

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION - PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE*

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Abstract: A strong emphasis on publicity in all decision making in the Nordic countries is a deep cultural and historical fact. The basis for this was created in 1763, and it is now more valid than ever. The citizens can and are supposed to control power elites through publicity.

Various types of organisation favour different means of communication. Communication in bureaucratic organisations is different from that in a net or in a matrix organisation. To disseminate enlightenment knowledge differs from the dissemination of instrumental knowledge; both are necessary for decision making. Without understanding about the use of knowledge the communication organisation is watering the Sahara. In spite of huge amounts of knowledge, the soil remains dry.

The professional practice of information specialists and librarians reflects their understanding of publicity and knowledge. Examples from Finland will be presented in the paper.

“The future is not inevitable. We can influence it, if we know what we want it to be” (Handy C. The age of Unreason 1989)

1. Nordic democracy and public knowledge from historical point of view.

Strong emphasis on publicity in all decision making is in the Nordic countries a deep cultural and historical fact. The basis for this was created more than two hundred years ago. In Sweden, Finland was at that time part of Sweden, the freedom of press act was the first in the world - given in 1766. The starting point of the Act was, that citizens can and are supposed to control the power elites through publicity. The publicity of parliamentary documents is connected with this fight of citizens to know and influence the decisions. The citizens can and are supposed to control power elites through publicity. As early as in 1908 nine years before Finland gained independence libraries got the right to get this type of material free of charge to guarantee that the right to know will be fulfilled.

* Paper delivered at the 63rd IFLA General Conference, Amsterdam, August 31- September 5, 1997

Nowadays the content of the Nordic democracy is more and more labelled by the idea of a citizens society.

A citizens' society is a society that is regarded as legitimate by citizens who possess all rights therein. It is this aspect regarding society as legitimate - that keeps up a large number of autonomous institutions (independent) and organisations like schools and libraries.

First and foremost, a citizens' society is a society where the status of citizen is common. The status of citizen includes certain basic rights, such as equality before the law, the right to vote, the right to social security, the right to education and the right to knowledge.

The concept of citizen enables the elimination of one apparent dichotomy, the dichotomy between positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom means freedom from some obligations, whereas positive freedom means an attempt to define the contents of a person's life - what life should be like. The individual has opportunities to make life look like their own life. They have similar possibilities to get knowledge. It leaves open whether people use their freedom or not.

On the other hand, citizens are required to behave responsibly, to take responsibility. Our democratic process requires that citizens have an insight into society's affairs at both state and municipal levels. People are supposed to influence and take part in society in different ways: by elections, by acting, by educating themselves, etc. All this needs the practical, the real possibility of getting information and cultural products according to individual needs. This is solved by free access to both public and scientific libraries. Public libraries nowadays carry minutes of the municipal bodies as well as information on local environmental questions and other matters of public interest. And of course novels, films and music records. And, for instance, the Parliament and the Parliament Library in Finland provide, within 24 hours after decisions are made, the content of those decisions on the Internet. At this time in Finland, most libraries have Internet connections.

2. Decision making and knowledge

Various types of organisations favour different means of communication. Communication in a bureaucratic organisation is different from that in a net or in a matrix organisation. To disseminate enlightenment knowledge differs from the dissemination of instrumental knowledge; both are necessary for decision making.

Since the 1960's, instrumental knowledge especially is easy to disseminate. Instrumental knowledge is often presented in simple numeric form, as so called

facts. In the dissemination of this kind of information, the new technology is especially useful and in this area there is a large potential for self-service.

The dissemination of enlightenment knowledge sets demanding requirements for information specialists. This means, that e.g. from numerical data, various analyses must be made. And different types of information should be analysed and reformed by intellectual work into knowledge. Useful tips are an in example of this. This type of knowledge does not necessarily aim at direct application but it is necessary for understanding causal relationships and for evaluation of the direction and the consequences of decision making.

3. Right to know - but whose and why

Without understanding about the use of knowledge, the communication organisation is watering the Sahara. In spite of huge amounts of knowledge, the soil remains dry.

Civil servants, who know why it is important to inform citizens, disseminate information. Information specialists, who know why information is so important for a proper functioning of a society, disseminate information, proud of their profession. Finally the users of information that know their right to knowledge want information and are able to use it.

In the Nordic countries, both public and scientific libraries are publicly funded. Both public and scientific libraries are open for everybody. This is the Nordic model for libraries. A vital principle is that scientific libraries, as well as other libraries, are open to everybody, not only for university staff or students. One does not need any recommendations to be a user of a scientific library. Private collections and private libraries have no significance in the overall policy. In Finland we have altogether 1,312 libraries, and only 5 million people. In other words, about 3,800 people have one library. Not too bad at all for fulfilling the right to know. The slogan is not sufficient, one has to have real possibilities of obtaining material.

Everyone has to have the equal possibility to use libraries which are full of knowledge. If you do not have this possibility you are unable to be the master of your life and to be a citizen with rights and responsibilities. You can not follow the laws, you can not influence on the content of the law, you can not criticise the law, if you do not know the law. Democratic society and citizens are unable to act without freedom of knowledge without freedom to know.

Public libraries and scientific libraries have very close contacts with each others in Nordic countries. This co-operation has a very long tradition. For almost 60 years

we have had this network. In other words, we had a functioning network long before the concept of network as it is understood today.

4. Two examples

A. The decision making and working of Parliament

The decision making and working of Parliament is recorded in the parliamentary documents. The library of Parliament has been responsible for the general availability of the documents and for giving information on parliamentary business since the beginning of the century as was mentioned above. From December 1995 this information has also been provided via the Internet. The first form of dissemination was paper, then microfilms and now electronic dissemination. The information about parliamentary business on the Internet comprises:

- parliamentary documents in full text since 1991, covering government bills, committee reports and statements, written and oral questions, and private members bills. Information retrieval by the title of the item or by free terms. Retrievals can also be made by the name of the MP.
- debates of plenary sittings since 1994. Search by the name of the MP or by free terms.
- references to parliamentary procedures since 1989. The progress of a Government bill, a motion or a question can be followed by searching the item titles of parliamentary matters, by subject headings, or by a given date on the screen . The procedure screen links to the full text screens of the item in question, even covering the speeches of the members and the responses of Parliament.
- the voting behaviour of an MP in a given matter since 1996: the positive, negative or abstaining response of an MP, as well as the government and the opposition. Votes by parties, sexes or electoral districts is also given. Links to voting behaviour open up from the parliamentary procedure screen.

The Internet database also give personal data of the MPs elected in the latest general election. The personal data screen links to the speeches of the MP in the plenary sittings, to the initiatives and questions.

B. Valtipa - Network

A few words now about the network of information management for the Council of State, Parliament and National Archive. All the information management personnel of the ministries, Parliament's library and National Archives are

involved in the Valtipa. All professional groups such as archivists, librarians, information specialists, information service secretaries and information service managers are represented. The areas of co-operation are:

- organisation of the common information environment of the Council of State
- promotion of the common use of the information resources by using common rules
- development and maintenance of self-services and network services
- development of the standards and working methods of records management
- development of common information systems
- joint procurement, e.g. books, magazines, CD-ROM products, hardware and software
- data bank agreements
- development of new services and
- training.

A Valtipa brochure is available.

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