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**Bridging the digital divide:  
libraries providing access for all?**

# Libraries for all? Visions, challenges and economic realities in Norwegian libraries

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses visions and realities concerning access for all and bridging the digital divide in recent Norwegian governmental reports on libraries. The main issues in the inquiry are the libraries' role in lifelong learning, increasing information literacy among children, senior citizens and immigrant population, and how to provide these services in times of financial crisis, budget cuts and decreasing resources. The investigation attempts to reveal the realism in the government's plans. The government's budget proposal for 2010 indicates willingness to implement the commitments in the governmental reports, with some important exceptions. The small amounts allocated to competence building and model libraries, together with the rejection to fund the digital reference Ask the librarian service (*Biblioteksvar.no*) are contrary to the expectations in the Norwegian library community.

**Key words:** public libraries, access, governmental reports, library economy,

**Type of paper:** case study

## Introduction

The idea for this paper rose from the long waiting period and steadily increasing expectations to the publication of two important official library documents in Norway.

The research is based on these two governmental reports:

- *Libraries. Information commons, meeting places and cultural arenas in digital times and*
- *National strategy for digital conservation and providing access to Norway's cultural heritage (our translation)*

(Report No 23 (2008-2009) and No 24 (2008-2009) to the Norwegian Parliament) (St. meld. Nr. 23 og 24(2008- 2009))

How do the local libraries interpret them and how realistic are these visions, especially in light of the government's budget proposal for the year 2010, presented October 13, 2009 (Prop 1 S (2009-2010))

The bold plans for Norwegians libraries would demand a considerable financial lift, amounting to millions of Euros extra per year in governmental investments, plus additional funding from local authorities. How realistic are the government's plans in terms of economical commitments?

The study attempts to pinpoint problem areas and make them more visible to the public and the authorities, which may affect the debate throughout the library community. The study may serve as an inspiration on how to provide library access for specific user groups.

## **Methodology**

The methods used in the study are a qualitative analysis of interviews, and an examination of relevant statistical data. The analysis of reports addresses issues concerning special categories of users. Librarians and governmental representatives have been interviewed in an attempt to reveal how realistic the authorities' objectives are and how they can be implemented. Six public libraries have been selected for analysis to cover different population groups and the special challenges faced by the local library.

## **Governmental reports and studies**

These two governmental reports were the last ones published in a long series of studies from the Norwegian government and the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum (ALM) Authority.

They are the follow-ups of two other major reports: *The library reform 2014* (Berg 2006) and *Cultural heritage for all – digitization in the ALM-sector* (Norsk digitalt bibliotek, 2006). The main objective in these plans was to create the *Norwegian nationwide library* through a network of cooperating libraries, across municipal borders and to create easy access to digital content. They aimed at consolidation and led to the closure of many small branch libraries.

The summing up of all the Norwegian library reports in recent years can be formulated in the following points:

- The Norwegian government wants robust libraries which can offer all citizens better services, promote democracy and cultural identity and preserve the cultural heritage for future generations.
- The libraries are important meeting places, both in physical and digital terms and should promote education, lifelong learning and research.
- All user groups are to be included, especially those which are in need of special attention. The libraries should give simple access to both services and digital content.

## **Libraries for all: specific user groups**

In the governmental report *Libraries. Information commons, meeting places and cultural arenas in digital times* a whole chapter is dedicated to specific user groups and titled *Libraries for all* (St. meld. Nr. 23 (2008-2009), pp. 25-26). The aim is that both the physical library and the library services should be available for all and include all segments of the population. Specifically mentioned are the immigrant population and the national minorities, the Sami, the people of Finnish descent, Romani and Jews. The multilingual library in Oslo public library serves as a competence centre and offers literature in a number of languages throughout the country. Other target groups are people with disabilities, patients in hospitals and prison inmates.

But most importantly, the authorities target children and the young with special initiatives, which aim at enhancing reading skills and digital competence. The year 2010 has been proclaimed a National Year of Reading. In this context, the libraries will be important institutions for various services like Books for everyone (*Leser søker bok*), a project to which the Ministry of Culture has granted 715 000 Euros for 2010. The whole project will last until 2014. Adults and senior citizens with poor reading skills and little computer literacy are also on the priority list. Digital and reading competencies are seen as vital for participation in society and working life. In an interview with the Norwegian library journal, *Bok og bibliotek*, the Minister of Culture, Anniken Huitfeldt from the Labour party, stated: "It is important to make more people come to the libraries. We want to strengthen the libraries as arenas for reading, learning and cultural experiences" (our translation) (Letnes, 2009).

## **Politics and culture**

The political parties associated with these ambitious library plans were the red-green coalition consisting of three parties: The Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*), The Socialist Left Party (*Sosialistisk Venstreparti*), and The Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*). They displayed a strong commitment to promote libraries as central institutions for literature and learning.

The red-green coalition won the election in 2005 and again in 2009. If the right wing opposition parties had won, the cultural commitments probably would have been much more uncertain. The opposition parties recommended large tax deductions and cuts in public spending. The biggest opposition party, The Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*), which is often described as a right wing populist party, proposed payment for specific library services (computer games, music and films) and cuts in the budget on cultural diversity and integration.

In 2005 the red-green coalition contested the general election with a programme for a considerable increase in grants to culture, the so called Cultural Lift I. If they won the election in 2009 this cultural programme would continue in 2010 with the Cultural Lift II. The strengthening of libraries was high on their priority list. Their plans and visions for libraries and other cultural institutions would require a considerable amount of funding. Consequently the library community had great expectations to the government's budget proposal for the

year 2010. It was published in mid October and in some cultural areas it contained considerable increases in grants (Prop 1 S (2009-2010)). The increase for the whole budget of The Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs was 9.3 % and amounted to about 95 million Euros. The total budget relied heavily on the Norwegian petroleum income with a spending of 18 billion Euros in oil-money. The heavy reliance on oil revenues is an extraordinary situation and was provoked by the financial crisis in 2009. The Minister of Finance, Sigbjørn Johnsen, has announced a budget reduction of about 4% for 2011, commenting that this spending of oil-money cannot continue (Narum, 2009).

The overall impression was that the red-green coalition had fulfilled their cultural promises, even though there were disagreements on how the increase was distributed throughout the cultural sector.

### **Budget proposal for 2010: libraries, languages and literature**

The total increase for libraries, languages and literature (the common budget chapter) was about 7 million Euros. The National Library of Norway was the budget winner with 2.7 million Euros allocated for digitization and developing a cross-database search for libraries. 1.3 million Euros extra were allocated to the Norwegian Culture Fund, for the strengthening of cultural activities. Grants to the National Reading Year 2010 amounted to 715 000 Euros. Only 200 000 Euros were set aside for skills and competence building in libraries and 358 000 Euros were allocated to model libraries i.e. special types of libraries with new functions and activities. The Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille received an increase of 143 000 Euros, and prison libraries received an increase of 298 000 Euros. There was an increase in funding for Sámi culture of 4.5 million Euros, allocated through the Sámi Parliament and an increase in investments for multicultural diversity amounting to 2.6 million Euros, including extra funding for the Multicultural library under Oslo Public Library (Prop. 1 S (2009-2010))

### **Reactions to the budget proposal from the library community**

The reactions from the library sector were mixed. Representatives from library organizations expressed satisfaction with the total budget increase and especially the funding of the National Library and the strengthening of the state programme for literature and reading. The large amounts allocated to prison libraries and the multicultural library was also welcomed. There was, however, huge disappointment with the small amounts allocated to the improvement of library skills and to model libraries. In the ensuing debate, which took place on the national mailing list and the Norwegian library association's website, the opinion was divided between those who wanted to spread out the grants through the whole library sector and those who wanted to concentrate them on specific projects.

Because local governments are responsible for the financing of public libraries in Norway, the librarians must turn to the local politicians for grants. Consequently libraries must compete

with other worthy causes such as health, schools, the elderly and so forth. Nevertheless, the Government proposed a strengthening of the local economies for the budget year 2010, which may have positive effects on the library budgets.

### **Public libraries and access for all**

In order to see how the contents in the Norwegian governmental reports may affect the libraries on the local level, we have chosen six public libraries for closer inspection. The main focus in our inquiry will be the libraries role in lifelong learning, increasing information literacy among children, senior citizens and immigrant population. The libraries selected are Drammen, Enebakk, Tromsø, Nordre Land, Vestre Toten and Vadsø public libraries. They have been selected because they are situated in different parts of the country and offer different organizational solutions. Most of them are situated in new library buildings (Tromsø, Drammen, Vestre Toten and Vadsø). This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of visitors and a considerable increase in the number of loans.

It must be emphasized that the local economy and budget situation for libraries vary from municipality to municipality. We will treat the libraries on a general level and focus on specific services aimed at giving access for all user groups. A tabular survey of libraries and services is supplied at the end of the chapter.

Because the year 2010 is the National Reading Year in Norway, libraries offer services particularly aimed at stimulating reading and improving reading skills. Below is a list of the most important initiatives:

### **Books for everyone (*Leser søker bok*)**

About 30 per cent of the Norwegian population have reading disorders and problems with finding suitable books. The *Books for everyone* alliance is part of the international Easy-to-read Network, which was established in 2005. The main purpose is to stimulate joy of reading and promote specially adapted books for all who struggle with ordinary books. The main target groups are adults with reading and writing difficulties, people with poor vision and non-native speakers. Representatives (*leseombud*) are recruited from volunteer organizations and trained in reading for those interested. The *Books for everyone* alliance cooperates with different kinds of libraries both public-, county- and prison libraries. In January 2009 there were 150 *Books for everyone* libraries in Norway, among them Enebakk-, Drammen-, Nordre Land- and Tromsø library. The service covers different types of media such as easy to read books and newspapers, audio material and books with large types. A manual for authors and publishers have been worked out with advice on how to make adapted books. The manual is translated into English (Swensen, 2008). The alliance has its own web page *boksøk.no* with an archive of more than 400 titles, in different genres and media, and for different age levels. Each title contains an extensive review, to suit the potential reader.

### **Summer reading (*Sommerles*)**

Summer reading is a campaign to make school children read during their summer holiday. The motto is that reading is fun and that reading improves reading skills. Participants can read

the books themselves, be read for or they can listen to audio books. If they read a certain number of books and fill out the *Summer reading* form, they can take part in lottery or be invited to an ice cream party. Only Enebakk library takes part in this campaign, among our chosen libraries.

### **Literary events in the library**

All our selected libraries have literary events such as literary evenings or literary lunches on their agenda. National or local authors are invited in connection with the launches of new books, writers' anniversaries or important topics for the library users. The libraries cooperate with the authors' association in selecting authors and topics. The recital or lecture is usually followed by commentaries and discussion.

### **Apple libraries**

Tromsø library is a model library for children with reduced functional abilities. The project is funded by the Norwegian ALM Authority (*ABM-utvikling*). The term *Apple library* originates from Härnösand library in Sweden, which was inspired by *The Library for the Handicapped Child in London*. The idea is that all children have the right to books, even though not all books are adapted to children. The purpose is to give children with disabilities better access to the library and an opportunity to meet with other children (Bibliotek og byarkiv. Tromsø kommune, 2009)

### **The book is coming service**

A number of Norwegian libraries take part in the *The book is coming* service, among them Drammen and Vestre Toten libraries. The target groups are people who are not able to come to the library themselves. It may be elderly people with physical disabilities or people with long term illnesses. It is usually organized through book deliveries once a month.

### **Senior Surf**

Enebakk and Tromsø libraries arrange *Senior Surf* on a regular basis. The service is aimed at bridging the digital divide and make computer education accessible for the elderly. The classes usually include how to search the web with Google, how to find interesting web pages for seniors, how to get a free e-mail address and how to send and receive photos etc., which belong to the basic skill in digital competence.

### **Reading groups**

Vadsø library arranges reading groups and takes part in a literary blog, initiated by Finnmark county library called Joy of Reading (*Leselyst*). The titles, in the archive of *Leselyst*, are categorized through literary genres with extensive review of each title. The reading groups have their own web page, with links to a discussion forum, blogs and to other relevant web sites. The reading groups meet once in a month and about an hour is set aside for the presentations.

## Books in minority languages

The multilingual library at Oslo Public Library is a national center offering nationwide service to minority language users with literature in their own tongue. Vadsø library has service for Finnish speaking peoples. The neighboring public library of Kirkenes has a large collection of books in Russian and about 25% of loans are to Russian speaking users. For the year 2010 the government has granted 60 000 Euros for the development of this service.

## Tabular survey of public libraries and services

Public libraries:	Enebakk	Drammen	Nordre Land	Vestre Toten	Tromsø	Vadsø
Books for everyone	x	x	x		x	
Summer reading	x					
Literary lunch/evenings	x	x	x	x	x	x
Apple libraries					x	
Other services:						
Book is coming service		x		x		
Senior Surf	x				x	
Reading groups						x
Books in minority Languages						x

## Conclusion:

The economic realities for the public libraries are determined by the priorities of local politicians. On the local level libraries must compete with other important objectives, like grants for the elderly, health and education.

Generally, the Norwegian government has fulfilled its library promises, implicit in the governmental reports, through the budget proposal for 2010 with an increase in the spending of about 5 to 10%.

The important exception is the rejection to fund the digital service *Biblioteksvar.no* (The Norwegian Ask the librarian service).

In addition there is a contrast between commitments and the small amounts allocated to competence building and model libraries.

In those cases there is a discrepancy between economic realities and visions, which can be summed up in the old saying: money talks louder than words.



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