Libraries as third place and digital space: interview with Knut Skansen

Knut Skansen is the Deichman Library Director and Director of the Deichman Public Library agency.

The Deichman Public Library is the agency for public libraries of the city of Oslo and operates 22 branch libraries. The Deichman Library is Norway's largest and oldest public library, founded in 1785. In 2020, the building of the new Oslo's library opened in Bjørvika, close to the Opera house. The Deichman's mission, as stated on the library's website [1], is to contribute to a society where everyone feels belonging, can participate and be engaged.

In 2021, the Deichman Bjørvika in Oslo was the winner of "The Public Library of the Year award," presented annually by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in collaboration with the Danish software company Systematic A/S. Among the criteria of the award are functional architecture, creative ICT solutions and digital development in interaction with local culture. On the choice of the Deichman Bjørvika, jury chair Jakob Lærkes said [2]:

> The Public Library of the Year award is all about paying tribute to role models, and the winning library – Deichman Bjørvika – is a shining example. A beautiful and impressive building which serves as a beacon for future library buildings. Deichman Bjørvika more than lives up to the criteria for the award, and the international jury was particularly impressed by how the building combines environmental awareness with architectural flair. The library is a new paradise for books and reading, while incorporating advanced technological solutions. Deichman Bjørvika shows how libraries can function as institutions that bring people together in towns, cities and local communities.

This interview will focus on the Deichman Bjørvika digital services and understand the impact of digitization on the library and the community. The method used is that of a remote interview, sending the questions by email to Knut Skansen.

Q1. In presenting the Deichman Library, you said a strategic goal is "promoting democracy"? How is the Library's mission aligned with digitization policies toward extending democracy?

In Norway, the law on public libraries is anchored in the constitution. The public library is part of the democratic infrastructure and must ensure that everyone has equal and free access to knowledge and culture. The law also ensures that the library's content must be broad and diverse. This applies both to the physical content – such as paper books – and to the digital content – such as e-books. In addition, the Norwegian Library Act states that we must facilitate debate, conversations and a public space for the exchange of opinions. We can do this in the physical space through a program for various themes. But we can also do that by making available tools and knowledge about how to express your opinion in a modern democracy. We have three podcast studios in the new main library. We also have such offers in the local libraries. We produce many podcasts with varied content, but also invite patrons to produce their own content and use their democratic right to say what they think or facilitate a debate. We know that for many young people it

is difficult to say what you think on social media. The debate is often harsh and characterized by fear of saying something wrong. The library can contribute to a safe environment where all people can express their views.

Q2. Entering at the Deichman the big neon installation by the artist Lars Ø Ramberg is representing connections. How does the Deichman integrate the physical and virtual space? How does the Library facilitate virtual communities?

The artist Lars Ramberg has grasped the roots of the public library. When he started work on "Brainstorm" he went back to the philosophers of the 18th century – who are also the ancestors of the public library. The great idea of the Enlightenment was that man is free, that is, if individuals are given equal conditions and opportunities, then man will develop for the good of his own life and that of others and for society. This idea is – as I see it – transferred to Lars Ramberg's artwork – where the enlightenment is not only to illuminate knowledge but also to show that knowledge is like a network of signals and roads – both in our brains and in our society. When I look up at the beautiful work of art, I see a brain, a city and a library. The biggest challenge in our sector is now getting politicians and decision-makers to understand that the analogue library must be supplemented with a digital network and offer. I am convinced that the physical library has a value independent of the digital one, but we must also offer the library's ideas and services in the digital space. Over the past 7 years, we have developed comprehensive tools to communicate what is happening in the physical space in the digital channels. The operation of our websites and use of social media is currently managed by a separate communications department where we work purposefully to build awareness of the library network and our services, while at the same time publishing much of what happens in the physical spaces in these channels.

Q3. To fight and reduce the digital divide, what does Deichman do for digital literacy?

I mentioned the podcast studios. I really like that example, but the most important thing we do is to provide digital tools in the libraries. In the new main library in Bjørvika, we have a separate department with a lot of advanced equipment such as advanced 3D printers, laser cutters, printers for large formats, editing programs for sound, image and video and sewing machines. The latter may not be so digital, but they are connected to all the other machines through the fact that everything is available as part of the sharing economy in the library. Instead of everyone having this at home, you can come to the library to use it when you need it. We have various courses and programs where people can learn to use the machines and not least use them to repair something (the sustainability perspective) or acquire digital knowledge. It is important to be aware that digital competence is unevenly distributed in society. Children and young people from families with more resources will often have easier access to such knowledge. Another perspective that I like is that when people meet to learn about and use the machines, it is also a social meeting taking place between people who otherwise would not have met each other. The department I am talking about here is a kind of "Maker space" and we share many of the ideas from that movement and also collaborate with similar institutions in Oslo.

Q4. Libraries can refer to the opportunities of participation made possible by digital technologies. How do the Deichman use or plan to use platforms and other technologies to facilitate active participation?

I believe that the library is primarily a physical space and that the quality of the physical library space can never be reproduced in a purely virtual library. A few weeks ago, I discussed with a colleague whether the library should also establish itself in the virtual communities that many people use. I do not think we are there yet, but considering how fast development has gone in recent years, I do not ignore the fact that in the future a public library will also have to market itself or make its offer known in virtual communities. In that case, it will be to remind those who are there that there is also a physical space and a digital offer.

Q5. After COVID-19, how has the pandemic affected the Deichman digital transformation practices and the behavior of the communities?

The effect of the pandemic is twofold. The first is positive and the second is negative. Firstly, we developed digital services and offers at record speed. During the first year of the pandemic alone, we streamed 200 events without an audience in the hall. This means that some of our employees today are very good at producing digital content in the form of events, podcasts, events for children and much more. We would never have been able to build this competence so quickly if the pandemic had not forced us to prioritize our resources to make it happen. The negative effect of the pandemic is that we still see that user behavior has changed. The patrons are gradually returning to events and activities in the library that are programmed, but there are still approximately 20% fewer visits than before the pandemic. This is a phenomenon that we see throughout the cultural sector in general and it is seen in most countries. We continue to stream a good number of our events and see that we have gained many followers in digital channels. The challenge, however, is that it is expensive. Both the fees for those who participate and the actual production cost increase when it has to be done both in the physical space and via digital channels.

Q6. What scenario of digital libraries do you foresee in five years? How Deichman could help to mitigate the risks of digital transformation?

It is very difficult to answer this as the changes are happening so quickly. I believe – as I said earlier – that we must focus on the physical space and ensure the understanding that virtual spaces and smart phones cannot replace or take over the public libraries' mission. To believe such a thing is very naive. In a five-year perspective, I think the most important topic is to find good models for lending e-content according to the same model as paper content. Neither publishers, libraries nor authorities have been able to come up with good solutions that ensure that e-content is available in libraries on the same terms as paper content. From a sustainability perspective, we should ensure that this happens as quickly as possible. Transporting paper books requires a lot of energy and will in the long run have to be replaced by more environmentally friendly formats. I do not think the paper book will go astray, but it may be that in a few years the lending of different literature will be spread over different formats. Fiction will probably still be read in paper format for a long time, but I think that nonfiction and other content must be offered to a greater extent in e-formats. This is already the case in university libraries. I believe that the personal meeting between the patron and library staff will also be as important in the years to come as before. The vast majority of people who come to borrow do not necessarily know what they want to borrow. Talking to a librarian can open many doors you did not know about.

Knut Skansen [3]

Knut Skansen
Oslo Public Library, Oslo, Norway, and
Anna Maria Tammaro
Department of Information Engineering, University of Parma, Parma, Italy

Notes

1. https://deichman.no/om-oss

2. IFLA (August 19, 2021) New Public Library Champion Award: www.ifla.org/news/new-public-library-world-champion-named/

3. Photo from: www.mynewsdesk.com/no/kulturbyen-oslo/images/knut-skansen-1966879