

БІБЛІОТЕЧНА СПРАВА І НАУКА. МІЖНАРОДНИЙ ДОСВІД

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The meaning of a national library¹

The purpose of the article is to characterize the contemporary challenges and prospects faced by the National Library of Sweden in the context of changing cultural, informational, and political landscapes. The aim of the article is to analyze the impact of globalization, digitization, and changes in defining national identity on the library's operations and strategies. The **scientific novelty** lies in identifying the role of the national library not only as a repository of knowledge and cultural heritage but also as an active participant in shaping and supporting national identity in the context of globalization and digitization. The **research** findings demonstrate that the national library must maintain its autonomy regardless of political and ideological changes, while actively adapting to the new realities of the digital era. **Conclusions.** The importance of balancing the preservation of physical collections with the development of digital resources and services is identified, as well as expanding the library's functionalities, embracing new technologies, and adapting to the changing needs of society. Special attention is paid to the need to rethink and update the role of the national library in the modern world, the engagement of new technologies, and adaptation to society's evolving needs. The significance of international collaboration and integration into global knowledge networks is also emphasized.

Key words: national library, National Library of Sweden, international collaboration, integration, global knowledge networks, digital era.

Relevance of the research topic. Anyone who visits the National Library of Sweden (NLS) in Humlegården, Stockholm is greeted by an inviting sign kindly announcing that the domain you are now entering constitutes nothing less than "Society's memory". Appointing oneself as the bearer of our common memory is truly an ambition that should oblige. But what does it really mean, and what should it mean?

According to its instructions, the NLS is to be Sweden's national library, and a national research infrastructure in addition, tasks that above all require sustainability and endurance over very long periods of time. Anyone looking for NLS' finest roots therefore ends up all the way back in the late 16th century book collections of the Vasa kings. To the same extent, the gaze forward should of course be directed at least as far.

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Presenting main material. Several central movements in our contemporary cultural and research policy landscape, which also greatly influence NLS as a government authority,

¹ This text is a revised and expanded version of a talk he gave upon leaving the National Library of Sweden on December 16, 2022.

unfortunately point in a completely different direction. It is partly about how elated, time-limited and short-term projects have many times have been allowed to supplement or even replace the ongoing operations, which were set on slow emaciation.

It is also about a stubborn and tiresome fixation on constant renewal and development – read "digital transformation" – often at the expense of everyday long-term management. Last but not least, it is about how profound specialist knowledge and academic professionalism are gradually being replaced with an increasingly instrumental, not to say industrial, approach to collections and collection building.

Contemporary, on the other hand, does not seem particularly concerned with the sweeping changes that the concept of nation itself, and thus the traditional scope of a national library, is subjected to through escalating globalisation, migration and digitisation. How these forces influence and reinterpret what should count as "our" cultural heritage thus risks becoming almost non-issues, not least in a political climate where "the national" in a narrow sense has made a strong comeback.

All national libraries are different. Some, such as the South African, have extensive publishing of literature in minority languages. Others, such as the British Library, offer their visitors a series of very ambitious and grandiose exhibitions. For its part, the NLS has received a major government mandate as Sweden's official library authority, to create a national overview and promote collaboration within the public library system. The variation is therefore considerable.

Nevertheless, all national libraries are similar in their basic fundamentals: the continuity of collection building, the long lines, the principle of completeness in the collection – or the pursuit of it – the role as a qualified node of knowledge, and not least the notion of reflecting a relatively homogeneous and well-defined nation or nation-state.

Therefore, the current challenges that the NLS grapples with are almost universal, even if Sweden stands out in several respects as extreme in its rapid sprint towards the future. The "world's most modern country" has in practice already abolished the rear-view mirror, which is clearly evidenced by the widespread benevolent indifference that often characterises political attitudes to the concept of cultural heritage.

A national library can also be described as the sum of buildings, missions, collections and employees – a kind of living organism that grows and successively renews itself in time and over time, or rather in a timeless time where the long past and a distant future often feel equally present as the present.

In the timeless time, history, the present and the future meet, where the very long-term struggles with the rapidly changing, where medieval parchment manuscripts thrive together with e-legal deposit and language models for data-driven research. In the timeless time, our present is only a very temporary break between the long past and the future, which we sometimes dare to call eternity.

Today's greatest challenge for a national library is to take continued responsibility for this long time perspective, precisely what forms society's collective memory over decades and centuries, in an era that increasingly strives to forget or repress the past in its great haste to try to catch up with a future that is constantly moving forward.

However, the organism that is the national library seems to be a prisoner of a development paradigm with mostly religious or ideological overtones, otherwise in good company with research libraries and other cultural heritage institutions. Organisational development and leadership for change have become the concepts of the day, and one can now even hold the title of "library developer" within the Swedish library community.

There is less and less talk about organisational management, about confidently and courageously standing up for what you are when change and movement seem to be the only

assets that are valued. This also means that it is particularly essential to guard the long lines and protect the continuity of the collection building, so as not to lose important values just when a rapid digital transformation demands priority.

The mission is, to put it another way, to constantly manage and develop the long-term perspective, at the same time that the media landscape that the national library has to navigate looks new and a little different every year. If one is to succeed in finding the right way forward in this complicated terrain, both a rear view mirror and a radar are needed to continue to keep an eye on the rear while the scouting ahead must be continuous.

There are, of course, a number of important and relevant angles on this complex theme, but here I will only dwell on three (draining the swelling project swamp is primarily a political issue that a national library unfortunately finds it difficult to do so much about on its own).

Legal deposit first! Or, wait: what if legal deposit really isn't everything? When the legal deposit legislation is often presented as the obvious basis for all collection building – and thus for the national library's mission – it is easy to forget that legal deposit, at least for the NLS, only began to function effectively towards the end of the 19th century.

The fact that KB's collections are still so complete from much further back in time is above all thanks to rich and generous donations. And of course today's wise, knowledgeable employees who systematically fill the old voids through antiquarian acquisitions. Former librarian Sten G. Lindberg's essay "The donors made the library" from 1977 in *Bibliis* – periodical of the Friends of the NLS – bears witness to the former.

It is also easy to suppress the importance of private archives and similar materials in order for research to really understand the public conversation that is being conducted today. A conversation, a text, a documentary film, a blog post doesn't just appear out of thin air. As a rule, they have grown and matured over a sometimes rather long period of time. With a almost worn-out concept, it refers to process, rather than events.

If the research doesn't have access to posts and drafts, correspondence and diaries or other so-called preparatory work, then the understanding of the common becomes significantly thinner and poorer. Legal deposit and what is called "supplementary collection" go hand in hand over time, intimately and mutually dependent on each other. Therefore, supplementary collection is a concept that misleads the mind, as if, for example, private archives were just an insignificant and unnecessary appendage.

A national library like the NLS has a long tradition of collecting archives from people and organisations in the cultural field, in the broadest sense. That tradition is something to care about and to highlight as just as important as legal deposit. For example, ask some of the NLS' most frequent researchers which source material is the most unique and sought after.

Another reason to see traditional legal deposit collection in a larger perspective is that the legal deposit legislation nowadays works increasingly poorly when the digital and the internet have become the culture's default. Legal deposit must therefore be supplemented in the future to an even greater degree with targeted and event-driven acquisition if the national library is really to succeed in capturing even the essence of the public conversation in all its increasingly diverse guises, social media such as Twitter and Facebook not least.

The information losses have already reached alarming proportions. The corona pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine are examples of mega-events that will certainly affect the understanding of our contemporary times for a long periods to come. Nevertheless, they cannot be found in the NLS' collections in any form other than as single and individual documents. The whole has already been lost.

But collection is of course not an end in itself. The whole point of a national library is that the collections should be as accessible as possible, to as many people as possible. This requires

good catalogues, but also a deep knowledge of collections that is difficult to simply read or transfer to thinking machines. In that sense, Artificial Intelligence is probably still waiting.

Unfortunately, I believe I can see a movement in the wider cultural heritage Sweden, which is well on its way to transforming librarians, archivists and museologists from proud, qualified and sometimes somewhat nerdy craftsmen to replaceable industrial workers on the conveyor belt of knowledge mediation. By the way, knowledge and erudition as concepts are increasingly being replaced by information and education.

I hope I am exaggerating, but at the same time I look with great skepticism at the fact that the intellectual content of the professions in the long run risks being crowded out by a more instrumental attitude where trust and confidence are often trumped by detailed control from above – contrary to all the fancy talk about trust-based governance – and by a constantly swelling administration, a dilemma which, incidentally, is shared by too many universities and research institutions.

It is tempting to think that it would be enough to be skilled at navigating the contemporary literary landscape, to be aware of the latest publication or to have a good grasp of the year's legal deposit submissions, to correspond to good collecting skills. But that is, unfortunately, a far too limited approach.

One also needs to possess or practice an intuitive feeling for the internal connections, not least in all older collections that are poorly or not cataloged at all. One must have the ability to hear and understand the low-key conversation that is constantly going on. There, author August Strindberg talks with colleague Selma Lagerlöf, Karin Boye with Stig Dagerman, who in turn has a conversation with poets Sonja Åkesson and Kristina Lugn – to keep us on Swedish ground.

It may possibly sound backwards, but I am convinced that such qualities as good general erudition, not least deeper knowledge of history, literary studies and various social sciences, will be absolutely necessary to keep the national library's collections open and alive even in a digital age. It also doesn't hurt if you happen to be a researcher.

The erudited authority – this is how old cultural heritage institutions like the NLS have often been described, with a slightly superior tone of our own time's better knowledge. Today it is easy to see that the erudited authority was hierarchical, patriarchal, exclusionary, not for everyone, "infused with the exercise of power", to speak with Professor Mats Malm, Permanent Secretary to the Swedish Academy, training and experience, the national library's collections risk slowly sinking into the oblivion of ignorance.

But there is also something positive that is worth rediscovering, defending and preserving in the concept. Without erudition we simply become dumber – and without qualified collection knowledge, an ability that requires both erudition, education and experience, the national library's collections risk slowly sinking into the oblivion of ignorance. From experience, it is difficult to recreate unique knowledge and skills that have once been lost.

All this is also developing against the background of an increasingly dissolved concept of nation and a new global, interactive and unregulated information landscape. In a time when traditional concepts such as "nation" and "national collections" are becoming increasingly difficult to call in, it's every reason to ask what is really Sweden in the world and the world in Sweden?

Is it geography, language, history, media format – or something else – that should bind us together, guide us and thus shape the national library's mission in the future? In a more practical sense, that issue also concerns to the highest degree the right of all new Swedes to their own history and cultural heritage. Serving as a national library in an increasingly globalised, borderless world should really be an impossibility.

Fortunately, national libraries belong to an increasingly international family, with good and resourceful members such as IFLA, CERL, Liber and CDNL. There are already today arenas where colleagues can meet and discuss the need for a higher level of coordination of fundraising policies, media formats, selection criteria, etc. – all to prevent future gaps and deficiencies that may arise in the global knowledge infrastructure when old national borders are loosened or blurred out.

Therefore, a national library now and in the future needs to put even more effort and resources into genuine international collaboration – alongside the need to radically redefine its national mission. The latter is not only about fundamentally taking a larger and more inclusive approach to the "nation" and who or who should be considered to belong to it, but also about how the collections should be able to practically reach out to the entire country.

The journey from print to multimedia should be basic and self-evident. If the national library fails to follow along on that journey with all that it entails in terms of technology, competence and resources to navigate a rapidly expanding digital media landscape, it is doomed to be reduced to a museum of the last printed book. The establishment of the NLS' computer lab and collaborative library projects such as the Digitised Swedish Print (DST) are investments that show the way.

But this journey also involves a necessary movement from place and space, to node and digital resource. The idea of placelessness, the compression of time and space, becoming an online service for everyone everywhere regardless of time and place, should be an obvious must for the national library if it wants to preserve its legitimacy in a time when old borders, and thus distance, increasingly have lost their meaning. This may be said, but the challenge will certainly be very extensive in terms of technology as well as economics and legislation.

At the same time, the best must not be allowed to become the enemy of the good. Finding a sensible and functional balance between operations in the physical space and in the digital space is an obvious necessity. The need to meet its collections on site does not disappear simply because the national library is digitised. Rather, the growing supply of knowledge and the new social contact surfaces made possible by digitisation create a seemingly paradoxical need to revive the physical encounter.

To summarise a bit: a national library should, by definition, strive to both follow and move out of step with its times. To be in opposition to the rapid changes of the zeitgeist and fads is, in fact, one of the most fundamental traits of the national library, something that has become particularly tangible and essential in our time.

The systematic, patient and knowledge-demanding collection building that forms the national library's very *raison d'être* requires a long-term perspective and continuity that stands in strong and principled contrast to all short-term fluctuations, whether it is about literary fashions, research trends or, for that matter, political climate changes.

As former National Librarian Mrs. Gunilla Herdenberg often claimed: "governments come and go, but the NLS remains". A national library worth the name is characterised by both high integrity and great autonomy from short-term political and ideological conjunctures: a double arm's length distance at the very least be kept! The national library must never become a symbol of a one-sided party interest or – God forbid – a monument to a single person. It has received its real and important mission from the research community – and from the future.

Conclusions. A National Library should therefore equip itself with knowledge and integrity, self-esteem and courage in order to be able, dare and have the courage to stand up for demands for the constant changes that are often proclaimed just for the sake of change itself. Society's memory must, in a fundamental sense, constitute an oppositional force that resists the easy temptations offered by the high-intensity vicissitudes of time.

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ЗНАЧЕННЯ НАЦІОНАЛЬНОЇ БІБЛІОТЕКИ

Мета статті – охарактеризувати сучасні виклики та перспективи, з якими стикається Національна бібліотека Швеції у контексті змінюваного культурного, інформаційного та політичного ландшафтів. **Завдання статті** є аналіз впливу глобалізації, цифровізації, та змін у визначенні національної ідентичності на роботу та стратегії бібліотеки. **Наукова новизна** полягає в визначенні ролі національної бібліотеки не тільки як сховища знань і культурної спадщини, а й як активного учасника в формуванні та підтримці національної ідентичності в умовах глобалізації та цифровізації. **Висновки.** Результати дослідження засвідчують, що національна бібліотека повинна зберігати свою автономію, незалежно від політичних та ідеологічних змін, одночасно активно адаптуючись до нових реалій цифрової епохи. Визначено важливість збалансування між зберіганням фізичних колекцій та розвитком цифрових ресурсів і сервісів, а також розширення функціоналу бібліотеки, залучення нових технологій та адаптації до змінюваних потреб суспільства. Особлива увага приділяється необхідності переосмислення та оновлення ролі національної бібліотеки у сучасному світі, залучення нових технологій та адаптації до змінюваних потреб суспільства. Також наголошується на значенні міжнародного співробітництва та інтеграції в глобальні знаневі мережі.

К л ю ч о в і с л о в а: національна бібліотека, Національна бібліотека Швеції, міжнародне співробітництво, інтеграція, глобальні знаневі мережі, цифрова епоха.

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