

Library year: 2008 – a fairy tale too good to be true?

A new bookmobile, the UN Public Service Award, AudioIndex and the Internet. Video games and library alterations. Inger Edebro Sikström, head of the Central Public Library in Umeå sums up the library year 2008 and looks ahead to the hottest topics for 2009.

Looking back on the year 2008 one has to start with the extensive and popular core services that the libraries basically offer every day, all year round. Library activities that are usually taken for granted, without further reflection about the great amount of work and effort that are involved.

The ability to search for and evaluate information together with good reading skills and reading comprehension are prerequisites for the pursuit of knowledge. It could also be said that it is a question of being able to participate in democratic processes as well as the right to knowledge and culture.

It is in this perspective that the core services of the libraries are so incredibly important.

Good habits are formed early in life and therefore the libraries give all newborn infants a copy of *A Child's first Book*. This is followed up with more books, story time, programme activities, reading groups, writer's workshops, class visits and much, much more.

In Umeå, everyone who lives in the urban area lives within biking distance at least one library. Proximity to a library is especially important to all children. On the other hand, children who live in the country have to depend on their parents who can drive them to the library.

This is why the bookmobile visits all the schools, pre-schools and childminders outside urban areas: in total 140 stops. No library, except for the Central Public Library, can measure up to the high lending statistics of the bookmobile.

We got to design a new bookmobile in 2008 in Umeå, the world's best and finest if I may boast a bit. Close co-operation has been developed with the Umeå Institute of Design at Umeå University. The task was not only to design a bookmobile that would not only arouse children's desire to read and stimulate their curiosity, but also to offer visitors more privacy by increasing the amount of self-service, while improving ergonomics in a compact and demanding work environment.

This is a comment that a visitor wrote in the in the visitors' book, "Here we are in the fantastic world of fairy tales, both in the bus and when see the bus on its way to Angersjo. Culture is cool".

"Growth of Identities" is a theme in Umeå's bid to become the European Capital of Culture. In the application "this theme aims at giving voice to diversity, creating arenas for co-creation and creativity and strengthening people's quality of life and health through culture".

The libraries are one of the few public places where people with different backgrounds can meet. By offering a large selection of media, information and cultural activities, the libraries

provide people with different cultural backgrounds opportunities to maintain and develop their own language and culture. At the libraries, the native-born Swedes can gain insight into and knowledge of other cultures, something that promotes increased intercultural understanding.

Did you know that the libraries in Umeå offer literature in 35 languages? It was particularly gratifying that during 2008 we were able to purchase more literature in Thai, a language that many have requested. We also have databases of newspapers from all over the world, most of them are available the same day they come out and with the same contents as the printed newspaper.

National statistics show that the percentage of library visits by those with low education has declined during the past six years from 60 to 36 per cent (the equivalent number for the well educated declined from 85 to 70 per cent). These figures indicate a widening social gap and it is important for all of us on the library staff to consider why with our large and free selection of material has not reached those with low education.

We have to ask ourselves what can the libraries do to reach those whom we do not reach today?

One way of attracting new groups is to try out new services. During 2008 we therefore started to lend video games at the Central Public Library. According to surveys, 26 per cent of all young people between 13 and 20 play video games each day. We wanted to see if we could attract new visitors by showing that the library also provided this form of cultural expression.

We soon realized that we didn't have much experience with video games so we consulted with some youthful and adult gamers before we bought any. In order to learn more about the games themselves, we got help from the non-profit consumers' association *Goodgame*. The results were beyond our expectations, in fact a huge success.

One young man commented, "Bravo old library. Now I'm gonna get a library card."

I began by writing about the extent of the libraries' core services, something that cannot be emphasised enough. In a democratic society, access to a library is important since the ability to read and access to information are fundamental conditions necessary for participation in a democratic process.

During the past year, the libraries in the UmeåRegion were awarded the United Nations Public Service Award. In our acceptance speech to the United Nations we emphasised that we saw the award as confirmation for not only UmeåRegion's libraries, but also for the significant value that libraries all over the world represent.

Being awarded the United Nations Public Service Award – "It is like winning gold medals in all the events at the Olympic Games" – according to someone there. A fairy tale too good to be true, or what is it that Lisa Ekdahl sings in her song, *Who Knows?* Tomas Wennström, chairman of the Cultural Committee and Lars-Erik Edlund, deputy chairman described the event like this:

"Pride, joy and inspiration. A few words that best describe what we felt after we had been privileged enough to be among those who were present to receive the

United Nations award for the UmeåRegion's development project *Bibliotek 2007*. The honour is none the less significant due to the fact that it is the first time that any municipalities from Sweden have won the prestigious United Nations Public Service Award. And as we won in the category "Improving the Delivery of Services" (best innovative citizens' service) the value of the award is even greater".

How did the UmeåRegion's libraries get this prestigious award?

First and foremost I see it as confirmation of the long-term and proactive work that we have done to develop the libraries' services for those who live in the UmeåRegion. We have been able to sustain a spirit of cooperation in the project, and we were able to cope with the challenges we have faced. Last but not least, there was no hesitation in conferring with outside expertise to develop innovative services.

AudioIndex, or the Talking Library, began as an audacious, somewhat playful idea in the EU-funded project *Bibliotek 2007*. AudioIndex utilises RFID technology, which means that RFID tags (transponders) are attached to the spines of digital talking books, so-called Daisy books. The tags are read with a pointing device and the information that is related to the scanned tag is retrieved from a database and converted into speech that is read out via the headset.

None of us could ever dream that our idea would eventually be put on the market as a commercial product for libraries, museums and convenience shops. In 2008 AudioIndex was nominated along with 1 000 other businesses for the Venture Cup, a competition that aims to stimulate the establishment of new, innovative businesses with growth potential.

All this has happened thanks to the libraries in the UmeåRegion and our ability to think differently and work together. Wow!

The joint web site for UmeåRegion, *Minbibliotek.se* is the example of how we succeeded in realising a political decision with high aims. It is an activity that has been considered innovative, even by international standards. It contributes to Umeå's candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2014.

Minbibliotek.se has even earned national recognition. Along with two other libraries, it became the first virtual library to be nominated to the Library of the year competition. The jury stated in its decision that

"The web site is temptingly easy to navigate on. The visitor is offered an abundant smorgasbord of activities that include reading, music and film tips, knowledge and interactivity. *Minbibliotek.se* inspires not only the use of the libraries' joint digital resources, but also visits to the local, physical library."

What is going to happen in 2009?

Yes, as early as January alteration will begin for an automatic return machine at the Central Public Library. The alteration will take a couple of months so there will be controlled chaos for a while during this period. But as the saying goes, "good things come to those who wait."

During the coming year, the new Ålidhem Library in the new Ålidhem School will take form. Ålidhem's Culture and Resource Centre is the new name. The opening ceremony will take place around the turn of the year 2009/10. Something I am eagerly looking forward to!

I feel that another major issue during 2009 will be if the Central Public Library will be relocated or not. The local newspaper, Västerbottens Kuriren, asked 500 randomly selected inhabitants of Umeå over the phone. The heading was "Little support for relocation of the library".

My interpretation of result is rather that those who live in Umeå support a centrally located library and that they are very satisfied with today's library. On the other hand, no other supporting documents have been presented that can be evaluated to determine the need or location of a library of the future.

During the spring 2008, the Cultural Committee demanded an inquiry be conducted concerning the library of the future. This inquiry was called "Thinking ahead and Moving Forward".

Briefly, one could say that the inquiry stated that the public library is a cultural institution with long traditions that are based on the freedom of speech and information, as well as values that deal with everyone's right to knowledge, cultural experience and information. The library's contribution to these democratic rights is as important today as they were a hundred years ago. However, libraries must find a balance between upholding that which is traditional and keep pace with other developments in society.

A feasibility study will be undertaken to determine the conditions for remaining in the same location and at the same time a new central public library is a consideration in discussions about a city between the bridges.

It is essential for me as the chief librarian to ensure that even in the future there are opportunities for development, not only for the Central Public Library, but also for all the libraries. Furthermore good core services must be guaranteed and opportunities for working with innovative development must be created.

In order to succeed, we must cooperate with many stakeholders and find better ways of getting a hold of your ideas and needs. Please share your thoughts here below.

The year in review by Inger Edebro Sikström, Umeå's Central Public Library

Read more from the library year 2008:

- the article about the bookmobile
- articles about the library of the future
- info pages about AudioIndex
- news text about the UN award
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