

OSLOMET

The return of enlightenment

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Libraries, Archives and enlightenment

- Historically, the role of libraries, museums and archives have been to promote enlightenment and cultural education (Bildung) and, through that, promote democracy and empowered citizens
- Is that still relevant in an age where the world's knowledge virtually is at your fingertips and where the level of education is higher than ever before in the history of mankind?

Plan for the lecture

- What is enlightenment?
- Does the digital development create challenges related to public enlightenment revitalizing the role of LAM-institutions as agents for public enlightenment and formation?
- Digitalization, enlightenment and the need for low intensive meeting places
- Digitilization, enlightenments and an informed public discourse

Do we need enlightenment in our age of mass education and digital access?

- In 50 years from the 1970s access to higher education has exploded in most Western countries.
- Information is ubiquitous on the net.
- Do we really need enlightenment?
- And is not the very idea of enlightenment intolerably paternalistic?

What is enlightenment?

- Rooted in the age of rationality and enlightenment which took off in Europe in the last half of the 18th century
- From the start two tendencies:
 - One paternalistic top down perspective: knowledge controlled by a small social elite – a central goal is social control.
 - One democratic and liberating perspective.

What characterizes democratic public enlightenment

- Oriented towards equality – equal access to knowledge and culture
- Closely linked to the public sphere, democracy and empowerment
- Anchored in voluntary mass organizations
- But: also anchored in norms and ideas from above: what does it mean to be an enlightened person?
- A collective dimension
- A belief that knowledge and culture refine people

From 1970/1980: The demise of public enlightenment

- Whereas public enlightenment and formation (Bildung) was the primary legitimation of libraries up till the 70s, that changed during the last two decades of the 20th.century and the first decade of the 21st.
- Enlightenment was to a large extent regarded as outdated, belonging to an era gone.
- Focus on information and digital access.
- Information versus knowledge

But over the last 15 years we have experienced the following

- Parallell with continued digitization a surge in demand for physical meeting places:
- Proportion of library users who have attended meetings and events in libraries have exploded
- A gradual revitalization of concepts such as enlightenment and formation.
- The Norwegian Ministry of Cultures national library strategy for the period 2018-2023 is titled Spaces for Democracy and Self-Cultivation.
- The strategy explicitly links the role of libraries to public enlightenment – a concept believed to be dead in the 90s and first decade of the 21st.century

Why have these changes taken place?

- The third social turn (Söderholm and Nolin, 2015).
- The honeymoon-years of digitilization are approaching the end
- More and more people are realizing that the process of digitilization also contains threats and challenges. (What did I say).
- These threats and challenges are closely related to the LAM-institutions and their role as agents for enlightenment and formation .

The fundamental task of libraries and digitization

- The fundamental tasks are still related to:
 - Learning
 - Promote reading
 - Promote empowerment and democracy
 - Low intensive meeting places exposing us to the values and interests other than our own

Our task as LAM-professionals is to promote this: An open and informed dialogue and conversation



To initiate social processes of sharing experiences and knowledge



Research has shown that

- Digitilization tends to reduce the ability to be concentrated and focus over time dramatically
- Reading on screens has negative effects on comprehension compared to reading on paper

Your attention didn't collapse. It was stolen



- More and more research documents that digitalization and social media are destruvive for long time concentration. How shall libraries relate to that?

Some possible consequences for practical library policies

- Even though we have to adapt to new technologies and new needs: Public enlightenment and formation are the core tasks
- Collections of literature and knowledge form the basis for realizing our social mission, although we have to add new services.
- Be critical when it comes to introducing new services which might be counterproductive to realizing our core mission
- Forming citizenship means a focus on discourse more than debates with winners and losers
- The library shall be a market free zone. Should it also be a zone free from attention-disturbing elements stemming from digital market economy?
- In these days of identity politics: important to stress the importance of giving access to all points of view and all perspectives.

Some references

- <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110636628/html?lang=en><https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JD-10-2018-0157/full/html>
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- Thank you for your attention!