Samhällets allt-i-allo?

Om folkbibliotekens sociala legitimitet

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The aim of this thesis is to increase understanding of how different public library activities enable and challenge the social legitimacy of public libraries in a digital society. It would seem that when different activities are offered, different prerequisites for social legitimacy become stronger or weaker depending on how these activities are understood. Social legitimacy can be understood on two dimensions. On the first dimension, legitimacy is achieved when an organization is perceived as trustworthy. A trustworthy organization is an organization that is predictable and delivers what is expected. On the second dimension, legitimacy is achieved when an organization is perceived as appropriate for fulfilling particular needs or finding solutions to problems in particular contexts.

This is a compilation thesis based on five articles that are the result of three different data collections: two web-based surveys addressed to Swedish public library directors and 19 semi-structured interviews with local politicians. Based on the analysis, the following conclusions are reached:

Firstly, reading and literature related activities are central to public libraries. This may confirm the general expectation of public libraries as promoters of analogue books. When activities are offered as expected, public libraries may be considered trustworthy and their social legitimacy may be strengthened. On the other hand, this confirmed expectation may also limit external groups’ perceptions of the potential of public libraries to meet needs and interests other than those related to reading and literature. This may hinder the innovative public library in extending its legitimacy.

Secondly, perceptions regarding public libraries can be broadened if services and collections are offered outside core activities. However, according to my empirical data, when such services and collections are offered, they may not seem connected to other public library activities. There is therefore a risk that they will be considered occasional. In such a scenario, perceptions are unlikely to change and wider-reaching social legitimacy will not be enabled.

Thirdly, thanks to digital development, new tools may create new possibilities for public libraries to reach out to new groups in society. Public libraries can thus be perceived as supporting a broader spectrum of interests and needs which may further extend the social legitimacy of public libraries. At the same time, according to my empirical data, the possibilities afforded by digital development may be curtailed due to lack of resources and, in consequence, challenge views of the usefulness of public libraries to citizens. Attention must also be paid to the kind of activities provided through these new tools. If these activities are reading and/or literature related, they are unlikely to strengthen a perception of public libraries as capable of meeting new needs. Instead, public library activities will be regarded as static and in line with traditional views of libraries. The only difference will be more focus on digital formats in relation to analogue formats. The trustworthiness of the public library can be strengthened in this respect but it will probably not widen perceptions of what public libraries could be.

**Keywords:** public libraries, public library activities, social legitimacy, trustworthiness, appropriateness, new institutional theory, sustainable organization, Sweden, digital society.