Type of Contribution: PAPER

Digital dissemination in a library perspective

Keywords: public libraries, digital dissemination, cultural activities, teaching.

# Introduction

In Denmark, the digitalization of the public sector has advanced. Most contact between citizen and authorities take place through digital communication rationalizing the public administration and changes the lives of citizens in late modern society. The introduction of new routines, systems, and media forms has always changed our perceptions of culture, human sociality, etc. (e.g. Ehn & Lövgren, 1982; Lövgren, 2004). Hitherto, the digitalization of public libraries has resulted in the establishment of 1) a public Danish literature portal ‘eReolen’ (https://ereolen.dk/) regarding down loans of digital books and audiobooks, 2) a public Danish film portal, ‘Filmstriben’ (https://fjernleje.filmstriben.dk/) regarding down loans of digital short films, feature films, and documentaries, and 3) a public Danish music portal, ‘Bibzoom’ (https://bibzoom.dk/) regarding down loans of music.

**Research questions**

Based on the epistemological potential of the Cultural Analysis, the purpose of this study is to investigate the consequences of the increasing use of digital documents for library staff members’ perception of their dissemination activities. I presume the introduction of digital documents has led to a radical shift in the way library staff articulate their practice.

**Theoretical framework**

The public libraries’ dissemination differs markedly from other institutions and has been the subject of both historical and comparative studies (e.g. Emerek, 2001; Biblioteksdidaktik, 2013; New frontiers in public library research, 2005). The etymological meaning of the concept ‘dissemination’ refers to a process enabling people to interact using an intermediary. Bennett argues how cultural institutions attained their justification through the development of the political public, occurring during the emergence of democracy. (Bennett, 2013; See also Giddens, 1991). The then populations had lived their lives in pre-modern societies without such freedom rights and first had to be enlightened to become aware of their opportunities and obligations as working professionals, politically engaged citizens, and moral human beings, respectively (Emerek, 2001, p. 102).

The content and form of dissemination

This aim still exist, but dissemination is not a uniquely defined concept (Rasmussen, 2016, pp. 9-10; Gudiksen, 2005, pp. 31-32) and is used as a common term for several practice regarding interpersonal interactions. Consequently, literature operates with several different content definitions of dissemination, e.g. as teaching, as communication and as cultural activity (Den danske ordbog [n.d.]; See also Danskernes digitale bibliotek, 2012, pp. 5-14).

Conversely, Dag Solhjell (2001) has studied dissemination *form* in terms of paratexts and contexts and argues how it requires an intermediary to point to certain works as works of art before e.g. a painting ceases to be random combinations of frame, canvas, and paints. This designation is always linked to different societies’ perceptions of the art institution and their relationships to other activities. Solhjell refers to these interrelations as the dissemination’s context determining which readings of the artworks, citizens are expected to conduct e.g. social critical. Solhjell’s observations may serve as an introduction of the dissemination’s form, also in public libraries in terms of direct, indirect, or digital dissemination.

Simultaneously, dissemination activities have always been implemented as cost-effectively as possible why governing agencies and authorities have always sought to minimize public costs. From this perspective, the digitization of the public libraries’ dissemination activities becomes very interesting as a rationalization measure (Danskernes digitale bibliotek, 2012, pp. 15ff.).

Accordingly, my analytical apparatus focus on identifying the respondents’ articulation of dissemination activities’ content and form. Content is analyzed based on the respondents’ articulation of dissemination activities as teaching, communication, and cultural activity, while the form is analyzed based on the respondent’s articulation of dissemination as direct, indirect, or digital dissemination. Schematically, the analysis model looks like shown in Figure 1.:



**Methodology**

This study is based on a current documentary study of the public libraries’ dissemination activities and 9 interviews conducted with library staff at 9 Danish public libraries. The central documents on which this study is based are: Reach Out (Haagen, 2012), Reach out inspirationskatalog (Center for kultur- og oplevelsesøkonomi, Kulturministeriet, 2008), The public libraries in the knowledge society [2012], Danskernes digitale bibliotek (2012), National bruger og benchmarkundersøgelse på biblioteksområdet (2016), and Kultur (Danmarks statistik, 2019).

The interviews were conducted with inspiration from Nigel King & Christine Horrocks (2012) and Svend Brinkman (2013). During my analysis, the answers were separated from their contexts and coded into 2 categories; content and form. This coding was based on different components mentioned by respondents and on my theoretical framework.

**Research Results**

The respondents generally agree on the principle framework for public library dissemination activities as a specialized communication form aimed at supporting the population’s interpersonal interactions. What digitalization is changing, is library staff’s practice and thus the arguments used to legitimize their practice. As the concept of dissemination is not clearly defined, the conceptual content may be expanded to include various digital activities in which the respondents indulge. The question here is, what paratexts the respondents use to show whether the context of the dissemination should be interpreted as aimed at human growth as professionals, citizens, or human beings, respectively?

When it is about teaching, respondents make a clear distinction between dissemination’s informal nature and teaching’s didactic goal orientation (e.g. EK, 2020, lines 26-27). Teaching is generally understood as direct activities taking place outside the public library. Digitization of society has made information seeking and critical reflection relevant hence relate library education to human growth as professionals and citizens (Emerek, 2001; Bennett, 2010) - and is the reason why e.g. EK, CA, LJ, SJ, and SB initially get involved in teaching activities.

When observing dissemination as communication, respondents’ distinctions become less clear particularly the differences between dissemination and marketing. Several respondents (e.g. AV, BF, and MS) do not distinguish between dissemination and marketing, which places their dissemination activities in a commercial context not aiming at human growth but the rationalization of the public library's administrative procedures.

A third understanding is shown when dissemination is regarding as cultural activities. BF states, how the environment and action determine the context of cultural activities (2020, lines 30-34). The responses show, how implementing digitization influences culture activities’ context, e.g. CA stating how: ‘All major events must have a ‘digital layer’ because the digital opportunities must be exploited!’ (2020, line, 65 - my translation). Furthermore, one of the public library’s aims are to: ‘... raise awareness of societal issues and trends’ (AV, 2020, line 14), referring to enlightenment and community as a framework for human growth as citizens and as human beings (Emerek, 2001; Bennett, 2010).

**Discussion**

One of the emerging challenges is to determine what areas of responsibility library staff have. To some extent, this challenge has always been a basic condition because library staff seldom indulged in the production of content. The dissemination of analog materials took place at document level based on ownership and on responsibility for available material. Therefore, the public library developed routines like inspection schemes, selection policies, etc. to make collections and activities accessible to critical analysis.

Dissemination of digital documents centers on public libraries’ ability to create access to other institutions’ collections through subscriptions and licenses (Danskernes digitale bibliotek, 2012, p. 9; Witten & Bainbridge, 2010, pp. 29ff.). Consequently, disseminators' intentions with different activities become increasingly invisible and disappear behind the designs of interfaces, business models, etc. Several respondents state different challenges related to various attempts to digitalize personal dissemination (e.g. EK, 2020, line 214-216 & AV, 2020, lines 66-70) revealing the existence of two different trends within public libraries digitalization; co-existence and replacement (Beck, 1998, pp. 11ff.).

**Conclusion**

In this study, I investigate the implications of the increasing use of digital documents, for library staff’s perception of the dissemination work. I reveal, how the overall and principled purpose of dissemination activities has been maintained. The continuing work on enlightenment and cultural activity are still decisive for respondents’ involvement in and articulation of their dissemination practice.

I note how there is no consensus on how to interpret the concept ‘dissemination’. Dissemination is a flexible term embracing different definitions without jeopardizing the concept’s applicability. The conceptual flexibility is a prerequisite for the possible inclusion of changing activities under this designation because what changes are library staff’s practice and their articulation of practice. The changed practice assumes different expressions relating to content and form. In terms of content, elements of teaching, communication, and cultural activity are present at the same time, but the respondents distinguish. Thus, there is greater rhetorical clarity between ‘dissemination’ and ‘teaching’ than between ‘dissemination’ and ‘communication’ especially when dissemination is regarded as marketing. In terms of form, respondents categorize their activities in terms of direct, indirect, and digital dissemination but there exist two overarching trends. One trend aims to allow the public and libraries’ analog and digital dissemination activities to co-exist. Here, the purpose is to promote enlightenment and cultural activity through available documents and services regardless of their nature. The second trend aims at replacing analog dissemination work with digital ditto. Here, the purpose is to promote the use of digital documents and services through teaching and marketing, and by creating changes in the population’s and library staff’s mindset. Here too, the respondents do not clearly distinguish.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank employees at public libraries in region South and Mid in Denmark. Without their kindly participation this study could not have been conducted.