

Revisiting the notion of the public library as a meeting place: challenges to the mission of promoting democracy in times of political turmoil

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores how public librarians understand and perform the democratic mission of public libraries in times of political and social turbulence and critically discusses the idea of public libraries as meeting places.

Design/methodology/approach – Five group interviews conducted with public librarians in southern Sweden are analyzed using a typology of four perspectives on democracy.

Findings – Two perspectives on democracy are commonly represented: social-liberal democracy, focusing on libraries as promoters of equality and deliberative democracy, focusing on the library as a place for rational deliberation. Two professional dilemmas in particular present challenges to librarians: how to handle undemocratic voices and how to be a library for all.

Originality/value – The analysis points to a need for rethinking the idea of the meeting place and offers a rare example of an empirically based argument for the benefits of plural agonistics for analyzing and strengthening the democratic role of public libraries.

Keywords Democracy, Plural agonistics, Public libraries

Paper type Article

Introduction

In his seminal work from 2005, Ragnar Audunson introduces the idea of public libraries as “low-intensive meeting places” in multicultural and digitized societies. Building on previous work by [Leckie and Hopkins \(2002\)](#) and [McCabe \(2001\)](#), Audunson convincingly argues for the potential of public libraries as democratic instruments given the institution’s low barriers and accessible spaces. Since then, the notion of the public library as a meeting place has turned into a catch-phrase that has found its way into the heart of the library profession, profoundly shaping its understanding of the democratic potential and role of public libraries in contemporary society. Different popular iterations have been promoted, such as the framing of public libraries as public living rooms or third places (cf. [Oldenburg, 1999](#)), that can support the democratic needs for public spaces open for all (cf. [Putnam, 2000](#)).

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In Library and information studies (LIS), the notion of the public library as a meeting-place has also been widely embraced, often theoretically motivated by the deliberative norm and Habermasian democratic model, stating the need for public arenas where people can meet and deliberate (e.g. *Aabø et al., 2010; Audunson et al., 2019; Buschman, 2003*). Different interpretations of public libraries as builders of social capital (e.g. *Vårheim, 2014*) share the Habermasian emphasis on accessible public spaces as necessary for democracy.

A different view on democracy with implications for the role of public libraries is provided by *Mouffe (1999)*, who instead of rational consensus and deliberation place conflict and passion at the center of political debate. Building on Mouffe, we argue in this paper that current political turmoil calls for the idea of the meeting-place to be revisited and possibly rethought (see also *Hansson, 2010; Rivano Eckerdal, 2017, 2018; Engström, 2022; Carlsson et al., 2022*).

The idea of public libraries as meeting-places, promoting tolerance and community building, stems from a period in which many Western European countries were entering into a phase where a “multitude of cultural expressions and values” were “tolerated and appraised” (*Audunsson, 2005, p. 429*). Almost twenty years later, the strive for a more tolerant society is challenged as the cornerstones of multi-culturalism and liberal democratic governance are questioned and contested (*Mounk, 2018*). In Sweden, the country in focus in this article, a right-wing-turn in political discourse and practice, related to similar developments in Europe and North America, has challenged the previous cross-partisan consensus surrounding plurality and cultural diversity that characterized Swedish cultural policy up until the 2010s (*Lindsköld, 2015*). The cultural policies of Scandinavian radical right parties, in Sweden represented by The Sweden Democrats (“*Sverigedemokraterna*”), build on sentiments of ethnic nationalism and anti-establishment populism opposition (*Rydgren and Van der Meiden, 2019*). Multiculturalism is thus constructed as a threat to the nation and something to counteract. This is reflected in a harsher political climate and in more polarized conflicts concerning immigration and diversity, expressed in formal politics and in society at large.

Due to this development, public libraries in Sweden have become politicized in a new, more explicit way. Questions about who the library is for and what sort of values libraries should promote has become a matter of both public concern and professional debate. This, together with the harsher political climate and the increased polarization, invokes the question of how the idea of the democratic role of public libraries as meeting places play out in a time of political turbulence and polarization. Drawing on data from group interviews with Swedish public librarians the aim of this article is to explore how public librarians understand and perform the democratic mission of public libraries in times of political and social turbulence. With a particular focus on the idea of public libraries as meeting places our purpose is to further a discussion on the potentials and limits of this specific understanding of the democratic role of public libraries – and the theoretical premises it is built upon – in times of political antagonism and societal polarization. Based on this, we raise the following research questions:

- RQ1.* What different understandings of the democratic mission of public libraries are expressed by public librarians and how are these understandings related to different theoretical views on the democratic role of public libraries?
- RQ2.* Which professional dilemmas are voiced in the librarians’ narratives of how the democratic mission is enacted in everyday work practices?
- RQ3.* What consequences may these dilemmas imply for the understanding of the democratic role of public libraries? How can the notion of the library as meeting place be adjusted to current demands?

We will now present previous research to further situate how public libraries are investigated as promoters of democracy. Thereafter we introduce the theoretical frame of a typology of

four perspectives on democracy and the method of interviews. We then analyze how the interviewed librarians understand and enact the democratic mission of public libraries. In the discussion we summarize the interviewees' views on the democratic mission of libraries which illuminates a need for a new direction adjusted to today's polarized landscape.

Previous research

Similar to [Audunsson \(2005\)](#), a rich body of research exists that relates the public library to Habermasian understandings of liberal democracy with notions of the public sphere as a main theoretical foundation. In this research tradition, the public library is considered to support the existence of a robust public sphere and the public library is strongly influenced by the idea that good and equal access to information is pivotal for the informed deliberation that is essential to liberal democracy (e.g. [Aabo et al., 2010](#); [Audunson et al., 2019](#); [Buschman, 2003](#); [Widdersheim and Koizumi, 2016](#)). Following the theorizing of Bourdieu (e.g. [Bourdieu, 1984](#)) and [Putnam \(2000\)](#), the democratic role of public libraries can also be connected to the creation and dissemination of cultural, social and economic capital, in effect contributing to societal democratization ([Ignatow et al., 2012](#)). Pointing to the importance of the physical room, research suggests that public libraries generate social capital by providing venues for social networking (e.g. [Vårheim, 2014](#)). This perception builds upon [Oldenburg's \(1999\)](#) conceptualization of third places, that are neither home nor work, but locations where people spend time and build relationships (see also [Putnam, 2000](#)).

[Jaeger et al. \(2017\)](#) draw on [Wolin's \(1996\)](#) idea that democracy is constructed through experiences of justice and injustice that sparks thinking, reflecting and agency among citizens. The democratic role of public libraries is then to meet the needs and fulfil the missions given by the local communities they serve, in effect being agents empowering citizens ([Kranich, 2020](#)). A slightly different perspective is offered from a study investigating the place of libraries in the French political sphere ([Merklen, 2016](#)). In this study, public libraries are considered democratic institutions characterized by offering cosmopolitan and pluralistic places and services for all users without advocating certain positions. At the same time, public libraries are conceptualized as public, political institutions promoting social equality. In a Nordic context, where socialist and liberal values are combined in liberal democratic welfare-states, [Koizumi and Larsen \(2023, p. 7\)](#) frame democracy as an essential part of contemporary librarianship and public libraries are seen as "neutral public spaces for exercising democratic discourse". Using Mouffe's agonistic pluralism ([2005](#)), where democracy is understood in terms of power and conflict, [Seale \(2016\)](#) analyses policy from the American Library Association. In this analysis, the public library is framed in terms of an essential public good.

From studies of multicultural library services, the democratic importance of public libraries is related to how libraries contribute to the social integration of individuals and groups with plural cultural identities ([García López et al., 2012](#)). Additionally, research shows how conversation-based programming can support the political integration of immigrants ([Johnston and Audunson, 2019](#)). Adopting a human-rights perspective where transnational rights are not bound to national states, [Lundberg and Dahlquist \(2018\)](#) explore sanctuary practices of public libraries offering services to irregular immigrants and point out how the democratic role of libraries include safeguarding universalistic rights to equal access to information and freedom of expression.

Notions of neutral public spaces (e.g. [Koizumi and Larsen, 2023](#)) are tested when right-wing actors wish to use public libraries to disseminate ideas through literature and debate (cf. [Sundeen and Blomgren, 2020](#)). While [Sundeen and Blomgren \(2020\)](#) characterize some librarians as activists, as opposed to their idealized view of librarians as neutral civil servants, [Kann-Rasmussen \(2023\)](#) problematizes the term activism. Firstly, librarians who are

professionally involved in promoting diversity or social movements do not consider themselves as activists (Kann-Rasmussen, 2023). Secondly, these issues find support in long-standing Swedish cultural policies concerning diversity and national and international sustainability goals. Public libraries are highly valuable to the communities they serve, but as Jaeger *et al.* (2013) show, public libraries cannot be seen as neutral, and some groups will benefit more from their services than others given the governing policies in place. To promote equal access to information and culture and to mitigate socioeconomic divides are parts of Scandinavian policies of democratization of culture, and in recent decades, goals concerning diversity, inclusion and representation are inscribed in policies concerning cultural democracy (Kann-Rasmussen, 2023). These policies are not uncontested, however, and the work of public libraries aiming to safeguard interests of minority groups is increasingly challenged.

In recent years, political actors from the radical right have increasingly challenged and questioned public information organizations. In Britain, the radical right uses misinformation and misrepresentation to challenge both public libraries and public service companies, portraying these public institutions as vehicles for the “liberal elite” (Usherwood and Usherwood, 2021). These attacks illustrate how institutions conveying fact-based knowledge are challenged by anti-pluralist and anti-expert sentiments from the radical right (Waller *et al.*, 2017). These attacks may undermine the potential of public libraries discussed in previous research (Rivano Eckerdal, 2017, 2018): to serve as important democratic institutions providing venues for antagonistic debate and struggle (see also Carlsson *et al.*, 2022; Hanell *et al.*, 2022).

Theoretical background: perspectives on democracy

The standard view on liberal democracy combines “the institutional realization of popular sovereignty” with the protection of “individuals’ independence from their fellow citizens and from the political authority they have jointly created” (Sharon, 2019, p. 36). In addition, the criteria for democracy explicated by Dahl (1998, p. 38) are often cited: “participation, equality of voting, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusion of adults”. However, the concept of democracy is disputed and there are several varieties. Previous research defines a wide range of “models of democracy” in analyses of the development of liberal democracy (see, e.g. Gabardi, 2001; Held, 2006). We do not strive to map all forms of democracy, instead, we use a limited number of models of democracy to analyze how librarians perform the democratic mission and the different perspectives on democracy expressed by the interviewees. Therefore, we utilize the notions of democracy applied by Povitkina and Jagers (2022) in their analysis of which political system that is best suitable for addressing environmental problems. Those concepts are: (1) (thin) liberal democracy, (2) social-liberal democracy and (3) deliberative democracy. These three democratic concepts are chosen since they cover a broad range of the democratic spectrum. In addition, these concepts are particularly suitable for this study; social-liberal democracy is prominent in welfare countries like Sweden with a tradition of social-democratic governance, deliberative democracy has been influential in library policies and research, and (thin) liberal democracy forms a baseline which the other two perspectives take their starting points from (or are positioned against). However, we also utilize a fourth perspective on democracy, Mouffe’s (1999) concept of agonistic pluralism, to be able to reflect on the existing situation and imagine alternatives.

(Thin) liberal democracy focuses on the individuals’ “political and property rights on the one hand, and a vision of democratic representation, participation and accountability on the other” (Povitkina and Jagers, 2022, p. 2). The individuals’ autonomy and freedom are the basis of liberal democracy in its thinner understanding. Thereby civil and political rights are defined as negative, as in the freedom of speech, religion, private property and life, protecting the individual also from government interventions (Habermas, 1994, p. 2). Hence positive rights, such as a minimum standard of living or access to culture and information, are not included in this version of democracy. Thereby, the approach of liberal democracy leaves

public libraries with a narrow role to for example supply the information that individuals request rather than promote literacy or cultural participation. In a library context, this perspective is therefore seldom expressed in its pure form. In our analysis, (thin) liberal democracy is used to illuminate and understand certain statements, which are often mixed with a social-liberal view.

The view that libraries should take measures to promote democracy, manifested in international and national policy documents and in research, is related to a social-liberal perspective. In this context, libraries' provision of information and knowledge to all citizens as well as their role as open public spaces is put forth as they are seen as public institutions that "contribute to a healthy democratic society" (Jaeger *et al.*, 2013; Buschman, 2019). Furthermore, public libraries counteract social divisions in society by reducing disparities and facilitate interaction and thereby strengthen democracy (Igarashi *et al.*, 2023). Here, the promotion of democracy is related to increased social rights and equality, and this characterizes social-liberal democracy (Asara, 2020; Povitkina and Jagers, 2022). The freedom of the individual is thereby played down as positive rights are highlighted.

Deliberative democracy focuses participation even more and emphasizes the privileging of the community over both the market and the autonomy of individuals (Povitkina and Jagers, 2022). Deliberative democracy is "decision making by discussion among free and equal citizens" (Elster, 1998 p. 1). Public libraries' democratic role as public spheres and arenas for debate relates to this variant of democracy. In library research and policies, Habermas' version of deliberative democracy, in which decisions are made after deliberations with rational arguments amongst free and equal participants, has been especially influential. In this communicative situation all participants should have the same chance to speak, and the quality of the argument is decisive. Public libraries are here seen as providers of information enabling informed discussions and as open spaces for deliberation. The fact that persons in different life situations with different backgrounds can meet at the library is also important in this context, since deliberative politics is built upon the communicative process and not a "collectively acting citizenry" (cf. Habermas, 1994, p. 7).

Since the 1990s there has been a debate on pluralism and whether democratic deliberation should aim for consensus. For example, Fraser (1990) has pointed to the fact that historically, there are multiple competing publics and not only a bourgeois one. In addition, not all are included in the liberal public sphere, and those who participate in the discourse are not equals. Fraser therefore encourage us to acknowledge existing inequalities, which stresses the need for a pluralism of public spheres (Engström, 2022).

Similar to Fraser, Mouffe points to social and economic disparities in society and their influence on democracy. Mouffe argues that both an interest-oriented economical view on democracy, and the deliberative perspective which instead emphasizes moral values, fail to take the dimension of the political into account (Mouffe, 1999). According to Mouffe (1999, p. 751), discourse "in its fundamental structure is authoritarian" and therefore there can never be any free public deliberation for all. The problem of the ideal speech situation, and consequently deliberative democracy, is therefore ontological.

Mouffe's alternative to deliberative democracy is agonistic pluralism. This perspective recognizes how dimensions of power and conflicting positions inform public discussions (Mouffe, 1999). According to Mouffe (1999, p. 47), the aim of democratic politics is to "transform an 'antagonism' into an 'agonism'", that is to transform a political relation "between enemies" to one "between adversaries". Instead of excluding passions and taming conflicts, politics should strive to facilitate dissent and find democratic ways for conflicts to play out.

In our analysis, we utilize the above-described typology of democracy to investigate how librarians understand and enact the democratic mission of public libraries in times of political turmoil, and we make use of Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism to discuss ways forward.

Method

To investigate librarians' experiences and understandings, we conducted group interviews with public librarians in four regional municipalities in the south of Sweden. The selection of regions was chosen as it represents a combination of urban and rural municipalities and thus mirrors important differences and a large variety of conditions for how public libraries in Sweden operate. We do however recognize the sample's limitations and that a different selection might have generated results diverging from the ones presented in this study.

We initially reached out to libraries in six regions. Librarians in four out of these agreed to participate. In total we did five group interviews during late spring 2022, with three to five participants in each session. The participants represent a broad spectrum of working roles found in public libraries, including for instance the role of manager, developer, children's librarian and computer system specialist. Some were relatively new to the profession, others had longer experience and were thus able to compare between different positions and workplaces. The participants' current workplaces ranged from small branch libraries in rural areas to central libraries in urban regions. Hence, the interviewees were able to give voice to diverse parts of the multifaceted Swedish public library landscape. A majority of the participants were women with a Swedish ethnic background, which corresponds with the general demography of the library profession in Sweden. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min. We used a semi-structured interview guide with thematic questions concerning who the library is for, what governs the library and the daily tasks, the professional role in relation to the democratic mission of public libraries and experiences of conflicts and tensions at the library. Group interviews enable use of group interaction as a source of data (Ho, 2006), and participants were encouraged to talk freely and to engage in conversations with each other. We did not strive to identify the librarians' common views or perceptions in the interviews. On the contrary, we consider different experiences and apprehensions to enrich the material. The interviews were conducted digitally using a video conference program. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The quotes used in this text are translated from Swedish to English. To strengthen the anonymity of the interviewed we use identifiers that only signal which persons who participated in the same group interview. Thus, the number (1–4) used in the identifier indicate the specific interview session and the lower-case letter (a-p) indicate the specific person.

The analysis was conducted through repeated readings of the interview transcripts. Broad topics were distilled into themes, and the themes were then reviewed, defined and named (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The thematic analysis resulted in two main thematic clusters: *Understandings of the democratic mission* and *Enacting the democratic mission*. These clusters were in latter stages of the analysis connected to our theoretical framework.

The issues investigated in this article are ethically sensitive as they touch upon political and philosophical views. Given the sensitive topic, particular efforts have been made to guarantee informed consent and to secure the anonymity of the interviewed. The authors have worked in alignment with the ethical guidelines of the [Swedish Research Council \(2023\)](#) and the research is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference number 2021–01003).

Results and analysis

In this section we present the results of the analysis divided into two sections. We commence by presenting how the interviewed librarians understand the democratic mission of public libraries followed by an exploration of how they enact this mission in times of political turmoil.

Understandings of the democratic mission

All interviewees describe the library's role to promote democracy as fundamental. Several interviewed librarians mention the Swedish Library Act, stating the library's role "to promote

the development of the democratic society” (Swedish Library Association, 2015) and points to the regulated demand to engage in activities to strengthen democracy. Although this does not imply an unanimous understanding of what the democratic mission entails, we did identify three prevalent themes in the narratives and the analysis below is structured accordingly. The first theme concerns how the democratic mission of libraries relates to the promotion of equality, which requires access to information and knowledge to be realized. The second theme concerns inclusion and representation. The third theme discusses how participation relates to the democratic mission and how library activities can be seen as examples of democracy.

Promoting democracy by strengthening equality and accessibility. When defining the democratic mission, several interviewees emphasize the compensatory role of the public library. According to them, the public library has a role in society to counter a perceived growth of inequality and social and political polarization, indicating a social-liberal variant of democracy being linked to, or constituent of, libraries role in society.

The task to reduce social, educational and economic inequalities is brought forward as particularly important in municipalities with low levels of education, as social divides could lead to democratic dysfunction (Igarashi *et al.*, 2023). In this context libraries are considered as promoters of democracy by working for a more equal society:

gaps are widening and libraries are given a role to counter this [. . .] So that we can have more equal conditions for living, equal conditions for children coming of age. How can libraries contribute to that? (Interview 2:e)

Public libraries are thereby given the role to contribute to reduced social gaps and disparity and to foster democracy by strengthening positive political rights (Asara, 2020).

If libraries are to reduce inequality, library activities and services must be accessible. Accessibility is foremost framed in terms of opening hours and access to services and resources that the (physical) library offers:

Interview 4o: People should be able to come here during good opening hours and take part of what we can offer, I guess there is a foundation in that.

Interview 4n: I agree, it is the accessibility and that you are pretty clear in signaling that this is an open place for all groups of society.

The everyday mundane practices to make the library material and space accessible for all are described as part of the long-term promotion of democracy: “. . . we sit here and drudge upon lists of books to select and arrange story telling for children and promote literacy and reading which might give democratic fruit twenty-five years later” (Interview 3:k). Intrinsic to this pathos of accessibility is the right for everyone to take part of what the library offers without any costs:

You should be able to be there regardless of your income / . . . / libraries are one of few places you can go to that doesn't require a purchase, or like, to go to an exhibition, you can just go there and be there. (Interview 1:a)

One interviewee also mentions removing fees for overdue loans as a democratic reform, as it may increase the accessibility and willingness to use the library (Interview 1:a).

The free information and knowledge, including source criticism and digital literacy, that libraries provide is also highlighted by the interviewed, as well as the provision of digital technologies: “to be a so called ‘e-citizen’ is to be part of a democratic society” (Interview 1:a). There are several aspects of this; both the information itself, in digital and physical form and the dissemination of the material to different groups of users. In this context, the individual user and the users’ access to material is in focus, securing the individuals negative political rights.

The analysis above shows that (some) librarians occasionally draw upon a thinner variant of democracy emphasizing the individual users' negative rights, but mostly a social and deliberative variant of liberal democracy is reproduced.

Promoting democracy by inclusion and representability. Several librarians connect the notion of accessibility to inclusion. Inclusion is described as providing an accessible and open space for all kinds of people. The interviewees point to the importance of low thresholds and state that everyone is welcome in the library. This approach is exemplified by one of the interviewed librarians who concludes that: "the library is for everyone, regardless of opinion" (Interview 2:f). In relation to how the interviewees emphasize the inclusion of everyone, it is interesting to note that the term "all" replaced the term "citizen" when the Swedish Library Act was rewritten in 2013. The reason for this re-formulation was to avoid exclusion of persons who did not have a certain juridical status (Swedish Library Association, 2015). This change illuminates the indefinite meaning of "all" and the contentious character of who the library is for.

Additionally, several librarians describe the public library as one of few places open for the public when other community services have reduced availability. In many cases, the library is the only public space in local communities open for all where help can be found for a broad spectrum of issues (Garner *et al.*, 2021).

However, as other institutions, public libraries "reflect the marginalizations and exclusions of the society they serve" (Olson, 2001, p. 639). With the notion of libraries as open for all, the issue of representation becomes an important aspect. In this context, representation is understood as visibility for, and recognition of, different minority groups in society (Popowich, 2021), which builds upon positive rights of equality. Several librarians reflect upon this issue and connect representation to showing that the library is indeed for everyone by promoting diversity both in collection development and library activities. These efforts are often directed towards the prioritized groups that public libraries are required to devote particular attention to, according to the Library Act.

Promoting democracy by participation. Deliberative democracy entails that the persons who are affected by a decision should be involved in the decision-making. This requires informed and knowledgeable inhabitants, and therefore libraries' provision of information, as well as their role as spaces for deliberation, is seen as central to the promotion of democracy. However, few interviewees discuss library users' possibilities to exercise power over and influence the library itself, apart from statements on how users can ask for certain library materials. But there are exceptions. One interviewee describes how they organize a library board with users of mixed ages (Interview 3:l). In addition, this library has a wall where users are encouraged to post comments regarding the library (Interview 3:l). Another interviewee working with children explains: "We are obligated to work quite a lot with participation. That is also a way of practicing the democratic mission" (Interview 3:k). In these examples, democracy is understood as a deliberative process and by enabling the users to influence the library they can strengthen their democratic competences.

Another aspect of the democratic mission, which relates to participation represented in the interviews, is to offer a safe space for children, regardless of language or other potential barriers. As one librarian reflects, the library should work for children growing up fostering a view of the library as an open place:

The library is meant for everyone regardless of background, who you are, what you believe, and so on. And to implement that with children, to place it on that level so it is clear and evident, it is kind of what we try to do. [...] It is about opening up and making the library into a place that children then can grow up with, that this is a place for everyone. (Interview 2:f)

In these accounts, children are targeted specifically. Libraries are seen as exemplifications of democracy and library activities are put forth as means to teach children to function in a

democratic society (Interview 3:k). Accordingly, one interviewee uses the term “mini society” to describe how the library itself can be understood and used as a democratic example, showcasing the possibility of sharing common resources and welcoming different groups of people (Interview 3:k). In these statements, democracy is perceived as something that is enacted in everyday activities, at the same time as these activities are related to the organization of the library.

Enacting the democratic mission: professional dilemmas

In this section, we turn to narratives of how the democratic mission is enacted in the daily activities of librarians, in times of political polarization and turmoil. Two professional dilemmas stand out as particularly challenging for the interviewed librarians: how to handle undemocratic voices and how to be a library for all.

Remaining neutral or speaking up? The notion of public libraries as meeting places has, as mentioned above, been promoted as an important democratic function of public libraries in previous research. A central issue in this context is the possibility for librarians to remain neutral facilitators of ideal communicative situations – as stipulated by the deliberative ideal – in a changed political landscape. In one of the focus groups the librarians express how the political climate in Sweden has changed and public discourse has turned harsher, which is especially noticeable in times of general elections:

/ . . . / in connection with the early voting, four years ago, we had an elderly couple who were waiting for their turn to vote and stood in front of our counter and started talking to each other “throw them [immigrants] out” and so on. / . . . / it was very derogatory so a colleague had to say, “we don’t express ourselves like this, you have to go away, you have to go out or do something else, you can’t speak like this in here”. So that was one example but there have been other examples as well . . . and that kind of verbal outburst would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. (Interview 4:o)

In the example the librarian portrays a discursive change in Sweden where racist and derogatory speech no longer is unthinkable in public spaces. By deciding to turn the abusive patrons away, staff abandon the library’s neutral position but also implicitly fail the possibility of reaching a consensus in this communicative situation. Examples where patrons are turned away are rare in the interviews. Still, most interviewees agree that it is legitimate for librarians to speak up and take a stand against racist or misogynist statements. Where to draw the line is however a matter for discussion:

everyone has the right to his or her views, but to what extent do you have the right to voice everything in a public space? Where do you draw the line for . . . hate speech, for example? (Interview 2:f)

Many interviewees discuss how creating an open space for deliberation in the current political climate is a matter of balancing conflicting interests. A concern for many interviewees is how to handle undemocratic and insensitive opinions that make certain groups feel unwelcome. One librarian reflects on the insecurity she experiences on such occasions.

I mean, just to take a simple example, we have several oldsters at the library, oldsters daycare as we call it, they sit and read newspapers and so on. Some of them are-, voices opinions which are rather racist and misogynistic when speaking to each other. Are they welcome at the library? Should you go and sort of discuss with them – now there actually is a guy from Iran there who hears what you are saying, that isn’t so good. Yes, but I am a woman, I don’t think it is fine that you talk a lot of bullshit about women. Or should you just let it pass? (Interview 2:g)

This example further illustrates how, in times of a harsher, more polarized public discourse, the realization of the public living room – the open space for deliberation – becomes a matter

of professional hesitation and even disillusion. One librarian actively seeks to situate the notion of the public library as a meeting place in the polarized political landscape of present Sweden:

Because at the same time we want all of those who holds, what you might consider to be crooked opinions, they should also be welcomed, and you hope that in some realistic world they will experience other things by noticing that all the other people who exist which they must co-exist with. To find new information, get new perspectives. But that is not how it plays out in practice. Unfortunately. But that is what we are working for, what the library should be, in this idealistic image of what a library is. (Interview 2:f)

Recognizing the difficulties of knowing when and how to act, some librarians seek to develop personal strategies for when speaking up is legitimate. For example, one librarian who implicitly leans on a social-liberal view on democracy, explains that if others listen – particularly if they are young – there is a responsibility to say “I don’t agree with you” (Interview 2:g).

Although some patrons may be challenging, the interviewees agree that the public library should be open for everyone, regardless of political opinion. Whether that includes avoiding taking sides in political debates is not a matter of consensus. One interviewee emphasize that librarians should not moralize or interfere when a user request certain information (Interview 3:m), and another emphasizes the importance of librarians staying neutral in relation to political or current issues (Interview 4:n). According to the latter view, which reflects the envisioned role of public libraries in a thin liberal democracy, the library is understood as an empty vessel with the ability to promote informed discussions and enable deliberations, simply by providing the space for people to meet. An opposing view expressed in the interviews, which echoes a social-liberal stand, argue that ongoing political debates are something librarians should engage in to support democracy.

One issue, where different lines of opinion become evident, is libraries’ position in relation to the rights of sexual minorities. In most focus groups, working with LGBTQ-issues is framed as an issue concerned with the protection of human rights, which motivates librarians to take a stand:

during Pride we have had patrons wondering why we have – should we expose children to this? But at the same time, it’s important that this is brought up so that we can also take on responsibility and explain that this is important. (Interview 2:f)

However, in one of the interviews the librarians clearly positioned LGBTQ-rights as ideological and positioned to the far left on the political scale. Following the argument of libraries as neutral empty vessels, LGBTQ-rights should from this point of view not gain any special attention from libraries. This line of thinking resonates with findings in a US-study, showing that librarians in some situations “view neutrality as being non-partisan” (Scott and Saunders, 2021, p. 163). Thus, when an issue is politicized – as LGBTQ in this case – the library should not be seen as taking sides.

Still, from the librarians’ narratives it is clear that avoiding taking sides is not only a matter for librarians themselves to decide. Many statements in the interviews point to how the library has become a symbol and an arena for political struggle for radical right-wing politics challenging the rights of minorities. Several examples are mentioned of politically motivated controversies beyond common social tensions and disturbances, where hatred or threats were directed towards the library in connection to Pride-activities or other activities where LGBTQ-issues were focused. One library experienced hatred and threats, both digitally and in the physical library when celebrating Pride-week:

But then there was a little commotion when we had Pride-flags and people were – they thought kind of that this is everything we have and care about. And then you are like no, it is this shelf, and the rest

of the library is not [about LGBTQ]. But we were also written about and sort of exposed in, a librarian, in [a radical right media outlet] it's called, right? With like 300 hateful and threatening comments about [the library]. And that was not fun. (Interview 3:k)

In this case, library staff was taken by surprise and not prepared for the hostile reactions their Pride-week engagement generated. At other libraries, both Pride-events and Drag Queen STory Hour, where drag queens read children's stories, have generated strong reactions both from the public and far right-wing politicians. Some libraries have felt obliged to increase staffing and provide improved security when the Drag Queen STory Hour is offered "because there has been commotion with people who, well, do not accept that this exists in society" (Interview 2:e). Whereas another librarian notes that they were ready for negative comments and reactions, but "nothing came. Only love" (Interview 2:h).

Although reactions from the public may differ, it is clear that the public discourse on certain matters in Sweden have, in the Mouffian sense, become antagonistic rather than agonistic. This demands a reconceptualization of the conditions for libraries as meeting places and promoters of democracy. A vantage point is required that does not take for granted shared understandings of democracy and community but endorses plurality and strive to find democratic ways in which conflicts can play out.

Are public libraries for all? The Swedish Library Act clearly states that publicly funded libraries are for everyone. At the same time public libraries are also prescribed by the same law to "devote particular attention to persons with disabilities" and "to national minorities and persons with a native language other than Swedish" (Swedish Library Association, 2015). Public libraries are thus for "everyone, but they are also particularly for some" (Interview 1:a). This manner of prioritizing reflects Swedish cultural policy from the 1990s up until present. This position is presently challenged by the strong influence of the radical right in government and political discourse, questioning what they consider to be the promotion of cultural diversity at the expense of other interests and groups (Lindsköld, 2015; Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019).

There are many instances in the interviews where libraries' promotion of cultural diversity produces antagonistic conflicts with threats and hatred directed at library staff. Often, these threats are expressed when libraries offer activities for patrons with a native language other than Swedish, such as story times or movie screenings in Arabic. In these cases, trolling the social media of libraries and individual librarians appears to be a common, and potentially disruptive, strategy among radical right-wing political actors:

she who was responsible for diversity at the library, they found her Facebook account and she received tons of bad comments and then direct threats. But the manager was there, and yes, everyone rallied around her and she was temporarily assigned new tasks so she didn't have to be at the desk. It was still tough on her. (Interview 3:k)

The interviewed librarians also share experiences of xenophobic comments or actions directed at colleagues that by their looks or accent may be perceived as having a foreign background. Once again, when children are involved in these events, there seem to be a ready response of fostering them into democratic citizens, which indicates that this is a type of situation where the social-liberal view of democracy can be reconciled with this new form of agonistic conflicts.

Although none of the interviewees express support for the right-wing critique of cultural diversity, many interviewees reflect on the presence of prioritized groups in the Library Act. One librarian problematizes the existence of prioritized groups as such since individual users and needs might be overshadowed if certain groups are focused: "it is good to have prioritized groups, but it so easily becomes the only thing that you talk about. And I mean, a human is so much more than native tongue or gender, or age or impairment, I think." (Interview 3:m).

While the prioritized groups of the Library Act in general are seen as the "right" groups to target for public libraries, the librarians repeatedly mention other groups that are not

prioritized by law but are still in need of substantial support, for example unemployed and persons with mental illnesses (Interview 3:k). These groups are often socioeconomically disadvantaged and formed the object of attention for the compensatory efforts of cultural policies during the development of the Swedish welfare state. This in turn may lead some users to argue that the library has turned its back on them in favor of efforts for promoting cultural diversity and LGBTQ-issues, an argument that echoes the positions of ideological polarization in the current political climate. One librarian reflects upon whether this cultural, or political, divide is possibly the main challenge for public libraries today:

You know, sometimes I almost feel that the problem is more about attracting those who believe libraries are only working on LGBT-issues and offer story hours in “multi-cultural languages”, you know those who have that view on libraries. (Interview 3:i)

Another interviewee also notes that “the families voting for SD, they do not usually have such a positive view on libraries” (Interview 3:k).

The erosion of trust in societal institutions is not limited to public libraries. Radical right-wing populism challenges a perceived elitist establishment they believe are threatening the good of the “people” by promoting pluralism and cultural diversity (cf. [Waller et al., 2017](#)). One librarian with a foreign background describes experiences of verbal abuse from patrons that perceive her presence at the library as ruining the Swedish library institution and, by referring the rights of “our children”, also the Swedish nation. Overtly xenophobic comments are not frequently mentioned in the interviews. Still, for public libraries with the mission to provide accessibility for everyone, the distrust and critique of the institution from parts of the population is particularly troublesome.

Alarming as the critique may seem, the sentiments should not come as a surprise given the history of public libraries. The SD voters are usually representatives of what was formerly identified as the Swedish working class ([Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019](#)), a group that during the 20th century has been the object of the bourgeoisie’s civilizing attempts rather than approached as free and equal actors in the enactment of the deliberative understanding of libraries democratic mission ([Andersson, 2009](#)). In one municipality, librarians perceive a tension between locals without academic background and people moving in from other parts of the country with another socioeconomic and cultural profile:

you know the class-clash like in “libraries are only where rich Stockholm ladies from [wealthy area] go and borrow fiction books” and when you then meet these [motor-interested local youths] and tell them that we have books on two-stroke engines, and they just “wow”. (Interview 3:i)

The view of public libraries as institutions mainly for wealthy literature connoisseurs stands in stark contrast to the ambitions and goals of the Swedish Library Act as well as the thoughts on professional ethics expressed by the interviewed librarians. However, the discussion on which groups to specifically target and the elitist image of public libraries, invoke questions about which competing publics that are actually present in the imagined public sphere that public libraries, according to previous research (e.g. [Koizumi and Larsen, 2023](#)), are supposed to constitute.

Discussion

The librarians interviewed for this study represent a multifaceted view on the democratic mission of public libraries and ultimately on democracy, corresponding with the complex and situated nature of public library practices. Returning to the typology of four perspectives on democracy, some of these perspectives are deeply ingrained in the librarians’ understandings of the democratic mission, whereas some are more or less absent. (Thin) liberal democracy, for instance, is rarely represented in its pure form, but we find elements from this perspective

when interviewees focus on issues concerning the provision of information. The perspective is also implicitly invoked in relation to arguments for being a neutral civil servant (cf. [Sundeen and Blomgren, 2020](#)).

Social-liberal democracy, on the other hand, is a perspective that is commonly represented in the interviewees' accounts. This is hardly surprising given its strong influence on the Nordic welfare models and Scandinavian cultural policy, focusing on overcoming socioeconomical barriers and the promotion of equal access to information, culture and knowledge ([Kann-Rasmussen, 2023](#)). Social-liberal democracy also entails an educational element where libraries are seen as exemplifications of democracy, where people in general, and children in particular, can learn to live as citizens in a democratic society (cf. [García López et al., 2012](#)). The compensatory role of public libraries is emphasized in all the group interviews, illustrated by how the librarians understand inclusion and representation of minorities as important parts of the democratic mission, which is a long-lasting focus in Swedish cultural policy ([Kann-Rasmussen, 2023](#)).

Another recurring narrative in the interviews is the importance of providing accessible and open spaces for all, corresponding with established views in previous research where libraries are understood as public institutions that contribute to a healthy democratic society ([Jaeger et al., 2013](#); [Buschman, 2019](#)). To support this narrative, librarians occasionally draw on the social-liberal perspective, but primarily, and in line with LIS research (cf. [Audunson et al., 2019](#); [Buschman, 2003](#); [Koizumi and Larsen, 2023](#)) on ideas associated with deliberative democracy. The latter perspective is commonly represented in the group interviews, for instance in discussions about the library as a place to reconcile conflicts, and when libraries are portrayed as spaces for deliberation where users with questionable opinions might be convinced by sound arguments and complementary views on societal life offered in the library (cf. [Koizumi and Larsen, 2023](#); [Merklen, 2016](#)). In these latter accounts, the echo from Habermas and the idea of the library as a meeting-place are clearly visible. Presenting an idealized view on societal co-existence and political debate, the underpinning reasoning can be understood this way: if public libraries offer a place where different types of people meet, there will be deliberation enabling the reconciliation of conflicts and peaceful co-existence.

Our results indicate that in times of political turmoil, this position gives rise to professional dilemmas for the interviewed librarians – two of these are especially engaging and distressing: how to handle undemocratic voices in library spaces and how to be a library for all. Our analysis shows how these dilemmas can be understood as expressions of tensions between established ways of understanding and performing the democratic mission of public libraries and the new conditions for enacting that mission in a polarized and politically turbulent society. Several challenging situations connect to new, or at least different, problems where the three democratic models mentioned above do not seem to provide adequate tools for handling, preparing, or intellectually framing what is at stake. This may result in reactions that are insufficient or even incompatible with the democratic mission.

One such tension arises when the imagined ideal of [Audunsson's \(2005\)](#) low-intensive meeting place is situated in the harsher political climate of Sweden today. The ideal of the meeting place assume discussions based on rational arguments rather than passions. This presumption is at the heart of the Mouffian critique of deliberative democracy ([Mouffe, 2005](#)). These ideals do not consider the prospect of the public living room chitchat turning ugly. Thus, few practical or intellectual strategies are offered for handling such events.

Furthermore, a known critique of the deliberative norm concerns how it disregards barriers for equal participation in the public sphere ([Fraser, 1990](#); [Engström, 2022](#)). If positions are too polarized or if diverse groups, in line with the deliberative norm, are (wrongly) understood as having equal opportunities to participate, how can librarians be expected to handle the resulting conflicts? In our study, questions such as these arise in relation to tensions between prioritized groups and other user groups, as well as between

competing political viewpoints in relation to library programs and content. For the librarians who strive to realize the idea of the meeting place, tools for handling such conflicts may be hard to find since the deliberative ideal does not prepare for, or offer any considerable alternative to the unreachable aim of consensus.

What sort of intellectual and practical tools are required for librarians to handle the challenges and changes provoked by the questioning of liberal democracy from the radical right? We now turn to the fourth theoretical perspective on democracy: Mouffe's theory of plural agonistics. Proposing a framework for public library development and the institution's response to change, [Rivano Eckerdal \(2018, p. 1412\)](#), building on the work of Mouffe and others, proposes an understanding of democracy as an ongoing process, which calls for "an ongoing debate discussing the enactment of the library" and its democratic mission. We agree on the necessity of such discussions, but also recognize the risk of them being hampered by the boundaries of established ways of thinking of democracy and the democratic mission, as these do not offer the new or different directions called for. An important issue to consider is how librarians can be encouraged to leave the strive for dispassionate consensus behind. An alternative path would be to embrace the political passions of their users and assist them in using these passions for democratic purposes, in the words of Mouffe: "mobilizing them towards democratic designs" (2005, p. 3).

To encourage "democratic designs" is to choose a certain direction, it involves taking a stand. Whether or not to do so is another tension we found that stems from a clash between different understandings of the basic tenets of librarianship, the demands and regulations of the civil servant and the politically turbulent landscape that librarians in Sweden are currently facing. Taking a stand could be motivated from the perspective of social-liberal democracy, especially if the action involves an educational element, which we see examples of in this study.

There are also librarians arguing for the need of remaining neutral in relation to current political issues. This view corresponds with the position of [Koizumi and Larsen \(2023\)](#) concerning the role of public libraries in the Nordic welfare model as "public sphere arenas" for deliberative democracy, where neutrality and democratic librarianship are closely connected. From this perspective, taking a stand is an expression of activism ([Sundeen and Blomgren, 2020](#)). However, based on the findings from this study and the issues at stake in the current political landscape in Sweden, we argue that a neutral standpoint better corresponds with the role of public libraries in a thin liberal democracy. Resigning from certain activities when social issues are politicized to remain neutral might not only reinforce the status quo (cf. [Scott and Saunders, 2021](#)) but also force librarians to step away from enacting parts of the democratic mission and the endorsement of universal human rights. This scenario is exemplified in this study in accounts about how to handle LGBTQ-issues in library settings. Building on the work by [Lundberg and Dahlquist \(2018\)](#), taking a stand for universal human rights is not an expression of activism, but a basic tenet of librarianship in a democratic society (see also [Kann-Rasmussen, 2023](#)). Furthermore, if we agree with Mouffe that democracy is passionate and conflictual and that the serenity of consensus can never be met, taking a stand is not in conflict with endorsing a democratic space or promoting democratic conversation. Taking a stand constitutes the very essence of democracy. We therefore agree with scholars like [Rivano Eckerdal \(2018\)](#), see also [Hansson, 2010](#) who argues that "[n]eutrality is not an option if the profession is to have a role in and for democracy" (p. 1411).

Conclusions: revisiting the meeting place in times of political turmoil. Is the idea of the public library as a meeting place still relevant in times of political polarization and when liberal democracy is questioned from the radical right? In this study we have shown that established ways of thinking about the library as a meeting place produce certain dilemmas and challenges for the librarians who are supposed to make this ideal come to life. Although these dilemmas are problematic indeed, we do not suggest that they are grounds for

disregarding the democratic potential of the open and accessible spaces of public libraries. On the contrary, based on our results we argue that it is not the idea of libraries as open spaces for democratic exchange that needs to be rethought, but that the intended outcome of those exchanges should be tranquility and agreement. This suggests rethinking the constitution and the aim of the meeting place from a more passive one where people exposed to differing views (cf. Audunsson, 2005) will (hopefully) eventually come together in shared understandings, to a more dynamic one where librarians actively work for democracy by facilitating meetings and debates between conflicting views and interests – by striving to turn *antagonism* into legitimate conflicts, that is *agonism*.

To do so, we propose to make use of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism (1999, 2005) – a perspective rarely represented in the group interviews of this study. We argue that a recognition of Mouffe's basic tenets – that our differences may produce conflicts for which there are no rational solutions and that passion rather than rational discourse is characteristic to the democratic process – will produce an increased democratic vigilance in librarianship, especially in times of political turmoil. This recognition, we suggest, may be the intellectual tool needed for practically handling the current conflictual environment and turn public libraries into the truly democratic spaces they have the potential to become.

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