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To cite this article: Maciej Liguzinski, Terje Colbjørnsen & Kim Tallerås (18 Sep 2024): Perceptions of e-lending in Scandinavian libraries: tension and harmony between institutional logics, International Journal of Cultural Policy, DOI: [10.1080/10286632.2024.2402902](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2402902)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2402902>



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Published online: 18 Sep 2024.



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Perceptions of e-lending in Scandinavian libraries: tension and harmony between institutional logics

Maciej Liguzinski^a, Terje Colbjørnsen^b and Kim Tallerås^a

^aDepartment of Archivistics, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway;

^bDepartment of Communication and Culture, BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

This study examines e-lending dynamics in Scandinavian public libraries, by exploring the relationship between libraries and publishing houses. We ask how representatives of both fields perceive the public library's role. Public libraries and publishers have traditionally served different roles in the book sphere: the library as a key cultural policy institution providing access to information and culture, and the publishers as involved in the production of books, operating on commercial premises. This relationship is affected by the change from ownership to licensing of digital book collections, which occurs along with changes on the national book markets. As a theoretical and analytical tool, the study uses the institutional logics perspective to explore the relations between different perceptions. We argue that this relationship can be illuminated through the dynamics of public service logic, market logic and digital logic. The study is empirically based on 26 in-depth interviews with representatives of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish major libraries and trade publishers. Findings indicate that the relationship is nuanced and multifaceted, more than if it relied on a simple opposition between the public and the market. Both libraries and publishers share a common understanding of public service and market logics; however, they differ in perceptions of library's role which is amplified by digital logic. The study also indicates that e-lending dynamics are influenced by cultural policies but with different outcomes in the three countries.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 April 2024



Accepted 6 September 2024

KEYWORDS

E-lending; digital book; public library; publisher; institutional logics

Introduction

Lending of e-books and audiobooks has long been a part of public library services across the globe (Eblida 2023; Whitney and de Castell 2017). Unlike printed books, which libraries lend out in accordance with the first sale doctrine (in the US) or exhaustion of rights (in Europe), digital books are subject to the control of rightsholders such as book publishers and they are made available to public libraries through a myriad of complex licensing schemes (Band and Butler 2022; Giblin, Kennedy, Charlotte, et al. 2019; Giblin, Kennedy, Weatherall, et al. 2019; Liguzinski 2023; Mezei 2022; Perzanowski and Schultz 2016). The transition from ownership to licensing has made public libraries reliant on an ongoing relationship with publishing houses, who, typically via intermediating companies – aggregators – decide on the availability, licensing terms and pricing of digital books (Giblin and Weatherall 2015).

CONTACT Maciej Liguzinski  maciejli@oslomet.no  Department of Archivistics, Library and Information Science, Oslo Metropolitan University, P.O. Box 4, St. Olavs plass, Oslo 0130, Norway

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The growing significance of digital books highlights the changing nature of the relationship between public libraries and publishing houses, two institutions that have cooperated in the trade book industry for centuries. Libraries depend on publishers to provide the books that still constitute a vital part of a public library's services, alongside other media and various cultural events (Edquist, Audunson, and Huvila 2023). However, the digitalisation of the book supply chain, visible in production, distribution and consumption, has led to conflicts among the industry stakeholders, resulting in what John B. Thompson (2021) calls 'book wars'. Similarly, one could talk about 'e-book wars' (Grøn and Balling 2016; Worsøe-Schmidt 2019) or 'e-lending wars', as publishers have been concerned that an unrestricted and free-of-charge lending of digital books will undermine their own and their authors' revenues (Clark and Phillips 2020, 49). In many countries, publishers have employed restrictive licensing terms, high pricing and embargos on digital titles, preventing libraries from providing access to popular books (Feldman 2019; Liguzinski 2023; Sisto 2022). In response, libraries have been engaged in advocacy initiatives and lobbying campaigns to make the case for creating sustainable conditions for digital lending. These e-book wars have had many fronts. For example, one could mention here attempts to guarantee fair e-book lending conditions by means of state bills in several American states (Haight and Hickman Pierson 2023; Minow and Courtney 2022) or the case *Hachette v. Internet Archive*, propelled by the controversies around lending of e-books during COVID-19 pandemic via the model of Controlled Digital Lending (Wang and Lipinski 2023).

This article examines e-lending in Scandinavian public libraries. In this context, the public library and its available resources generally rely on the municipal budgets. This vulnerable position of single library systems in relation to market actors has led to the emergence of institutional e-lending setups, where cultural policy actors (e.g. national libraries or municipalities' lobby organisations) have, in different ways, negotiated with the publishers, while the librarians have been in charge of curation of digital collections (Liguzinski and Kann-Rasmussen 2024). At the same time, limitations on digital book accessibility and availability, are challenging for an institution whose core task is to work with literature and reading promotion and increase the consumption of books (Rydbeck, Larsen, and Rasmussen 2022). In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, public libraries have been important cultural institutions. Historically, they were formed in the context of the Enlightenment, and further developed within the Nordic Cultural Model and in accordance with the principle of democratisation of culture (Audunson, Jochumsen, and Rydbeck 2022; Duelund 2003, 2008). Today, libraries are present in every municipality, publicly funded, and thanks to the free-of-charge principle, they provide access to information and culture to every citizen, as well as serve as an infrastructure for the public sphere (Audunson et al. 2020).

Research on e-lending in Scandinavia indicates that the advent of digital books in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish public libraries has been characterised by both conflict and cooperation between the libraries and publishers, together with the involvement of different policy actors (Bergström et al. 2017; Bjerke and Halvorsen 2020; Colbjørnsen 2017; Grøn and Balling 2016; Liguzinski 2023; Wallin 2019; Worsøe-Schmidt 2019). However, little is known about how libraries and publishers view each other's roles in the context of e-lending, especially the role of the library as an institution providing access to digital books. The main research question of this study is how representatives of major Danish, Norwegian and Swedish libraries and publishers perceive the role of the public library in the context of e-lending. To explore this question, we employ the institutional logics perspective (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012) to shed light on the dynamics between different assumptions, values, beliefs and rules across three similar but also different national settings.

Background

Public libraries and publishing houses are institutions which form part of the chain of actors that bring a book from author to reader. They can be seen as intermediaries, as conceptualised in Robert Darnton's communications circuit for books (Darnton 1982), where the library is placed close to

readers, indicating its role as a gateway to access to the books, whereas a publisher is placed alongside authors, suggesting its close alignment with the producers of texts. At the same time, libraries and publishers serve rather different roles in this circuit. Fundamentally, most publishers are commercial enterprises, while public libraries are publicly funded. These somewhat simplified positions (commercial vs. public) mirror the supposed opposition, or balancing act, between commerce and culture that characterise much of the scholarly and professional discourse on the book industry (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 1982; Miller 2006; Striphas 2009; Thompson 2010) and the cultural industries more broadly (Caves 2000; Hesmondhalgh 2019, 33). In our study, we aim to go beyond simple dichotomies and explore the tensions between multiple logics that cut across the library-publisher relationship. In other words, our approach opens the possibility that publishers can, for example, rely on ideas and notions that are foremost associated with public institutions, while libraries can function as market actors.

There is scant research literature on the library-publisher relationship in the trade book sector, but a useful account can be found in the *Oxford Handbook of Publishing*. Holzman and Lippincott (2019) picture a rather harmonious and symbiotic library-publisher relationship, as both actors benefit from each other. They note, nevertheless, the challenges caused by the digital revolution and the transformation of the library's role (Holzman and Lippincott 2019). The strain on the library-publisher relationship can be found in research on e-lending in academic publishing, as in the study of Zhang and Eschenfelder (2023). Their library informants describe their relationship with e-book vendors as contractual but often associate it with positive experiences. On the other hand, most university presses see libraries as customers. Even though some of these findings are transferable to the public library sector, we note that the premises for academic publishing are different from those for trade book publishing (Hyland 2015). The market for academic literature is highly globalised and many academic publishers rely almost exclusively on purchases made by institutions. Additionally, the content of digital literature handled in academic libraries is primarily the reporting of research and of such a nature that it has sparked significant sector-specific discussions related to excessively high prices, open access, and the overall role of libraries in scholarly communication (Björk 2021; Burns 2014; Rawat and Meena 2014).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to provide a more in-depth analysis of public library vs. trade publisher relationship. We conceptualise the public library and the publishing house as institutions influenced by different institutional logics relevant in the context of e-lending. Institutional logics are used as an analytical tool and metatheoretical framework for analysing the interrelationships among institutions, individuals and organisations in social systems (Thornton and Ocasio 2008; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). A concept of institutional logic builds on the neo-institutional theory in organisational studies, and was first introduced by Friedland and Alford (1991), and then developed by Patricia H. Thornton and William Ocasio, who defined an institutional logic as 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 804).

Logics are 'concretely experienced and made durable through practices' (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017, 510; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). Employing an institutional logics perspective means identifying an institution at a particular level of analysis, and the organising principles of those institutions that have 'a certain degree of unifying coherence' (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017, 511). The institutional logics perspective is applied by means of ideal types (a concept loaned from Max Weber), which are the analytical abstract representations of the logics, not the institutional logics themselves. As put forward by Thornton, Jones, and Kury (2005, 131), the ideal types are theoretical models that 'offer hypotheses that can be tested by examining the similarities and dissimilarities between the institutional logics' ideal types and the independent and dependent variables presented in the cases'.

Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury (2017), in their overview of advances in the institutional logics perspective, note that researchers have employed many ontological approaches for this metatheory.

In the following study, we develop the logics' ideal types in an inductive and abductive manner, meaning that they are identified against the backdrop of the empirical material, but then theoretically grounded and furthermore, again, used in the analysis of the empirical material. Applying institutional logics to cross-national empirical material is in line with the argument of Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury (2017) and Friedland and Alford (1991) that the comparative method is especially fruitful, as it enables seeing and contrasting the outcome of institutional logics across institutional orders, in this case in qualitative and cross-country analysis.

Data and methods

Empirical material

The study is based on 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish organisations involved in e-lending, from both the public library and the trade publishing field. The informants were chosen by a strategic sampling selection, as they represent institutions involved in the development of e-lending models in Scandinavian countries (Liguzinski 2023). In addition, representatives of libraries and publishers' associations in Denmark, Norway and Sweden were interviewed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the respective fields' perceptions. The one-to-one interviews were conducted by the first author, online and in person, in the autumn and winter of 2022/2023. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, mainly by a specialised transcribing company to guarantee the quality of the data material, which is in three Scandinavian languages. The interviews were conducted with informed consent and the quotations used in the findings were approved by the informants. The research project has been approved by Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

When selecting informants, we approached representatives of libraries who work with e-lending or collection management/e-media in general (besides books, newspapers, music or films). Similarly, the publishers' representatives are editors working with digital sales and digital strategies or who explicitly work with sales for public libraries (see Table 1 for a complete overview). Such a sample of informants brings certain limitations to this study. As the interviewees represent the major organisations in both fields, the perspectives and experiences of the minor and small ones are not included. However, this selection of the informants assumes that the scale of e-lending is most substantial for these major ones, so they also have the most experience and at stake in this matter.

Table 1. Overview of interviewed organisations (Table by authors).

| | Denmark (D) | Norway (N) | Sweden (S) |
|---------------|--|--|---|
| Library (L) | DL1: Big city library DL2: Medium city library DL3: Medium city library DLS: Danish public libraries' e-lending service eReolen | NL1: Big city library NL2: Medium city library NL3: Medium city library NLA: Norwegian Library Association | SL1: Big city library SL2: Big city library SL3: Medium city library SL4: Medium city library SLA: Swedish Library Association |
| Publisher (P) | DP1: Large publisher DP2: Large publisher DP3: Large publisher DPA: Danish Publishers Association | NP1: Large publisher NP2: Large publisher NP3: Medium-sized publisher NPA: Norwegian Publishers Association | SP1: Large publisher SP2: Large publisher SP3: Medium-sized publisher SP4: Medium-sized publisher SPA: Swedish Publishers Association |

The interviewed organisations are anonymised. However, we provide short description to explain their position in the field. For libraries: "big city library" refers to a library in a municipality that has over 500 thousand inhabitants. "Medium city library" refers to a library in a municipality that has between 100 and 500 thousand inhabitants. For publishers: there is no clearly established distinction between "large" and "medium-sized" publishers. According to Coser, Kadushin, and Powell (1982), these characteristics may depend on the publishers' title output, annual sales or workforce size. In this case, we define the "large" publisher as being ranked in the top 3–4 biggest trade publishers in industry trade statistics, whereas "medium-sized" as ranked under the top-tier but having a broad catalogue of publications and considerable share in the market.

The questions posed to representatives of libraries and publishers differed slightly, as the first group were asked about the daily operation of e-lending, as well as particularities and challenges connected to digital books in libraries. Further questions concerned the librarians' view of publishers, authors and the cultural policy context in their respective national settings. The publishers were asked about the general impact of digitalisation on the book industry, as well as the role of libraries for the publishers in both analogue and digital context. Further questions concerned the publishers' strategies towards libraries in digital distribution, as well as the policy context.

Institutional logics

To apply the institutional logics perspective, we coded the empirical material, which involved several rounds of organising, categorising and thematic analysis of data, similar to the approach suggested by Terry et al. (2017). After familiarisation, and an open coding process conducted by all three authors, we developed five codes: users, profit, policy (meaning involvement of the state and a legal framework), culture (meaning the question of genre, curation, authors, etc.) and digitality (meaning applications, services and practices that are based on digital technologies). These codes were further used to re-read the empirical material through the lens of institutional logics, tracing patterns of values, assumptions, beliefs and rules prevalent in the informants' accounts of e-lending. Finally, we refined the codes and identified themes by outlining three logics that are central to the publisher-library relationship: public service logic, market logic and digital logic. In line with Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury (2017, 546), the ideal types are 'simplified, synthetic, analytical, abstract representations of institutional logics, based on empirical observations.'

While the first two logics are firmly grounded in other theoretical considerations, digital logic emerged inductively from the material in the sense that informants evoked ideas about what digital technologies imply or afford. Consequently, the public service logic refers to instances where the informants link activities and institutions to ideas and notions of public good, comprehensiveness of offering and access, together with fulfilling a certain societal mission. Commonly, the notion of public service refers to government-enabled activities in general or to the remit and mission of public service broadcasting media (Lee, Oakley, and Naylor 2011; Moe 2011). This has been developed in public management studies as a conceptual framework by Osborne (2020). Our application here is more specific, referring to ideas about the values and missions of the public library. The public service logic here implies both being financed by public funding and being anchored in a cultural policy context, stipulating certain tasks to fulfil, such as enlightenment, popular education, democratisation of culture, supporting marginalised and vulnerable social groups. The public service logic closely connects to how the public library provides comprehensive cultural offerings free-of-charge and open to all citizens. As such, being funded by taxes, serves as a counterpoint to the market logic (defined below). One example of the public service logic comes from an informant who states that 'libraries should not resemble commercial services since a commercial service will always try to lead you to where it is most profitable for them'.

The market logic refers to instances where the informants invoke directly or indirectly ideas and notions of increasing profit and building a competitive position in the market. Thornton (2004) and further Thornton, Jones, and Kury (2005) have conceptualised market logic in the investigation of institutional change in American higher education publishing, illustrated by the transformation from an old editorial logic to a new one, market logic. The latter is characterised by such features as, among others, seeing publishing as a business (not a profession), building a competitive position as a corporation (not prestige of house) and increasing profit (rather than sales, as before). An example of the market logic is an informant who states that 'libraries come more into direct competition with booksellers in the digital rather than printed book lending'.

The third logic, the digital, also refers to instances where the informants make references to what digital technologies imply or afford and reflect the technological advancements caused by both digitisation and digitalisation (2016) of media production and distribution. In our context, we apply it

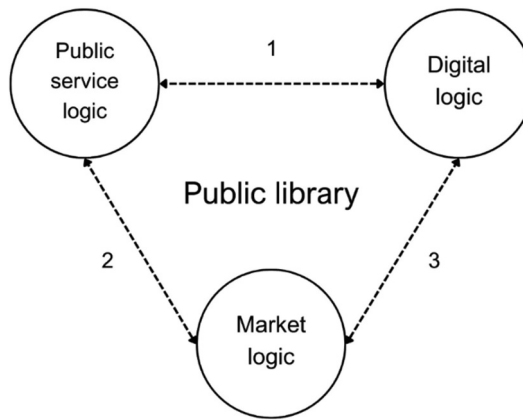


Figure 1. The relations between the three institutional logics, used in structuring the analysis (Figure by authors).

to instances where an informant talks about digitality levelling the physical constraints of analogue media formats and promising seamless reproduction and easy accessibility of cultural goods. An example is an informant stating that ‘there is markedly less work involved in digital lending than in the physical, that goes without saying’.

After coding by institutional logics, the authors organised representative interview quotes to illustrate and elucidate emerging themes. The objective was to investigate how various institutional logics come into play in the actors’ accounts. Our analysis follows along three lines, as indicated in [Figure 1](#): First, we look at the relation between Public service logic and Digital logic (1); next, we examine the Public service logic in relation to Market logic (2); finally, we analyse the relation between Digital logic and Market logic (3).

[Figure 1](#) illustrates our analytical approach, showing the relations between the three logics not as uni-directional or dichotomous, but as multi-directional and multi-dimensional. Crucially, [Figure 1](#) also conveys the position of the public library institution in between the three logics, rather than as separate from the logics of the market or the digital.

Analysis and discussion

In the following, we analyse and discuss the library-publisher relationship in four parts. Firstly, in three sections, we present the perceptions of the public library’s mission along the dimensions outlined in [Figure 1](#). The findings are presented in a country-independent way, so that, for example, the library from Denmark’s perception may be confronted with, for instance, the Swedish publisher. In the fourth part of the analysis, we present and discuss an overview of dominating perceptions, but in a country-dependent way.

Public service logic and digital logic

The majority of the interviewed librarians, as well as leaders of library associations, consider lending of digital books as being in the very nature of a library as an institution. E-lending is justified by referring to the legal framework expressed in the respective countries’ legislated library acts. The legal provisions stipulate access to information and cultural content – regardless of the format – as well as promotion of literature and reading:

The Swedish Library Act does not say that we shall promote reading by means of printed books – we shall promote reading. It would be strange if we, on our own, decide that we work on promoting reading only by means of a specific format. (SL3)

The informant's perception means that the mission of promoting reading is more significant than the question of format. Another reoccurring perception of public service mission in digital context engages the patron's perspective: the library follows societal and technological developments and, therefore, responds to the needs and expectations of the patrons increasingly more interested in digital reading (NLA, DL3, SL2, SL4). As stated by one librarian:

We have digital books because our patrons want them. In our library, we do not differentiate between an e-book, an audiobook, a book for blind people, or a paper book. If these formats are available, we would like to have all of them so that patrons can choose which one they want. As stated in our mission, we also shall reach out to those who cannot get to the library. In that case, e-books and audiobooks are a great offering. (SL2)

The digital logic here is not questioned; it is rather taken for granted and seen as a means of achieving the bigger institutional goal, which is serving the patrons, promoting reading and fulfilling the public service mission. In other words, the digital logic here can enhance the public service logic.

Incorporating digitality into the public service logic also may take place at the level of practice. As in the account of many librarians (NL1, NL2, SL3), who work with curation of digital collections, the criteria for developing a collection of e-books and audiobooks do not differ from the printed collection. As in the following account:

It is important for us to have the same purchasing criteria for digital and printed books. This means that we will maintain a breadth of titles, offering both the popular ones and titles of high quality. (NL1)

For this library, the curation principles of providing a wide range of literature to the patrons are not changed by the digital logic. Therefore, a shift in a book format does not lead to a different understanding of the public service logic. However, this principle also faces challenges in this library: entertainment literature may become too easily accessible for the patrons and is lent out too often, as it is made available via the Cost per Circulation lending model (Liguzinski 2023). Consequently, these titles generate costs and therefore the librarians deliberately restrict their availability, as according to them, the media budget should be spent on the literature associated with a certain quality. Restrictions on e-lending in the face of patron-driven circulation exemplify tensions between public service logic and digital logic.

Digital book lending is also forced by technological changes, according to many Scandinavian librarians. This issue is raised by librarians (NLA, NL3, SL3, DL1), who pinpoint that newly published and in-demand audiobooks are no longer published as compact discs, which leaves libraries with no other option than to shift to digital distribution and licensing schemes.

There is a noticeable difference in many of the Scandinavian publishers' perceptions of the public library's mission – either in general or in a digital context. When asked about the general role of public libraries in the book industry, a common perception – expressed by almost all the interviewees from the publishing field – is an appreciation for the librarians and affirmation that the public library has always been a crucial institution. Libraries are repeatedly considered key in promoting literature and reading, as institutions that create interest in literature, which is, according to the publishers, a fundamental premise for the development of book culture in general. Major Danish and Norwegian publishers (DP1, DP2, NP1, NP3) note that certain kinds of books (children's books) would not be economically viable and therefore would remain unpublished without the libraries. In addition, they note that libraries not only create new readers, but also future authors.

Nevertheless, when the publishers are asked about the role of public libraries in the digital context, their perceptions of the public service mission are often nuanced. Most of them stress that the development of e-lending is an expression of the libraries' ambition to remain relevant and updated in digitalised societies (SP1, NP3, DP2, DPA). At the same time, many of them refer to the more overarching understanding of an institution, while referring to the public service logic, as in the account of one of the middle-sized Swedish publishers:

I think that the public library is so much more than a place where you just borrow books. In many municipalities it serves as a meeting place. Perhaps the point is that the role of libraries could also be reviewed? The libraries should not just focus on the reading promotion, but perhaps work more to be like a meeting place. (SP3)

This account illustrates the publisher's recognition of the public service logic, but in an updated context of observed changes in the role of the library as a public institution that over the recent decades in Scandinavia shifted the focus from building collections to developing other services, events and meetings (Colbjørnsen, Brenna, and Edquist 2022; Mathiasson and Jochumsen 2020; Söderholm and Nolin 2015). However, here this extended public service vision is used to diminish – or question – the importance of digital lending. In a similar tone, a representative of Norwegian Publishers Association asks rhetorically, stressing the importance of printed books and reading on paper in the digital age:

What is the public library's societal mission? What place has the promotion of literature in libraries, in relation to other tasks the library has nowadays? When we look at the promotion of literature, what place should digital media have in libraries' work, in relation to traditional media – especially printed books? (NPA)

In these two accounts, the public service logic is problematised in an updated understanding of public libraries. E-lending, according to these informants, takes too much of libraries' attention and resources, among all the other tasks and obligations that the library has nowadays. This line of thought is also confirmed in the argument raised by one of the major Swedish publishers, who at the time of interview (January 2023) had a strategy of not making adult fiction audiobooks available to the libraries at all, but makes available some of the children's titles. The publisher asks:

What is the task of a public library? Is it to make a server or an app that works in the same way as the commercial one? No, I do not think that would create a balance in the market and it does not really feel like the mission of the public library. The library is something much more than just an interface that gives you access to digital books. (SP1)

Importantly, these perceptions, where the relation between public service and digital logic is seen as problematic, correspond to accounts of some Scandinavian librarians. For instance, one of them (NL2) observes that the e-lending's low share of lending total in Norwegian public libraries (max 4% of total number of lending¹) is due to the fact that the libraries make too little effort to promote this service for the patrons, as it is not an attractive and stable offering. Nevertheless, the informant explains that other tasks are much more prioritised nowadays in public libraries, such as organising meetings and events, which confirms the 'from collections to connections' trend:

My impression is that digital services are often seen as not one of the central services in our library, but something that is considered as an extra thing. They are slightly on the side of our offer. (NL2)

As a follow-up to this perception, a well-integrated digital logic may also be challenging to the public service logic, in the context of the library's physicality. The interviewed representatives of Danish libraries (DL1, DLS) observe that their e-lending service is well-functioning and popular, with proactive and curated literature promotion and high lending rates, which leads to a new paradoxical challenge. If patrons can access the library collection without the need to visit the library building and they pay for the lending in a very indirect way (via local taxes that finance the library), together with the fact that the scale of e-lending is substantial, it leads to a question of whether the digital books may be too disconnected from the library's daily operation, identity, and *raison d'être*. Therefore, one of the interviewed libraries puts more effort into the promotion of the printed collection:

This is problematic in the long run. We have a very explicit campaign going on in our libraries that aims to increase the lending of printed books, because we must have a reason to be here physically. It is a very deliberate strategy with regard to the politicians – we want to prove that we also can lend out the printed books. (DL1)

In this perspective digitality, being primarily an opportunity, turns into a threat within public service logic, as the physical space and storage of printed collections may become irrelevant not only to patrons but indeed to national and local politicians who decide on library budgets.

Public service logic and market logic

When the public service and market logic meet, the perceptions of the Scandinavian publishers inevitably need to be interpreted in the light of book market structures. It is noticeable that the representatives of publishing houses that do not own or co-own subscription-based streaming services for digital books (SP2, SP3, SP4, DP1, DP3) express less concern about public libraries and e-lending.

The informant from a large Swedish publishing house (SP2) that has a non-fiction profile and releases mainly e-books, stresses the importance of public libraries as sales channels, among streaming services, arguing that the more library lending, the more sales. Therefore, this publishing house does not apply any embargo on its digital titles at the library channel:

We want to reach out to as many readers as possible. If we had not been paid for that by the libraries, we would not have done it. However, we receive remuneration from them for e-lending, which, in general is comparably high compared to the one we get from streaming platforms. From a business perspective, there is no reason to not have our books available in the libraries. (SP2)

A beneficial effect of e-lending on sales is also pinpointed by another Swedish publisher (SP4), whose profile is popular literature (crime novels, romance and thrillers). This fits with the account of one of the Danish publishers (DP3) who acknowledges that the library e-lending service suits its business strategy, as they explicitly focus on publishing so-called backlist titles, meaning older titles.

Similarly, the representative of Danish Publishers Association (DPA) sees the libraries as a sales channel among others, as e-lending represents 28% of the digital revenues in the Danish book market (as of 2022), but also acknowledges that this channel is meant to promote the width and diversity of Danish book market. This corresponds with the perception of the large publishers (DP1), which has a broad publishing profile; it sees the public service role of libraries in the following way:

The public libraries have more of a role of literature promoter. It is not their task to take the latest book of Lars Kepler and lend it out as many times as possible. Their task is to try to spread demand across as many titles as possible. Indeed, their role is to get people to read more, by spreading out the demand. (DP1)

The public service logic seems to perfectly align with a certain interpretation of the market logic: the library's mission is to spread the demand for the publishers' less in-demand titles, for which they no longer profit from in other channels. This understanding of the library and its public service tasks corresponds to the self-perception by the chief negotiator of the Danish e-lending service:

We took a position in the book market that no one else has. That is also why there has been more peace between us and publishers, because then we let the others fight over the most popular bestsellers. We, as a digital library, have the older titles, we have Danish literature, we have niche literature, we have high-brow literature. (DLS)

These two perceptions seem to picture a well-functioning coexistence and harmony between the public service and market logics, as two institutions agree on a sort of mutually beneficial labour division in the book sphere. However, the representative of Danish libraries' lending service (DLS) and other library informants (SLA, NL1) observe that it is problematic if the library decides to lend only certain types of literature (older publications, less in-demand titles). The popular titles are seen as a necessity – a sort of bait – as they attract patrons to the library:

Our mission is to promote the literature that is not necessarily the most popular, the 'niche' literature that does not make it onto bestseller list. However, if we only offered that type of literature, we would not attract many patrons. We also would not succeed in helping readers to discover the breadth of books we offer, which is a diverse collection that we developed over time. (NL1)

These perceptions illustrate that the public service and market logic can be in harmony, but there is also tension. The library's safe position on the market, granted by focusing on a specific niche, is not easy to combine when the library at the same wants to live up to its principles of relevance and comprehensiveness – and therefore provision of access to an attractive, updated collection of books to the patrons.

The positive attitudes towards the e-lending in libraries stand in contrast with accounts of other large publishers (NP1, NP2, NP3, SP1, DP2), whose perceptions underscore possible negative effects, that e-lending may unbalance the book sphere. Importantly, we note that many of these publishers are connected to streaming services for books, by direct or indirect ownership. A Norwegian publisher (NP1) sees that the library free-of-charge lending has a potential to undermine their commercial sales:

No one would buy a digital book if they could get it for free in the library. When it comes to digitality, the library's lending has a completely destructive potential for the commercial market. (NP1)

This argument is grounded in a vision that both public and market actors equally compete for the users' attention: potentially the same product would be available in two different apps (commercial and free-of-charge) on the user's mobile device. In this perception, the library becomes a market player that the publisher sees as a serious competitor, threatening their commercial interests. A similar reluctant attitude to libraries' e-lending, as pinpointed by another main Norwegian publisher (NP2), bemoans the lack of transparency, as it is not possible to assess the scale of lending by libraries and how it affects sales since there is little data and publicly available statistics for lending checkouts. This confirms one of the findings from a large-scale e-lending project in five English-language markets, where the lack of transparency on the book circulations is identified as one of the biggest concern of all involved actors, in particular the publishers (Giblin and Weatherall 2022).

Market logic and digital logic

The meeting of logics is also visible in the accounts where both librarians and publishers comment on the micro-level details regarding the models public libraries use for e-lending. These models have been seen as 'artificial frictions', as a defined limitation of loans per book/user/time embedded in a certain licence intentionally to limit the potentially easy access to digital books (Liguzinski 2023). These frictions are perceived by the publishers as a necessity, even if they are, as they acknowledge, in contradiction with the logic of digitality. As said by one of the Swedish publishers:

The lending friction must be evident. For users it should be a little more difficult to get a digital book for free than to get it via commercial channels. It's the same product, but it has to be a little more user-friendly if you have to pay for it. It is good that the limitations exist, for example, that you cannot listen to the audiobook when the lending time is over. In that perspective, the commercial market can exist by the side. (SP3)

The digital and market logics here are intertwined in the e-lending, for the obvious reason that the rightsholders hold control over digital book lending (Giblin and Weatherall 2015) but this comment shows that control is fundamental for the publishers in order to be able run a commercial operation at all. Similarly, the representatives of all national publishers' associations (DPA, SPA, NPA) stress that the crucial factor for the publishers is to maintain flexibility in shaping their digital offering to the library:

What is important with the solution we have right now in Denmark, at least in case of the large publishers, is that they sign individual contracts and can negotiate with the libraries. In addition, they can introduce restrictions on their biggest titles, as an embargo or placing them under a restrictive licensing model. It is meant to make it attractive for the users to sign up for a subscription to a streaming platform. For the publishers it is important to have both the possibility to negotiate and to press the brake pedal, if needed. (DPA)

On the contrary, complex e-lending schemes and the frictions embedded in them, put in place to secure the interests of publishers, may be difficult to manage for the libraries, as experienced by Norwegian librarians (NL1, NL2, NL3). For example, the newly published audiobooks are made available by a quite restrictive e-lending model (Metered Access) which makes it difficult for the librarians and patrons to know which titles are available via a library at a specific moment, as the books are checked-out quickly and then disappear from the catalogue. Such an intertwining of the market and digital logics makes the digital book offerings very unattractive for the patrons, according to the librarians.

At the same time, the Scandinavian librarians do not question the need for friction and express an understanding of the publishers' concerns. They accept the fact that publishers guard their interests, especially in the age of streaming platforms (NL3, SL2, SL3, SL4). At the same time, the librarians underscore that the library cannot compete with the publishers' streaming platforms:

We have quite big demand for digital audiobooks, but I think that since we allow 2 loans per week per person, if you listen to a lot of them, it would not be enough if you want to listen six hours a day. (...) In that context, I would say that we cannot compete with Storytel and other big commercial platforms. (SL3)

As one of the librarians observes, the lending frictions, embedded for example in a certain e-lending model with waiting lists for e-books and audiobooks, may even be beneficial for the market actors:

Our budgets are too small to fully saturate the market. In many cases, we believe that libraries can generate more sales because when the patrons see that there are long waiting lists, they will choose to buy books instead. (NL1)

These perceptions acknowledge the library's weaker position on the book market, towards the streaming services, but are also pointing out the potential for a library to have a beneficial effect on the sales, which resonates with the vision of a library as 'midwife' for the digital book market, previously elucidated by research of Grøn and Balling (2016). Similarly, the library informants (DL2, DL3, SL3) observe that a library has historically existed side-by-side with booksellers, so patrons who do not have enough reading from the library offering, could always have chosen the commercial book channels instead. According to them, the situation remains the same in the digital context. In that sense, the library is naturally positioning itself in a secure and unproblematic position, despite the intertwined market and digital logics.

Cross-national comparison

In addition to observing the dynamics between perceptions in the light of institutional logics, the analysis of the interviews also revealed national patterns. Quite visibly, actors from respective fields in one country often raise similar arguments. This may be explained as a result of the sampling procedure and therefore a limitation of this study. The informants, unprompted and independent of one another, mentioned that they know each other from working groups for digital issues in libraries and publishers' lobby/advocacy interest organisations. The similarity of arguments may thus depend on the fact that they were formed in the same fora and consequently, we see clustering them in national perceptions as justified. Seeing the national particularities is also inevitable because of the previously noted national particularities of e-lending in Scandinavia (Liguzinski 2023; Liguzinski and Kann-Rasmussen 2024). Despite many similarities between Denmark, Norway and Sweden as representatives of the Nordic Cultural Model (Duelund 2003), the existing research on both library and publishing fields has also indicated the national particularities and differences between these three countries: for instance when it comes library legislation and policies (Audunson, Jochumsen, and Rydbeck 2022) or discourse around audiobooks and streaming services (Colbjørnsen, Tallerås, and Steiner 2023).

Our analysis indicates that in Denmark, the public library is perceived as having found its safe place on the book market, by focusing on digital book offerings that differ from those that are mostly valuable in the commercial distribution. The library's role is, as perceived by both the publishers and

librarians, to provide access to diversity and breadth in literature. For the publishers, whose business profile fits in this strategy, the library is a perfect partner, as it contributes to generating profits within a certain segment of their market. At the same time, the well-working e-lending scheme allows the librarians to focus on other tasks, important in the renewed understanding of the public library as an institution. It is therefore noticeable, as for 2022/2023, that after many conflicts and tensions caused by introduction of e-books to the public libraries, which previous research (Grøn and Balling 2016; Worsøe-Schmidt 2019) has analysed, the Danish librarians and publishers came to viable terms.

In Norway, the prevailing perception of the librarians is that the library shall strive for a wide range of titles, diversity and quality in literature promotion, and it does not have an intention or power to compete with the commercial distributors. At the same time, the librarians express the feeling of being neglected by the publishers, who are afraid of the market development, especially the growing popularity of streamed audiobooks. From the publisher's side, we see a dominating uncertainty and concern that the library's e-lending may undermine their sales and market position. Therefore, they argue for a sustainable condition secured by restrictive lending frictions, so that the user is aware of the difference between commercial and non-commercial offering. We interpret this tension between perceptions of the library's role in the light of the Norwegian book industry structure and the particularities of the cultural policy context. In particular, the big publishers in Norway have ownership stakes in subscription-based services for digital books. E-lending can thus be seen as potentially a direct competitor to the activities of the publishing house. Moreover, because of the Norwegian fixed price regime on books in all formats (mandated by law since January 2024), new titles remain unavailable for streaming 12 months after publication. Thus, the streaming services function as backlist platforms (Colbjørnsen, Tallerås, and Øfsti 2021; Colbjørnsen, Tallerås, and Steiner 2023). Otherwise, lending of frontlist titles in public libraries would imply that the library patrons would free-of-charge get more attractive products than the paying users of publishers' streaming platforms. The public libraries anticipated a solution to the long-standing dispute on e-lending in the Norwegian Book Law but were left disappointed as the final legislation left library distribution outside of the new law (Norsk Bibliotekforening 2023).

As for Sweden, the informants share a varied set of perceptions on the publisher-library relationship and the role of libraries specifically. The Swedish book market differs from the Norwegian in being significantly less regulated (Colbjørnsen, Tallerås, and Steiner 2023). The absence of strong cultural policy measures is similar to the Danish system, but the Swedish book market is more marked by prominent digital players such as streaming services Storytel, Bookbeat and Nextory, all present across the Scandinavian countries. Our Swedish informants depict a situation where library users and streaming services users are two separate groups, making for less direct competition and friction between the market logic and the public service logic. Most of the Swedish informants express a sense of a division of labour between libraries and publishers: frontlist promotion is mainly the task of the commercial actors, whereas the task of the public library is to promote backlist and more niche forms of literature. However, some of the library informants question it as well, wondering why many new and in-demand digital book titles are not made available to the libraries by the publishers at all, which is problematic for working with an attractive reading promotion.

Concluding discussion

Although the empirical material is limited to a small part of the library and publishers' fields in Scandinavia, we see that the discussion on the public library role in the context of e-lending is nuanced and multifaceted, more than a simple polarity of the public vs. the market. As such, our findings here echo the notion that libraries are, for publishers, 'customers, competitors and collaborators' (Colbjørnsen et al. 2024). Referring to the military rhetoric used in research on digitalisation of book industry and libraries (Grøn and Balling 2016; Thompson 2021; Worsøe-Schmidt 2019), we could conclude that the cross-Scandinavian empirical material is neither unequivocally indicating a 'war' on digital books, nor a complete

peace. In general, our analysis shows rather a dynamic situation, meaning that the institutions' positions are both stable and shifting, adapting to the changing conditions. We do not see the relationship between libraries and publishers as a clear-cut or contradictory, which confirms the argument raised previously by Bergström et al. (2017, 109).

A shift is underway. Pre-digital understandings of the library-publisher relationship were established in a world of physical constraints. Although never completely without conflicts, the analogue relationship can be described as 'symbiotic' (Holzman and Lippincott 2019). By applying the tool of institutional logics, we see that the tensions between the public service logic and the market logic are kept to a minimum in the physical context. With the introduction of digital technologies, a new set of logics arrives, creating new questions and preparing the ground for both new conflicts and new forms of cooperation. In short, digitality presents both an opportunity and a threat.

There are two considerations. On the one hand, as our informants indicate, the digital logic may in fact enhance the public service role of libraries – as digital technologies promise to fulfil the mission of access to information and culture in a more comprehensive way. On the other hand, the digital also poses a threat, as the practical implementation of e-lending (including payment models, restrictions and licensing conditions) appears closely tied to the business strategies and profiles of publishers, digital booksellers and the role of streaming services. In other words, the market logic is more or less intertwined with the digital logic, which is a source of conflict. While our library informants see their role as digital intermediaries undermined by overly restrictive licenses, our informants on the publishing side are threatened by the promise of unrestricted e-lending. Moreover, the implication of digital logic to make geographical boundaries irrelevant also poses a threat to the physicality of the library, potentially disconnecting the library from its users. Lending of digital books indeed takes place in an institution which is no longer only about collecting, storing and mediating books, but it has evolved into a meeting place, organising events and meetings and engaging with communities. The question to be asked, which our informants also touched upon, is what these circumstances mean for the role of libraries as promoters of reading and book culture.

The empirical material was analysed with the lens of institutional logics, which implied a certain limitation on how we looked at the relationship between libraries and publishers. Through an exploration of public service logic, market logic and digital logic, we find both tensions and harmony in the relationship between public libraries and publishers. Arguably, what is missing is a detailed account of the economic aspects of this relationship and the contracts and licensing schemes at the heart of e-lending. A valuable follow-up study could be to analyse the relationship through a different theoretical lens, for instance looking at the question of various actors' interests and differences in power relations.

Another question that has not been analysed in this study, but which we identify as relevant, is how the relations between publishers and libraries are affected by the middlemen actors, that is, the aggregating platforms (distributors). Their role have been analysed before in the Swedish (Bergström et al. 2017; Wallin 2019) and international e-lending research (Giblin, Kennedy, Pelletier, et al. 2019; Giblin, Kennedy, Weatherall, et al. 2019). As indicated by many of our informants, there is little contact between libraries and publishers. The role of intermediaries and distributors in-between was analysed in the case of academic libraries and university presses, where e-book vendors are seen as platforms that hold a quite strong position in the market (Zhang and Eschenfelder 2023).

Our empirical material is limited to major libraries and publishing actors in Scandinavian countries. Further research could preferably extend the research on the library-publisher relationship to other national settings. Such comparative analysis would allow us to see e-lending from new perspectives.

Note

1. To illustrate a scale of e-lending in Scandinavia in the moment of study: according to the recent national-wide official library statistics from Denmark, in 2023, physical books were lent 23,3 million times, whereas digital books 9,4 million times (Danmarks Statistik 2024). In Norway, in 2023, there were 12,6 million lendings of printed books, whereas 1,5 million lendings of e-books and audiobooks (Nasjonalbiblioteket 2024). In Sweden in 2023, printed books were lent out over 64,6 million times, whereas 3,2 million e-books were downloaded (Kungliga Biblioteket 2024).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study is a part of a PhD research project, that was funded by the Norges Forskningsråd (The Research Council of Norway) through the research project Political Dynamics of the Cultural Sector (POLYCUL), project number 302199.

Notes on contributors

Maciej Liguzinski is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Archivistcs, Library and Information Science at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. His research interests include digital books, library studies, cultural policy research and sociology of literature.

Terje Colbjørnsen is an Associate Professor at BI Norwegian Business School in Oslo, Norway. His main research interest concerns media industries, digitalisation of cultural policy, library and information science, media technology and media economics.

Kim Tallerås is an Associate Professor and the head of the Department of Archivistcs, Library and Information Science at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. His main research interest concerns how digitalisation affects cultural and information policies.

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