

A DEEPLY ROOTED TRADITION: ENSURING
ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE IN
FINISH LIBRARIES

by

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In Finland, part of Sweden for more than 600 years and at that time Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, ideas of popular education emerged with the national awakening in the mid nineteenth century. Elementary education for all and the Anglo-American concept of "public libraries free of charge" began to gain ground in social thinking. The founders of the first elementary schools and the first parish libraries were students, teachers, clergymen and philanthropic persons of standing, wanting to bridge the educational and cultural divide of their time.

The first building intended for public library purposes in the Nordic countries was opened in Helsinki in 1882, and although the premises for common people were strictly separated from those of the educated, the bourgeoisie and the persons of standing, the library was still open for all. An open shelving system giving patrons direct access to the collection was not introduced until 1914 and the whole idea of such a radical procedure was accompanied by fear of chaos, anarchy and theft.

No matter what, the connection between libraries and democracy was a central argument of the early Public Library Movement. The independent Republic of Finland was born in 1917, civic freedom had been given to the Finnish people, citizens had their rights, one of them the right to information.

A Library Act was issued in 1928, launching determined and purposeful development of public libraries, based on the principle of equal opportunities for all regardless of domicile or economical circumstances. Seventy years

later, in 1998, the *objectives* part was formulated as follows

"...equal opportunities among citizens for personal cultivation, for literary and cultural pursuits, for continuous development of knowledge, personal skills and civic skills (...)"

with the additional sentence:

Library activities also aim at promoting the development of virtual and interactive network services and their educational and cultural contents.

Local authorities receive about 40 % of expenditure in statutory state aid, and 1,5 million euro is allocated annually to public libraries for developing userfriendly services and contents on the web. The Ministry buys negotiating services from FinElib, the National Electronic Library, in order to furnish public libraries with collections in electronical format.

Virtual libraries and web-portals provide services for all citizens. The physical library, open on regular hours only, is now also the *ubiquitous library*, available from anywhere, at any time.

In 1996 the Ministry launched a development programme and the House of Knowledge-website for promoting networking and for updating training of library staff. Very soon all public libraries were connected to the Internet and had their catalogues available on the web for free use, forming regional networks with common computer systems and web sites, common lending cards and common rules for inter-library lending. Today the site is called libraries.fi, and it includes a high-quality subject guide, a statistical database and the new national portal in combination with the university libraries 'portal; the Search*Find*Locate or the Citizen's Gateway to Knowledge. The whole site is trilingual, as in Finland - a small country with a language nobody else can understand - we often operate in Finnish, Swedish (the Swedish-speaking are some 6 % of the whole population) and English.

Cooperation between public libraries and scientific libraries is based on the fact that in Finland citizens can - and do - use university and public libraries freely.

The period of crisis in municipal economies in the nineties and the concurrent rapid computerisation of public libraries brought new ways of thinking in terms of pooling local, regional and national resources - in fact,

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using the new technology, libraries were able to improve their services despite severe budget cuts. Public libraries in Finland are very diligently used, 80% of the entire population regularly uses library services, and 65 % are frequent users. The average lending is more than 20 loans per capita and year, and the physical library visits are 11 per capita and year - actually, today the virtual visits on libraries' web sites are just as many, 11 per capita and year.

The Finnish Library Policy Programme was published in 2001. According to this Programme the public library is an active and effective institution in the Finnish society, easily accessible and easy for people to visit. It is open to all and strengthens democracy; it passes on cultural heritage and supports multiculturalism. The library builds and promotes the community spirit. It adds value to the collections of documents by selecting and organising different materials. It is a learning environment, supporting learners of all ages, and it promotes comprehensive literacy and media literacy. The library is a desirable partner and contributes to the success and welfare of the region.

The Library Strategy 2010 was based on this Programme and published a couple of years later as a national policy for ensuring access to knowledge and culture. According to this strategy public libraries create the prerequisites for citizenship in the information and knowledge society. When formerly there was much emphasis on learning how to find information we all know that there is only too much of it to-day, and that information literacy is mostly about evaluating and validating, about combining and comparing facts and information.

In the Prime Minister's *Finland in the Networks*-campaign public libraries were brought out as gateways to all kinds of web-services - from eGovernment services to buying flight tickets on the web, as the library network offers free use of the Internet and help from the skilled staff. Some professionals think this is only too much, librarians are turned into generalists, when at the same time, in these Google and MySpace-times, skilled information specialists are needed more than ever. The easy questions users look up for themselves on Google, but librarians spend more and more time helping with demanding and complicated information retrieval. Today's librarian works side by side with the user, the user being the expert on what information is adequate for his or her purpose and in the current situation.

The third national Information Society Strategy, which covers the period 2007-2015, was published about a month ago. This strategy speaks of a re-newing, *humane* and competitive Finland. Among national assets a high level of education and regional and social equality are mentioned. Libraries are mentioned as "*a special national asset*".

Manuel Castells, Berkley professor and author of the Information Age trilogy, is one of the authors of *The Information Society and the Welfare State; the Finnish Model*. In his view, a strong identity, high technology, network innovations, a democratic civil society and welfare services have given the Finnish information society a human face. The co-author of the *Information Society* report, Dr Pekka Himanen, is a well-known author and researcher,

recently salaried to advise the government on matters relating to the information society. When the parliamentary Committee for the Future commissioned Dr Himanen to review the key challenges for the future he mentioned creating a caring, encouraging and creative Finland. It is really not just about having the newest technology.

Library 2.0 is emerging, and there are already librarians busy with producing Wikipedia material, writing blogs and pondering should the library catalogues be included in the MySpace library - search services owned by Google. If the customers spend their time in MySpace and similar places, then the catalogues should be there, too, they say.

In Library Journal no. 15 this year there is a story about the Google stand at the ALA Conference in New Orleans donating small twinkling buttons to their customers. Rumours went that the buttons actually were tiny scanners, meant to convey everything within 10 meters from the librarian attached to this button to the Google research and development team...

Using the Finnish national portal, the S*F*L, the impatient user can switch to Google any time, to speed up the search. On the other hand, using the library search, there is more and deeper information to be obtained.

Words like *slowly* and *deep skills* are pronounced today with high regard, like they were brand new words, by consultants in marketing and branding. Why? Because the markets are full of people who know a little about everything, but nothing really well. A nice word for this would be renaissance thinking. But real specialist are desperately needed among all these smart generalists, people who really know what they are talking about.

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Gaining deep knowledge is a slow process. We speak of slow food - should we start speaking of slow knowledge, too?

Libraries should not try to compete, I think, with the giant's search robots on the market. For one thing, they really don't have the money needed, and, more important, their value is elsewhere. The added value of libraries lies in skilled staff, in personal service and versatile collections as well as in the quality request. Libraries serve *individuals* and their needs in the current life situation, by communicating with the user here and now, locally.

A couple of weeks ago there was a Library Forum in Helsinki, available now on demand on digital TV. Librarians met representants of the business world. A well-known manager from the forest industry said that there is nothing as useful as reading useless books - meaning, I assume, reading fiction.

Reading good fiction is indeed going very deep, learning something about the world, oneself and other people that could not possibly be conveyed in any other way.

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