories of place were identified:

- the library viewed as a “square”,
- as a place for meeting and interacting with people with varying backgrounds,
- as a public sphere/space,
- as a place for joint activities with friends and colleagues,
- as a metameeting place,
- as a place for virtual meetings.

The survey concentrated on representative samples of the population in three townships in Oslo, Norway, each with a markedly different demographic profile (labeled the gentrified community, the multicultural community, and the middle-class community). Analysis was conducted to examine why some people use the library for various kinds of meetings whereas others do not. Also investigated were variations in the use of the library for different types of meetings. Findings revealed that public library spaces are used for a variety of meetings, formal, unstructured, virtual, etc. The Aabø, Audunson and Vårheim study forms part of a research programme undertaken within the project framework Public Libraries—Arenas for Citizenship (PLACE), which received funding from the Norwegian Research Council for the period 2007–2011. As pointed out in the paper reporting the study, two dominating trends fundamentally modify and mould today's society: digitization and multiculturalism. The three Norwegian researchers consider that both major societal developments can be seen as potentially positive. It is mentioned, as an example, that digitization developments increase the number of individuals that constitute a community. Moreover digitization opens up new modes of communication between citizens and politicians as well as between citizens and citizens. The new digitized landscape enables and encourages increased participation in democracy. Similarly, multiculturalism can pave the way for a fruitful and dynamic interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds. The researchers note that public libraries serve as meeting places, but there is a dearth of published empirical research on the actual use of public libraries as meeting places. Thus, the reported piece of research offers a valuable contribution to filling this vacuum. The results of the study critically illuminate the role of the public library in a multicultural context.

Kranich (2001, pp. 83-95) explains how libraries help reduce the digital divide, increase access to government information and are fighting against both censorship and private interests to ensure that access to information is as free as possible. The library as civic space creates opportunities for community and dialogue, which she thinks, provides a very important democratic function to supplement information-related and education-centred tasks. In their joint article Canadian library researchers Alstad and Curry (2003) describe how squares and other public spaces are increasingly being replaced by company-owned areas such as shopping malls, where people can no longer act as citizens, but are primarily consumers. In order for libraries to support democracy and serve as public spaces they should, among other things, change their objectives and move towards a more proactive stance by making room for lectures and discussion groups.

Issues and requirements regarding theory building in civic librarianship are addressed by John Budd (2008, pp. 147-223) who takes a fresh look at (public) library purpose and sets the scene for a fundamental re-examination of the social foundations of librarianship. What Budd (2008) offers is an intriguing in-depth analysis of the interrelatedness and interplay between the vital concepts of social responsibility and intellectual freedom. Through extensive reading of academic texts in disciplines such as philosophy, political science, public sphere theory and democracy research new light is shed on basic ideals and tenets in library service provision including, for instance, the continuing controversy of value-neutrality. Concepts are critically examined and philosophically reconfigured to identify new unorthodox features and perspectives. In exploring the place and role of (public) libraries in a democratic society, Budd returns to first principles, embarking on a conceptual analysis of democracy as an entity. In conjunction with this mapping exercise, Budd focuses special attention on the notion of deliberative democracy, which has a Danish precedent as Danish theologian and educator Hal Koch can be said to be the founding father of a political theory termed *samtaledemokrati* ("conversational democracy"). According to Koch, the essence of democracy is dialogue and not just a form of governance. Budd thoroughly explores how deliberative democracy relates to libraries and librarianship and the extent to which it is actually relied on in specific library-related contexts. Fairly detailed coverage is given to the phenomenon of neoliberalism and the way this ideology leaves its stamp on current library policy-making and rhetoric. Budd's approach and his painstaking analysis of the democracy-sustaining and

supporting role of librarianship is very refreshing and stimulating and is matched by very few contributions in our study.

John Buschman (2003, pp. 120-121), cited by Budd (2008), strongly disputes one-sided economic logic, customer-centredness, marketplace thinking and value-for-money regimes in (public) librarianship. Reservations about the dangers involved in these reforms are voiced as follows: "The democratic public sphere roles of libraries as disseminators of rational, reasoned, and organized discourse, as a source of verifying or disputing claims, and as a space for the inclusion of alternative views of society and reality have no place in the vision of the library as the instant-satisfaction, fast-food equivalent of information".

### Manuel Castells and the Space of Flows

This section highlights the concept of the library as a 'public space' and posits how we can refashion and remediate the library in the direction of "space of flows". In respect of this discussion, it seems obvious to draw upon Castells' spatial approach concerned with the space of flows and the space of places. Convincing arguments can be presented in support of transforming the public library to represent the space of flows in which the technological infrastructure as well as the services provided are advanced and where the library does not only exist in a physical realm, but has moved more into a digital realm through global networks. However, this process (i.e. the library conceived as bricks and walls being transformed into a space of flows and thus being hybrid, interactive and open), we would argue, inevitably implies changes in the service modes whose principles are still upheld by the public library. This transformation process necessarily supports the introduction of a business model which may require libraries to be restructured or perhaps deconstructed.

Castells in his extensive work *The Rise of the Network Society* mentions "the space of flows that is becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies" and "space organizes time" unlike traditional environments where time organises space. So what do we mean by flows? Castells explains:

[O]ur society is constructed around flows: flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organizational interaction, flows of images, sounds and symbols...[T]hus I propose the idea that there is a new spatial form of characteristic of social practices that dominate and shape the network society: the space of flows. (2000, p. 442)

As argued above, if a library can be seen as extension of an urban space, indeed in Castells' terms "postmodernism could be considered the architecture of the space of flows" (Castells, 2000, p. 442). The "information-based value production complexes" feed into global nodes from anywhere in the world through "key locations"; thus the world has become more "interconnected" and global cities become a "process" not merely a "place". While these key locations stay connected to a global network, the "territories surrounding these networks" stay disconnected at a local level. Consequently, these key locations or indeed spaces of flows become "irrelevant or even dysfunctional" to their surroundings and hinterlands (pp. 411-417). This raises the question of whether public libraries can help to link up these "switched off" places to the nodes in the network. Being disconnected is arguably a form of punishment in a network society as it may lead to continuous "decline in economic, social and physical deterioration" (p.443). Although it may seem that in today's world "spatial dimension" is not included in the concept of place of innovation or in Castells' concept: "milieux of innovation", we two authors agree with Castells that "place" is still a vital "condition" in order for "such milieux" to exist: "the space of flows is not placeless". So much so that Castells sees the technological infrastructure as a key characteristic of the digital age just as the railway network was for the "economic regions" in the industrial age. In other words, for Castells, the space of place, which is the "historically spatial organization of our common experience", still matters in order to create "synergy" (p. 419). Hence, communication hubs, information centres or libraries can act as a hybrid space, a connection where global and local interact in a meaningful way, as opposed to clashing head-on. Castells shares the same hypothesis:

People do still live in places. But because function and power in our societies is organized in the space of flows, the structural domination of its logic essentially alters the meaning and dynamic of places. Experience, by being related to places, becomes abstracted from power, and meaning is increasingly separated from knowledge. There flows a structural schizophrenia between two spatial logics that threatens to break down communication channels in society. (2000, pp. 458-459)

We think that Castells analyses important issues about today's power structures and their distribution through the nodes in the network society. These factors are not only relevant from a technological point of view but are also salient sociologically, economically and, of course, philosophically. We would argue that libraries can act as a bridge, a hybrid space, in making surroundings more relevant to the global network and vice versa in a world where services and products are designed globally and distributed locally. Such processes cause conflicts as local communities may feel excluded from decision-making, by their being disconnected from the nodes while the cosmopolitan elites dominate them. Hence, the space of flows becomes a space of power, where the "technocratic-

financial-managerial elite” hold a prime position (Castells, 2000, p. 445). However, there are alternatives to this. Libraries or information centers may serve as a starting point for interaction, resistance, and indeed alternative politics and policies.

Finally, libraries can restore reconciliation and revitalise spiritualization both locally and globally. In this context, it seems advisable to use the word "deconstruction" as a philosophical trope to illustrate how to reform and re-think libraries in the digital age: a deconstructed library where online, offline, digital and physical planes symbiotically interact, transforming the traditional library as we know it into a whole new model.

### **The Public Library as a Virtual Meeting Place and a Space for Democratic Empowerment**

In this section, a few case studies are considered to illustrate how public libraries can organize web-facilitated discussions and act as a virtual meeting place. The examples have been selected from the Danish public library community. In the Municipality of Odder (Denmark) it has for several years been natural for citizens and politicians to engage in discussions on a variety of issues using web-based discussion forums. According to Buur Rasmussen (2009), the 2009 municipal elections in Denmark provided an example of electronic communication between citizens and local politicians in that more than 400 comments were posted as part of a lively debate between citizens and those standing as candidates for the Odder Town Council.

This demonstrates how public libraries could take a role in stimulating active democratic communication in matters and issues that are of concern to citizens. In the context of the 2009 Municipal Election, video-based profiles and portrayals of the candidates for municipal election were made available. At the same time a group was set up on Facebook in the hope that this network could offer more effective channels for attracting and engaging younger target audiences. Digital debate is not better than analogue debate, and you cannot say that it is better to argue on the web rather than relying on conventional discussion forums like letters to newspapers or asking questions at public meetings. But e-debates facilitated by outlets such as the Odder Net before and up to the municipal election could be instrumental in enabling citizens to make an informed decision when casting their votes. At the same time it should be noted that many citizens express themselves only on the Web. Obviously, a certain amount of resources are required for setting up an adequate framework for a debate. Therefore, the role of the library/librarian is primarily that of a mediator.

Similarly in the light of the 2009 Municipal Election, the Vejle Libraries conducted a project entitled "Debate that has effect: the library as a democratic greenhouse" (Debat, 2011). The Libraries decided to highlight democratic values and brought up the major themes of art and politics for discussion by arranging a series of workshops leading up to the Municipal Election. Each of the six political youth parties was invited to participate and to select a specific democratic principle, and at the same time six artists created works of art that interpreted the ideals chosen by the young politicians. Within the urban space, six selected places provided the location for public debates based on the democratic values selected and the works of art that came into existence within the conceptual framework represented. In this way the artists' contributions challenged the politicians and a high level of discussion was recorded. The project experiences inspired the Vejle Libraries to respond to the variety of intermediary roles performed and to initiate public discussion sessions enhancing participants' perception of the issues being addressed.

Considerably broader in scope is a draft development project presented by the Aarhus Municipal Libraries and entitled *Demokrateket* (2010). The concept of *demokrateket* seeks to animate societal and community-related citizens' movements and create physical and virtual forums that allow citizens to be involved in shaping the political agenda. Although currently embryonic, *demokrateket* is intended to develop innovative approaches to the library's communication and mediation of community information as a proactive and interactive process, which should include users and political players in the physical library environment along with web pages and social and mobile forums. The final project will be unique in that it envisages a paradigm shift of the library's activities via a democratic (physical and virtual) application from a reactive and communication-centred model towards a proactive, front-edge and staging role. In taking on its new role, the library should establish and facilitate interactive, independent and direct channels of communication between citizens and their political representatives. In doing so, the library should support free opinion building and active citizenship. The library staff's competencies in terms of serving as trendspotters identifying social and political issues and moderating discursive and dialogic processes become central to implementing the *demokrateket*. The project was initiated by the Aarhus Municipal Libraries and a local adult education association. Potential partners for the project include media houses in the Aarhus area, a local high school (Thestrup), political parties and social science departments (e.g. political science) at the Aarhus University. The intention is to create a forum for Aarhus as a whole. Modelled on the concept of reading clubs that have already been tried out for quite a few years are a range of debate clubs which will be set up to operate digitally as well as physically. Opinion formers, experts and politicians will be invited as contributors and presenters. An

essential principle is that the library should act as facilitator whereas content will be provided by others, but the library system could support and supervise debates on various topics, local as well as national, regularly brought up for discussion. An interesting new informational role is envisaged for Aarhus librarians in that library professionals could compose "information packages" covering specific themes tailored to the needs of debate clubs and those actively participating in debates. These theme-specific information packages could be downloaded for use either in the library or in private homes. Social media like Facebook might, in spite of their transient, elusive and somewhat superficial nature, have a curiosity-raising effect and could serve as a vehicle for highlighting and spreading information via demokrateket and ongoing public debates.

Related to the Aarhus project is a previous project undertaken by the public library in Frederikshavn and supported by a grant from the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media (now part of the Danish Agency for Culture). The project, which has now been completed, is entitled "The Library as a Democratic Agora" and one of its objectives is to explore the role of the public library as a "third place (space)" and as one of the cornerstones of Danish democracy. In examining and developing this role, which includes facilitating democratic discourse, a challenging and slightly provocative approach should be adopted. Critical analysis of the findings of the Aarhus and Frederikshavn projects and output from similar democratic discourse projects conducted in library contexts is essential to defining a new role for the public library.

Although social media are typically seen as opportunities and methods for supplementing, enhancing and enriching the existing mix of library-related services and facilities, a few innovative approaches can be found as well. Thus, as a library-driven social media campaign a project was launched to set up a social network targeted towards senior citizens (those over 50) in Denmark (Ageforce, 2011). This age-specific social forum on the web shares some of the features of Facebook, but in some respects it differs from Facebook; for instance, no disturbing commercials and banners are included. The name of the site is Ageforce.dk and the development of the project was grant-funded. Ageforce.dk is based at Roskilde Library and three libraries are involved in the pilot run, but the intention is to increase the number of libraries involved. Hence, a toolbox with materials on user instruction, public relations and promotion as well as the conduct of meetings and joint activities for site users, etc. is available to libraries deciding to embark on this social site project intended for mature users. Those setting up profiles on Ageforce.dk can exchange information, post items on an electronic notice board, conduct internal communication, register for discussion groups covering a wide spectrum of interests and topics, become involved in blogging and participate in discussions with other registered users on various issues and matters raised. Although the site cannot fully qualify as an initiative on the part of libraries for deliberately activating public and community-wide e-discussion on specific topics and issues identified, it provides an example of a library initiative combining user education, web 2.0 and web-based discussion facilities.

## **Concluding Observations**

Today public libraries are faced with major concerns and challenges such as dealing with new technological innovations, tackling increasing levels of communication literacy, coping with a decreasing professional work-force and maintaining public awareness by raising the level of services provided. Other major challenges to be confronted by public libraries and the public library community include cutbacks and reduced library budgets, which force public libraries to review their current business models. Equally pertinent is the fact that the value of public libraries has gradually lost esteem - a perception which is becoming more popular. Attention has also been focused on the fact that user services in libraries can be made more digital and that library space can be used for alternative services (in harmony with the principles of place-based economy).

It appears from the review of relevant public library sources that the library can be viewed as an extension of urban space. We are - in a metaphorical sense - seeing trends towards removing or eliminating the walls between the library as a physical entity and the community in which the library functions. In other words, the library should be an integral part of urban life. In addition, in the age of social networking, the library could serve as a space for communication, leisure and cultural activities as well as learning and act as a meeting place (civic spaces). In enhancing the communication and meeting place functions, libraries can encourage and facilitate public discourse and exchange of views on current social, political and cultural issues (democratic agoras). Numerous ideas about the roles and major tasks of the future public library have been circulated within the library world, the LIS academic community and within the political sphere. At the same time, there seems to be a need for the library to redefine or reinvent itself by opening up to the surrounding world in new ways and by establishing new alliances and partnerships. Some information science professionals and scholars see a role for the public library as a catalyst and mediator of alternative information sources and as a facilitator of public discourse. But it is hard to see the viability of a "platform" for the library emphasizing this sort of "activist" or political orientation. Some authors argue in favour of a contrasting library model of a very customized and demand-oriented nature emphasising fees and revenue generation. This is a library where the connotations of "business models" and other concepts from the neoliberal

vocabulary are uncontroversial. Digitization seems unavoidable as a key feature of the ongoing and upcoming transformation process facing public libraries everywhere. Another significant consideration, according to some researchers and practitioners, is the multicultural dimension of public librarianship. The public library also needs to modernise the way in which it fosters information literacy and supports lifelong learning.

The perennial question arises: can the public library of the future successfully redefine its mission? The analytic review of selected readings and reported projects on the public library of the future, coupled with an outlook on the space of flows and the space of places conceptualizing approach as defined by Castells, has generated intriguing issues. “Places are increasingly becoming unrelated to each other, less and less able to share cultural codes” states Castells. “Unless cultural, political and physical bridges are deliberately built” he argues, “we may be heading toward life in a parallel universe whose times cannot meet because they are wrapped into dimensions of a social hyperspace” (2000, p. 459). These might be relevant reference points to develop the continuing discussion on the changing role of the public library. To elucidate this issue, more exploratory efforts are needed.

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