Public libraries as a vital social function or something we can do without in times of crises. The Swedish reaction to Covid-19

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Abstract
During the COVID-19 period, Swedish public libraries have gone through five phases, which diverge, noticeably from many other European countries. During the first phase of the pandemic, most public libraries stayed open. The week before Christmas 2020 most public libraries were temporally closed. The role of public libraries in the local community was under debate, could the local community do without libraries?

Keywords
COVID-19, Public libraries, social function

What is the role of public libraries during a pandemic?
When Covid-19 struck, libraries had to respond. In most countries, libraries closed entirely. From a European perspective, Sweden took its own route since Sweden never went into a full lock down. As a result, most Swedish libraries stayed open. In Sweden, each municipality made their own decision about closing the library or not. Municipal self-government is a highly regarded principle in Sweden even in times of crisis. During the first phase of Covid-19, no nationwide decision to lock down was made. At the end of March and early April, approximately 85% of public libraries remained open ‘as usual’, although general programmes and events at the libraries were cancelled.
At the same time, Sweden watched as most libraries in Europe closed for patrons and users. Europe’s public libraries took a rapid leap and transformed public libraries into true digital libraries, with no access to printed physical material. During late spring, at a time when European libraries developed reopening plans, Sweden decided to continue with a ‘business as usual’ approach for most public libraries apart from cancellation of larger events and some adaptation of the physical space. During the summer, libraries operated the same as during any other year, including their usual reduced summertime opening hours.

The National Library of Sweden conducted a first data collection at the end of March. All 290 municipalities were assessed using a four-level scale:

Level one – Almost ‘business as usual’ except for programmes and events.

Level two – There are two varieties depending on size of the municipality. In large cities, some branches of libraries were closed while other branches kept open but with limited space availability in the library. In smaller municipalities, all branches except for the main library were closed.

Level three – Main libraries as well as branches are closed for patrons, but outreach actives, the library bus, home delivery and pickup service operate almost as usual with the difference that users did not enter but were served outside.

Level four – Digital services only, no access to printed collections, no services from staff in any way.

Based on the collected data, it is possible to follow the different strategies of each of the 290 municipalities in regards to their reaction to Covid-19. Due to a change in tone by the Public Health Agency of Sweden in October 2020, the strategies from the spring were changed. In regions and municipalities where a rise in Covid-19 infections occurred at the end of October or beginning of November, libraries were closed down by not admitting any visitors into the libraries. This was accelerated in more and more municipalities as the rise of Covid-19 infections rose. Still these libraries continued to deliver physical reading materials to their users in either by ‘open kiosks’, a delivery and drop off function for ordered books and returns, or by home delivery. Finally, as the spread of Covid-19 rose sharply the week before Christmas, most Swedish public libraries ceased admitting physical visitors and closed their doors entirely. An open public library during Christmas of 2020 will have been a rare exception.

In many senses, Sweden has undergone the opposite response compared to most other European countries, which went from full closure to gradual reopening.

**Early spring**

The public libraries’ immediate response to Covid-19 in March was to cancel all major events and programmes such as live readings, author visits, cultural events and children’s activities, while keeping the library itself open. Users could still browse through the collections, borrow, and return books and use computers and printers.
New services emerged rapidly; a call and collect service named ‘Take Away’ was developed. The user called the library with requests and pre-packed bags with the ordered books were then delivered at the library entrance or even out in the street. Home delivery was another service by which users in high-risk groups or aged 70+ could get their books delivered to their doorstep at home. A couple of weeks later, most public libraries had put up Plexiglass screens protecting the staff, and reading rooms and study spaces were rearranged to keep distance between users. Floor markings with instructions to socially distance and large notice boards with instructions became a common sight in all libraries, as shown in Figure 1 Uppsala public library, March 2020, with floor markings for keeping distance and plexiglass scenes between staff and patrons.

During this first phase of the pandemic, the general attitude was that public libraries are a vital part of the community and a centre for Covid-19 information. Thus, the library in some municipalities was part of the local crisis response package as information needed to be widely communicated about the virus to as many people as possible.

Libraries served as an important information hub of the community. Access to accurate, updated and relevant information was regarded as crucial. Information gathering, reading and using the library computers to access information was considered more important than limiting the potential spread of Covid-19 by closing the libraries.
Most public libraries used the Swedish Library Act⁴ as basis for maintaining the libraries open. It was argued that closing the public library entirely would violate the Library Act and would go against the common good.

Of course, there were discussions about the risks of keeping public libraries open, both in concern to staff security and the risk of infected users infecting others. Whether to remain open or close down was widely discussed between librarians on social media, at workplaces and in media. A common opinion during the spring was that the library as an institution is too important to be completely closed. Services and library collections are essential for the local community, and in addition, libraries offer an easily accessible, open public space. Thus, users continued to visit the libraries. Even though the elderly were urged to stay at home, we found them in reading rooms with a newspaper in hand or at the lending desk with a heap of books. In response, some libraries offered special opening hours for high-risk groups, but still users came to the library as normal.

When finally, high schools closed and went online during mid-April, students instead went to the libraries. The same pattern could be seen when some of the university libraries closed. Consequently, public libraries became popular to new user groups while simultaneously the usual users continued coming there.

Public libraries also tried other newly invented ways of meeting their users outdoors, which was highly appreciated during days with nice weather. Some libraries had special

![Figure 2. Västerås public library using the library bicycle for outreach activities. Photograph: Västerås Stadsbibliotek (Västerås public library).](image)
library bicycles carrying a large box containing books in order to reach people outside in the cities or for outreach activities, like the one in Västerås (Figure 2).

To reach new users, the public library in Karlshamn even hung book bags in trees in the surroundings of the library. In Östersund, the library bicycle visited socio-economically weak areas of the city, trying to raise interest in library services and reading promotion activities. The target group were children and teenagers. Even though the pandemic made library work more challenging, creativity blossomed.

### Late spring and summer

During late spring, many libraries changed to reduced summer opening hours earlier than usual, making the service level close to normal for the summer holiday period. Outdoor activities grew increasingly more common than other years. Activities such as outreach activities, using library buses to reach users, book readings in the park, walks, using bicycles to visit underserved areas and reach children and youth flourished. Some public libraries even started to book events and programmes for the fall and winter season as the Covid-19 situation seemed to move in a positive direction. During the second week of June, only 1 out of 290 municipalities had closed their libraries entirely. Based on the collected data, 90% of the municipalities offered ‘normal’ seasonal library services. Only 3% had the physical library closed, but instead offered their users ‘Take Away’, home delivery and digital or phone services.

Increased access to electronic media that was launched during the first phase continued during the summer period. Streaming services for digital films, e-books and sound books found its way to both new and regular users. Regular patrons who had not previously been using the library digital media services rapidly learned how to do so. Combined with the outreach services, home delivery and ‘Take Away’ users had good access to library collections as well as to computers and technical aids such as scanners and so on. To some extent, the Information and communications technology (ICT) tutorial activities were reduced as librarians avoided giving instructions at the computers close to the users.

### The fall

The fall started out close to normal, as public libraries had adapted to the new normal; a ‘Corona safe mode’ of service. Data collection made at the second week of September showed that 98% of municipalities operated close to normal library service. In only 1 out of 290 municipalities the main library building was closed for users to enter, while 2 weeks later the same library offered their users ‘Take Away’ and home delivery services. In other words, at mid-September, all 290 municipalities gave their users access to printed collections either by browsing and picking books or by call and collect.

On the 29th of September 2020, the Swedish Library Association addressed The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) urging them to include public libraries in the analysis of needs and recommendations to the Swedish government regarding Covid-19 preparedness:
Libraries contribute to a sense of security during a crisis: most people have a connection with the libraries and the libraries are a place where everyone can access news and use the internet. And librarians are experts in source criticism, something that proved necessary during the pandemic.\(^6\)

The turning point

A rapid change started at the end of October when levels of new Covid-19 infections surged to alarming levels and region after region closed down public spaces due to harsher regulations, including public libraries. In some regions, library buildings now closed for patrons, but home delivery and ‘Take Away’ continued. Coming first week of November a new trend was clearly visible, and in December even more so as the number of libraries staying open for ‘business more or less as usual’ decreased while the numbers of libraries at ‘minimal services’ level increased as shown in Figure 3.

The collected data clearly show that libraries went from ‘open’ to ‘closed’ regarding the possibilities for the users to enter the library facilities. Just a few libraries fell into level two and four in the assessment scale during November and December.

During this phase, a heated debate arose in the Library Association Magazine Biblioteksbladet\(^7\) regarding whether the staff felt closing or not was the correct action to...
take. Some personnel were relieved while others were dissatisfied with libraries closing and wanted to remain open. A clear contradiction occurred between the ones who preferred to stay open and the ones that favoured closing down. The discussion focused on safety of the staff, the library as an icon, free access to information as well as the mission given by the Library Act to the libraries. To what extent is it justifiable to keep public libraries open when infection rates rise to calamitous levels?

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) made a statement in early December 2020 regarding the interpretation of the Library Act. Closing a public library is a question for municipal self-government. Reducing library services to only digital access will shut some users out; therefore SALAR was of the opinion that offering solely digital services during a longer period is not acceptable. In addition, public libraries offer more services apart from access to the collections, and municipalities need to arrange alternative ways to deliver library services. How this is done is however a local decision and may vary from library to library.

Christmas time

Since the last data collection of 2020, which was conducted during second week of December, the crucial turning point in the subsequent week was not included. At a press conference on the 18th of December, the Public Health Agency of Sweden included libraries in the category ‘places where people gather’, therefore they now constituted a place of possible spread of Covid-19 and should therefore be avoided. In addition, the government mentioned libraries several times within a short time period as a place for active spread of Covid-19 infection. Despite the Library Act, most municipalities now closed libraries for patrons to visit. In many libraries, staff was sent home for Christmas leave and are due back in early January 2021.

At the 23rd of December, Expressen, one of the larger newspapers, stated that the large closure of public libraries even temporarily constitutes a violation of the Swedish Library Act.

Simultaneously, the Swedish government issued a proposal for new legislation making it possible to close many public places including libraries. The new legislation was processed at high pace with the review period being closed at the 23rd of December. The preparatory work for the new Covid-19 Act was presented to the Parliament on the 28th of December and the new legislation is intended to be implemented from the 10th of January 2021. Based on the new Covid-19 Act, the government or the Public Health Agency of Sweden has the authority to shut down every library in the country if necessary, overriding the principle of municipal self-governance as well as the Library Act.

The proposed legislation was sent to the National Library of Sweden for consultation. In the answer from the National Library of Sweden, issues were raised about the level of forced closings without taking into account the substantial interference to the local decision making it would mean, as well as the fact that different types of libraries operate in different ways with different users patterns. Some of the comments were included in the preparatory work and will act as guidance in the implementation of the new legislation. However, the government will include all kinds of libraries in the Covid-19 Act.
Conclusion

Thus, one could say that during these 9 to 10 months, the response from the Swedish libraries has gone through five phases which diverge noticeably from many other European countries.

As a result of the big undertaking to collect all data, records from all 290 municipalities, it will be possible to make deeper analyses in the future. In addition, during this period of pandemic, the National Library of Sweden has been able to depict the general situation month by month.

As described, Sweden has had a complex situation, balancing municipal self-governance, recommendations from the Public Health Agency of Sweden, regional health recommendations and interpretation of the Library Act: ‘Every municipality shall have a public library. Public libraries shall be accessible to everyone and adapted to the needs of their users’. All this ending up in 290 different local decisions with varying degree of coordination between the municipalities leaving the users with a significant variation of library services depending on where in the country one lives. From the point of view of the Library Act, this is a very unfortunate situation as equal access to libraries and library services is the paramount mission; discrepancies should be kept at a minimum.

In conclusion, the discussion within the Swedish library community reflects the overall view of Sweden’s Covid-19 response. In the early phases of the pandemic, the prevalent view was the importance of libraries as points of information and therefore keeping public libraries open. The needs of different user groups were highlighted and most public libraries used creativity and ingenuity to solve practical issues.

In contrary, during the fifth phase (late November and December 2020), library staff more often expressed negative opinions regarding public libraries remaining open (business as usual). And finally, before Christmas most public libraries were closed with possible reopening in January 2021.

To conclude, Sweden has continued to follow its own route compared to the rest of Europe, making its way from open to closed libraries a 10-month long process.

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Notes

1. The data were collected at 10 occasions during 2020. At each occasion, information have been extracted from every public library, websites and sometimes social media as well. The data were collected in an Excel spreadsheet. The data collection mid-September contained 2440 pieces of information, all other data collections are of the same size except for the ones in late
November and December, which focused on assessment of whether to stay open or closed. The National Library of Sweden decided to allocate six staff members to collect the information and analyse the results. A separate Covid-19 website was launched in early April 2020. https://www.kb.se/samverkan-och-utveckling/biblioteken-under-corona.html.

2. The four-step scale is a Swedish adaptation of the The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) assessment scale. https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries.

3. Open kiosk usually means that the outer main entrance is accessible, but the inner entrance to the library physical space is closed to the users. Staff delivers call and collects ordered books in the outer entrance or at the street.

4. Section 6: Every municipality shall have a public library. Public libraries shall be accessible to everyone and adapt to the needs of their users. https://www.biblioteksfor.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/2017/01/development-of-of-a-democratic-society.pdf.

5. Translated from Swedish: Biblioteken bidrar med trygghet i kris: de flesta har en relation till biblioteken och biblioteken är en plats dit alla kan komma för att ta del av nyheter och använda internet. Och bibliotekarier är experter på källkritik, något som visat sig nödvändigt under pandemin. https://www.biblioteksforeningen.se/nyheter/inkludera-biblioteken-i-den-samhallsviktiga-verksamheten/.

6. MSB is responsible for issues concerning civil protection, public safety, emergency management and civil defence as long as no other authority has responsibility.

7. https://www.biblioteksbladet.se/ideer/debatt/superspridare-av-demokrati-sa-varfor-stanger-bibliotek/; https://www.biblioteksbladet.se/ideer/debatt/replik-nej-vi-kanner-ingen-stangningsgladje/; https://www.biblioteksbladet.se/ideer/debatt/replik-en-nedsattande-ton-som-kan-leda-till-brak/

Author biography

Elisabet Rundqvist graduated from Uppsala University in 2003 with a Master’s degree in Library and Information Science and started working as a librarian at the National Library the same year. Since 2007, Elisabet holds a position as an executive officer at the National coordination of libraries, as a specialist of the Swedish Library Act and public libraries.