

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Sweden

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In 1998, the Swedish public libraries received the award of Stig Dagerman, who is a Swedish author and one of Sweden's best representatives for freedom of expression. Quote from the statement of the jury: "Their continuous work to make the written word available for everyone regardless of geographic placement, age, race, religion etc.: Their working methods are a guarantee for freedom of expression and free flow of information."

Population:	8,819,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 25,710 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Kingdom
Main languages:	Swedish
Main religions:	Lutheranism
Literacy:	99% (1995)
Online:	50,72% (Sept. 2000)

Public libraries are more involved in the everyday democratic process than a scientific, private or a national library. The main goal for a scientific or a library in a private business is to provide researchers or employed with important documentation, whereas the main goal for a national library is to make the cultural heritage available for the public.

Sweden is an old democracy where openness and freedom of expression are honoured and often admired in many countries in the world. People, who come to Sweden from other parts of the world where free access to knowledge and information is not common, enjoy coming to the libraries and read and borrow material without anybody making any comments and special registrations of material available free of access.

Democracy is given thing and librarians very seldom discuss definitions and aims of democracy. Certainly, there is a potential danger in taking democracy for granted to that extent that it is never even talked about. The public libraries are regarded as a tool for democracy, at least that is what everybody says, but a scientific report from the college Mälardalen shows that neither politicians nor the staff can define the role of public libraries as providers of information from the society to the general public.

The library is a stable institution and its place in modern Swedish society is never questioned. It has many missions, providing novels and leisure reading, encouraging children to read and to support students and adult learners etc. The above quoted report states that neither the staff nor politicians clearly could define the most important mission for the public library.

In autumn 1998 elections it was expected that all public libraries should disseminate programs from all political parties. A survey showed that in one part of the country politicians and staff made an agreement not to have any material from any political party. They made a mutual agreement that the library was not to be considered as a tool for political propaganda. In another part of the country an expose of all the eligible political parties were withdrawn because some parties did not want to be seen in the neighbourhood of what they define as non-democratic parties. In many libraries, and libraries are one of the most frequently visited places in a community, there were no signs or material available two weeks before elections day. These examples shows that we are dealing with the democratic process with a great lack of awareness and that the role of public libraries in being an information source for the general public is evidently not clear. There is a lack of discussion in the role of libraries in Sweden and there is also lack of awareness from politician's point of view of the role and mission of the public libraries.

Another survey among students with an average age of 15 –16 years shows that boys have vague definition of democracy and they can not support their answers with arguments. The questions to the students were also made in a very undefined definition of democracy. The Swedish national authority made the definitions for the survey in which the school children were assigned to fill in a form of questionnaire with quick answers, often in a classroom together with 30 other children. This is, of course, not a measure of awareness of democratic values, but it says something about the attitude and shows that we are dealing with important democratic values without clear definitions and a profound discussion. Libraries can play an active role as providers of information to the general public as well as being an open space for discussion in democratic matters.

The situation could be improved through discussions on the role of libraries in a democratic society with politicians and with librarians and through the implementation of the [code of ethics for librarians](#).

Swedish libraries and censorship

In general the libraries are not victims to censorship, but they can find themselves in a censorship-like situation. Situations of censorship occur in libraries, but are not a subject for internal discussion. Libraries faces from time to time (although not too often) that a customer wants a book removed from the library or wants to donate books and other material to the library. The material may be such that the library, for one reason or the other, may not have it. This type of donation is, usually, accepted, but the library always decides how to deal with the material. A customer may ask a library to borrow certain material from the library that the customer does not think should be available to the public. The reasons can be different. Once a librarian was asked to remove all books written by a certain author because, a family well-known in town was pointed out, not by name, but everybody would recognise them in the story.

There has been some individual reactions within the public library system, for instance in connection with the referendum on Swedish membership of the European Union (EU) in 1994. Now and then librarians, who were against the EU, tried to avoid collecting or supplying "pro-EU" information to users. This was clearly contrary to the assignment from the government, which was that information from all aspects and sides should be provided in the public libraries. Attempts like these among individual librarians occur now and then, but there are no systematic examples of censorship.

It is very common that Swedish libraries have guidelines and policies of buying and storing material. These guidelines are similar from library to library, but they are very seldom a subject of discussion once adopted. In general, the guidelines state, among other things, that the library shall not buy books that humiliates women, children, minorities etc., or are too violent or defined as being of bad quality.

Freedom of expression

The libraries in Sweden have a great deal of freedom in that sense, but there are signs that indicate that the freedom of expression is under threat, often in a sophisticated way.

Due to unemployment there are indications that people no longer can discuss effectiveness and changes at work without being punished. A common punishment is no raise of the salary that is motivated by "a lack of loyalty". This phenomenon occurs both in the public and the private sector. The newspapers may not publish statements and articles from organisations or people or experts that they find uneasy.

Democracy is not defined once and for ever and in a country like Sweden the threats to democracy are often rather sophisticated. Freedom of expression and free flow of information must constantly be under discussion. Politicians must decide the mission of the public libraries so that the libraries in Sweden can fully live up to what qualified them for the Dagerman award 1998.