
Professional values in Norwegian librarianship

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Abstract

Value considerations and ethics are increasingly relevant in the library and information science (LIS) field, both in education, research and in the profession. Change management in LIS therefore needs input from studies of professional values among librarians and information professionals. The article presents some preliminary findings from the first survey of professional values in Norwegian librarianship. International surveys have shown that patron service, intellectual freedom, preservation of the record, equality of access, and information literacy are primary ethical and professional values for librarians and information professionals in many countries. The Norwegian survey in general supports these findings but also identifies and explains some nuances in value preferences among public librarians compared with college and university librarians.

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Methodology

The article presents some preliminary findings from the first survey of professional values in Norwegian librarianship. It is intended as the first step in a continuous, annual series study of value orientation among Norwegian librarians, library staff and information professionals. The design is open to other interested library and information science (LIS) scholars who would like to develop international comparisons, which are needed. The Norwegian sample was gathered electronically over a six-week period from 15 March to 1 May 2003. An electronic, pre-structured questionnaire based on previous studies (Dole *et al.*, 2000; Dole and Hurych, 2001) and adapted by Dr Alexandra Horvat, Croatia, was employed[1]. The questionnaire was made available for two weeks on the Web site of the Norwegian Library Association and for the remaining four weeks on the Web site of Oslo University College. Two e-mails were distributed, the first on 16 March and a reminder on 2 May, to subscribers on the address list bibliotek@norge, encouraging subscribers to take part in the survey. At the time, the e-mail list had 1,965 registered subscribers, both qualified librarians and others. It is the most popular e-mail address list and debate forum for Norwegian librarians and library employees.

Respondents were asked first to state in which type of library they worked, to identify the library's geographical location (county and municipality), to specify position and responsibilities, gender, whether the respondent had a three-year diploma in library studies or not, and number of years in the profession. Respondents were then requested to prioritise among a total of 15 selected values, and select three values considered the most important. These were to be graded on a 1-3 scale of importance. In the present article, the 1-3 scale has been disregarded and only the total scores of all 15 values included. In the authors' view the 1-3 scale gave rise to the possibility of skewed interpretations concerning values excluded from the 1-3 grading. In addition, although the 15 values in the questionnaire were not ranked according to perceived importance, their order of appearance did have an impact: several respondents thus added a comment to the effect that they had "used up their three votes" on the values listed first.

The method, which was non-random and not statistically representative (Blaikie, 2003; Antonius, 2003), thus shares several shortcomings

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with earlier studies. Dole and Hurych (2001, p. 49) similarly regret their pool being small and that their procedure was “unscientific and informal”. In an expanded analysis Dole *et al.* (2000, p. 296) regret that their sample “is not adequately comprehensive to permit us to perform statistically valid tests”.

The 372 Norwegian respondents represent all of Norway's 19 counties and a majority of its 435 municipalities, all types of Norwegian libraries, all levels of management, all career stages, both genders, and also both qualified librarians and others with another professional background. Also, the respondents have prioritised among all 15 values in the electronic questionnaire. The results are therefore seen as suggestive of more general trends in, and characteristics of, Norwegian librarianship (Vaagan, 2002, 2003a, b).

The data allows, for example, bivariate cross tabulations, using type of library, type of position, gender, educational background, seniority in the library profession, and region as independent variables and professional values as the dependent variable. Our research question is that each of the independent variables, separately and acting together, to some extent influence the dependent variable – professional values. Yet we are well aware that the opposite may also be true, i.e. because one holds certain values one chooses an education, a geographical location, one is promoted, etc. For these reasons explanatory and inferential analysis is avoided in this article and accordingly causality is not discussed, and there is no claim to present any causal model or present any hypothesis or theory. As tests of significance are inappropriate when samples are drawn using non-probability procedures, tests of significance are also avoided (Blaikie, 2003, p. 7). Within the ramifications of the present article it is, therefore, chosen to present only one cross-tabulation of library types and professional value preferences.

This analysis in the authors' view is quite interesting and appropriate in a Norwegian context. Prior to the creation from 1 January 2003 of The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority (NALMA), there were two separate organisations – one for public libraries and another for academic and special libraries (including college/university libraries). These two organisations were supervised by different ministries, and there were distinct cultures separating the two library sectors, at times also making co-operation difficult[2]. While the main objective of NALMA is to bring archives, libraries and museums closer together, another intention is to reduce differences in the library field symbolised by the two former organisations. Therefore the

finding of differences in value preferences between public libraries and college/university libraries would be expected.

Libraries, staff and respondents

Table I summarizes the number and type of libraries in Norway, the total number of qualified librarians and staff employed, and finally in which type of library the 372 respondents are employed.

As can be seen, the largest number of respondents (211 – 57 per cent) work in public libraries, of which there were 1,409 in 2001, according to statistics provided by NALMA[2]. The 211 public librarian respondents amount to about 20 per cent of all qualified librarians (1,059) in Norwegian public libraries. In 2001 there were in addition 3,395 school libraries (2,971 primary and 424 secondary schools), 170 college/university libraries, 139 public special libraries (including the National Library), and 30 private special libraries. Of course, the number of libraries says little about their individual size or relative importance: for example, most school libraries (the most numerous group) are only open a few hours per week.

Under the Public Library Act of 1985, which regulates public libraries (but not, for example, college/university libraries), each of Norway's 435 municipalities must provide a public library led by a qualified librarian. Each municipality (with one exception) therefore has a public library, and including branches there are 974 public libraries in all (*Statens biblioteksystem*, 2002, p. 8). Yet only 64 per cent of these are headed by qualified librarians since many exemptions are made due to a lack of qualified applicants. The Public Library Act was revised in 2003, and the Norwegian Ministry of Church Affairs and Culture which supervises all libraries, has made no secret of the fact that it would like closer library co-operation among neighbouring municipalities in order to reduce the total number of public libraries. This is because the present coalition Government wants a considerable reduction of the total number of municipalities in Norway. The Government also encourages a continuation – and even a widening – of the exemption system allowing non-librarians to head public libraries. The Ministry has announced plans to present a comprehensive Library Law embracing all types of libraries in a national, “seamless” library structure which is being developed.

Table I Libraries, staff and respondents

Type and number of libraries	Qualified librarians		Total staff		Respondents	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Public libraries (1,409)	1,059	45	1,871	43	211	57
School libraries (3,395)	241	10	659	15	14	4
College/university libraries (170)	643	28	1,159	26	85	22
Public, special libraries (139)	358	15	639	14	48	13
Private, special libraries (30)	45	2	68	2	14	4
Total number of libraries (5,134)	2,346	100	4,396	100	372	100

Value preferences

Coming to what is seen as the dependent variable in the analysis – this is the value preferences. As for the 15 professional values made use of, these and the questionnaire were developed by Dr Alexandra Horvat, Croatia. She has expanded on the 11 values identified by Dole and Hurych (2001) and Dole *et al.* (2000) by adding values such as “encouragement and provision of lifelong learning”, “efficient management and organisation”, as well as “creation of a culture of reading”. As there is as yet no common agreement on the exact composition of professional LIS values, this seems appropriate. Gorman (2000), for example, lists eight enduring librarianship values, while Lester and Koehler (2003, p. 231) focus on only six ethical and moral values in LIS and in other information professional associations. Zwass (2003) by contrast argues in favour of four principal infoethical issues.

In Table II the 15 values in the survey are cross-tabulated with library type, showing value preferences (as percentage distributions) according to library type.

School libraries

The school library group of respondents is very small (14) and also has the highest proportion of missing data. First preference was given to “free access to materials and information” and “spreading information and literacy” (both 12 per cent), while the remaining values received little or no priority.

Public libraries

Among the 211 respondents from public libraries, “free access to materials and to information” is by far the first preference (21 per cent) compared with “creation of culture of reading” (12 per cent) and “spreading knowledge and literacy” as well as “professional neutrality and objectivity” (both 8 per cent). Conversely, this group viewed as the least prioritised “creation of quality bibliographic record” and “protection of user confidentiality” (both 1 per cent), and “respect of copyright” (0.3 per cent). Yet it would be fallacious to conclude, for example, that public librarians in our sample do

Table II Value preferences by library type, as percentage distributions

Professional values	SL	PL	C/UL	PuSL	PrSL
Free access to materials and information	12	21	19	13	17
Creation of culture of reading	7	12	0.4	1	2
Spreading knowledge and literacy	7	8	12	10	21
Professional neutrality and objectivity	7	8	2	4	0
Encouragement and provision of lifelong learning	5	6	8	3	0
Providing services to users	7	5	11	13	12
Providing equitable access	5	5	2	5	0
Spreading information literacy	12	4	20	8	12
Encouragement of cultural diversity	0	4	0.4	2	0
Preservation and maintaining the book record	2	3	2	3	7
Selection of quality information and collection building	5	3	8	6	10
Efficient management and organisation	0	2	4	6	10
Creation of quality bibliographic record	0	1	2	4	0
Protection of user confidentiality	0	1	0.8	1	0
Respect of copyright	0	0.3	0	1	0
Total percentage of respondents	69	84	91	80	91
Missing	31	16	9	18	7
Total	100 (n = 14)	100 (n = 211)	100 (n = 85)	98 (n = 48)	98 (n = 14)

Notes: SL = School libraries; PL = Public libraries; C/UL = College/university libraries; PuSL = Public, special libraries; PrSL = Private, special libraries

not view “respect of copyright” as a professional value: As stated, we believe the requirement that only three out of 15 values were to be prioritised can give rise to exactly this type of misinterpretation.

College/university libraries

The second largest respondent group, college/university librarians (85) prioritised “spreading information literacy” the highest (20 per cent). Almost as many (19 per cent) preferred “free access to materials and to information”, and also “spreading knowledge and literacy” (12 per cent). Conversely, the three lowest value preferences were “protection of user confidentiality” (0.8 per cent), “creation of culture of reading” and also “encouragement of cultural diversity” (both 0.4 per cent).

Public, special libraries

This group (48) includes respondents from the National Library, and the first preferences were given to “free access to materials and information” and “providing services to users” (both 13 per cent) and “spreading knowledge and literacy” (10 per cent). The lowest preferences were accorded to “creation of culture of reading”, “protection of user confidentiality” and “respect of copyright” (each 1 per cent).

Private, special libraries

This group was also small (14) but with less missing data than the foregoing group. Here the highest preferences were “spreading knowledge and literacy” (21 per cent) and “free access to materials and information” (17 per cent). As with school librarians, a number of values received little or no priority.

Discussion

If the discussion is limited to the two largest respondent groups: public librarians and college/university librarians, a few interesting points emerge. Both consider “free access to materials and to information” and “spreading information literacy” as important value preferences. However, whereas the respondents from the public libraries seem to value the former most, the college/

university respondents consider them as almost equally important. Both groups also value “spreading knowledge and literacy”, while college and university librarians value “providing services to users” higher than public librarians. Both groups more or less concur in what they do not prioritise the highest, perhaps with one exception: Only 0.4 per cent of the college/university librarians prioritised “encouragement of cultural diversity”. This was not among the first preferences of the public librarians either (4 per cent), but still much higher.

As noted earlier, it was expected to find some differences in value preferences between librarians in public libraries and college/university libraries. These differences can, of course, be interpreted as insignificant nuances. However, bearing in mind the earlier comments on NALMA, it must be acknowledged that there was a history of unsatisfactory co-operation between the two disbanded organisations merged under NALMA. This tension had in fact infused the organisational culture and affiliations in Norwegian librarianship. Distinct cultures and foci still separate public librarians from college/university librarians and librarians in the private sector.

Against this background, the author believes the differences are suggestive of substantive underlying differences in value orientation. In Norway, the Public Library Act also in its revised version from 1 August 2003, states that library services are free of charge and must be extended to children and adults residing in the country, i.e. there is no citizenship requirement, and implicitly multiculturalism is therefore encouraged (Vaagan, 2003b). Public libraries, as their name suggests, have a much wider social function than other types of more specialized libraries. Library materials in Norwegian public libraries are collected based on the three criteria of variety, quality and relevance. In consequence, the public librarian has been, and still is, primarily committed to values such as free library services, equitable access, lifelong learning and the creation of a culture of reading (Audunson, 2001, p. 214).

The situation for the more specialized college/university libraries where The Public Library Act does not apply, is different. College/university libraries, as well as special public and private libraries and academic/research libraries, come under various regulations which were previously the responsibility of the National Office for Research Documentation, Academic and Special Libraries. From 1 January 2003 NALMA has taken over these responsibilities. The typical college/university librarian is concerned primarily with academics and students. In consequence, priority is given first and foremost to values such as

spreading information literacy, spreading knowledge and providing services to main users. Library services, including access to book collections and electronic journals, are normally restricted and sometimes fee-based. Since science and research are international and much of the course curricula is in a language other than Norwegian, encouragement of cultural diversity is here taken for granted.

Conclusion

Previous international surveys view patron service, intellectual freedom, preservation of the record, equality of access and information literacy as the primary ethical and professional values for librarians and information professionals in many countries. While the limitations of the methodology prevent the drawing of general conclusions about Norwegian librarianship as a whole, the findings suggest that the situation is much the same in Norway. The nuances focussed on among the respondents in terms of value preferences among librarians working in public libraries versus college/university libraries, are attributed largely to differing types of library legislation, competing organisational histories, different cultures and user groups. Follow-up studies will show whether these distinctions persist.

Notes

- 1 We are particularly indebted to colleagues Dr Alexandra Horvat, Croatia, and Dr Marian Koren, The Netherlands, for fruitful suggestions and discussions influencing the present article.
- 2 Statistics from 2001 have been used, compiled by the former National Office for Research Documentation, Academic and Special Libraries (RBT) and The Norwegian Directorate for Public Libraries (SBT). Comparisons of statistical computations made by these organisations – both of which were merged under the Norwegian Authority of Archives, Libraries and Museums effective from 1 January 2003 – were complicated by their separate foci and procedures. In some cases statistics have been

insufficient, e.g. college/university/special libraries statistics provided by RBT were not arranged by county.

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Further reading

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