

# Libraries in Society: Openness from a Historic and Present Perspective

Michael René Kristiansson\* and Laura Skouvig\*\*

\*mk@db.dk, www.db.dk/mk

\*\*ls@db.dk, www.db.dk/ls

Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, Denmark

## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to investigate the phenomenon of openness in relation to library development. The term openness is presented and related to library development from historical and theoretical perspectives. The paper elaborates on the differences over time on to how openness has been understood in a library setting. Historically, openness in form of the open shelves played a crucial role in developing the modern public library. The paper examines this openness-centred library policy as adopted by Danish public libraries in the beginning of the 20th century by applying the theories by Michel Foucault on discourse and power to the introduction of open shelves. Furthermore, the paper discusses current challenges facing the modern public library in coping with openness issues that follow from changes in society and advances in technology. These influences and developments are not least brought about by the boom of the internet and the advent of the post-modern globalised knowledge-based and network-organised society. Finally, the paper outlines how theoretical and strategic library development can benefit from academic considerations on the dialectics between openness and restrictedness and on the transformed meaning and significance of openness in the knowledge society. The paper concludes that openness is still of decisive importance to library development and policy and that it should be included in strategic considerations on library development.

## Introduction

No matter what meaning one associates with the expression *globalisation*, it represents openness in the form of crossing and breaking down borders. This means that cultural, national and institutional borders are under pressure. Many different forces further the globalisation. The liberal ideology is one of the most important – if not the most important. The advocate of liberalism, Adam Smith, pointed out the economic and sociologic advantages of extending markets with many independent actors who could act freely and unhampered. Globalisation is accompanied by technological development and the rise of the knowledge society. The accelerated process from the discovery and diffusion of new knowledge, especially technological knowledge, towards its commercialisation and accessibility in the global market has a decisive influence on the knowledge society. This transfer of knowledge and the force behind it is organisationally supported by the network society (Castells, 2000).

In our view, one of the key questions in the globalized networking knowledge society is how to handle openness institutionally and organisationally. Our paper thus discusses the term openness from a historical, strategic and theoretical perspective and the purpose is to analyse the phenomenon of openness in relation to library development. In an introductory way the paper asks the questions: 1) what has been and what is the general relation between public

library and openness and 2) what is the relation between library development and openness (restrictedness)?

Historically, openness in terms of open shelves played a crucial role in the development of the modern public library. The paper examines library policy as discernible in European public libraries in the early 20th century by drawing upon the theories by Michel Foucault. His theories on discourse and power are used to analyse issues in the introduction of the open shelves. Furthermore, the paper discusses challenges for the modern public library in the light of openness issues by focusing on the changes in society and technological developments. These changes and developments, which have massively affected the library, are mainly a consequence of the emergence of the internet and of modern knowledge production.

The paper elaborates on the differences that have occurred over time in how openness has been understood in relation to libraries. The paper concludes that openness is still a concept of major importance to library development and policy and that openness should be included in strategic thoughts on library development. Thus, the paper presents an attempt to clarify the theoretical understanding of the relation between openness and library development.

The paper reflects a specific theoretical approach and do not present a thorough investigation on the relation between openness and library development. The investigation presented in this paper should be considered as a preliminary work that unfolds openness as an issue. A more comprehensive study should include more empirical analysis and theoretical work. A systematic analysis of the of the relationship between openness and library development that adds to the theoretical and strategic understanding of openness as a problem area could enrich practical library policy and development.

The paper contributes by drawing attention to an important issue in modern library activities – an issue that is highly relevant for strategic considerations on practical library development.

### **Openness and the library in the modern society**

Our main argument for discussing openness is that globalisation has put openness on the agenda. This does however not mean that openness had no relevance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's industrialised, modern society. Some would then argue that if we want to avoid the mistakes that librarians of former times made, we have to turn to history. Our argument for turning to history is that if we want to understand what we are doing right now we have to reconsider history through the glasses of openness.

Our starting point is Denmark at the beginning of the 20th century where Danish public libraries emerged after the public library model that the early Danish library advocates found in England and the USA. The main influences from USA and England was the idea of securing everybody access to reading, information and education through books.

Openness is thus historically seen a question of giving the entire population access to whatever material the libraries would have. In this respect the libraries were part of a larger discourse on liberal education. In the traditional society, enlightenment and liberal education were basically an issue for the private sphere. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this was transformed into a public agenda theme. Liberal education – or education in general – should no longer be considered the responsibility of the individual in his (or her) spare time.

How then to implement this noble ideology? In this section of the paper we draw on Foucault's thoughts on discourse, archaeology and power. Foucault identifies discourses as historical and cultural given rules that define what we do and think. In this respect discourses are very powerful. In Foucault's understanding power is not a question of physical power or simple prohibitions. He sees power as an inherent part of systems and when we study power we therefore should start from beneath the system. Discourses changes dramatically and consequently history is characterised by ruptures and discontinuities. He does not see history as an accumulation, development or refinement of ideas (Foucault, 2001).

For our purpose we consider the overall theme of openness as one of the major discourses when talking about libraries. And following the concepts of Foucault we acknowledge that this discourse might have changed and that the way openness was constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century public libraries was designed according to the specific conditions at that time.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the existing libraries in Denmark were very diverse. The library landscape was characterised by the distance between on the one hand many very small libraries owned by different kinds of associations and on the other hand few very large public but academic libraries in the capitol of Copenhagen. Opening the world of books to the common man was consequently a question of construction a system or an organisation that allowed the users to go to their local libraries and borrow whatever book they wanted. A well ordered library system would then be able to supply the user with the demanded book by request the book in all libraries from the smallest public to the largest academic libraries (Skouvig, 2004).

The construction of a national organisational form was however not the only strategy for opening the libraries to the common man. It was equally important to construct an organisation within the libraries – i.e. creating possibilities for the people to find the library in order to find the books in the library. It is perhaps a banality but it was important that the library was constructed as an institution with opening hours, routines for accessing books, principles for acquiring books and routines for lending books to the users (Skouvig, 2004). As a consequence, the catalogue became very important as the first entry into the world of books. The use of the catalogue was in this phase connected to and explained by the arrangement of the library where the reading room was the central part of the library and where the lending department's books were placed in "closed stacks". This meant that the user did not have direct access to the books but had to consult the catalogue before ordering the books at the librarian's desk. Thus, the librarian was inevitable for the user in order to lend books (Black, 1994). In this contact between the librarian and the user, the librarian had all possibilities of guiding the user towards reading that which the librarian from a professional point of departure would see as desirable even if it contradicted the user's own desires. And it was exactly this possibility for the librarian that was crucial for those arguing against opening the closed stacks for the users and (re)placing the books on open shelves.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, discussions on open access through the open shelf system became part of the general discussion on public libraries in Denmark as it was in the USA and England (Dahlkild, 2006). The introduction of the open shelves can also be seen as a final step in the construction of an open, democratic public library where the population should be transformed and disciplined into productive and efficient contributors to society (Skouvig, 2004). The question of how to discipline the population was a consequence of the needs and demands of the evolving industrialised society in Denmark.

Openness in the library is thus an expression of democratization and discipline – two seemingly contradictory issues. So let us have a look at them separately. The open shelves are an expression of a democratization of knowledge. There should be no intermediary between the reader and the requested book. The user could freely browse the shelves and find the desired literature. The role left for the librarian would merely be that of issuing the books. Ideally the users were empowered and capable by their own intellects to assess what literature they wanted. The library was thus installed as a very democratic institution that gave free access to the literature possessed by the library. In this reading, the library is an institution free from power. Of course the exception from this totally free access was the limitations that the libraries never included all possible literature – and in fact never aimed at doing so.

The open shelves could also be perceived from the standpoint of disciplining the population. This does not rule out the former explanation of open shelves as the expression of a democratisation of knowledge. However, from a Foucauldian perspective the library was installed as an institution with the mission of educating the people in order to serve democracy. The consequence of the open shelves was meticulous procedures that on a very concrete level guaranteed that the users did not remove the books from the shelves unauthorized. Instead procedures were constructed about the issuing of the books so that the library always knew the whereabouts of the books. The major problem of the open shelf system was the possibility of abusing it (Skouvig, 2004). The users were often assumed to lend nothing but fiction and consequently regulations of the library ruled that users had to lend non-fiction together with fiction. This was accompanied by library cards that were divided in a side for fiction and a side for non-fiction. This partition was a very direct means for the librarian in order to control the reader's reading – but also very practical. The librarian could easily overlook if the reader did not lend non-fiction.

The library cards in this way supported the librarian's role as the teacher of the people. Despite the fact that the regulations on fiction and non-fiction disappeared, the librarian still had the role as teacher. The librarian's mission was to bring people to a higher standard through reading. This however also implies a certain notion of openness for the librarian: the librarian had to be open to the user's standpoint in order to develop it. However, this notion was a bit to implicit so in the governmental regulation that followed the 1964 Library Act it was emphasised that the librarian was a neutral transmitter (mediator) of information (Jochumsen & Hvenegaard Rasmussen, 2006). This, of course, reinforced that the librarian had to be open to the users' standpoints. The task of the library as an open institution was then to educate the population to be open towards whatever information they searched and read in order to take part in democracy, working life and the cultural life. In our view, the library is not a place out of reach of power. Power also exists in the library as a disciplining of the population to use the library and behave in the library in a certain way.

So far our analysis (with or without a foucauldian inspiration) of the public library links the public library to the Enlightenment. In this respect openness can be seen as access to the library book and the library collection. The collection thus represents openness and restrictedness at the same time. Openness is in relation to the selection of material (information) that is visible to the user due to the collection and the catalogue. Restrictedness is in relation to the non-selected literature (information) since it is neither visible nor accessible for the users through the collection or the catalogue.

From the Library Act in 1964 onwards, openness to a still greater extent is turned into a question of opening the library to the needs of the users. In this perspective the library turns

out to be a common good of the welfare state (Qvortrup, 2007). Literature and culture are equally seen as common goods of the welfare state for the entire population and perhaps especially for the socially and economically less well-situated groups in society. These goods are entirely or free of charge – or at least to a very large extent free of charge. Acquisition of the requested material is a right for the library user. Openness is thus provision of the requested information whereas restrictedness can be seen as the information that is not visible for the user.

In the discourse of the welfare state, the library as an open institution should reflect the surrounding society and the variety of cultural manifestations and ways of life (Schreiber, 2006). Consequently, openness is a reflection of society.

In a letter to the editor in the Danish newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, (Qvortrup, 2007), the rector of the RSLIS, Lars Qvortrup, describes these two discourses on Enlightenment and the welfare state in connection to a discourse on the knowledge society. In a modern Scandinavian setting these three discourses have had a major impact on how we understand and discuss the library especially from a strategic point of view. Traditionally and historically the library contained these three dimensions in the one and same institution. The question raised by Lars Qvortrup is whether it is time for separating these discourses in different institutions.

From this historic background we see that openness relates to three dimensions: 1. the collection in its materiality. What is included – what is excluded? 2. The economic dimension: the library contains what the user requests – but not what the user does not request (no matter whether the user does not request it or whether the user does not know what the library contains). 3. The technological dimension: At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, libraries took in new possibilities for providing free access to information. These possibilities were open shelves and card catalogues. In this period, the transparency of the building is quite important too (Dahlkild, 2006). With the internet we see quite another focus on openness. The internet means in this respect two things: 1. free access for those with access to the internet bypassing the library and 2. The library has to guarantee an open and transparent access to the enormous mass of information. Restrictedness also exists in relation to information overload in the sense that an individual can feel overwhelmed by information; in this way it becomes difficult to attain an overview of relevant information and therefore some information will forever remain closed for the individual.

### **Openness in the knowledge society**

In recent years, since the 1990s, a particular view of society perceived as the knowledge society has emerged. In this context, the library can be viewed as a knowledge organisation that is naturally embedded in the knowledge society and in the knowledge economy. The library is capable of communicating knowledge to citizens, institutions and companies in society, among other things by supporting the informational and knowledge competences of the population. In Denmark, libraries have jointly developed a large-scale internet-based library catalogue named *Bibliotek.dk*. This online catalogue has made all Danish library collections visible to the users. Library users are now allowed to view all Danish library collections as a totality and as one big repository. If the Internet is included as well and considered a part of the collection that should be made available and promoted by the library, the collection in the first instance appears as an unlimited resource. All information in the world can thus be considered a part of the collection. If possible this collection should be made visible and available and viewed in relation to the costs arising from the acquisition of

library materials. In principle, openness can here be viewed as representing unlimitedness but in reality this state of affairs is constrained by capacity conditions and other restrictions such as e.g. censorship. As a paradox, this situation has the effect that the library appears as restricted. The reason for this is that the library as a community agency cannot allow that all types of information are made available. Again, in this way it becomes clear that the role of the library also involves preventing that citizens are allowed access to what can be considered anti-social or community-detrimental information.

Scott & Davis (2007: 95) observe that an open system is characterised by its capability of maintaining itself as a system based on a stream of resources from its surroundings. These resources are constantly flowing through the system. An open system is thus not protected against the complexity of the surrounding world, but exactly the constant flow of nonuniformity is capable of preserving and reshaping the heterogeneous structures that constitute the characteristics of an open system. However, this is not to say that an open system is without limits. Energy should be spent on maintaining the boundaries of an open system. But it is equally important to invest energy in crossing and moving borders. (Buckley 1967: 50; Pondy & Mitroff 1979: 7 cited in Scott & Davis 2007: 95). Further, it is difficult to establish the boundaries of an open system. Does, for instance, a library also include users or previous users? And what about permanent collaborative partners?

It appears helpful to operate with a view of system borders, which lays down that a system does not comprise persons but is confined to activities (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978: 30 cited in Scott & Davis 2007: 95). In this connection it should be stated that a person's actions can be useful to several systems at the same time. An example is experimental or pilot services where the librarian both creates experience and is useful in relation to the library in which he or she is employed, but also in relation to the person, the organisation or the commercial firm serviced by the librarian. To this should be added that the librarian can make these experiences available to other users, to a larger user community or to potential users and. Finally, experiences can be useful to society as such.

In the case of an open system, a strong relation exists between incidents and circumstances in the surrounding world and the significant features of the system, for instance its structures and communication system. An open complex system cannot remain complex given a stable, simple and predictable outside world and the system will not exhibit a degree of diversity exceeding that shown by its surroundings (Pondy & Mitroff 1979: 7 cited in Scott & Davis 2007: 97). Significant universities are not developed and do not prosper in densely populated areas (Scott & Davis 2007: 97). No doubt the cultural factors and circumstances inherent in the outside world can have a decisive impact on the development of innovation-intensive areas, cf. the rise of computer industry in the 1980s in Silicon Valley (Saxenian 1994).

What is asserted here is that the knowledge society makes openness a basic condition. The argument is that the knowledge economy is organised around and based on fluctuating networks cf. Castells (2000). The knowledge economy is organised around global networks of capital, management and information and for which access to technological know-how is a crucial factor in maintaining their productivity and competitiveness. The principle is that networks arise from concrete challenges and are dissolved when the task has been solved. Castells (2000) dates the development of the networks society or the informational society to the period of 1975-2000. The concept of informational society should be seen as an analytical category different from that of information society. According to Castells, the notion of information society just refers to the fact that knowledge and information play an essential

part in today's society. On the other hand, the expression informational society points to the development of a specific organisational structure – networked structures – that permeates society. Similarly, the label the industrial society not only covers a society where industry exists but also denotes a society where the industrial approach to organising things govern all or most societal activities including everyday matters and doings. In the knowledge society, the dominant factors are increasingly organised in networks and the networks-centred logic has a controlling impact on societal processes, structures, phenomena and appearances.

Networks are open structures that can extend in a boundless way and integrate new nodes as long as these are able to communicate within the network, i.e. as long as they adhere to common communication codes, for instance values and aims. A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic open system, which is open to innovation but it safeguards at the same time that the system's balance is not being endangered. Networks constitute a culture of infinite deconstruction and reconstruction (Castells 2000: 501-02).

The informational society can be perceived as a socio-technological system, which is structured around the creation, processing and transmission of knowledge. The impact of the system is owing to the fact that information becomes an integral part of all human activity with information constituting the raw material of the production processes. The convergence of technologies produces interrelated information systems. The logic is that networks structure unstructured and unequal and irregular units and in this way the networks create the possibilities of bringing about and stimulating innovation. The flexibility of the networks renders it possible to change processes, organisations and institutions rapidly.

Inclusion in or exclusion from networks and the nature of the relations between networks determine the processes and functions that will be the dominating ones in society. The openness issue considers two matters. First, openness becomes a matter of access or no access to the communication systems (the networks): who defines and implements the barriers of access and how is this done and who or what is being included or excluded? These are decisive questions in diagnosing the openness of a system. Second, openness becomes an issue about the capability of the individual to adapt itself to the logic and language of the system. In other words, you have to realise and accept the way the system functions, for instance the increased possibilities of anonymous surveillance and disciplining through the gathering of information on the individual citizen and his/her behaviour; automated execution of power through recording and analysis. Restrictedness in the knowledge society can then be understood as 1) systems in the society you have no access to and 2) systems you will not or cannot understand and the social consequences of which you refuse to accept. In other words, you must acknowledge the way in which the system functions and the system must be recognised as a legal player. This mechanism creates the social elements in the knowledge society. In other words, the openness or restrictedness of the systems – as reflected or expressed by 1) access / no access and 2) recognition / no recognition in double sense, in relation to the systems – constitute the social elements. The above observations have implications for the role of the library in the knowledge society.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

What we have suggested in our paper is that the concept of openness is not totally new within the sphere of the public libraries. Since their emergence in a Danish context, public libraries have looked for strategies to handle the openness issues, but at the same time these endeavours have installed the libraries as instruments for disciplining the population and thus preparing citizens for actively participating in democracy, industry and culture. We have

pointed to the fact that libraries have handled openness from the perspective of the collection, the user and the technology and that the library can be considered a space for strategies of power. However, it is important to stress that openness is a basic condition in the knowledge society and thus openness is even more crucial for the libraries. From a theoretical standpoint, it is evident that openness and restrictedness are two sides of the same coin. For the libraries as a system, it is important to understand this dialectic in order to conduct reflections on the relation and balance between openness and restrictedness in knowledge society.

We have pointed out that on the one hand openness is a question of access or non-access and on the other hand it is a question of the ability of adjusting to the logic and language of a system. The consequences of this double bond for the public libraries remind us that power is still an issue of major importance – and illustrated not least by the ways in which power intrudes in the public libraries in the shape of surveillance measures and gathering of information on the individual.

The question of openness and restrictedness in our view causes a double problem for libraries. As an organization that traditionally has marketed itself as an open institution, the libraries could now stand in a position where they are in danger of becoming a restricted system. They may turn into restricted systems if they do not open towards the new logic of the knowledge and network society. They turn into restricted systems if they do not accept that openness is related to gaining access to networks and if they do not accept its pervasive function in society. And this function or role in society might very well be that of opening the knowledge society to the population in general by mediating or communicating the foundation of the knowledge society, and to interpret and explain the current social developments. This demands, however, that the library acknowledges how the knowledge society functions and requires a new understanding of the relation between openness and restrictedness. The knowledge society has ways of functioning that are different from those of the industrial society. If the public library is firmly rooted in the Enlightenment and the welfare state discourses and sticks to a traditional stance on the relation between openness and restrictedness we can anticipate a major strategic task and challenge for the public libraries in the following years.

## References

- Black, A. (1994). The Open Access Revolution in British Public Libraries: Consumer Democracy or Controlling Discourse. *Librarian's World* 3 (5): pp. 3-8.
- Buckley, W. (1967). *Sociology and modern systems theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall cited in Scott, R. & Davis, G.F. (2007). *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural and Open Systems Perspectives. International Edition*. Pearson Education Limited (Paperback)
- Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Dahlkild, N. (2006). *Åbningen af biblioteksrummet – de formative år i danske folkebibliotekers arkitektur i det 20. århundredes første halvdel*. <http://biblis.db.dk/uhtbin/hyperion.exe/db.nandah06>
- Jochumsen, H. & Hvenegaard, R. C. (2006). *Folkebiblioteket under forandring. Modernitet, felt og diskurs*. Copenhagen: Danmarks Biblioteksforening.
- Pfeffer, J. & Salancik, G. R. (1978). *The External Control of Organizations*. New York: Harper and Row Publications cited in Scott, R. & Davis, G.F. (2007). *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural and Open Systems Perspectives. International Edition*. Pearson Education Limited.



- Pondy, L. R. & Mitroff, I. I. (1979). Beyond open systems models of organization. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*. 1: 3-39, cited in Scott, R. & Davis, G.F. (2007). *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural and Open Systems Perspectives. International Edition*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Qvortrup, L. (2007, 12 August). Hvilken slags bibliotek vil vi ha'?? *Berlingske Tidende*, 25.
- Saxenian, A. (1994). *Regional Advantage. Culture and competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schreiber, T. (2006). Bibliotekarprofessionen siden 1960'erne. In Elbeshausen, H. & Schreiber, T. (red.). *Bibliotekarerne - en profession i et felt af viden, kommunikation og teknologi* (pp. 15-47). Kbh.: Samfundslitteratur.
- Scott, R. & Davis, G. F. (2007). *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural and Open Systems Perspectives. International Edition*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Skouvig, L. (2004), *De danske folkebiblioteker 1880-1920: en kulturhistorisk undersøgelse ud fra dannelses- og mentalitetshistoriske aspekter*. From <http://biblis.db.dk/uhtbin/hyperion.exe/db.lausko04>
- Winther, A. (2007, 5. Oktober). PET kan tjekke hvilke bøger vi låner. *Nyhedsavisen*, 36.