

## Mind the gap! Library services to the disabled in a new framework

by Tone Eli Moseid

Are public libraries facing a new paradigm, concerning library services to people with disabilities? There are at least two different ways of approaching this question. One is whether we may speak of such a thing as a new paradigm within this field, or we are merely facing ordinary changes in an always ongoing evolution of library services. The other way of approaching this question is to ask whether the public libraries actually *are* facing this paradigm, in the sense of trying to meet the changes with new ways of acting, or are in danger of falling behind, due to not acknowledging the changes that may cause a great impact on the society as a whole.

In this article, I will use the first approach, finding support in ongoing processes and projects in Norway, which of course are closely connected to similar development in Europe. The second approach is not actually a question to be answered at this time, but it is a challenge that should be taken seriously. First, we will have to acknowledge the fact that there is a new point of view on the issue of library services to the disabled, whether this is a new paradigm or not. Then, we will have to raise the awareness on how to approach this – new ways of thinking demands new ways of action. In this article, I will use a model – the accessibility triangle – to present how public libraries may develop their services to disabled persons, within what may be a new paradigm. I will use examples from Norwegian projects and library services, as this is what I know best, but I'm sure such examples will be found in many other European countries as well. Finally, I will try to draw some conclusions, including some advice on priority issues that ought to be followed, if the libraries are not to fall behind on this important field.

### What is a paradigm?

The online dictionary Merriam-Webster<sup>1</sup> defines a paradigm<sup>2</sup> broadly as “a philosophical or theoretical framework of any kind”. The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn referred the word to the set of practices that define a scientific discipline during a particular period of time (Kuhn 1962). The term *paradigm shift* is often used for a major change in a certain thought-pattern, often a radical change, replacing the former way of thinking or organizing with a radically different way of thinking or organizing. Well-known examples within scientific disciplines are the development of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, which overturned special creation as the dominant scientific explanation for the diversity of life; the transition from a Ptolemaic cosmology to a Copernican one – and the transition between the worldview of Newtonian physics and the Einsteinian relativistic worldview. The term paradigm shift has found use in other contexts as well, extending the value of the term to a limit where it is in danger of loosing some of its value as scientific term.

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<sup>1</sup> see [www.m-w.com/](http://www.m-w.com/) [read 23.06.06]

<sup>2</sup> see [www.m-w.com/dictionary/paradigm](http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/paradigm) [read 23.06.06]

## **A new paradigm or just a new point of view?**

When we speak of a new paradigm, this implicates that the theoretical framework we have used as a basis for the library services for the disabled, has made so great a change, that we actually have discarded the framework as such to make room for a new framework. In many ways, the theoretical framework used by public libraries concerning services for the disabled, has been much the same as for the rest of the society. The majority of the population has been the basis when the standards for the basic services has been defined, excluding groups and making it necessary to develop special services for the excluded. We recognize this in the long tradition of having special libraries for the blind and visually impaired, in having home library services for those who are unable to visit the library themselves, and developing special departments in the library for defined user groups, such as the mentally disabled or visually impaired, where they may find books and other material specially selected – and often specially developed and produced – for this defined group of patrons.

This framework is based on the tradition of defining disability as a marked characteristic of the individual itself. It has been closely connected to a medical comprehension, where the disability comes as a consequence of illness, defect or other biological diversion. Within this context, we understand blindness as disability as a biological diversion that makes the individual unable to see, and a wheelchair user is understood as a person that is unable to walk because of for instance a spinal injury. The strategy following this definition will very often be a combination of prevention and treatment, and when these efforts are inadequate, organizing special environments. The efforts are either to change the characteristics of the individual, or rendering assistance through special efforts. Within this framework we may find patronizing attitudes towards “the disadvantaged”, seeing them as groups excluded from the majority society, needing special care and support, and becoming users of provided services, rather than active citizens. This is not coherent with the aim of having an inclusive society with full participation from all citizens.

During the last twenty years, this biological-medical understanding of disability has been heavily challenged. First of all, the society has been criticized for allowing the environment surrounding the disabled to go free. There has been insufficient awareness of the fact that the environment has a major importance for to what degree a person will have to be defined as disabled. A person in a wheel chair is not disabled in an environment with elevators and ramps in stead of (or in addition to) staircases. A deaf person is not disabled in an environment where people use sign language, and a person unable to read will be less disabled in an environment using signs with pictograms in stead of (or in addition to) words. An inaccessible environment is what makes a person disabled.

The new framework defines disability as a gap between the society’s demands on the individual, and the individual’s ability to meet these demands. This framework challenges us to both change the demands of the environment, and strengthen the individual’s ability to meet these demands, in order to close the gap. This is a new way of thinking, and it may well be called a radically new way of thinking in the context of public library services. We will have to rethink everything we do and how we plan our services in the future, based on this new framework. In this way, we may acknowledge this as a shift of paradigm, forcing us to find new ways of doing things.

If we do not accept this as a new paradigm, but define the theoretical changes as just an extension of the ongoing development, we may of course go on developing the services rendered to the disabled on this basis, and even probably succeed in giving satisfactory services to major groups of the society. Following this path, though, the public libraries will be out of time with the rest of the society, and also loose the possibility of filling the role of being libraries for all.

### **Universal design**

A new strategy is being drawn up in Norway to break down the barriers which face the disabled. A special report on this subject "From user to citizen" was published in 2002, and has later on been followed by several reports, including a recommendation of establishing a disability discrimination act. In order to achieve the objective of full participation and equality, communities must be fashioned so as to ensure that everybody can participate to the maximum degree on their own terms and in accordance with their own wishes. Accessibility for all is a social right and should in principle be achieved in a non-discriminatory way by an expansion of present availability. Accessibility for all requires universal design.

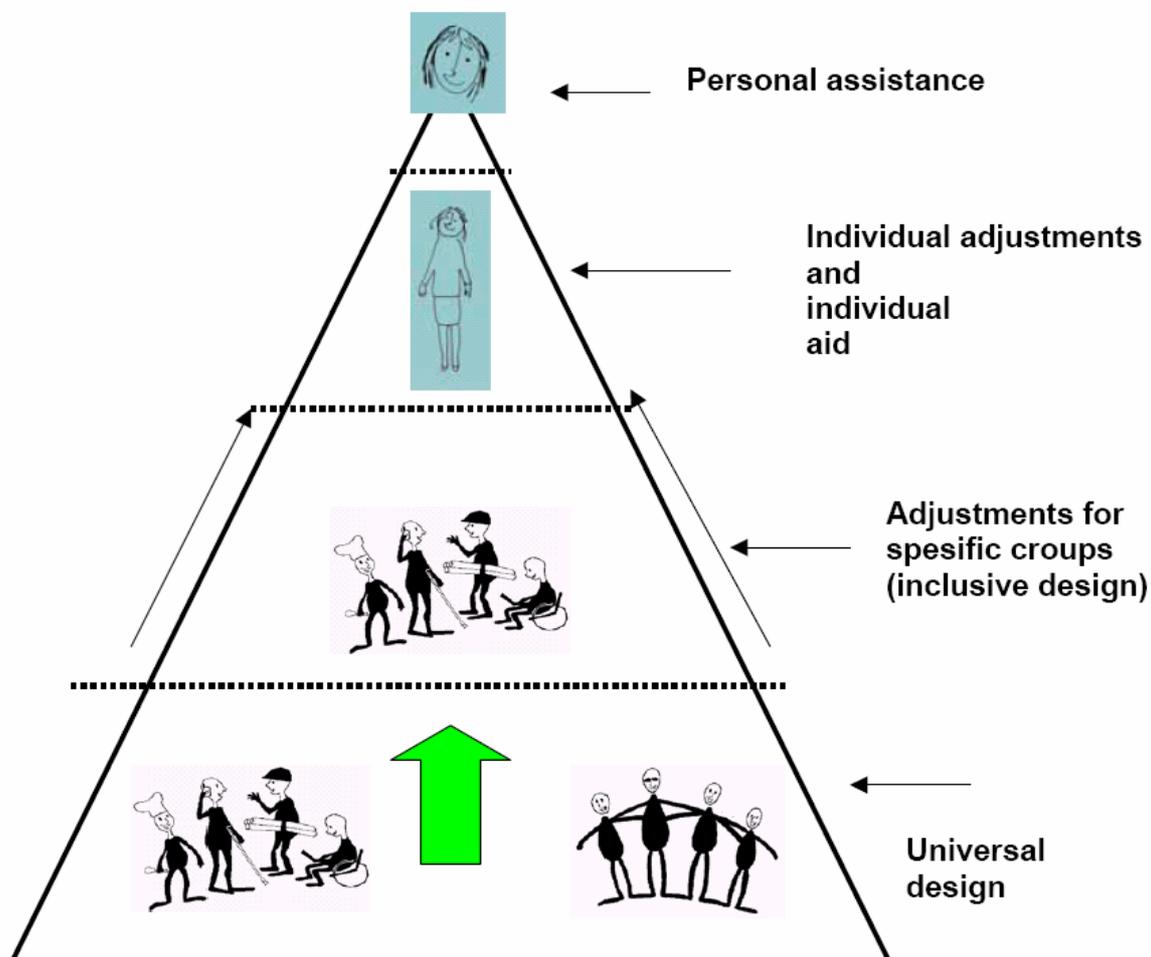
Universal design is the shaping of products and environments in such a way that they can be used by everybody as widely as possible and without the need for further adaptation or individual design. The aim is to simplify life for everybody by making products, the means of communication and the environment more usable for a greater number of people at little or no extra cost. The target group for universal design is everybody, regardless of age, size or ability. The threshold is lowered without creating new groups to whom access is denied. A very simple example is the need for good general lighting in a public library. A necessity for those with impaired vision, it is also a benefit to all visitors in finding their way around. Another simple example is eliminating plants causing allergy in the library area and its surroundings, and this way avoid excluding patrons with asthma or allergies. Automatic door openers are often necessary for wheel chair users to enter the library building, but also very convenient for parents with baby prams or strollers, or people who just have trouble opening heavy doors.

Universal design has become a well-known strategy in public planning the last years, already showing results in accessibility to all within fields like public transport, city planning and design of everyday utensils. Education and training of professionals like architects, designers and city planners has contributed to this development, along with strategic work from governmental bodies like the Norwegian *Delta Centre*, who has produced guidelines and toolkits for planning and developing. The *Delta Centre* is the Norwegian centre of competence for participation and accessibility for disabled people. It has among other things been responsible for drawing up accessibility norms for schools, museums and libraries, and also supplies information on making the Internet available to the disabled.

### **New ways of thinking in the libraries**

New ways of thinking demand new ways of action in the public libraries. What actions may this be? The Norwegian *Delta Centre* has drawn up a model that may be useful in defining the libraries' services to people with disabilities, using universal design as a major strategy in an attempt to narrowing the accessibility gap, but also placing individual services within the model. I will use this model to place both ordinary and special library services within a new framework, and I will use both traditional and new examples from the libraries.

## Accessibility for all



*The Accessibility triangle. The Norwegian Delta Centre*

### Universal design as a major strategy

This model is divided into four sections, where the basic section contains universal design as a major strategy. Shaping of products and environments in such a way that they can be used by everybody as widely as possible and without further adaptation or inclusive design – the more effort one put into this strategy, the more inclusive will the library services be, altogether. The higher up the division line between this section and the section above comes, the more inclusive is the library to all, and the less effort will have to be made on the higher levels in the model.

The project “The Accessible Library” was carried out in Norway from May 2001 to December 2004. It was initiated by the *Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority*, with the *Delta Centre* and the *Labour Market Authorities* as main collaborators on the national level. The aim of the project was to give disabled library users the same access to the

library services as other users. The main objectives of this project have therefore been to remove disabling barriers in the physical surroundings and increase accessibility to electronic services in the libraries. The results of the project are presented on the website<sup>3</sup> of the *Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority*.

One of the products of the project is an accessibility guide<sup>4</sup> to how to develop accessible libraries, based on universal design. The guide is also supplied with a simple introduction guide. With the accessibility guide one may take a step-by-step tour, starting with the access to the library building from the closest public transport stop, parking availabilities and library entrance area. The guide makes it possible to go through the library premises and check out the accessibility of shelves, signs and other information, lighting, toilets and other facilities, door openers, elevators and café areas – all based on acknowledged standards and recommendations. The final result of such a checklist walk-through is a very good basis for developing a local action plan for accessibility.

The public libraries must also consider the demand of 24-hour accessibility based on electronic services, the further development of electronic trade and life-long learning through Internet-based teaching. New technology can give older people and the disabled greater possibilities to participate actively in the community, but can also create new barriers. Where there is a disparity between the expectations of the individual and the functional demands of the environment, Information and Communication Technology can create new obstacles instead of improved accessibility. It is therefore vital that everybody should have access to the new technology.

One way of securing accessibility to the library's website is to follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines provided by The Web Accessibility Initiative<sup>5</sup> (WAI). One of the examples WAI gives, is the importance of giving images used on the web a textual description, making it possible to be read also with artificial speech or by Braille list. This way, the information is available also to blind or visually impaired. WAI also accentuates the use of standards like HTML, XHTML and CSS that supports web pages to be read in a uniform way in different browsers. Simple adjustments may simply result in better accessibility to the digital library.

### **Inclusive design**

The next section of the triangle contains adjustments for specific groups, or inclusive design. To render services to groups of individuals with special needs, the library will have to supply the universally designed library and library services with special equipment and initiatives. Again, the more inclusive these efforts are, the less effort will have to be made on the next level of the triangle.

In the project "The Accessible Library" a computer with the necessary technical devices for various user groups and the DAISY<sup>6</sup> format for digital talking books were some of the measures taken to include groups with special needs. The Norwegian government has now implemented software providing a speech generator on its information website ODIN<sup>7</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> see [www.rbt.no/abmu/prosjekter/Interne/ABM/tilgjengelighet/index.html](http://www.rbt.no/abmu/prosjekter/Interne/ABM/tilgjengelighet/index.html)

<sup>4</sup> see [www.rbt.no/abmu/prosjekter/Interne/ABM/tilgjengelighet/tilgjengelighetsmal\\_bib.html](http://www.rbt.no/abmu/prosjekter/Interne/ABM/tilgjengelighet/tilgjengelighetsmal_bib.html)

<sup>5</sup> see [www.w3.org/WAI/](http://www.w3.org/WAI/)

<sup>6</sup> see [www.daisy.org/](http://www.daisy.org/)

<sup>7</sup> see <http://odin.dep.no/>

making all text accessible to blind and visually impaired, and also to the large group of people with dyslexia or other reading difficulties. Clicking the button “Lytt til teksten” (listen to the text) opens up the software and large amounts of governmental information is available to all by being read aloud. With 25 million visits a year, this website is probably one of the most important governmental information channels, and should of course be available to all. How many visitors do the libraries’ websites have in a year? How accessible are these websites, or more important: Do we know at all whether they follow the WAI guidelines or not?

Other inclusive efforts to be done may be the production of easy readers, tactile books or audio books – already well-known to the public libraries, and still necessary to provide for groups who find the traditional collection of the libraries less available. But when more and more text-based information is digitized and made available by speech generator and Braille list, the more resources may be used for production of specially arranged audio books for those who are in need of such, and in such way strengthening this production. One example of this is production of audio versions of textbooks with complicated content, like mathematics, physics and other fields that demands highly qualified readers to interpret illustrations, diagrams and tables.

Placing aids like audio loops in connection with the library help desk, the lecture room or storyteller’s room will make people with a hearing aid able to participate in lectures and other events, and communicate with the librarians without trouble – good examples of inclusive design.

### **Individual guidance**

The third section contains the need for individual adjustments and individual guidance. Both universal design and inclusive design aims at making accessibility better for the public at large, and for groups with the same needs. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to meet the individual’s needs, because people with disabilities are like most people: different. The physical environment and the operations that are necessary to access the services, require sight, hearing, mobility, efficiency abilities etc on different levels. In a working situation, a person with reduced ability in one or more of these fields, may need assistance in adjusting technical equipment and receive guidance in using software etc. in a way that lowers or eliminates the barriers.

Another important part of the project “The Accessible Library” was to establish a new type of jobs, the position of information officer. Knowledge about technical aids and disability was considered to be an important qualification for these positions; and were therefore given to people with impairments. One of their tasks has been to assist library users unfamiliar with the technical devices, and they have also had the task of making the project and the services known among the public. In a public library it will never be sufficient to place advanced technical equipment, or install inclusive software or equipment, and then leave it to the patron to learn how to use these tools by themselves.

Many libraries offer services to people who have difficulties in partaking in the ordinary library services, or benefit from special organized activities, adjusted to their personal needs. The traditional home service, delivering books to people who are not able to come to the library themselves, is a well-known example.

In Norway, the organization “Leser søker bok”<sup>8</sup> (Reader seeks book) has established what is called “leseombud” (reading-ombud) – an arrangement where people who have problems reading by themselves, receive help from either someone working in the institution where the reader live, a friend or relative, or it may be someone from the public library. The “leseombud” cooperates with the local library, which provides both literature and advice on what to read. The “leseombud”-arrangement is a network which has as its aim to cover all of Norway, providing reading assistance to people who have difficulties reading, either because of disabilities or illness. The assistance covers both reading and talking about what has been read. “Leser søker bok” is an alliance of 20 member organizations, and was established with the aim of providing easy-to-read books for all categories of people with reading problems. The organization receives governmental funding.

### **Personal assistance**

The top peak of the triangle is meant to secure the need of some few individuals who need personal assistance. Persons with large and complex disabilities often need a personal assistant to partake in different activities. People in unfamiliar situations may also need personal assistance, before they are able to cope with the situation themselves. The difference between individual guidance and personal assistance may be defined by personal assistance being where the patron is unable to do something for himself, but need a second part to actually perform the act on his or her behalf. Guidance, on the other hand, has as an aim to make the patron able to perform the act himself in the future, after being given guidance. A “leseombud” reading aloud may be defined as personal assistance, and assisting a multi-disabled patron accompanied by a personal assistance may be defined as individual guidance.

In a public library, the librarians are familiar with the situation where they meet the personal needs of an individual – like answering reference questions, giving guidance in how to find one’s way around the library or locating a book on the shelf. In the framework of the accessibility triangle, the librarians meet a new kind of challenge, where they need to know more about different disabilities, to better understand the needs of the individual. People with difficulties in expressing themselves, for example because of loss of speech after a stroke, people with mental disabilities or lowered movability – the traditional skills of the librarian must be combined with new knowledge on how to provide services to people with such disabilities.

### **Challenges**

The model of the accessibility triangle shows that the library may succeed in supplying better services to all, based on this new framework of thinking. In many ways, we are facing – or rather are forced to face – a new paradigm, based on a new definition of disability, with a focus on closing the gap between the society’s demands on the individual, and the individual’s ability to meet these demands.

Perhaps we do not have to discard what has been done so far in giving services to disabled persons, but we should rethink how we approach the issue as a whole. New ways of thinking

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<sup>8</sup> see [www.lesersoekerbok.no/](http://www.lesersoekerbok.no/)

demands new ways of action. The main challenge in this new scheme is to follow up the concept of universal design as a strategy for giving library services to all. By using acknowledged toolkits and guidelines, both the physical library and the digital library services may be developed to secure accessible services to as many as possible.

The main challenge, though, lies in the need for raised awareness for the new framework, and for building new skills in the libraries. There is a need for a more user-centered approach, securing services that are both usable and user-friendly. There is a need for knowledge on how to meet the needs of both individuals and defined user groups, knowledge on how to make digital services available to all, and knowledge on how to make use of the concept of universal design.

The new framework is already there, and the libraries need to face the challenges of giving library services to disabled patrons within the new framework.

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