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# Theorizing Public Libraries as Public Spheres in Library and Information Science

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**Abstract.** During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, library and information scholars have set out to theorize the role of public libraries as public spheres. Most of this research is engaging with Habermas' early work on the structural transformation of the public sphere. Even though Habermas has continued to develop his theories on the public sphere and deliberative democracy throughout his career, library and information scholars have to a limited degree engaged with his more recent work. Simply relying on Habermas's early work when theorizing public libraries as public spheres is limiting, but in addition to getting up to speed on Habermas' theoretical development, library and information scholars should also familiarize themselves with a broader set of public sphere theories. In this paper, I will give a short presentation of Habermas' work of relevance for public libraries, I will give a short presentation of some additional theories of public spheres, and I will present key concepts in studies of public libraries as public spheres within library and information science. I will conclude with some thought on how to move forward when theorizing public libraries as public spheres within library and information science.

**Keywords:** public sphere, public libraries, Habermas, democracy, social theory

## 1 Introduction

During the 21st century, scholars of library and information science have set out to theorize the role of public libraries as public spheres [1-4]. Most of this research is engaging with the work of Jürgen Habermas, and in particular his early work on the structural transformation of the public sphere in Europe [5-6]. This classic study has had a strong impact on several disciplines in the human sciences, and Habermas has remained an influential scholar and thinker throughout his career. Most disciplines have kept up with his intellectual development and particularly the work of relevance to one's own discipline. As pointed out by Michael Widdersheim, this has not been the

case with library and information science where scholars to a limited degree have engaged with Habermas' more recent work [7]. This is remarkable, considering that Habermas has continued to develop his theories on the public sphere [8-9] and deliberative democracy [10] throughout his career. These are works that should be of great interest to scholars seeking to understand and theorize the role of public libraries as public spheres, especially when concerned with libraries role as meeting places. I fully agree with Widdersheim [7], in that simply relying on Habermas's early work when theorizing public libraries as public spheres is limiting. But I think we need to take it one step further: Getting up to speed on Habermas' theoretical development is not enough for amply theorizing public libraries as public spheres; library and information science scholars must also familiarize themselves with a broader set of public sphere theories. As digitalization frees up space in the physical libraries and digital culture seems to enhance the need for physical meeting places, the societal mission of public libraries has to an increasing degree been related to their role as public spheres [11-12].

In this paper, I will give a short presentation of Habermas' work of relevance for public libraries, I will give a short presentation of some additional theories of public spheres, and I will present key concepts in studies of public libraries as public spheres within library and information science. I will conclude with some thoughts on how to move forward when theorizing public libraries as public spheres within library and information science.

## **2 Habermas' Public Sphere Theory and Public Libraries**

Habermas describes in his 1962 book how the public sphere in Germany, Great Britain, and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries went through a transformation from being a sphere where the rulers were displaying their power, to becoming a bourgeois public sphere inhabited by property-owning and literate men discussing central social and cultural issues (it later evolved to also include other social groups). In these public discussions, arguments were to transcend the individuals' social status, no topic should be foreign for critical discussion, and the audience should in principle be totally open [6]. For Habermas, this sphere where "private people come together as a public" [6] represented an ideal liberal public sphere. But Habermas' theory ended on a negative note: He believed it to be deeply problematic that the new mass media of the time (such as tabloid newspapers, radio and popular cinema) transformed the public to be consumers of culture, rather than critically discussing citizens. According to Habermas, this led to the dissolving of the bourgeois public sphere; due to the mass media, citizens were no longer capable of performing arguments in public.

Habermas later changed his perception of the role of mass media for democracy: 30 years after the publication of his dissertation, he launched a theoretical model for liberal democracies [10]. According to this model, any political decision must be supported by a majority of the population in order to be considered legitimate. A public sphere that strives to live up to the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere plays a key role in this model, as a majority will be attained through public deliberations. Habermas is no

longer a pessimist. He now considers the mass media to play a key role in the communicative structure of the public sphere, where different groups from civil society can communicate their interests to a broader public. Depending on the kind of support they manage to achieve, these interests can be channeled to the political system and potentially end up in political decisions, and at best changes in law. Within such a democratic power circuit, public libraries can play a role as an open and inclusive space where citizens can get together and discuss cultural and political matters, in addition to be a free and open space for citizen education.

Public libraries have increasingly emphasized their role as public meeting places and hosts of cultural and political events, especially in the Nordic countries [11-12]. Scholars of library and information science has also emphasized this aspect of public libraries in recent years, deeming public libraries an important element in the infrastructure of a sustainable public sphere [1]. Habermas' theory has proven helpful when conceptualizing this aspect of the mission of public libraries. When we take other dimensions of the mission into account, dimensions that also point to public libraries being public spheres, simply relying on a habermasian approach will come short. In order to theorize the complex role that public libraries play as public spheres, we need a broader set of theories.

### 3 Theories of Public Spheres

Since Habermas published his influential book, the thesis of the book has been discussed and criticized by several influential scholars [13], in turn leading Habermas [8] to revise his initial thesis. Habermas' thesis has also had considerable impact on theorization of the public sphere, as his influence has led scholars to develop perspectives on the public sphere that position themselves as an explicit alternative to a habermasian perspective, with the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge [14] and Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau [15-17] as prominent examples (the public sphere has also been theorized by scholars prior to Habermas' work [18]). Where Negt and Kluge argued that Habermas in his theory of the bourgeois public sphere missed out on counter public spheres, especially proletarian ones, Mouffe does not consider consensus as a goal. Instead, she looks at conflict and emotional involvement as a value in itself and believes that this serves democracy better than an unattainable ideal of consensus and communicative rationality, which is a central tenet in Habermas' oeuvre.

Another influential theory on the public sphere and democracy has been developed by Jeffrey Alexander [19]. With his theory of *The Civil Sphere*, he has developed a theory of democracy and the public sphere, emanating from a cultural sociological perspective, with its strong focus on the role of meaning in social life [20]. Alexander [19] adheres to Habermas' [6] definition of the public sphere as "the sphere of private people coming together as a public", but criticizes Habermas for assuming that the idealizing principles of deliberation and rational discussion "actually grow out of speaking, deliberating, or being active in the public sphere" [19]. Where the public sphere for Haber-

mas is an arena for rational discussions, it is for Alexander an arena for social performances, since “the ideal of rational dialogue and dispassionate deliberation is only one of several performative modes available to cultural actors in the public sphere” [21]. Habermas’ [22] theory is based on an idea that there exists a specific form of rationality in the lifeworld that sets it apart from the instrumental rationality of the systems of market and state. Through communicative rationality, Habermas [23] argues that we meet each other as equals and let the power of the best argument decide the winners of every discussion. For Alexander, on the other hand, solidarity rather than rationality is the guiding principle of the public sphere. For Alexander [19], such a civil public sphere “relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle.” The civil sphere is “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time” [19]. For Alexander, the discourse of the civil sphere has at its core a set of binary cultural codes separating the civil from the anti-civil. This discourse is in turn sustained by specific communicative institutions (public opinion, mass media, polls, associations) and regulative institutions (voting, parties, office, law). This leaves no room for public libraries as an explicit part of his theory. Nevertheless, as public libraries are tied to the civil side of the binary code of civil sphere discourse, basing its legitimacy on such civil values as inclusion and openness, public libraries can be viewed as civil organizations. At the same time, it is important to remember that the public library can fail to live up to its ideals. In the US, for example, the public library has throughout its history gradually dissolved its tendencies for exclusion and anti-civil actions [24].

As public libraries have a strong mandate to serve the whole community through various inclusive practices [25], Alexander’s civil sphere theory, with its heavy focus on solidarity, can be helpful when theorizing the democratic and inclusive mission of public libraries. Lacking in Alexander’s theory is a focus on the public sphere as a place, as a physical location, an aspect that is captured by Habermas’ theory, as well as other theories of public spheres, particularly those developed by Richard Sennett [26-27]. My argument is therefore that simply relating to one theory of the public sphere is not sufficient to amply theorize public libraries as public spheres. Instead, we need to develop a sophisticated theory of public libraries as public spheres by critically engaging with several theories of public spheres and seek to develop them as fitted to public libraries.

#### **4 Public Libraries as Public Spheres**

In recent years, library policies have been developed to emphasize the public sphere function of the public library. This is especially true in the Nordic countries, where several national laws on public libraries have been reformulated to encompass the libraries roles as public spheres [11-12]. Most of these are explicitly or implicitly inspired by the work of Habermas. In Norway, Habermas’ work has had a profound impact on the social sciences and humanities, and through that also the formation of cultural policies [28] and laws on freedom of speech [29-30]. This is due to a tradition for involving

scholars as experts when developing policies [11, 30]. Even though policies emphasize public libraries as public spheres in a habermasian sense, there is nevertheless a leap to argue that the public library is merely a public sphere institution in a habermasian sense, in that rational discussions of cultural and political matters are but one aspect of the democratic mission of public libraries. As free and open public spaces, public libraries are just as much about social solidarity as about democratic deliberation. In order to capture the totality of the democratic mission of the public library, it makes more sense to combine insights from Alexander and Habermas, rather than simply relying on one of the theories. From Habermas, we can get a precise definition of what constitutes a public sphere. “Private people coming together as a public” [6], serves as a description of certain aspects of the life at a public library. Nevertheless, Habermas’ theory is too focused on democratic deliberation. If we instead turn to Alexander’s theory of the civil sphere, we get to include democratic aspects of public libraries that goes beyond deliberative events taking place within the libraries, as his theory is not build on rational deliberation as the basis for a civil public sphere. Public libraries can most certainly be considered an institution of the civil sphere, as it “generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time” [19]. In public libraries patrons can attain knowledge deemed important for participation in public sphere discourse, and potentially also feel as part of a community simply by being present in the library and engaging with its various offerings. The *public* in public libraries relates both to the library as a physical “meeting place” for various activities involving some form of deliberation (be they debates, book club meetings or language cafés) and it being an open and inclusive space (at least in principle, although not true throughout the history of the institution [24]).

Social scientists have developed many concepts that can capture the *public* in public libraries. In library and information science public libraries have been conceptualized as low intensive meeting places [31], as meeting spaces [32], as public spheres [2, 4], as third places [12, 33] and as palaces for the people [34]. Library and information scholars activate sociological theories when developing models and concepts for public libraries, irrespective of whether the original theory emphasizes public libraries as a part of the theory. Oldenburg hardly mentions libraries in his book [33], while library and information scholars talk about libraries as third places [12]. Similarly, libraries make up a minor part of Habermas’ theory, yet library and information scholar rely heavily on his theory when conceptualizing libraries as public spheres [1-4]. Alexander does not mention libraries, yet his theory has been activated when theorizing the role of libraries in society [35]. Klinenberg is an exemption as he is a sociologist writing explicitly about public libraries (New York Public Library) when developing his argument on the importance of social infrastructures for creating a more just and united society. Combined, these different perspectives provide us with a rich conceptual language for understanding public libraries. Yet, there exists no fully developed theory of public libraries as public spheres.

Scholars of library and information science have relied heavily on Habermas’ early work when conceptualizing public libraries as public spheres [7]. In going forward with this theorizing in library and information science, scholars should engage with Habermas’ more recent work as well as with alternative theories of public spheres. Only then

will we be able to develop a theory capturing the many aspects of public libraries as public spheres.

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