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Public Libraries in Norway and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Public libraries have played a central role in natural disasters such as the tornado in the Gulf of Mexico in 2004/2005 and the tsunami in the Tohoku region of Japan in 2011, but also in the financial crisis from 2008. While public libraries in these crises took on a very active role in providing shelter and infrastructure for their citizens, health crises seem to tell a different story. Zach for instance concludes his study of the websites of the public libraries in the fifty largest US cities during the situation with the H1N1-virus in 2009 “that providing risk alerts, or even links to emergency preparedness and response resources, is not a priority for the majority of libraries” (Zach, 2011, p. 410).

The major lockdown of public libraries’ buildings for weeks and months during spring and summer of 2020 was a new experience for Norwegian public libraries, as was the case for almost every other European country.

Previous Research

The Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing, and research has just started to appear. Sara Jones points to the fact that many public libraries in the US responded almost immediately to the lockdown by “expanding wi-fi coverage to their parking lots and devising effective, efficient, and touch-less curbside delivery of books and other materials” (Jones, 2020, p. 954). Wang & Lund (2020) show that more than 50 percent of the public libraries in the US informed their patrons about the pandemic and provided general advice about how to behave. Italian public libraries provided digital services but experienced problems with the available infrastructure and the digital competencies of the users (Tammaro, 2020, p. 219). A study from Finland shows that library professionals who could carry on with their work “were able to innovate new forms of online services and the staff was able and keen to develop their skills in producing content on social media” (Haasio & Kannasto, 2020, p. 3), while persons who were temporarily laid off had troubles in keeping up their motivation. A study by Evjen and others conducted a survey of 843 library workers across public, academic, special, and school libraries in Norway. Not surprisingly, their findings showed that the social mission of libraries was put under pressure in a situation “where structures and plans to manage situations of crisis are lacking” (Evjen et.al., 2021, p. 17).

The lockdown of physical library buildings led to an increased focus on digital services and the use of social media platforms to keep in contact with patrons during the crisis in several countries. The Norwegian public libraries were no exception. This paper investigates the situation for the public library in Tromsø in the period from 12 March 2020 and towards a gradual reopening of the library building to the public in April the same year.

An Increased Focus on Digital Resources

The Norwegian population is often considered a digitally skilled one with high access to the Internet and to technical equipment like laptops, smart phones, and reading tablets. Digital services in the form of electronic books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as streaming of music and film have also been available to Norwegian library users for a long time. After the lockdown in March 2020 the Norwegian government and the National Library of Norway implemented extraordinary measures to ensure digital access to the collections for all inhabitants. Digital national library cards and announcements (see illustration 1) in all major Norwegian newspapers were two important initiatives taken to inform about Norwegian inhabitants.



Illustration 1: Digital national library card announcement

The message was simple and clear: The library is open online! It is difficult to know how many new users could be reached, but, not surprisingly, the numbers not only for access to digital materials at the National library but also for participation in digital events organized by the National library increased during the lockdown.

While the National library seemed prepared for the situation and had the necessary infrastructure in place to organize digital events, many of the public libraries had to find ad hoc solutions, much depending on the creativity of their staff. Even if the lending numbers for e-books and for audio e-books increased

during 2020, the use of physical materials is still significantly larger, both in Norway and in other European countries.¹ A closer look on the lending numbers of the Tromsø public library illustrates that tendency (see Illustration 2).

	2018	2019	2020
Children non-fiction	25.382	26.338	20.755
Children fiction	160.197	163.689	130.088
e-books children	1.027	1.230	2.317
Adult non-fiction	58.793	61.024	46.774
Adult fiction	55.175	56.838	45.477
e-books adult	7.205	8.554	13.601
Audiobook adult	18.678	14.961	7.399
Audio e-books adult	345	1.677	4.218

Illustration 2: Lending data provided by the Tromsø public library

As mentioned above, the inhabitants of Norway are often considered digitally skilled with good access to the Internet at home. However, there are differences in income and access to technical equipment and in digital literacy. While the library could help with access to digital material, more basic needs like printing or scanning at the library were not possible during lockdown. Users who needed technical support could no longer meet at the library counter but had to use e-mail or Messenger. Because of the lack of social meeting places during the pandemic one should expect an increased use of social media to keep in touch with each other.

Facebook as a Means to Keep in Touch?

Almost all Norwegian public libraries have been using social media for many years now. The Tromsø public library has been especially active on Facebook, but also on other platforms. During the first period of lockdown the library used Facebook to inform their users first and foremost about digital resources and practical issues concerning services available or not. First findings indicate that the library was more active on social media during lockdown but that the users

¹ See also Holden, 2020, 18 for the situation in Great Britain: “Despite the significant increase in digital lending, its scale is still small compared to lending of physical material.”

were almost absent or at least not responding by likes, sharing or commenting. Posts were foremost about library related issues, only one post was about fake news, and no post did address the ongoing health crisis.

	January	February	March	April	Mai	June	Total
Number of posts	20	20	45	32	27	18	162

Table 1: Number of posts on the library’s Facebook page per month in 2020

	Number of posts	Information	Digital event	Literature	activities
12.03.-26.03.	31	15	10	6	0
27.03.-09.04.	20	6	1	6	7

Table 2: Number of posts on the library’s Facebook page per theme (12.03.- 09.04. 20)

Previous research has shown that public libraries use posts on Facebook to inform their patrons about practical issues like opening hours etc. and to invite to events at the library (Skare, 2020). Persons who follow an institution like Tromsø public library on Facebook are obviously not interested in a conversation with other patrons or with the library and the librarians working there. At least surprising are the findings from the physical lockdown that patrons are even less active on Facebook, despite the lack of face-to-face contacts and communication. Another finding about the content of the posts opens the floor for discussions about what responsibilities a public library should take in times of crisis. Even if we could argue that both the municipalities and the government did a good job in informing the inhabitants of Norway about the Covid-19 pandemic, the question if libraries should inform and instruct about fake news and how to find trustworthy information is still relevant to ask.

Conclusion

The pandemic has undoubtedly contributed to an increased focus on digital offerings and solutions and has in many ways led to a digitalization boost, also for Norwegian public libraries. Although Norwegian library users could already use digital material and digital services before the pandemic, the physical shutdown forced an increased effort in the digital field. While the library had a special focus on children, other vulnerable groups did not receive the same attention. Future studies will have to show whether this has led to new usage

patterns and whether user groups with low digital competence have received the help they needed, or whether the digital divide has only become greater during the last year. In the future, we will also have to discuss advantages and disadvantages of digital solutions and in what situations face-to-face interactions are to prefer.

The public library's mission can be said to be at the crossroads between different tasks. The library shall make available and disseminate information, knowledge, and culture, but also be an arena for lifelong learning, a local meeting place and an arena for public exchange. The physical closure made the local meeting place function particularly difficult. The social mission of public libraries was put under pressure during the pandemic and will be in the future, especially when municipalities must decide what to spend their limited resources on. As the example from Tromsø shows, many libraries were most concerned about making their digital services known and available to users. While the focus of many Norwegian libraries was on 'traditional' library related issues, public libraries in other countries also offered online cooking classes or outdoor physical exercise. In Berlin (Germany) the library moved outside (images below), offering literature and events in open air with sufficient distance between the participants.



It remains to be seen if public libraries will meet next crises better prepared, both with digital and alternative offers.

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