**Managing Norwegian public libraries as civil public spheres: recent controversies**

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**Abstract**

Purpose: This article contains a theoretically inspired discussion of recent Norwegian controversies related to the management of public library space as a civil public sphere.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article engages with theories of civil public spheres, and their application within a Nordic context. The theories are applied in discussions of recent controversies related to the management of Norwegian public libraries as civil public spheres, as represented in professional journals and press articles.

Findings: Through the discussion it becomes apparent that the value of neutrality and librarians’ inclusive practices on part of societal minorities might be conflicting when managing public libraries as civil public spheres.

Originality: The article engages with recent library controversies in Norway and discusses them in light of recent scholarly work on library activism in a Nordic context, as well as recent theorizations of civil public spheres in the Nordic countries. It thus connects ongoing discussions among Norwegian librarians with recent library research and ongoing theorization of civil public spheres within the Nordic model.

**Keywords**: public libraries; Norway; library law; public debate; public sphere; civil sphere; activism; Nordic model; freedom of speech; neutrality; librarianship; democracy

**Introduction**

Neutrality has traditionally been posited as one of the core values of librarianship but has thoroughly been questioned as of lately (Gerolami, 2020; Lankes, 2020; Lewis, 2008; Mathiasson and Jochumsen, 2021, 2022; Wenzler, 2019). This especially holds true in an American context, where many library scholars have more or less abandoned this value for a more activist stand, or a viewpoint on public librarians as radical positive change agents (Lankes, 2016; Mathiasson and Jochumsen, 2021; Wenzler, 2019). In a Nordic context, the notion of activist librarianship has recently emerged as a topic (Bolllerup, 2021; Kann-Rasmussen, 2022; Kann-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2023; Nissen and Kann-Rasmussen, 2022; Sundeen and Blomgren, 2020), and as such a contested one (Aghed, 2022; Sundeen and Blomgren, 2022).

In order to understand why librarians politically and socially engaged practices can be perceived as problematic in a Nordic context, we need to understand the role of the strong and liberal state within the Nordic model (Engelstad *et al*., 2017). Of the Nordic countries, Norway is a particularly interesting case, as the state has a constitutional obligation to secure the infrastructure for freedom of speech (LOV-1814-05-17; NOU 1999:27) and provide positive freedom (Berlin, 2013[1969]) to citizens through culture-, knowledge-, media- and education- policies. The state in Norway plays a key role in facilitating civil public spheres (Larsen, 2016, pp. 11-14).

As of 2014, public libraries are in Norway also expected to provide a space where citizens can come together as a public (Habermas, 1989, p. 27) and engage in public deliberations (Audunson and Evjen, 2017; Larsen, 2018; Larsen *et al*., 2023; Golten, 2019, 2022; Widdersheim *et al.*, 2020; Kawamoto *et al.*, 2022; Koizumi and Larsen, 2022), in that the revised first paragraph of the law states that public libraries are to be arenas for public discussions and debate (LOV 1985-12-20-108; Prop. 135L (2012-2013)).

Although public libraries in Norway are funded through municipal budgets, they have a strong position in that they are regulated through national culture- and library policies, and the law on public libraries (Widdersheim *et al*., 2020). But the decision on actual programming within specific public libraries falls on part of the library director, in line with the liberal principle of arm’s length distance guiding cultural policies within the Nordic Model (Engelstad *et al*., 2017). With the revised library law, public library managers need to edit library programming in line with principles and regulations of free speech. Although public sphere activities within the library space is nothing new in Norway (Frisvold, 2021), and the topic has been researched in LIS for a number of years (Audunson *et al.,* 2019; Vårheim *et al.*, 2019), the revised law has created tensions in that controversial groups, as well as political parties and religious groups, are pushing library directors to allow them to host meetings within the library, and library directors are uncertain on how to interpret the formulation “independent ... arena for public discussions and debate” (Vannes and Hageberg, 2023). Library directors are thus engaged in boundary struggles (Midtbøen *et al.*, 2017) at the fringe of the civil sphere (Alexander, 2006), when managing library space as a public sphere (Habermas, 1989). Due to uncertainties on part of the library directors, there is at present a debate in the Norwegian library field on whether one should establish editorial guidelines for library directors, inspired by existing guidelines for press editors (Gjersdal, 2023; Hageberg, 2023a; Vannes, 2023). As library directors find it difficult to engage in boundary struggles when managing civil public spheres, the autonomy of the library director might be easier to carry if being able to navigate via some guidelines developed by fellow managers, the argument goes.

In this article, I will engage with a number of such inclusion-exclusion controversies, as they have been represented in Norwegian press media and library professional journals. I will discuss how the public library is interpreted as a civil public sphere by actors engaged in library debates. Before getting into these empirical realities of actual controversies, I will present the theoretical framework to be employed in discussing these cases.

**Nordic civil public spheres and pro-civil states**

Jeffrey Alexander has theorized the civil sphere as a “world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time … It relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle …” (Alexander, 2006, p. 4). This sphere has at its core a set of binary cultural codes separating the sacred from the profane, the pure from the impure, the civil from the uncivil, manifested in motives (active, autonomous, rational etc. vs passive, dependent, irrational etc.), relations (open, trusting, critical etc. vs secretive, suspicious, deferential etc.), and institutions (rule regulated, law, equality etc. vs arbitrary, power, hierarchy etc.) (Alexander, 2066, pp. 57-59). Social movements act as civil translators and seek via narratives and performances to expand the civil sphere and transform the core groups perception of their motives and relations from uncivil to civil. Boundary struggles are a constant element of the civil sphere, as for Alexander, “civil society is never an accomplishment that has achieved final form, but rather an ongoing project” (Kivisto and Sciortino, 2015, p. 22).

An important adaptation of the theory within a Nordic context has been to theorize the state as pro-civil (Alexander *et al*., 2019; Engelstad and Larsen, 2019; Enroth and Henriksson, 2019) rather than non-civil, as it was originally conceptualized within the US context, along such spheres as religion, the market, and the family (Alexander, 2006). In the Nordic countries, the state is supporting such organizations as political parties and voluntary associations at arm’s length and through that acting as both strong and pro-civil. Furthermore, the state is omnipresent in the Nordic culture- and media sectors as a key provider of facilitating inputs to the civil sphere (Engelstad and Larsen, 2019). The state is in the Nordic countries active in supporting physical public sphere (Habermas, 1989) arenas where actors can engage in discussions (Larsen, 2018; Larsen *et al*., 2023), which as of 2014 is an explicit part of the societal mission of Norwegian public libraries (LOV 1985-12-20-108; Prop. 135L (2012-2013)).

Semi-autonomous Nordic civil spheres is supported by the state through various policies designed to facilitate arenas where citizens can convene, speak truth to power and make sure the state remains pro-civil. Such policies has in Norway an anchoring in the Constitution, as it is stated in the paragraph on freedom of speech (Article 100), that “[t]he authorities of the state shall create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse” (LOV-1814-05-17). The state is thus obliged to deliver facilitating inputs to semi-autonomous civil public spheres (Engelstad and Larsen, 2019) via direct and indirect policies. But the state should not intervene in artistic or editorial decisions by managers regulating such public spaces. The liberal principle of arm’s length distance to such decisions on part of the state does not only provide freedom to managers, but also creates uncertainty on how to manage public spaces in accordance with national laws. As can be seen through the following empirical section, managing such spaces has complicated the role of library managers.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Controversies over library neutrality and the management of a civil public sphere**

Following the revised law on public libraries, there have been many discussions among librarians on how best to manage their societal mission as “… an independent meeting place and arena for public discussions and debates” (LOV 1985-12-20-108”). Several of these have been related to whether public libraries should host events by far-right political groups, either in closed or open meetings. The controversies are related to such groups wanting to use the libraries as a space for their meetings, and library directors being uncertain in their interpretation of the revised law (Golten, 2022; Vannes and Hageberg, 2023). Two such cases have been related to the group *Stopp islamiseringen av Norge (SIAN)* (Stop the Islamification of Norway).

*SIAN and Kristiansand public library*

In December 2013, the organization sent a request to Kristiansand public library for using the library space to host a public meeting on the topic “Islam – a threat?”. The meeting was to take place at night after library staffed hours but be open to the public. The format was set to a 45-minute lecture by the leader of the organization, followed by Q&A. The request to host this event was turned down by the library director, on the grounds that the “purpose of the organization and the format of the proposed information meeting, do not coincide with the values underlining the work of Kristiansand municipality and public library” (Sellevold, 2014). The library director also stated that the city manager and the culture director at the municipality supported her decision (Sellevold, 2014).

SIAN disputed the decision and filed a complaint to the culture board in the municipality, where five members of the board voted in support of the library director, and three voted in favor of the organization (Uleberg, 2014a). A representative from the nationalist party The Democrats later filed an interpellation to the mayor, asking whether the mayor could guarantee that SIAN, as a legal organization, in the future would be granted the same right as other lawful organizations to use municipal public spaces. This case was discussed in the city council, and it obtained a majority support, as all of the conservative parties supported the representative (Uleberg, 2014b). The mayor (Conervative Party) stated that the library director cannot deny SIAN or any other organization access to the library space based on discrimination, but that she is free to decide who gets to host meetings in the library space (Sundsdal and Møllen, 2014).

A month later, the library director informed that she had invited the leader of the organization to a future panel discussion on religion and freedom of speech (Sellevold *et al*., 2014). This meeting took place in the fall of 2014, moderated by the political editor of the local regional newspaper(Undlien, 2015). Even so, the leader of the organization was not satisfied with only being part of a panel. He still wanted SIAN to be granted access to host their own meeting in the library space. The organization kept on applying for using the library space for an information meeting but was turned down by the library director. The representative from The Democrats filed a new interpellation, and the case was once again debated in the city council, on whether the politicians should be able to instruct the library director to grant them access to the library space. A majority voted against such an instruction, but now both the mayor and the deputy mayor voted in favor, in an attempt to get this thing over with and being able to move on. The library director, on her part, said that they had already invited the organization to a debate, and that the organization is not important enough to be granted access to the library time and again (Ihme, 2015).

The leader of the organization continued to dispute the decision made by the library director and filed new complaints to the municipality, the country governor, and the civil ombudsman. Finally, after three years and three complaints to the civil ombudsman, the ombudsman stated that the library should reconsider its decision, in that it is not sufficient to deny a request based on the values of the organization being counter to those of the municipality and the library, which was the original reason for turning down the application. The ombudsman also made clear that the library is free to exercise influence on the format of a particular meeting, and that it is free to deny applications for meetings that is not suited for promoting public discussion and debate (Sivilombudet, 2016).

After the decision from the ombudsman, the library director granted SIAN access to host the meeting “Islam – a threat?” at the library, given that SIAN invite an independent moderator and an opponent, and that the utterances performed during the event should be lawful (Fidje, 2016). Even though the leader of the organization initially did not accept the offer, as he believed that the library director was giving unfair restrictions on the event (NRK Sørlandet, 2016), he later went along and proposed the politician from The Democrats as a neutral moderator. This was again initially turned down by the library director, as she believed that he was not a neutral moderator (Reite, 2016). However, later on she accepted him as the moderator, and SIAN managed to get a pastor who had written a book on islamophobia as an opponent (Eikeland, 2017). Approximately 60 people showed up to the event, including two police officers, the library director, and the leader of a local Muslim organization. The latter received the most questions in the Q&A, as he posed the first question to SIAN (Martinsen, 2017).

This three year long struggle between the leader of SIAN, the library director, the municipality, local politicians, the county, and the civil ombudsman became an important event for how to interpret the revised law on public libraries, and its emphasis on libraries as an arena for public conversation and debate. The evaluation from the ombudsman, and how this was interpreted by the library director in relation to the SIAN-event, later served as informal guidelines for other library directors evaluating applications from organizations to host meetings in the library space.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*SIAN and Deichman public library in Oslo*

In 2020, SIAN was once again involved in discussions over access to use the library space, as the organization was granted access to use a branch library (Majorstuen) of Deichman public libraries in Oslo for hosting its annual meeting after library staffed hours. As a consequence, the library received numerous complaints from library patrons who argued they would not feel safe in the library if the organization where to host its meeting there (Golten, 2022, p. 89). This case also got discussed in the press, where representatives from the trade union *Fagforbundet Deichman*, as well as *Fagforbundet Oslo*, argued that such a meeting would make it unsafe for librarians to go to work, and further that the library should not be a place where citizens can present potentially unlawful hate speech (Velle, 2020).

The library director (Skansen, 2020a) argued that the library should be a place for all kinds of speech, referring to the law on public libraries and its’ connection to the paragraph on freedom of speech in the constitution, and further that he cannot turn down applications for using the library space for closed meetings based on the leader of the organization having a prior conviction for hate speech. The library director went on to say that if the leader was to utter such speech during the meeting, he would be reported, but that he cannot censor the organization prior to the meeting.

This case resulted in a discussion on how to manage the library space according to the principles of free speech. Some argued that it is up to the director to curate the library space as a public sphere, and that right-wing hate groups should not be granted access, whether during or after staffed hours (Audunson, 2020a, 2020b; Pihl, 2020; Høimyr, 2020). Others argued that it is important that the public library remains value neutral and don’t exercise censorship on part of groups that might express views uncomfortable for librarians staffing libraries (Frøland, 2020; Letnes, 2020; Lund, 2020; Skansen, 2020b; Undlien *et al*., 2020).

In this particular case, the library director decided to cancel the meeting, due to security issues, both on part of library patrons and SIAN (Borgersrud, 2020). The organization filed a complaint to the municipal government on the library director’s decision of cancellation. The complaint was dismissed, and the municipality stated that the library director is free to cancel a meeting if he fears it will make it difficult to maintain normal activities for other patrons in the library space (Mauno, 2020).[[3]](#footnote-3)

As the organization stated that it wanted to apply to the library again for using the library space for its meetings (Pedersen 2020a), a politician from The Red Party wanted the municipality to make a decision that the library cannot grant access to hateful or racist organizations, but he did not manage to get support from fellow politicians (Pedersen, 2020b). Also, a representative from the trade union *Fagforbundet Deichman* said that she would fight to stop the organization from getting access to use the library for their meetings (Pedersen, 2020c). A few months later, the city council actually decided on a framework regulating who can get access to host meetings in Oslo public libraries. This time, the proposal came from the Labor Party, the Conservative Party, The Liberal Party, The Christian Democrats, The Green Party and The Socialist Left Party, obtaining a majority vote. The guidelines are a moderated version of the original proposal by The Red Party. They do now state that security for library employees, library users, and groups hiring library space must be maintained during events, that it is important that the library employees have a safe and secure working environment, and that security issues related to possible threats and violence against employees should be considered when evaluating applications for using the library space for meetings (Pedersen, 2020d). According to a representative from the Socialist Left Party, this decision makes clear that the library can turn down applications from actors that do not contribute to an enlightened debate (as was stated by the civil ombudsman in relation to the SIAN case in Kristiansand), as well as closed meetings that will interfere with the security of employees and library users (Pedersen, 2020d).

*Harry Potter Nights*

In addition to controversies over right-wing political groups, there has also in Norway been controversies over whether librarians should promote books by J.K. Rowling due to her stands on LGBTQ+ issues. An internal Facebook discussion among librarians on whether to continue with Harry Potter Nights in the library due to Rowling’s perceived transphobic views, got picked up by journalists in a major newspaper (Kallelid, 2021a). Librarians and library directors interviewed by a journalist expressed different views, where some voiced concerns whether a continued promotion of Rowling’s books would scare some from continuing to read books and visit the library, while others were concerned of a tendency where one is not able to separate between an author’s views and the books as fiction (Kallelid, 2021a).

The Minister of Culture entered the debate and expressed concerns if librarians are not able to separate between the author and her art works, and the leader of the library advocacy organization *Norsk Bibliotekforening* said that librarians should separate between one’s personal political views as citizens and one’s professional practice as a librarian (Lindblad, 2021). Similarly, the leader of the trade union *Bibliotekarforbundet* (Bergli, 2021) and the director of the main library of Deichman in Oslo (Lie, 2021) stated that librarians’ personal views should not influence their professional work, but they also defended the librarians’ freedom of speech in expressing their personal opinions in the public debate. A library professor also reminded librarians that their job, as specified in the law on public libraries, is to promote a diverse offering of literature to the public, and that librarians’ personal views should be irrelevant, as librarians should make sure the library is an institution for democracy and freedom of speech (Audunson, 2021). Also newspaper commentators and editors took part in the debate, expressing concerns if librarians do not do their job in promoting freedom of speech (Gerhardsen, 2021), or separate between an author’s views and the books as works of fiction (Kallelid, 2021b; Dagens Næringsliv, 2021).

The debate went on for some weeks. Everybody seemed to agree that one should not ban Rowling’s books from libraries, but there were diverging opinions on whether librarians should also consider the feelings of such minorities as transpeople when programming library events.

*The Red Party and Ulstein public library*

Another controversy has been related to a local representative from The Red Party applying for permission to use the public library in Ulstein for an open meeting where a member of parliament from the same political party where to give a lecture on social inequality in Norway. The request was turned down by the library director on the grounds that the political party was responsible for the event, and that they had not planned for non-party members to have any official role during the event. The argument on part of the library director was that he did not want the library space to be used for one-sided political communication, arguing that such programming was not in line with the law on public libraries. This stance was supported by a range of library directors (Espevik and Olsson, 2021; Kifle and Mejdal, 2021), but criticized by a press editor (Lerø, 2021), a library professor (Audunson, 2022; Kifle and Mejdal, 2021), a librarian and former party member (Kifle and Mejdal, 2021) and a newspaper commentator (Rossavik 2023), all arguing that there is not a requirement to have a balance of viewpoints in every program in the library, but that this should be achieved over a certain period of time, and that the library directors should take an active part in making this happen.[[4]](#footnote-4) The politician who was to give the lecture proclaimed to have been cancelled for the first time in his life. The municipality responded by letting The Red Party hold its event in the town hall (Espevik and Olsson, 2021).

*A religious group and Lindesnes public library*

In 2022, yet another controversy related to managing the library space in accordance with the library law emerged, as the library director at Lindesnes public library terminated weekly after-hours meetings for a religious group within the library’s cafeteria, stating that open meetings with religious groups with no moderation from the library is incompatible with the law on public libraries (Sand, 2022). The director based her decision on the law on public libraries, which state that public libraries are to be an “… independent meeting place” (LOV 1985-12-20-108) and told a journalist that “if we are to maintain the library space as a neutral space, we have decided that content of a political, religious, or controversial nature should be followed by an open debate moderated by a neutral actor” (Sand, 2022). This practice is in line with the previous case from Kristiansand, where SIAN ended up getting access to the library space given that the session was moderated by an independent actor. As the religious group was meeting after-hours, the director’s decision was disputed by a local politician from the Conservative Party, and the City Manager ended up recommending a compromise where the group could continue to use the cafeteria after-hours, given that the space of the cafeteria be closed off from the library space. Consequently, the space could be regulated like any other space under the administration of the municipality, and not as part of the public library (Buhagen, 2022).

This controversy was also picked up by politicians at the national level where member of parliament and leader of the Christian Democrats formulated a written question to the Minster for Culture and Equality on whether the decision by the library director was in line with the law on public libraires, as such a practice would restrict rather than expand the room for public utterances (Bollestad, 2022). The minister responded by stating that the library directors have editorial freedom and should manage this in accordance with the law on public libraries (Stortinget, 2022).[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Legatum publisher and Deichman public library in Oslo*

In May 2023, Deichman public library in Oslo was once again at the center of a controversy over providing access for right-wing groups to use the library space for meetings. This time, the library director granted an application from the publisher Legatum to hold a press conference in the library related to its release of a Norwegian translation of a book by the French author Renaud Camus, who has coined the term The Great Replacement referring to white Europeans being in danger of being replaced by immigrants, and in particular Muslims. The press conference was to take place in a closed room that the library rent out for external activities. The library director was once again pointing to the constitution and that he cannot censor groups from holding meetings in the library based on what might be uttered during the event. If he was to cancel the event, it would be based on security issues related to employees and patrons (Jonassen *et al*., 2023), similar to the case with the SIAN annual meeting at Deichman.

Also this time the library director ended up cancelling the meeting as an antiracist group had announced a demonstration, which would lead to police presence at the library and undue interference with other activities taking place in the library (Velle, 2023). Prior to the cancellation, trade union representatives from *Fagforbundet Deichman* criticized the library director and argued that he should not continue to let right-wing hate groups use the library space with references to legislation on freedom of speech. Providing access to such groups is counter to everything the library stands for, in terms of democracy and inclusion, they argued, and called on Oslo politicians to come up with frameworks that can empower the library director to turn down applications from such groups to use library space for meeting activities (Dellegård and Alfiler, 2023).

The decision of the library director to cancel the meeting was applauded by the trade union representatives, but criticized by newspaper editors as problematic, in that conspiracy theorists should be met with arguments and not cancellations (Dagbladet, 2023; Lerø, 2023). Also a human rights scholar entered the debate, warning that cancelling events with unpopular groups due to announced demonstrations can lead to “heckler’s veto” (Johnson, 2016; Vasseljen, 2023) guiding library directors decisions on who gets to hold meeting in the public library. She ended up recommending the libraries to develop some guidelines on how to deal with these kinds of events in the future (Hageberg, 2023b).

**Discussion**

The last case brings out in full view the squeeze that library directors face with internal pressure for public libraries to be minority inclusive safe spaces, and outside pressure to be a public space promoting freedom of speech, where any lawful organizations should be welcomed to use the library space to hold meetings. The librarians arguing for cancelling Harry Potter Nights or events by right wing political groups emphasize public libraries as civil sphere (Alexander, 2006) arenas promoting minority inclusive practices and civil sphere expansion. The library directors, human rights and library scholars, newspaper editors and commentators who criticize cancellation discussions within the library field, on the other hand, emphasize public libraries role as public sphere (Habermas, 1989) arenas and spaces for promotion of freedom of speech.

There also seems to be a divide between the trade union for librarians with education within library and information science, *Bibliotekarforbundet*, and librarians organized in *Fagforbundet Deichman*, which do not require formal education for membership. Representatives from the latter were the ones pushing for civil sphere expansive actions, while the leader of the former defended public libraries as neutral arenas. Teachers from the library and information science program at OsloMet also entered the debate in the Rowling case, arguing that the students do learn about freedom of speech and democracy during their studies, pointing to recent classroom discussion of the SIAN case at Deichman Majorstuen (Dahl *et al*., 2021).

As documented through the survey conducted by *Norsk Bibliotekforening,* managing public libraries as public spheres is viewed as a difficult task by library directors (Vannes and Hageberg, 2023). As seen through the cases presented in this article, being independent arenas with a mandate to facilitate public discussion and debate creates tensions when non-civil groups are pushing for access to the library to promote their views. The civil motives and relations (Alexander 2006, p. 57-58) of librarians can thus be in conflict with the library’s role as a promoter of freedom of speech and public sphere discussions.

As independent arenas operating at arm’s length from politicians funding the libraries, library directors have been struggling to establish common practices on how to manage the library space as an arena for public discussion and debate. With the cases discussed in this article, the library directors have gradually gotten more experience in dealing with issues related to the management of public libraries as civil public spheres. From the Kristiansand case, the directors got guidelines from the civil ombudsman (Sivilombudet, 2016), and how the library director ended up hosting the controversial event inspired by these guidelines. With the two cases from Oslo, where right-wing groups first got access to the library before being cancelled, the directors got guidelines regarding security issues being reasons for cancelling meetings with controversial groups. The cases from Ulstein and Lindesnes showed that flexibility on part of local politicians can make for compromises in allowing particular groups to use other municipal spaces for their activities and meetings, if being turned down by library directors. Finally, the J. K. Rowling case demonstrated that librarians have the freedom to express their opinions in mediated public spheres, but that their political leanings should not influence their professional practice as librarians, in order for the library to remain a neutral institution.

Through being regulated by the pro-civil state via library laws and cultural policies, Nordic public libraries are independent, neutral and inclusive institutions, where everyone is welcome, and any kind of lawful literature and utterances in principle is available to the public. As a consequence, it becomes troublesome for librarians if they are explicit on political or social opinions influencing their professional work (Helgason, 2020; Sundeen and Blomgren, 2020; Kann-Rasmussen *et al.,* 2023). Although not hosting meetings by right-wing political groups or not promoting the works of trans-critical authors may seem like a civil activity, prolonging civil solidarity to immigrants and sexual minorities and securing multicultural integration (Alexander, 2006, p. chp. 17), establishing library practices on the premise of supporting the cause of societal minorities and social movements or on political antipathies towards right wing or anti-immigrant groups might result in biases in the offering to the public (Helgason, 2020), and thus a move away from neutrality.[[6]](#footnote-6) If the public library is to remain a neutral and semi-autonomous institution within the Nordic Model, it is vital that citizens have access to all kinds of lawful literature.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Public libraries in the Nordic countries are set up so as to not take sides in political issues dividing the citizenry. Librarians are of course free to express their opinions as citizens and engage in social movements on their free time (as expressed by the leader of *Norsk bibliotekforening* and the head of Deichman main library during the Rowling case), but if activist practices are brought into library space by the professionals, this all-inclusive space might limit its inclusivity. If library managers and librarians base their decisions on issues related to identity politics and contemporary struggles for recognition (Fukuyama, 2019), whether coming from the political left or the political right, their practices run the risk of being entangled in heated polarizing debates on these issues.

**Conclusion**

As seen in the empirical section of this article, there have been many controversies over management of public libraires as civil public sphere since the 2014 law change in Norway. The cases presented point to various options for library directors moving forward. One way to be diverse and simultaneously address contemporary social issues would be to program debates on controversial issues, where library directors curate the debate to make sure more than one side get to present their viewpoints, and that a neutral actor moderates the debate (as was the compromise in the first SIAN case). Another option would be to invite groups with opposing views to have another event in the library if one group (like a political party) wants to host an event with one-sided communication (as was suggested by critics of the library director turning down the application from the political party). As for closed meetings, there is now a practice, with official guidelines in Oslo, that the library director can cancel an event due to security issues and undue interference in normal library activities.[[8]](#footnote-8) But also such a practice will most likely continue to be criticized by scholars, newspaper editors and commentators holding liberal free speech values to be sacred. There is no quick fix regarding guidelines for library directors as free speech actors and editors of library spaces. However, the increasing number of cases discussed in this article, do make up a body of experience and knowledge on which directors can confer when facing similar situations in the future.

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1. The examples discussed are selected based on in-depth knowledge of Norwegian debates on public libraries. They cover the major controversies over management of public libraries as public spheres since the 2014 law change. Each example has been researched through going over hits from case specific search strings in the full text media archive Retriever, in April and May 2023, and the online archive of the library professional journal *Bok og bibliotek* in February 2023. In addition, occasional searches have been conducted in online archives of specific newspapers while writing up the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 2014, Deichman public library in Oslo and Sølvberget public library in Stavanger also hosted events with right-wing participants, which gained attention in the press and demonstrations from anti-racist groups (Aune and Haugen, 2014; Espeland and Grime, 2014; Schjeide, 2014; Tallerås and Dahl, 2020). As a consequence of these controversies, Deichman initiated a debate in the library on how to interpret the new library law, and who should get access to use the library space for meetings and events (Sørheim, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Oslo, library users can access branch libraries after hours, if they have registered for such access. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Due to these controversies and certain confusion among library directors on how to live up the 2014 library law, *Norsk bibliotekforening* conducted a survey among library directors on these issues. In the results, reported in the professional library journal *Bok og bibliotek*, 45 percent said that they are against and 27 percent uncertain on whether politicians should get to have meetings without opposition in the public library, while 28 percent think it is fine to facilitate such meetings (Vannes and Hageberg, 2023, p. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the survey among library directors, they were asked whether religious groups should have open meetings in the library space. 44 percent responded no, 26 percent yes, and 31 percent were uncertain (Vannes and Hagberg, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In Sweden there have been some incidents where librarians have refused to purchase or lend out right-wing or anti-immigrant literature upon patron’s requests. These incidents have been deemed unlawful by the Parliamentary Ombudsman, as the Swedish library act (SFS 2013:801) states that libraires “must work for the development of a democratic society by contributing to the dissemination of knowledge and free formation of opinions”, leaving no room for librarians to refuse patrons access to lawful literature (Helgason, 2020; Sundeen and Blomgren, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is in fact built into all the Nordic library laws: The Swedish law on libraries states that libraries “must work for the development of a democratic society by contributing to the dissemination of knowledge and free formation of opinions” (SFS 2013:801). The Norwegian law on public libraries state that “the task of public libraries is to promote the spread of information, education and other cultural activities through active dissemination and by making books and other media available for the free use of all the inhabitants of Norway” (LOV 1985-12-20-108). The Finnish law on libraries require public libraries to promote “equal opportunities for everyone to access education and culture” and further to promote “active citizenship, democracy and freedom of expression” (1492/2016). The Danish law on public libraries states that libraries should promote information, education, and cultural activity by making various material available, and that religious, moral or political viewpoints should not influence the decisions on what material to make available to the public (LBK nr 100 af 30/01/2013). And the Icelandic law on libraries states that “The role of libraries is to equalize people’s access to culture and knowledge [and that] [t]heir holdings shall emphasize the greatest possible variety in the viewpoints represented” (2012 No 150 28 December). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. However, this does not seem to apply when non-controversial groups use of library space interferes with normal activities at the library, as the director decided to close down the entire Deichman main library for a whole day due to the Government hosting the Crown Princess’ 18th birthday celebration within the library (Nielsen, 2022; Pedersen, 2022). Representatives from the two trade unions *Fagforbundet Deichmanklubben* and *Bibliotekarforbundet Deichman* criticized the decision and stated that this is most likely due to the problematic demand placed on the library by Oslo Municipality that it must have a yearly income of 12.8 million NOKs because the realization of the building surpassed the original budget by considerable numbers (Dellegård & Aarseth, 2022; Ighanian 2022). Deichman received a payment of 961 000 NOK from the Government for this particular event (Kristiansen, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)