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**Approaching a textually grounded typology for discussing public library activities in the digital age**

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**Introduction**

Literature events, makerspaces, lectures, writing workshops, debates and user driven reading circles are just a few examples of the activities taking place within or in relation to Danish public libraries today. These activities are part of user oriented dissemination practices, which are rooted in ideas about cultural democracy. Traditionally, they have been described as culturaleven though their content and functions are many.

In recent years, public library activities have grown both in number and in variety. Most remarkable is the growth of activities, which exceeds the existing categories used to assess public libraries. In the 2010 annual national report on public libraries, there were reported 4971 so-called “other activities”. By 2016, this number was 8541 (Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen 2010; 2016). Thus, the existing categories used to survey and debate public library activities appear to be too narrow, since they fail to grasp the complexity of these activities. Furthermore, the growing variety of public library activities seems to coincide with a growing use of volunteers and a tendency for libraries to work together with other institutions in the local community (Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen 2016). The increased number and complex variety of public library activities reflects a focus on user-involvement, participation and co-creation (Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen, and Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2015; Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2015; 2016) and stress that public libraries are striving to be significant and contemporary parts of the public sphere.

In this paper, we address public library activities as social interactions and real-time events taking place within or in relation to public libraries. These activities go beyond traditional conceptions of public libraries as primarily involved in cultural activities.

**Research questions**

To examine and debate the role and function of public library activities we need an understanding of the different kinds of these activities as well as a typology related to them. Thus, the aim of this paper is to update the vocabulary we use to discuss these activities. By deriving concepts and categories from textual sources related to the area of study, we approach a *textually grounded typology* of the activities taking place within or in relation to Danish public libraries today.

**Methodology**

The primary data of this study consist of 2793 event descriptions found on the Facebook pages of selected public libraries. In Denmark, more than 95 % of public libraries use Facebook as a platform for communicating with their users (Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen 2015) and the announcement of activities is a central feature here. The announcements provide a rich amount of descriptive text as well as metadata related to specific activities. We have chosen 12 library systems with shared Facebook profiles, thus covering a total of 47 public libraries. The selection is not considered representative but aims to provide a diverse sample for a qualitative investigation. The selected library systems vary in geographical location, library budget and municipality size. Focussing on the recent development of public library activities, we look at announcements from 2011 to 2017. Hence, in the selection of libraries a criteria has been that Facebook was used for communicating library activities since at least 2015.

Our research strategy for collecting and categorizing data is inspired by grounded theory as explained by sociologists Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990). As a research strategy, grounded theory emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between data collection, data analysis and theory development (Strauss and Corbin 1990). To develop a textually grounded typology of recent library activities, we gather descriptive textual data from the Facebook pages of selected public libraries using Facebook Pro. The individual pages are preserved using web archiving in the form of screen capturing, which is a method for collecting, fixating and documenting online data for qualitative research (Lomborg 2012). The qualitative data analysis software NVivo is used to structure the analysis. Using *open coding* and *selective coding* we sort and classify key concepts into categories, by which a textually grounded typology is approached.

**Theoretical framework**

The use of existing literature in a grounded theory study can serve multiple purposes; it helps stimulating questions for the further study, directing the theoretical sampling and it can function as validation (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In this study, we are experimenting with the use of textual sources from within as well as surrounding the area of study. The distinction between “technical” and “nontechnical” literature (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 48) allows us to examine a broad variety of existing literature. The primary data consist of textual descriptions found on the Facebook pages of selected public libraries. These texts are related to a broader context through secondary data such as national assessment reports and statistics. Building on our findings from the non-technical literature, we explore key concepts and categories from the data by relating them to relevant theories and ideas found in technical literature.

**Research Results**

In this study, we approach a typology based on a categorisation of public library activities, thus, constructing “in a creative way an explanation of the phenomena investigated” (Faggiolani, 2011). Studying different textual sources proves to be useful for understanding and conceptualising public library activities today. These activities reflect societal tendencies towards more actively participating users, which influence the traditional conception of public libraries as well as their function within the local community. The qualitative analysis of event descriptions helps us address public library activities as something exceeding the existing categories as either cultural, social or educational and to qualify our understanding of public library activities as a research area. Our findings points at societal, political and humanitarian responsibilities as part of the role and function of public libraries today.

**Discussion**

In 2018 the Danish Ministry of Culture wish to initiate an investigation concerning a possible change of the Danish Library Act, making it more in touch with changes and challenges due to the digital age. In this perspective, a focus on both activities and participation can be seen as a strategy to legitimize the physical public library in a time when lending-figures are declining and as a way to make the physical library relevant within the local community.

The political debate on the future development of public libraries shows that not everyone agree in the current development including an increased focus on activities and participation as appropriate for the public library field. The debate can be divided into two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, stakeholders within the library field (e.g. librarians, library-politicians and library-researchers) tend to look at the current development as a natural way to ensure that the physical library is still relevant in a time of digitalization. From this point of view, the many and varied events and the increased involvement of users are often explained as part of an overall development from “collection to connection” (Audunson and Aabø 2013). On the other hand, conservative and liberal voices from outside the library field express a view of public libraries as places solely focused on (book) collections and therefore reject any activities besides the collection-centred (Lerche 2017). From this point of view, a discussion of broader societal goals such as empowerment, community building or the creation of inclusive public spaces are not considered a task for public libraries.

The aim of our study is not to engage in this debate but to qualify it. As a part of the international research project *Archives, Libraries and Museum, Digitalization, and the Public Sphere* (ALMPUB), we advocate for an insight into public library activities as an area of research. This insight is of uttermost importance concerning an overall reflection on how public libraries, as well as museums and archives, evolve and find new ways to engage their communities.

**Conclusion**

Today, an increased amount and variety of activities are a central part of public libraries and these activities seem to be more complex than ever before. In this study, we approach a textually grounded typology for assessing, debating and researching public library activities. Furthermore, this study provides an insight into library activities as an area of research. The textually grounded typology encompass public library activities as social practices supporting diversity, community engagement and public debate. Based on this insight we conclude, that public library activities transcend existing categories as complex societal phenomena. We consider this study useful within an international and inter-sectoral context, both in providing a foundation for comparative research and in cultivating a debate of the future development of libraries, archives and museums as public sphere institutions in the digital age.

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