

Understandings of the role of a public library in Estonia

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Abstract: The results of the study about the understandings of the role of a public library in Estonia are introduced. It is an empirical study. To carry out the study, qualitative research methods were used. First the documentary analysis of national policies for culture, information and lifelong learning were done by using content analysis. Then various media materials (the articles and interviews of ministers, politicians, library directors, writers and other opinion leaders) were first analysed by using content analysis. Using the categories created during the content analysis, discourse analysis was used to find the discourses there exist in Estonian society about the understandings of public library's role. The results show, that the public library in Estonia is a book and reading oriented institution. Public libraries in Estonia act as active community centers, especially in rural areas of the country. They are not seen much as educational institutions and it is not expected from them to make different kind of media materials (like music, films) available for the public. Discourse analysis reveals the opposition between information and library worlds, a kind of battle between the new and old understandings. To continue, there a dialog and cooperation is needed between different parties. There is a need for national public library policy in Estonia. It should state, what are the roles of a public library and in which direction do public libraries develop in Estonia.

Keywords: public library's role in the society; public library's policy; challenges before libraries today

1. Introduction

The oldest public library in Estonia dates back to 1552 (Möldre and Reimo 2009: 134). It was the library founded by the magistrate of Tallinn and was meant to serve the needs of citizens. During the centuries public libraries have had different kind of roles to serve in: from simple book lending to intellectual development of people. With time societies change, bringing changes and new challenges for libraries as well. Today, in the age of information and knowledge, Estonia is proud because of its achievements in the use of ICT in society; its citizens readiness to participate and benefit from these developments and services offered, both by public and private sector. There various national

policies are in use for fields like culture, information and education. *The Public Libraries Act* is in use, but there is no (public) library's policy, special vision or other statement formulated into what kind of a direction will public libraries develop in Estonia.

The aim of this study is to investigate the understandings of the role of a public library in nowadays Estonia. How is the public library's role seen and understood by those who make decisions or have impact on decision making?

From history and international experience we know, that public libraries can be very useful for governments in building up a democratic society (Helling 2012, *Library Spirit...* 2009, Buschman 2003). Public libraries support local governments by providing services for local communities: be it a book lending, computer or information literacy course, space for various cultural or social events etc. Public libraries support their community in a lifelong learning and are there to help build a knowledge-based society. Among other things the *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* states:

„Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups. [...]The public library shall in principle be free of charge. The public library is the responsibility of local and national authorities. It must be supported by specific legislation and financed by national and local governments. It has to be an essential component of any long-term strategy for culture, information provision, literacy and education.” (IFLA/UNESCO... 1994)

The total number of public libraries in Estonia is 559 (Raamatukogude statistika 2012), including 20 central libraries, 50 city libraries and 449 village libraries. There 47% of citizens in the last twelve months have visited a public library at least once, according to the Eurobarometer report (Cultural access... 2013: 12).

2. The context and methodology

Still a few years ago libraries rarely managed to receive media attention in Estonia. Things changed in November 2011 with the then Minister of Culture's interview to one of the Estonian daily newspaper (Sikk 2011), where he announced that state no longer supports and gives money for mass culture acquisition in public libraries. There is a need to support Estonian language and culture, Estonian writers and publishers. He announced about the plans for embargo period for libraries before they can buy new books and about the list for public libraries of valued literature they should follow, while buying books by state money (lists came in January 2012, but since 2014 no longer in use).

In January 2013 the Minister of Culture gave another interview (Sibrits 2013), where he introduced state's plans to support digitization of Estonian literature and that soon state will not give money for acquiring books on paper for public libraries, but will support ebooks acquiring in the National Library instead. He tells that public libraries should not be the concern for state to support, because there are local governments, who should finance them. He does not like the fact that public libraries have become social institutions and offers, if they want to be social institutions, then maybe some other ministry should deal with them. Both of these interviews caused a lot of feedback and initiated discussions in media.

Years 2012-2013 were the time to update many national policies in Estonia, including *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020* (Kultuuripoliitika põhialused... 2014), *The Development Plan for Information Society in Estonia until 2020* (Eesti infoühiskonna... 2014) and *The Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Estonia 2020* (Eesti elukestva... 2014). Among other things, these documents and media materials reveal the understandings of the role of a public library in nowadays Estonia.

It is an empirical study. Carrying out the study, the qualitative research methods were used. First the documentary analysis of above mentioned three policies was done by using content analysis. Then various media materials (54 in total: the articles and interviews of ministers, politicians, library directors, writers and other opinion leaders in Estonian daily newspapers *Eesti Päevaleht*, *Postimees* and *Õhtuleht*, cultural newspaper *Sirp*, weekly newspaper *Maaleht* and few others from the years 2011-2013) were analysed by using content analysis. For this close reading was done, to find main statements, expectations and understandings. These were gathered, analysed, coded and categorized. For category creation the deductive category development was used and main missions of the public library by *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* (1994) were followed (free and equal access to information; reading; learning and lifelong learning; facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills; community engagement; providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts; supporting the oral tradition and awareness of cultural heritage; fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favoring cultural diversity). The aspects of text interpretation, following the research questions are put into categories, which were carefully founded and revised within the process of analysis (by Mayring 2000).

During the categorization process, the codenames were given to these, whose opinions were gathered from the media: *Minister* (Estonian Minister of Culture), *Politician* (Estonian politicians), *Publisher1* (publishers behind the idea of compulsory lists), *Publisher2* (publishers not taking a side), *Writer1* (popular writers, valued both, by readers and critics), *Writer2* (not popular writers, poets), *Reader* (public library users), *Researcher* (Estonian scholars), *Librarian1* (public library directors) and *Librarian2* (rural librarians).

Using the results of the content analysis, discourse analysis was done to find the discourses there exist in Estonian society about the understandings of public library's role. Discourses build on a number of meaning patterns that are available in social stocks of knowledge, or they may constitute and spread new ones, anchor them in such stocks of knowledge (Keller 2013: 121). They process particular combinations of such patterns which show up all together or partially, or manifest themselves in linguistic utterances. By Keller (2013: 121-122) the concept of *meaning pattern* aims at the statement level of an utterance, at those kinds of core elements that can be labelled as *socially typified* in a given context – i.e., temporarily conventionalized or fixed meaning figures in social collectives. This is a question of investigating the configuration of the relationship between specific components of the utterance in terms of its nature as *statement*: a meaning pattern links various sense making elements into a coherent meaning-figure that may appear in various manifestations.

3. The results

The results show the directions of public library developments in Estonia; how is the library's role seen and understood by those, who make decisions or have impact on decision making.

The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020 (Kultuuripoliitika põhialused... 2014) includes a special section dedicated to libraries. Statements about the roles of a public library in this policy are in accordance with main statements in *The Public Libraries Act*. There stands, that public library service guarantees the free access to information and is equally and without a cost accessible to everybody. The broadband Internet connection is available in every public library in Estonia for 2020. Public libraries play an important role in warranting equal opportunities for individual and self conducted education and participation in culture. As local government institutions public libraries communicate information, help in finding and using various kinds of information resources, but they also function as flexible and multifunctional centers to boost local life and culture and offer opportunities for lifelong learning. It gets mentioned, that books in Estonian are available for everybody regardless their format. State should support public libraries in acquiring books and other media, which is important and valuable in Estonian and for Estonian culture. State should also support and value public libraries development activities in carrying out various cultural and literature programs, propagation and support for lifelong learning, creating and strengthening reading habits in children, community work and services for minorities.

Libraries (including public libraries) in Estonia are not the item worth mentioning in the country's information policy, because there is not a word dedicated to them in *The Development Plan for Information Society in Estonia until 2020* (Eesti infoühiskonna... 2014). There are museums and National Archive mentioned in the context of digitalization of cultural heritage, for example, but not libraries. The need for service structure to offer access for

information and data, both in public and private sector is among the important preconditions mentioned – the structure itself is not specified. One can guess, that libraries are still part of that structure. There in many cases gets emphasized that this development plan needs to be followed hand in hand with other, related and more specific policies worked out for society developments in Estonia, but none of the listed policies sees almost any role for the (public) library.

The word *library* is mentioned twice in *The Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Estonia 2020* (Eesti elukestva... 2014). In both cases it appears in brackets, counted with other cultural institutions. Once it is said, that carrying out the learning outside of school environment (like in a library) enriches the learning process. The second time library is seen as a place, where both individual and team-work may be done by learning and taking part of advanced training courses.

Following main missions of the public library by *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* (1994), the results of Estonian understandings are presented.

3.1. Free and equal access to information, one of the classical core elements of the essence of public library. Current *Public Libraries Act* in Estonia states that *the aim of the public library is to warrant free and unlimited access to information, knowledge and achievements in science and culture to its citizens* (Rahvaraamatukogu seadus 2014). The same is declared in *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020*. *Minister* wants to change the situation, bringing up an idea for embargo period for public libraries and creating compulsory lists for acquisition. *Publisher1* supports *Minister's* idea and it becomes public soon, that *Minister* got the idea from some publishers and writers (mainly poets, who's works are not very popular among readers). *Publisher2* writes that there is no one agreement within publishers in this issue, because the problem is not in the libraries collection acquisition policy, but in the shortage of money for ideal acquisition. Estonian market is small and publishers are dependant on public libraries purchases – no-one knows how that kind of change may affect the book market. *Minister* further announces that there are plans to support digitization of Estonian literature (also living authors) and that soon state will not give money for acquiring books on paper for public libraries, but will support e-books acquiring instead. Readers and librarians are in a shock: how are these statements in accordance with democracy and freedom to choose? Many bring out the issue of social injustice. *Minister* replies, that it is time to leave communism and socialism behind. State will support the acquisition of cultural heritage and *all else is the matter of market economy*. The last statement is too extreme even for publishers, because the market share for ebooks is only 0,3% of the whole in Estonia. *Publisher1* writes, that it is not right to leave libraries without the state financing and stop acquiring books on paper. Most popular writers say, that they will not join with the plan and agree on selling their work to state. *Writer1* states that current laws are not in favor for writers or readers of ebooks, only for intermediaries of them. Unions of Estonian

publishers, writers, librarians and teachers of Estonian language release a joint statement about the *Minister's* words, stating how that kind of understandings can be harmful for Estonian written word and culture as a whole. Unions remind *Minister* of the international agreements Estonia has joined and accepted to follow, *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* being one of them.

3.2. **Reading** is the activity most associated with libraries and connection most made of the library's role in Estonia. It gets mentioned in various statements that with schools, libraries should be creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age. *Researcher* points out, that libraries are the most important places to carry on reading culture in Estonia. Nearly half of readers get their reading material from the library and 83% of these libraries are public libraries. Women read and visit libraries more often than men – women visit libraries three times more often than men. There only 10% of women have not read a book during the last year, while among men that percent is 25. *Minister* does not like the mass culture, yellow literature acquisition in public libraries, but readers are satisfied with the possibilities public libraries offer. Both, readers and librarians do not agree with the accusations of bad acquisition policy and need for compulsory lists. Librarians and *Publisher2* explain that it is natural, that not always most bought and borrowed books are the same, because people buy and borrow different books for different reasons. *Researcher* warns, that the habit to read for pleasure is perishing. Libraries should support and encourage reading, there should be events and activities to introduce good literature and books. *Writer1* mentions good contact with libraries and readers. He appreciates librarians, their dedicated work to promote reading. *Writer2* agrees with the plan for compulsory lists, because readers are dumb and can not choose. He thinks that taxpayer's money should not be spent on cheap pleasure – who's interested in that, should pay by him-/herself. *Researcher* emphasizes, that without habit to read on paper, there no-one will read ebooks either. *Writer1* brings out all the restrictions there are for ebooks and shares librarians concern: how to encourage reading that way? He mentions problems with the copyright law, digital rights management, sale tax difference for ebooks and licencing to public libraries.

3.3. **Learning and lifelong learning** – these activities have acquired a new meaning for public libraries in the era of knowledge and lifelong learning. Classical understanding in this context is that public libraries have had a supportive role for learning processes. Learning in a library has been closely associated with reading. It can be said, that this is the understanding, still prevails in Estonian society. There in *The Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Estonia 2020* no important part or active role are seen for (public) libraries. In *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020* stands, that public libraries play an important role in warranting equal opportunities for individual and self conducted education and offer opportunities for lifelong learning. But *Researcher* brings out, that library's role is changing, it becomes more educational institution than it has been before. *Librarian1* emphasizes public

library's role as an institution for free education. Librarians also mention the movement to put together school and public libraries, where public library's role changes and environment needs to be more education oriented.

3.4. Facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills – the context which gets mentioned in *The Development Plan for Information Society in Estonia until 2020*, but is not associated with public libraries, unfortunately. *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020* states that public libraries communicate information, help in finding and using various kinds of information resources. *Help in finding and using* can contain teaching how to find and evaluate resources as well. Teaching and carrying out various information and computer literacy courses is not much associated with public libraries, but there are a few city libraries who carry out that kind of courses in Estonia. There some private tutoring and help is provided by librarians during customer service in rural libraries. But as a whole, Estonian public libraries lack resources to carry out courses like this, because their computers need to be replaced and librarians need training to be able to teach.

3.5. Community engagement is a very actual context for Estonian public libraries. Due to demographic conditions and the regional politics carried out people leave from rural areas to bigger places and urban areas. Public libraries are often only public places left there in a village, where to get together with other local people or have some contact with the local authorities. *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020* states that as local government institutions public libraries communicate information, help in finding and using various kinds of information resources, but they also function as flexible and multifunctional centers to boost local life and culture and offer opportunities for lifelong learning. Librarians describe libraries as places, where various kind of cultural and social events happen: concerts, meetings with writers, politicians etc. Public libraries function as clubs, *maker spaces*, where people gather to do handicraft together, sing, dance etc. The public library is seen as a space for collaboration, but also seen as a place offering opportunities for personal creative development. *Reader* colorfully describes the rural librarian additional roles as a local salesman, news agent and a priest. *Minister* does not approve the public library's social role, in his opinion the Ministry of Culture should not support this. Both, *Researcher* and *Reader* point out, how *Minister's* activity with compulsory lists first drives away readers from a library and then soon there's a good excuse to shut the place down.

3.6. Providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts – that is the mission badly followed in Estonia. Estonian public libraries are book-centered. Estonian laws favor business interests to public and equal access for performing arts through public libraries. There are restrictions and embargo periods for public libraries to acquire music and films to their collections. And additional restrictions apply for borrowing. There have not

been no real public discussion over the issue. Few public library directors and **The Estonian Music Library Association have tried to change the situation and they have achieved some changes, but not enough. Potential customers seem to be ignorant of the service possible, because there is no public reaction from their side.**

3.7. Supporting the oral tradition and awareness of cultural heritage – the mission which gets mentioned in *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020*, where it is said that Estonian state should support public libraries in acquiring books and other media, which is important and valuable in Estonian and for Estonian culture. That is the context, where *Minister* also sees the role and mission for public library, declaring that the Ministry of Culture supports Estonian language and culture, Estonian writers and publishers. No-one argues with the importance of this mission, if there are resources to make the materials available and accessible in a public library. Writers mention the importance of events, where poets read their poetry to library visitors. Both writers and librarians mention the events organized for children, where stories are read and/or told. Sometimes plays are performed etc.

3.8. Fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favoring cultural diversity is a mission with great potential for Estonia, but not fully applied yet. In *The Basics in Cultural Policy until 2020* minorities are mentioned, but otherwise the context does not come up in the discussions about public library's role. *Librarian1* brings out language courses, a few libraries have carried out. *Publisher1* mentions the importance of translations among the literature made available in Estonian. Public libraries buy books in foreign languages, most of them in Russian and English.

As seen, the roles of Estonian public library are partly different from international recommendations. It can be said, that the public library in Estonia is a book and reading oriented institution. Public libraries in Estonia act as active community centers, especially in rural areas of the country. They are not seen much as educational institutions and it is not expected from them to make different kind of media materials (like music, films) available for the public.

While applying discourse analysis, there various approaches can be detected in seeing the role of a public library. Discourses are in different layers, be it based on one's world view and values, for example, or how knowledgeable one is about the developments in library and information field(s), etc. First, the conflict can be detected between the (electronic) information and (public) library *worlds*. It can be said there different discourses exist in understanding these worlds.

The Public Libraries Act states that *the aim of the public library is to warrant free and unlimited access to information, knowledge and achievements in science and culture to its citizens* (Rahvaraamatukogu seadus 2014). Yet the information policy, *The Development Plan for Information Society in Estonia*

until 2020 (Eesti infoühiskonna... 2014) says nothing about libraries directly. These documents are prepared by different communities and there have not been much communication between these communities. In building up an information society, the approach Estonia has taken is liberal and market oriented economy. There a strong emphasize is put on the role of information and communication technology, electronic environment and services. As *The Development Plan for Information Society in Estonia until 2020* does not mention (public) libraries (the same can be said about the previous versions of the document, as well), it reveals, that libraries are not seen among important institutions in creating Estonian information society. The development plan does not exclude libraries (it just does not mention them), but it gives a hint, that there may be a need for a new or different kind of structure for information services. That same kind of a hint comes from the *Minister* as well, when he talks about the plan to stop financing public libraries by the state money and for a need to inspect the public library's role.

Estonian public libraries being (printed) book oriented, are taken as institutions from a different area, from the past. Almost not making available other media, they are often not seen as a place being part of the contemporary information environment. What looms there in the background to support this discourse, is the Estonian success story as an e-state. The announcement about the digitalization of Estonian cultural heritage and making it available from one place (National Library, for example) is in a very good accordance with this view. There many services are almost replaced with e-services in Estonia, why not to do the same with books and libraries.

By the reactions to the *Minister's* statements, it appears that Estonian society is not ready for that kind of changes yet. It appears, that physical libraries and printed books are still needed and valued by Estonian people. Beside readers, especially writers are very active to announce their support to printed books and need for libraries as physical places. Many librarians mention their surprise to public's supportive reactions, as they never knew libraries are actually that valued in their local communities and in a society.

The next conflict, difference in discourses, reveals in the *Minister's* statements about the public library's social role. Being a liberal and having to deal with an area, where everything cannot be put into market economy terms, is repulsive to *Minister*, his disdain toward the context is remarkable. He is consistent in ignoring the explanations by experts about the missions of contemporary public library and continues with his own agenda. People, who talk about free and equal access and opportunities, get labeled as communists by him. (Due to Estonian Soviet past, that is purposefully used to be especially offensive.)

As a result of liberal regional politics, people are leaving from rural areas in Estonia. It is like a closed circle: people leave, because of lack of work. But their leaving causes the closer of services offered to communities (bank, post

office, pharmacy, shop, school etc) and in many places there only public libraries are left. That way the village libraries need to act not only as a classical library, but as a community center, post office, social aid center, child care etc. Public libraries serve their communities with social services in urban areas as well. *Librarian1* formulates the frustration librarians feel toward *Minister's* that kind of statements: why don't other ministers comment on Minister of Culture's sayings? Seems like it can be concluded, that Minister of Regional Affairs does not know, what kind of a work librarians do in rural areas; Minister of Education does not know, what roles there are for public library to help in education and lifelong learning processes; Minister of Social Affairs does not know, how libraries help those, who look for a job or children from low income families; and Minister of Internal Affairs does not know, how libraries can be helpful in building up an information society. It looks like this can be taken as a whole government's attitude.

A sexist approach, unequal attitude between sexes, can be detected in this study. Building up an information society can be seen as a masculine phenomenon and libraries as a feminine one. To move on, explore new areas, try new things is associated with males. To keep the existing, take care of the weaker ones and things like that, is associated with females. Those active in building Estonian information society and e-state are men with successful careers. And these are women with low salaries, who work in libraries. There is a split in Estonian society, where men earn more than women (Eurostat 2013). That happens often even if working on equal positions. The male and female roles are still very archaic in Estonian society and accepted by citizens consciously. Studies also show, that women read more books and are active library visitors, while men read less and prefer other activities (often technology oriented) (Vihalemm 2014). As a member of successful e-state government the *Minister's* discontent with public libraries is associated with the yellow literature being on top of popular books lists, borrowed from libraries. These are books mostly read by women. The manner, how *Minister* reveals his attitude toward the content of popular loans lists, can be considered sexist. And it is not only the *Minister's* sayings, the same can be said about *Writer2* and *Publisher1* statements, where they don't choose words to express their disgust toward the issue. How librarians can't buy the right literature, because they are women (Estonian word *tädi* is used here) and what do they know. How readers can't choose their reading material, because they are women – probably not married and comments are made about their sexual life.

The reason to attack these popular lists and to force libraries follow compulsory lists is just an excuse to hide a real problem – a shortage of money and the *Minister's* incapability to get more money into his fields of rule. Popular writers and humorists side with librarians by creating stories and jokes, where they ridicule *Minister* and his fear of libraries and librarians – *Minister* becomes quickly a kind of symbol for the enemy of library.

4. Conclusions

By the materials analysed in this study, it can be said that Estonian public libraries roles are seen mainly in cultural contexts and as a cultural institution. Public library's missions and roles are part of Estonian cultural policy, Estonian Minister of Culture expects public libraries act as cultural institutions above all. In accordance with that are readers and writers expectations to public libraries, as well.

There should not be a conflict between information and library *worlds* – there a dialog and cooperation is needed between these two parties. The opposition revealed here by the discourse analysis, can be seen as a classical battle between the new and old understandings. The frustration and ignorance does not help to improve the situation, there experts from different fields need to get together and discuss things in a constructive way.

Public libraries are facing budget cuts, pressure to modify their governance structure around the world. There different public library service models are in use internationally. The understandings investigated in this study show, that Estonian public library system needs updating. To get it done the best way possible, careful planning is needed. To overcome various challenges ahead, there is a need for national public library policy (the development plan, action plans etc) in Estonia. Like Helling (2012: 161) concludes in his international study of public library national policies: “*the countries and policies examined suggest that countries that enact national library policies are more likely to enjoy a robust, well-funded, evenly distributed network of public libraries.*” When executed correctly, a public library policy is a collaborative effort of government representatives and librarians that aims to achieve a common goal: quality library service for all.

Public discussions are needed. Librarians and other experts should introduce the roles and possibilities of a contemporary public library to their users and in a society as a whole. Starting from philosophical goals, like why there are libraries needed in a society. The societal mission of public libraries, public library as a central part of the development of a learning civic society. Public libraries part in the development of information society and offering free and equal access to information and knowledge. And many more.

Last, but not least: further research is needed. To investigate more about the role of a public library in Estonia. Like the impact of ebooks and their lending possibilities for public libraries. Public libraries as community centers, maker spaces in Estonian public libraries, professionalism and expertise of public librarians, and many other.

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