

Library activism - what it ought to become

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My Norwegian friend Anders Ericson, who is a librarian and a journalist, has minted an expression that summarizes a good deal of what I mean with library activism. It says that *The Library Takes Up The Case* (LTC), or *Bibliotekket tar saka* (BTS), in Norwegian.

Anders no doubt had some particular cases in mind. One such case which he thought that the librarians should take up was the transformation of a defunct military airfield in Rygge, near Moss, where Anders lives, into a third airport for the growing civilian air traffic to and from the Norwegian capital, Oslo.

Inevitably, some people in the region gladly supported while others vehemently opposed this plan. So what would the staff of the public libraries of Moss, Rygge and other nearby towns do in this situation? Would they just continue to do their usual job and let the heated discussion and politicized decision-making about the Rygge airport have their own course? Or would they take up the case?

When do librarians take up the case? And why should they? And how can they?

For Anders Ericson and some of the librarians whom he inspired, *documentation* was one of the key concepts. The *websites* of the libraries was another important thing. Taking up the case, therefore, meant documenting it and providing an information service to the public via the World Wide Web. What the librarians would do was, in other words, to co-operate and compete with the news media and, in particular, the local and national press.

The librarians would, for instance, do things that the media left undone. A good example was the original, old, written contract between the military and the Norwegian state. This was retrieved and saved for reference on the website of the library. Because, the librarians strove to produce the most complete, unbiased and lasting documentation of the case.

Why? Well, in order to give a handshake for more democracy.¹

¹ See the English version of the blog of the LTC-project, <<https://sites.google.com/site/edufdaoduf/librarycase>>.

I first met Anders Ericson during the conference “Trading in Knowledge? -The World Trade Organisation and Libraries” at Cambridge in March 2005. The question of how the WTO and its General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) affect the libraries was indeed another case to be taken up by librarians, albeit, in a way, a more traditional case, which fitted well into the concept of “lobbying for libraries” of the conference organisers.²

A year before, I had arranged a workshop on “Democratisation of information” with Indian librarians during the World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai.³ Botswanan university librarian Kay Raseroka, who at the time was IFLA chair, had delivered the workshop's keynote speech, in which she summoned all librarians to attend and document the WSF events, and to put the information from there on display in their libraries. Now this was an attempt at what I would call *global library activism!*

During the WSF in Nairobi 2007, we - “we” being some seventy East African library professionals and a smaller group of European and American social activists - tried as best we could follow up the message from Mumbai. Among other things, we started a Wiki server which is still up and running, and waiting for input from librarians and activists.

Needless to say, action “at the global level” is hard to organise and still more difficult to continue. Which brings me close enough to the heart of the matter: library activism signifies the combination of the most stable institution that our species has created (the library) with something that is, if not always volatile and ephemeral, at least temporary and cyclical in nature (the social activism).

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2 The conference was organised by the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA) in cooperation with the UK Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL). Toby Bainton's report from the workshop is found at https://web.archive.org/web/20060512193009/http://www.eblida.org/eblida/meetings/events/GATSConference_Cambridge_Report_April05.pdf.

3 The WSF in Mumbai, India, January 2004, was the fourth in a series that started in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, and has continued to this day. It is one of world's biggest and most important gatherings of non-governmental organisations and social movements, ever. The most recent WSF event was held in Tunis in February-March 2013. About the library-related workshop at the WSF in Mumbai 2004, see my article “Librarians and the World Social Forum, unite!” in Information for Social Change 19, <<http://www.libr.org/isc/articles/19-Book-1.html>>.

The Sisyphean labour of combining the library with the activism, concerns the local as well as the global levels of human activities. And yet there is still another difficult “level” that needs to be taken into consideration: the political level.

The library is, after all, a highly political institution. By consequence, the librarians are a heavy professional group, politically - as important, I would say, as the judges and law professionals, who have been assigned their own branch of government in the Montesquieuan division between the Legislative, Executive and Judicial Powers. (I leave out the priests from my comparison, because their influence on life is nowadays supposed to be separate from the political sphere.)

The reason why it is necessary to consider the library as a political category, and to think of the librarians as a kind of statesmen (and stateswomen!) has to do with the information. Certainly, there are many other professionals that deal with the information and are of great political importance, such as journalists, teachers, scientists, philosophers and computer hackers. At the end of the day, however, the librarians carry the greatest political responsibility, because of their fundamental role in the organisation and preservation of the information. And politics is, mostly, about information (or disinformation), that is, when/if politics does not degenerate into civil war, international war, or nuclear war.

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My thoughts about library activism have lead me to a highly political conclusion: the famous Montesquieuan triad needs amendment, because the political constitution of society (our basic law) lacks an informational state power, which I would like to call “the library power”, or governance by the librarians. Sometimes, the press (or the media) are called “The Fourth Estate”, and if your read Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) who wrote much on the subject, you will recognize the parallel.

The library is universal, in contrast to the three traditional branches of government, which are only national. Library power, too, has to be universal. The spread of the internet, which is the most recent extension of the age-old institution, the library, spells the end of the Westphalian system of national states (since 1648), or at least its decisive modification. Henceforward, national states and empires will be checked and balanced by the new informational power.

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Some days ago (on 31 August, 2014) an unusual and inspiring event took place here in Helsinki. It was a long and varied musical concert with internationally acclaimed stars such as Barbara

Hendricks and some one hundred more or less famous artists, gathered together for this happening by Finnish violinist-conductor Jan Söderblom. It was a long awaited manifestation of what George F. Bowerman once called “the sympathetic world spirit” in his address to the Annual Conference of the American Library Association 1915.⁴ It was called WE AGREE TO DISAGREE, and it was a peace concert, and thereby the musicians set a good example of activism for the librarians. You may see and listen to the concert via the libr... I mean, the internet. Here: <http://www.weagreeetodisagree.net/>.

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About the author: Mikael Böök, b. 1947 is a Finnish adult educationist and internet entrepreneur. In 1993-94 he took an active part in the setting up of “The Knot at the Cable”, which was the first World Wide Web-server of Helsinki City Library. His library-related publications (in Swedish) include *Nätbyggaren - undersökning av den moderna posten* [The Net Builder - An Investigation of the Modern Post] (1989) and *Biblioteksaktivisten - essäer om makt och bibliotek i informationssamhället* [The Library Activist - Essays on Political Power and the Library in the Information Society] (2013).

4 See Bowerman: “How Far Should the Library Aid the Peace Movement and Similar Propaganda?”, in Litwin, R. (Ed.): *Library Daylight. Tracings of Modern Librarianship, 1874-1922* (Library Juice Press, Duluth 2006) pp. 173-180.