

Editorial

To argue that we live in times of turmoil almost seems banal. The corona pandemic, which has not only caused severe illness and deaths but also pervasive changes in everyday practices (Eriksson-Backa & Tana, 2021), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be pinpointed as extreme nodal points in our time, at least in the part of the world that we in the guest editorial board inhabit. However, these events co-occur with a political and social situation in which populist and radical right-wing parties in several European countries have increased their influence. Simultaneously, research shows a decreasing trust in democracy, not least among young people (Mounk, 2018). Public libraries' role in promoting democracy is formulated in library acts and policy documents in Europe and North America and studies promote libraries as trust-building institutions (e.g. Johnston, 2019; Vårheim, 2014). However, libraries' democratic role and function in society is not pre-given. The political turmoil impacts the perception and management of libraries since they are publicly financed and governed. This situation calls for attention, at least in some countries. In Sweden for example, there is a heated debate on the role of the public library and the relationship between political governing and the professionalism of librarians. Recently, Anders Frenander, professor emeritus in Library and Information Science, in an essay requested research on the municipal political governing of libraries due to this discussion (Frenander, 2022, p. 45). This accentuates that the public library and library professionals constitute objects of study in themselves, but they also serve as empirical examples through which political tendencies in society can be explored and investigated. When a pandemic catches the world and a war is fought in Europe, the societal role of the public library thus comes forth as urgent, at the same time as it is put into spotlight and debate. The theme of this issue, *Public libraries in times of political turmoil*, focuses on these questions and explores them from different angles, making room for a multitude of perspectives to enable a deepened discussion and to further our knowledge.

The three scientific articles of this thematic issue contribute with both empirical and theoretical perspectives on public libraries in times of political turmoil. Two of the articles report studies conducted in Sweden, in both cases focusing on how the Swedish democratic model as expressed in national cultural and library politics increasingly is being challenged by radical right-wing politics, in particular on the local political level of the municipality – the political level responsible for providing public library services. In the paper *Plastic policies: contemporary opportunities and challenges in public libraries' enactment of cultural policy* by Johanna Rivano Eckerdal and Hanna Carlsson, public libraries are explored as situated at the junction of different levels of cultural policy. In several examples, policy documents and the democratic ideals they carry are found to be internalised by

library staff, and importantly, findings illustrate how democracy – understood as an ongoing process and a plurality – is enacted in local practices at public libraries in Sweden. The title of the paper alludes to how the policy documents, despite appearing to be fixed and solid, in practice are plastic and mouldable and consequently provide room for enacting the promotion of democracy.

The second article is by Hanna Carlsson, Fredrik Hanell and Joacim Hansson. It is written in Swedish and titled "*Det känns som att jag bara sitter och väntar på att det ska explodera*" - politisk påverkan på de kommunala folkbibliotekens verksamhet i sex sydsvenska regioner [‘It feels like I’m just sitting and waiting for it to explode’ – political pressure on municipal public library services in six South-Swedish regions]. The article emanates from an ongoing research project and reports on a timely study of public libraries’ experiences of political pressure. Even though illegitimate pressure of this kind is uncommon, the study shows that it does occasionally occur, in particular in connection to issues related to cultural diversity. A prevalent strategy for dealing with political pressure among the libraries participating in the study is to develop and employ policy documents, but there are also disquieting examples of libraries sometimes avoiding certain activities.

In the third scientific article, written in Danish, *Bibliotekarere som aktivister i Danmark og Sverige: Kompromis og konflikt* [Librarians as activists in Denmark and Sweden: Compromise and conflict], Anne-Sofie Elbrønd Nissen and Nanna Kann-Rasmussen explore differences between Denmark and Sweden when it comes to conflicts related to how librarians at public libraries may act as, or be perceived as acting as, activists. Against the background of the different cultural political climates of the two countries, where cultural policy generally attracts low interest in Denmark while the area in Sweden is the scene of ideological conflict between left-wing and right-wing political actors and between national and local political levels, the paper shows how activism is considered a suitable description for certain library work in Denmark while the notion of activism is considered more problematic in the Swedish library sector.

In addition to the three scientific articles this issue presents three book reviews of recently defended doctoral theses, all of which connect to the broad theme of reading, literacies, and search skills. The review section begins by Olof Sundin’s review of Anna-Maija Multas *New health information literacies. A nexus analytical study*, followed by Gunilla Widén’s review of *Development of online research skills among lower secondary school students: The roles of formal instruction and personal factors* by Tuulikki Alamettälä. Lastly, Terje Colbjørnsen reviews Elisa Tattersall Wallin’s dissertation *Sound reading. Exploring and conceptualising audiobook practices among young adults*.

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Lisa Engström, Fredrik Hanell & Ola Pilerot
Guest editors

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