

# Users, networking and law - success strategies behind Finnish libraries

Barbro Wigell-Ryynänen

*Finnish public libraries are widely known for their high user rates. 80 % of the population use public library services and libraries are the most frequently used cultural service. A readiness for networking comprising all actors in the field, state administration, library associations and libraries, also characterizes development path of libraries in Finland. Complemented with successful strategies and support of legislation public libraries have made their way as an essential part of the Finnish Way of Life.*

The service network is extensive: 840 public libraries and 154 mobile libraries serve a population of 5,3 million. The number of loans is an average of 18 per capita and year, with an average of 25-27 loans per capita in the top ten. In 2010, visits on library websites were 57 million and visits in the physical library 53 million. More than 40 % of the entire population has a library card.

## Centralized services and state funding

The current Library Act came into force in 1999 and it strongly linked public libraries to the Knowledge Society. State grants for developing virtual services has been allocated since 1995. All Finnish public libraries are now part of some regional library network with joint library systems and catalogues on the web. Also smaller libraries have been thus in a position to update and develop their services.

Public libraries are maintained by the municipalities but state subsidies cover about 40 % of total expenditure. Substantial state grants are allocated annually for developing contents and user-friendly services on the web as well as for reading promotion.

Additionally, the National Library Network Services and [libraries.fi](http://libraries.fi), maintained by the Central Library of Public Libraries (Helsinki City Li-

brary), furnish all public libraries with centrally produced web-services.

## Information Society and Library Act

According to the Library Act, users shall have access to services produced by library and informa-

tion professionals, and library services are free of charge. The Decree enacts about qualification requirements for the staff. A degree is stipulated for all librarians, for library directors a higher university degree is required. Libraries are expected to mediate relevant information and knowledge and to create multifaceted online services, a prerequisite for services of quality is a competent and skilled staff.

Alongside legislation and amendments of the Act, the national policies, acknowledged also in the Government Platforms, are essential for securing adequate state funding and purposeful development. The continuously updated policies are premised on changes in society and every-day life.

The *Finnish Library Policy Programme* from 2001 identified challenges arising in the civil Information Society and proposed, as certain assignments had been given to public libraries with the new Library Act, fast updating of funding, competence of staff and technological capacity.

## **Citizens information services and lifelong learning**

*Library Strategy 2010, a policy for access to knowl-*

*edge and culture* was issued in 2003 as one of the first European public library strategies. The Strategy emphasized responsibility for citizens' information services in digital environments and the necessity to work as one tight network, with coordinated production of local, regional and national web services.

*Library Development Program 2006 - 2010 – the library as an integrated service centre for rural and urban areas* (2006) responded to the proposal made in a national policy paper for developing the regions to transform rural libraries into cultural, information and activity centres. Rural structures have changed, alternative means of living are being developed alongside small-scale farming, and technology enables urban dwellers to work and study spending extended time in their summer-houses. Also small, rural libraries are accordingly expected to offer professional services.

*Finnish Public Library Policy 2015* (2009) responds to new ways of learning and seeking information, new ways of using the library. Libraries, now placed in a situation where they have to compete with other actors in the field, must be able to react swiftly to societal change. Future

success must be earned; libraries can answer to future challenges only by focusing on expertise and emphasizing quality.

## Measuring societal impact for the future

The national *Quality Recommendation for Public Libraries* (2011) presents quality descriptions for local libraries as well as tools for self-evaluation. The need to measure the societal impact of public libraries is accentuated, corresponding with a survey carried out simultaneously at the University of Tampere looking into the role of libraries in the everyday life of citizens.

## Finnish libraries in a nutshell

The Finnish library network comprises research libraries and public libraries. The former group consists of university libraries, polytechnic libraries and special libraries (mainly in research institutes and government offices).

On the research library sector we have 22 university libraries and 102 other government funded research libraries. The network of public libraries is made up of 888 public libraries, including regional libraries.

Municipal libraries, research libraries, special libraries and libraries at educational institutions form part of the national and international information service network. Both municipal and research libraries are open to all and nearly all libraries offer free access to the internet. Students use public and research libraries side by side.

In Finland we have several professional associations for librarians and information specialists:

Finnish Research Libraries Association (research libraries), Finnish Library Association (public libraries), Finnish Information Special-

The *National Digital Library* is the Ministry of Education and Culture's way of creating a unified structure for contents and services of archives, libraries and museums. Through the public interface, users will be able to search the digital resources of all these institutions, to renew loans, buy pictures and use a wide range of other services. Turku City Library is one of the key pilots. The treasure chest will be opened little by little, starting this year. 📖

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ists (special and corporate libraries), and Finland's Swedish Library Association (Swedish speaking library sector), as well as the Bibliothecarii Medicinae Fenniae, a special association for medical and health librarians. During the past years, all these associations have co-operated closely and they tend to organize joint activities or initiatives.

## Networking and co-operation through different library sectors

The Finnish library network is coordinated by the National Library of Finland, which also provides centralized services including union databases (LINNEA-databases) and consortia for joint library systems (LINNEA2, AMKIT) and acquisitions of electronic materials (FinElib). Further developments are going on to incorporate archives and museums into the co-operative network with the National Digital Library (KDK). All the library sectors contribute to the development of the National Library Network Services; their representatives gather to joint meetings several times a year.

Users find easily access to different library types via

a common portal, Libraries.fi, maintained by Helsinki City Library (the Central Library for Public Libraries in Finland).

Finland has a strong tradition of libraries co-operating regionally as well. On the public library sector, co-operation has been represented by the system of provincial libraries, created as a kind of support structure for municipal libraries.

Lately regional co-operation between different library types has also become more common. A good example of this kind of horizontal and regional co-operation can be found in the North Karelia region of eastern Finland. Seven libraries have co-operated there since 2007 to provide various joint library services. One of the municipalities acts as host for the library services. This particular co-operation model has improved the local services, created cost savings, opened up a greater choice through shared collections for library users and supported professional development of staff.

Statistics of Finnish research libraries and public libraries can be found from following sites:

- Research libraries -[https://yhteisilasto.lib.helsinki.fi/language.do?action=change&choose\\_language=3](https://yhteisilasto.lib.helsinki.fi/language.do?action=change&choose_language=3)
- Public libraries - <http://tilastot.kirjastot.fi/en-GB/>

Links to Finnish libraries & library organizations:

- National Library of Finland - <http://www.nationallibrary.fi/>
- Libraries.fi - <http://www.libraries.fi/>
- Finnish Research Library Association - <http://www.stks.fi/in-english>
- Finnish Library Association - <http://kirjasto-seura.kaapeli.fi/etusivu/seura/international/english>
- Information Specialists - <http://www.tietoasian-tuntijat.fi/fi/cfmldocs/index.cfm?ID=1103>

- Päivikki Karhula