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9. The People's Palaces

Public Libraries in the Information Society

Frank Huysmans and Marjolein Oomes

Public libraries, together with public broadcasting, are the only publicly funded cultural institutions with a broad social reach which includes groups of lower socioeconomic status and immigrants. Despite this crucial role they play, public libraries seem to have reached a turning point in the first decades of the twenty-first century. While they have a potential role as treasure troves of knowledge and guidance in a world of information overkill, 'alternative facts' and dwindling reading motivation among school-aged children, their societal relevance has been challenged, while cutbacks have affected the physical presence and professional staffing of public libraries over the last five years. However, a new public library law tightening the connections between the public library sector and the national library in the Netherlands may provide new impulses. This chapter tracks the developments in Dutch public library policy and the practices implemented by libraries to reposition themselves in the information age and 'data economy'. It concludes by exploring how the public role of libraries can be made visible by developing new ways to measure the societal value of these people's palaces.

9.1 The Dutch Public Library Network in 2018

The public library network in the Netherlands is well over a century old. In 1908, the Central Association of Public Reading Rooms and Libraries was founded by six members from the cities of Groningen, Leeuwarden, Utrecht, Dordrecht, The Hague and Rotterdam. It was not before the 1960s and 1970s that public library services reached all corners of the country. Economic crises, reluctance from religious groups (both Roman Catholics and Protestants) and the Second World War were important obstacles to the expansion that was so greatly desired by proponents of the Reading Room Movement, which was more successful in other Western European countries such as England, Wales and Scotland (Black, Pepper & Bagshaw 2009, Schneiders 1990).

The most recent statistics available at the moment of writing (reflecting the situation in late 2016 to mid-2017) list some 150 public library organisations

in the Netherlands that operate at approximately 770 main locations and fully fledged library branches. An additional 200 staffed access points with limited collections and 180 book collection points are scattered across the country. In total, 2.3 million children (0-17 years) and 1.4 million adults are registered as members. Yearly, roughly 65 million visits are made. In addition, over 2,500 primary schools are connected to the Library at School programme with public library organisations involved in such activities as bringing books to—or very close to—schools to support and strengthen education systems. Over 560,000 children enrolled at these schools (0-12 years of age) have access to a Library at School. In addition, 55 lower secondary schools with almost 50,000 students (12-16 years of age) are connected to the same programme (Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2017).

The Public Library Act (*Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheekvoorzieningen*, WSOB), effective as of 1 January 2015, stipulates that each of the 150 public library organisations fulfill five core functions:

- provide knowledge and information
- offer opportunities for development and education
- promote reading and literature
- organise encounters and debate
- introduce to art and culture.

Since these functions were introduced in a report jointly written a decade earlier by the Dutch Public Library Association (*Vereniging van Openbare Bibliotheken*, VOB) and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (*Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten*, VNG), they have been standard practice in the public library sector. The 2015 Act elevated them to legal status in conjunction with a set of public values to guide how these functions were to be executed: independence, reliability, accessibility, pluriformity and authenticity.

Observing the core functions and public values in the Act, the range of public library services has extended beyond simply lending books. The parliamentary deliberation on the bill in 2014 made it clear that all five functions were to be mandatory for every public library organisation (albeit not for every individual branch). Moreover, Article 5 of the Act states that these functions ‘contribute to the personal development and societal opportunities of the general public’—a statement that can be seen as referring back to the traditional role of the public library as it was conceived in the second half of the nineteenth century—namely, as an institution for empowerment through self-education (Black, Pepper & Bagshaw 2009, Greve 1906, Schneiders 1990, Wiegand 2015).

Indeed, in recent years the tasks and activities of libraries have expanded into various domains. Increasingly, libraries organise activities such as

lectures, expositions, workshops and debates in the fields of literature, the arts, culture, politics and social issues. Their role in reading promotion takes shape in educational programmes aimed at primary and secondary schools and organisations for early childhood education such as daycare centres and playgroups for babies and toddlers. In extensive cooperation with social organisations, they address social issues such as low literacy and low digital skills through programmes for basic skills education and lifelong learning (Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2017).

Meanwhile, both traditional and new tasks and services are being given a physical and digital appearance, and new forms of reaching out to user groups are being introduced:

- the national digital library: a portal (onlinebibliotheek.nl) offering e-books for e-lending as well as online courses (leisure, personal development and basic skills), together with a separate website for youth (jeugdbibliotheek.nl)
- experiments involving knowledge exchanges and development of online communities
- introduction of 'performative spaces' (fablab / maker space / media lab) to several libraries, including in mobile form
- digital information desks with reliable information in the fields of health and health care, labour markets and government (including e-government).

In overseeing the network's shape in 2018, it is fair to say that the public library network performs a range of activities that is much broader than the outdated public image of the institution—as a book lending warehouse—would have it. The *central question* of this chapter concerns how this state of affairs has developed over the past 25 years and the extent to which this has implications for public library policy and evaluation. Three dimensions or 'threads' will be central to our analysis:

1. the extent to which public library policy was *centralised versus decentralised*;
2. the *narrow versus broad* conceptualisation of the public library's societal role; and
3. the (development of) *indicators* that measure the extent to which the library network is effectively performing its desired functions.

First, we give a historical sketch of the development of public library policy over the past quarter century divided into several phases (sections 9.2 to 9.5). Then, we direct our attention to the current situation, discussing the broadening functions that the public library serves, the innovations in

library services, the status of physical libraries and the monitoring of the public library's functions (sections 9.6 to 9.9), before finally summarising our findings (9.10).

9.2 Public Library Policy, Part 1: 1975-1998

Public library policy in the Netherlands is predominantly local (municipal) policy. From the start of the public financing of public libraries in the early 1900s, local governments have been in charge of public library policy with the short yet notable exception of the period between 1975 and 1987, when an attempt was made to centralise the public library system with the first Public Library Act. This Act succeeded in strengthening and expanding the provision of public library services, especially in rural areas (defined as municipalities with less than 30,000 inhabitants). In the 1980s, however, an economic recession, in combination with the trend in public administration science to place democratic control at the level where citizens can enjoy the benefits of public services, led to the reinstatement of local governments as the principal level of public library policy. In 1987, the public library system was incorporated into the Welfare Act and then decentralised, a process that was eventually completed in 1989. The first Public Library Act of 1975 was history.

Already in 1993, public library policy shifted from the Welfare Act to the newly established Cultural Policy Act. Two articles were dedicated to public library policy. Article 11a arranged that a financial contribution for library membership would only be asked of children and adolescents if provincial or municipal governments so decided, but the contribution could only be at most half of the adult contribution fee.

Article 11b stipulated that the three levels of government 'promote that the library facility they finance or maintain participate in the lending traffic together with other library facilities' and that they build regional and national networks. These networks were to be built from the bottom up, with provincial networks comprising all local networks (public library organisations) within their territory, and with the national network consisting of all provincial networks. The networks were made responsible for such things as collecting and distributing library materials and other information sources, centralising their collection management (including automation), and providing library services for special groups (particularly for the visually impaired).

The library system had seemingly arrived in calm waters, but the truth was that storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. In the second half of

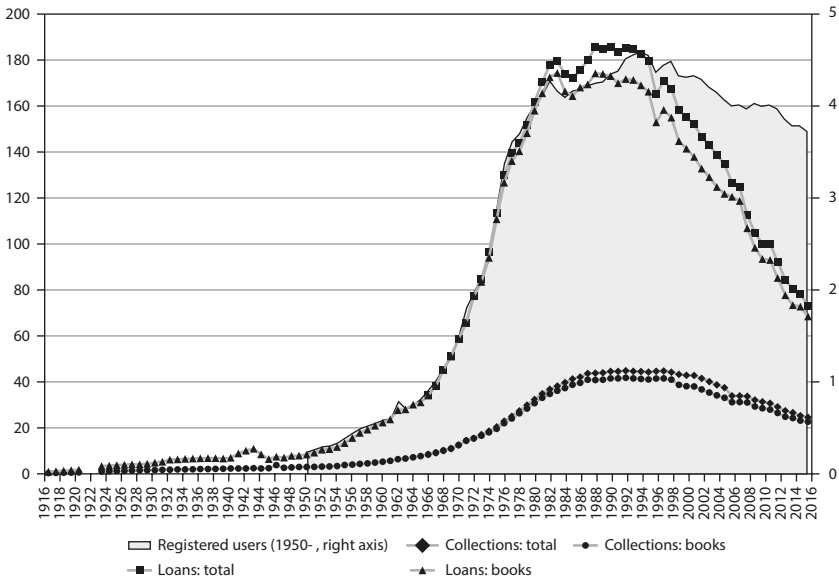
the 1990s, two developments started to preoccupy librarians and policymakers alike. First, a structural decline in reading began to emerge in library statistics. From the beginning of the 1980s, researchers identified a decline in the amount of leisure time the Dutch invested in reading print media from as early as the 1950s (Knulst & Kalmijn 1988, Knulst & Kraaykamp 1996). Remarkably, this trend failed to emerge in the library lending statistics until book lending finally stalled in the 1990s. Second, the rise of networked computers as household equipment and the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web as sources of information threatened the informational function of the public library.

9.3 Decline in Membership and Book Lending

The inclusion of the public libraries in the Cultural Policy Act in 1993 marks, in hindsight, the beginning of a period of decline in usage figures. After almost a century of first slow and then rapid expansion, Dutch public libraries reached a peak in membership, collection and lending in the beginning of the 1990s (Fig. 9.1).

Figure 9.1 shows the rapid expansion of the public library system in the period 1960-1985. During this quarter century, the rise in loans kept pace with a growing number of registered users. Over the decade that followed, users and loans more or less stabilised, despite some fluctuations. The number of registered users peaked in 1994 at almost 4.6 million. The number of loans reached a peak in 1990, already at over 185 million items. Starting in the mid-1990s, however, a gradual decline in users went hand in hand with a much sharper decline in loans. Logically, this was the result of users borrowing fewer books per capita. It is imaginable that the introduction of lending rights was a determining factor. Several libraries started to charge a small fee for each borrowed book or other item. This additional cost may have led to patrons becoming more critical in what and how much they borrowed. In that case, one would expect to see an initial drop after which stabilisation would set in at a lower level. Instead, there is a continuing, steep decline in loans. In other words, there must be additional and more powerful explanations, which we will now discuss.

Ten years ago, a study of developments in the public library landscape looked into several possible explanations for the marked decline in memberships and loans (Huysmans & Hillebrink 2008: Ch. 5). Starting already in the 1950s, a gradual and steady decline in the amount of leisure time spent reading was observed in time-use diary studies. From 1975 to 2005,

Figure 9.1: Expansion of the Dutch public library system (in millions)

Source: Statistics Netherlands (<https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/82469NED/table?ts=1516800365480>)

a series of studies every five years indicated a decline in the number of Dutch citizens (12 years of age and over) reading at all, i.e., spending at least one interval of 15 minutes reading a book, magazine, newspaper or other reading material per week. For those who did read, the amount of time spent reading declined only slightly. ‘Fewer Dutch are reading’ is a more apt way of describing the trend than ‘The Dutch are reading less’. A recent study (Wennekers et al. 2018) using a time-budget survey allowing for more fine-grained registrations of media use from digital devices has demonstrated that this trend is continuing. The study also showed a very pronounced decline for teenagers (12-19 years of age) and younger adults (20-34 years) and much less so for the older population (seniors aged 65 years and older), for which the proportion of readers remained unchanged.

Looking at the data on a descriptive level, the simplest explanation would be that age groups (or generations) have reacted differently to changes in the media and reading environments, such as the rise of e-papers, e-magazines and e-books as well as social media platforms such as Facebook and on-demand video services such as Netflix. Younger people may be more inclined than others to incorporate ‘new media’ into their media menus. Older age groups may not change their patterns of media behaviour so

drastically, which would explain why 'traditional media' tend to exhibit considerable resilience when confronted with new competitors. Looking beyond the media environment, the number of options to fill one's leisure time shows no signs of decreasing. In other words, the number of options to choose from in spending one's leisure time both in and outside the media environment makes it less probable that reading books and other textual media will make the cut, although the probability may well vary with age.

9.4 Public Library Policy, Part 2: The Library Renewal Policy Programme (1998-2008)

In a 1998 memorandum to the ministry responsible for culture, the Council for Culture (*Raad voor Cultuur*) argued that the public library landscape—which typically had one library organisation in each municipality—would not be able to survive the dual challenges of the decline in reading and the trend towards digitisation. It advocated the scaling up of the library system by putting one organisation per region (each covering 400-500,000 inhabitants) with one governing board in charge of that region's library services. Each board was to be filled with representatives from the provinces and municipalities in the region, thereby forming political bodies: 'The local involvement of citizens could be organised through customer councils or panels, or other forms of public participation' (Raad voor Cultuur 1998: 8, translated by authors).

The Council's advice spurred a heated debate over the future of the public library system. Many deemed the proposed upscaling and particularly the phasing out of the local governmental level in library policy to be too abrupt a measure. As a way out of this debate, a committee was established, in good Dutch tradition, with the task of finding a way out of the deadlock. The Steering Committee on the Restructuring of Public Libraries, as it was called, was chaired by former Secretary for Culture Wim Meijer (who had successfully guided the 1975 Public Library Act through the chambers of parliament). After consulting stakeholders, the committee presented its final report, *Open Gate to Knowledge (Open poort tot kennis)*, in 2000.

In its report, the Steering Committee upheld the Council for Culture's diagnosis that the public library system needed restructuring, but the nature of this restructuring deviated considerably from the Council's advice. In the view of the committee, small public library organisations should be merged into larger organisational units covering areas of at least 30-35,000 inhabitants but ideally (many) more. Local governments, however, were to

remain in charge of public library policy for its citizens. In the committee's view, the regional level of government (i.e., the level of the provinces) should act as the 'stage manager' of public library provisions within the province's borders and should stimulate the following:

- cooperation between library organisations,
- cooperation between library organisations and other cultural, educational, knowledge, and other social organisations working at, and beyond, the local level,
- innovation and renewal as well as a change towards a more user-oriented organisational culture.

The responsibility for the functioning of the public library system *as a whole* was to be positioned at the national level, 'enlarging its effectivity, coherence, quality and pluriformity' (Stuurgroep Herstructureren Openbaar Bibliotheekwerk 2000: 33). The national government could also formulate 'unsolicited' policy aims for library provisions, e.g., supplementary endeavours related to reading promotion, cultural education and international cooperation.

The report concluded with a detailed implementation plan for the restructuring process. It specified what was expected from the parties involved: municipalities, provinces, the national government, local library organisations, provincial support organisations and the Dutch Public Library Association VOB (which was subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science as its *de facto* executive branch in developing programmes at the national level). By and large, this plan was followed up in the subsequent years, with the notable exception of its duration. Initially, a three-year period was anticipated (2001-2003), but in practice, the implementation process lasted more than seven years. In April 2008, the process was officially concluded with a national conference in the new main building of the Amsterdam public library.

During the 2001-2008 period, a steering group was formally in charge of the restructuring process. It was supported by a 'process management office' facilitated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science which served as the force behind the restructuring endeavours. At the provincial level, plans were developed for the merging of library organisations while taking local/regional situations into account. In several cases, city libraries merged with the organisations of adjacent municipalities. Elsewhere, libraries surrounding a city wished to remain independent from the city's library and merged into a 'doughnut' structure. In regions without a city functioning as a *de facto* regional centre, regional cooperation developed,

sometimes with multiple 'main libraries' forming in the most populous villages of an area.

One notable comment from the 2000 *Open Gate to Knowledge* report was that new legislation would take too much time and would only constitute a formal operation while the main task was to change public library *practices*. The Cultural Policy Act did not in any way preclude a restructuring of the sector, according to the steering committee. What *was* needed, however, was a set of agreements—in addition to the Act—between the three levels of government to be laid down in a covenant. In it, the three layers of government should outline their mutual responsibilities in the process of restructuring the library network. The first covenant covered the 2001–2004 period. When in the course of that period it became evident that more time was needed, a supplement to the covenant was devised and agreed upon to cover the years 2005 through 2007.

The main reason for the delay relative to the planning was the wide variation in the pace of the restructuring process between the provinces. In the northern province of Groningen, a cooperation agreement between all library organisations in the region was already in place at the beginning of the Library Renewal process, whereas in other provinces, it took several years for the merging to begin. However, at the conclusion of the process in 2008, the number of library organisations had been reduced from approximately 540 (ca. one per municipality) to just under 200 in 2008. By 2010, only 166 organisations remained. This also meant that the number of citizens served per organisation had risen to ca. 100,000, far exceeding the 30–35,000 that the Meijer committee had recommended as a minimum. However, the number of library branches and service points remained roughly stable in that period at approximately 1,080 (Bibliotheekmonitor 2018).

9.5 Public Library Policy, Part 3: A New Public Library Act (2008–2017)

It is fair to say that in 2008, when the Library Renewal Process was formally concluded, a new surge of energy emerged within the Dutch public library sector. The Steering Group's final report (Stuurgroep Bibliotheekvernieuwing 2008) and an in-depth analysis of societal factors expected to affect the public library sector in the decennium to come (Huysmans & Hillebrink 2008) provided directions for the sector that it was eager to take up. The Public Library Association even developed its own strategic vision, *Agenda for the*

Future (Vereniging van Openbare Bibliotheken 2008). In the meantime, the national government was not idle. A considerable budget (ca. 20 million euros annually) was reserved for library innovation in the years to come.

Putting this new energy into action was somewhat thwarted by a restructuring of the subsidised part of the cultural sector. At the national level, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science intended to disentangle the implementation of its policy from the direct influence of the sector itself. The Public Library Association (VOB) was a hybrid organisation in that it was both a membership organisation governed by its members and an executor of policy programmes functioning on behalf of the national government (the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science). In theory, this could lead to situations in which public libraries could refuse to implement policy programmes and measures devised by the ministry and/or parliament.

The national government set up an advisory committee to devise an innovation strategy for the 2009–2012 period. In its report *Effective Innovation (Innovatie met Effect 2008)*, the contours of the ministry's strategy to solve the VOB's 'possible conflict of interest' problem became visible: the VOB was no longer to be in charge of the national government's public library budgets. Instead, a so-called 'sector institute' was to be established from 2010, and the VOB itself was to be transformed into a trade association with a much smaller budget stemming primarily from its members' contributions.

In practice, the disentanglement of the national government's responsibilities from the sector's interests implied dividing the VOB into parts. This process was to take the better part of 2009, which begged the question of what would happen to the innovation budget in that same year. The advisory committee proposed that a small project office be established that would organise a call for innovation proposals and function as a jury for awarding the most promising proposals. The intention was to integrate this project office into the Netherlands Institute for Public Libraries, which was to become operational as of 2010 (*Sectorinstituut Openbare Bibliotheken, SIOB*). In the course of restructuring operations, it was decided that a separate entity, the Bibliotheek.nl foundation, was to be established as separate from the sector institute. Whereas the SIOB would primarily serve as a strategic entity, Bibliotheek.nl was designed to be an executive organisation, developing several digital services at a national scale for both back office (e.g., library data management) and front office (e.g., a national e-book lending platform) purposes. As of January 2010, three separate organisations were operational at the

national level: the downsized 'new' Public Libraries Association (VOB), the Netherlands Institute for Public Libraries (SIOB) and Bibliotheek.nl (BNL). Although each organisation's responsibilities had been demarcated on paper, it took quite a long time for the organisations and the ministry to become used to both the new situation and to each organisation's ambitions.

When the dust had settled, another restructuring project was looming on the horizon: the development of a new Public Library Act. The legal basis for public library activities in the Cultural Policy Act (Articles 11a and 11b) dated from the pre-digital era. With the increasing prominence of digital libraries and of the distribution of e-content, there was a need to put local, regional and national governmental responsibilities on a new legal footing. It was felt, moreover, that incorporating the Royal Library (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, KB) would generate stronger coherence in the network. Additionally, the ministry claimed that incorporating the societal remit and function(s) of the public library system into the law would assist local policymakers in defining their libraries' budgets (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten 2015).

In January 2014, a bill was presented to the parliament. Over the course of the same year, the bill was passed by both the House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*) and the Senate (*Eerste Kamer*). It became effective on 1 January 2015. Both the sector institute (SIOB) and the national digital library organisation (BNL) were integrated into the existing Royal Library organisation. This meant that the public library sector was to be 'removed' from the Cultural Policy Act (Articles 11a and 11b).

9.6 From Act to Practice: Expanding Services

As part of discussions in both chambers of parliament, it was agreed that an evaluation of the Act would be conducted within five years. The senate also pressed for a mid-term review after two years. In December 2017, the Secretary for Culture sent a letter to both chambers accompanied by two research reports. Asserting that a two-year period is too short to observe any actual 'effects' of the act, the letter describes developments within the public library landscape in retrospect. Most notable is the appearance of several 'blind spots' in the landscape. In 2017, 16 of the 388 municipalities did not offer public library services in full concordance with the Public Library Act—i.e., operating on the basis of the five public values, offering all five core functions listed in the Act, and being a member

of the national network (Van Mil et al. 2017). The Act does not require that municipalities maintain public library services within their territories. (The absence of such an obligation was a strong wish expressed by the Association of Dutch Municipalities in the run-up to the development of the bill.) In a small number of municipalities, a commercial supplier was asked to supply limited library services (mostly book lending only) for a reduced subsidy, whereas in others, local voluntary organisations started to run similar provisions. By and large, however, the ‘official’ public library network—consisting of locally and regionally subsidised, not-for-profit organisations that were members of the VOB—remained intact despite the budget cuts following the global economic crisis in the 2008–2015 period.

Once implemented, the new Public Library Act also brought a renewed awareness of the broad social role of libraries. The inclusion of the five core functions led to greater recognition that the library is more than just books; the functions also provided libraries and their subsidy providers with a framework for making arrangements for their tasks and purposes. The precise interpretation of the core functions within this framework is determined locally, but in general, tasks and activities of libraries are similar all over the country. In the field of ‘reading and literature’, collections for adults are supported by activities such as reading circles, literary courses, writer visits and campaigns. For children and adolescents, the library organises reading activities and participates in national reading promotion campaigns such as the Children’s Book Week (*Kinderboekenweek*) and National Reading Days (*Nationale Voorleesdagen*). Through educational programmes such as Bookstart (*BoekStart*) and The Library at School (*de Bibliotheek op School*), they support institutions of pre-school, primary and secondary education in their reading promotion activities.

With a broad approach to art and culture, in many localities, the public library aspires to capture a central position in the local cultural life that is expressed in cultural activities and events and its collaboration with cultural institutions, with whom it shares space in many cases. Parts of the public library’s collections—self-education books, music CDs, film DVDs and sheet music—are dedicated to this function, as are music study cells. Both the volume and the use of the collection of audio-visual materials, however, have experienced a sharp decline in recent years. Most probably this has to do with the rise of audio and video-on-demand services offered by TV channels, internet providers and companies like Netflix and Spotify (Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2017).

The 'encounters and debate' function is shaped by the simple observation that libraries are public buildings that are specifically designed for lounging (e.g., in reading rooms or reading cafés), meeting with friends, having a chat with other members of the community, or participating in activities such as lectures and debate evenings.

Although the far-reaching digitisation of recent years has put the public library's role of 'knowledge and information' under great pressure, its purpose of providing citizens with access to information and skills required to navigate the complex information landscape is still perceived to be valid, even more so in times of discussions and concerns about the detrimental effects of 'fake news' for democracy. This function takes shape with a curated collection of informational books, digital databases, information desks and (online) communities. In addition, people are supported in their digital skills, media literacy and searches for information with consultation hours and courses on various topics such as health and health care, labour markets, social media and e-government.

In contributing to a person's 'personal development and education', libraries provide access to information resources, computers, study rooms and materials. These facilities are often supplemented with events such as lectures, debates and training courses in which the learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills (e.g. in languages, information and media) are key. With the rapid emergence of new technologies in mind, libraries invite young people and adults to become acquainted with these new technologies in fabrication laboratories ('fablabs') and media labs.

Although many of the services mentioned were already part of the regular operation of libraries before the 2015 Act was adopted, some changes have become noticeable in recent years and seem to indicate a shift of focus in the fulfilment of tasks. Especially in the field of (adult) education, libraries are beginning to take up new activities and to expand old ones. The background of this shift is the rather radical system change at the national level that occurred in 2015, whereby the previous tasks of the central government in the domains of youth care, work and income, and health care were decentralised to the municipal level. The guiding principle behind this system change was the government's aspiration to develop 'from a welfare state to a participatory society' in which the strength, self-reliance and self-responsibility of citizens were paramount. Since this so-called 'decentralisation' of hitherto national government tasks came into effect, awareness has grown among both libraries and municipalities that local libraries had a role to play in implementing and realising local government policies designed to prevent and combat social

disadvantages among vulnerable groups. The services provided by libraries—often in cooperation with other social organisations—concentrate on information provision and adult education and cover a wide range of domains: textual and digital literacy, health, child upbringing, personal finances, career development and the nature of labour markets, legal issues and e-government.

Overall, it seems justified to say that, over time, the activities of the library have covered a much wider field than just the cultural domain, a development that also becomes visible in the organisations with which libraries collaborate. In addition to cultural institutions and schools, libraries increasingly enter into partnerships with social service providers, health care institutions and financial and legal service providers (Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2017). The sources of financing for these new partnerships, projects and programmes also seem to be diversifying. Although the culture budget remains the main source of library funding, there has been a cautious shift towards financing from other policy areas. For social issues such as the prevention and combating of low literacy and basic skills education in particular supplementary subsidies at both the national and local level are added to regular budgets for starting up new projects, ‘boosting’ innovation through pilots and supporting the development of new programmes. Although such financing often still seems to be incidental, it appears to reflect and acknowledge the potential role of libraries in addressing broader social issues that transcend the cultural domain.

9.7 Innovation and the Rise of the Digital Library

The periods of library renewal and library policy review described in the sections above were driven by rapid developments in society, particularly in the technological field. Both the Council for Culture and the Meijer Committee (*Stuurgroep Herstructurering Openbaar Bibliotheekwerk*) argued, in 1998 and in 2000 respectively, that in addition to restructuring the library field, service innovation and renewal were pivotal to keeping up with the changing environment and surviving the challenges of digitisation. How this innovation was to be realised was determined by a committee chaired by the then deputy director of Leiden University’s library, Josje Calff (*Adviescommissie Bibliotheekinnovatie 2008*). In its report, *Effective Innovation*, this Advisory Committee on Library Innovation recommended central control and implementation for innovation

in the fields of digital infrastructure and digital content in particular. This belief was shared by the ministry, which reserved a substantial annual budget for library innovation to be spent under national control. The guiding principle was that the innovative capacities of the sector as a whole should be elevated, and for this, centralised coordination was deemed indispensable to ensuring the effective deployment of resources and energetic action.

The innovation strategy of 2009 and the subsequent foundation of the executive organisation *Bibliotheek.nl* in 2010 heralded a period of innovation with the purpose of constructing and managing a digital public library under national control. Activities were initiated to develop a common digital infrastructure to which all libraries are connected, providing library users with a low threshold and recognisable entry to an integrated library collection and innovative digital services. The most salient features of the digital infrastructure are the National Library Catalog Plus (NBC+), which provides information on all available titles held in Dutch public libraries and at the Royal Library; a joint website infrastructure (Website as a Service, WaaS) with a centrally arranged design and functionalities that local libraries can build upon to create their own websites; and an e-book platform through which members of public libraries can borrow e-books.

The development of the digital library continued after 2015, when the responsibilities of the sector institute (SIOB) and *Bibliotheek.nl* were incorporated into the Royal Library. At the time of writing, the digital library delivers different products and services made available via *onlinebibliotheek.nl* and *bibliotheek.nl*.

Although most of the national resources are made available with the aim of (further) developing the national digital library, several measures and projects have been set up to also boost innovation at a local level. The development of an innovation agenda in 2013 and the appointment of an Innovation Council (*Innovatieraad*) in 2014 by the sector institute (SIOB) formed the start of a centralised initiative to stimulate creativity and innovation at the local level and to scale up promising and innovative local projects and pilots. Examples include instruments and initiatives focused on online communities; programmes and facilities for the design of media labs and makerspaces; and innovative information services (both textual and digital) covering health care, the labour market and e-government.

This line of thought was continued in the subsequent innovation agenda (*Innovation Agenda 2016-2018*, Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2016), in

which administrative partners (representatives of municipal, provincial and national library organisations) established a goal to—jointly—strengthen the innovative power of the sector in line with its five core functions. The agenda explicitly emphasises the broadening of library tasks and encourages the development of a digital platform on which the library innovations of the library sector are shared within the field.

9.8 Changes in Physical Accessibility

The drop in book lending and the rise of e-books and mobile devices have sparked a discussion about the future of the public library both in and outside of the library sector. The global financial recession following the US subprime mortgage crisis put more pressure on libraries. National and local policymakers were confronted with rapidly shrinking tax revenues. As public library subsidies formed a considerable part of the budget for culture, budget cuts were considered inevitable among local politicians. From 2010 to 2016, subsidies declined significantly, resulting in a decrease in library branches (by 9% from 2012 to 2016) and library staff (by 21% in fulltime equivalents and by 25% in persons from 2010 to 2016; Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2017, see Table 9.1). Locally, these figures varied widely, with some cities closing all but their central location. Moreover, in less densely populated areas, the number of bookmobile stops dwindled, offset in part by the opening of Library at School branches in primary schools. However, these locations mainly catered to the needs of school-aged children and did not provide a substitute for library services for adults.

Although the number of physical library branches has been declining, this does not mean that the value of a building housing a library is no longer recognised. In contrast, there seems to be renewed recognition of the importance of the library as a physical space among library professionals, politicians and researchers (Jochumsen et al. 2012, Skot-Hansen et al. 2013). Worldwide, new libraries are being built—often by star architects—and are expected to give an economic, cultural and social ‘boost’ to local environments. No longer are they quiet places filled with shelves of books; they are now designed to be vibrant meeting places, open learning and co-working spaces, innovation labs and ‘community hubs’. In the Netherlands, not only are major cities such as Amsterdam, Utrecht, Arnhem, Tilburg, Groningen and Almere opening or building new libraries, but smaller towns such as Zoetermeer, Zwolle, Tiel and Leeuwarden are doing the same.

Table 9.1: Income of Dutch public library organisations, 2005-2016 (in millions of Euros)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
subsidies												
from municipalities	380.1	388.5	401.9	422.9	445.7	457.8	456.8	452.1	438.4	420.9	415.3	406.8
from provinces	9.9	14.1	16.4	15.7	14.2	13.0	10.9	9.0	8.5	8.3	10.0	9.3
from other sources	5.7	6.4	6.5	7.2	3.7	2.7	3.6	3.5	2.6	2.4	3.6	2.4
own sources												
membership contributions	71.0	69.9	69.8	69.7	70.8	71.8	71.4	69.8	67.6	62.3	62.8	62.6
other	1.7	1.4	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.3	1.1	1.0	1.8	1.0	0.7
other sources	24.4	23.7	22.4	27.6	32.7	27.4	32.3	35.1	32.6	28.1	27.6	29.9
total	492.8	503.9	518.5	544.6	568.7	574.2	576.3	570.6	550.7	523.8	520.3	511.8
funding of municipalities as % of total subsidies	96	95	95	95	96	97	97	97	98	98	97	97
funding of municipalities as % of total income	77	77	78	78	78	80	79	79	80	80	80	79
membership contributions as % of total income	14	14	13	13	12	13	12	12	12	12	12	12

Note: All figures refer to the incomes of public library organisations only; subsidies of provincial support organisations (2016: € 32 million) and the national government (2016: € 44.9 million) are not considered unless passed on as subsidies to local public library organisations.

Source: Statistics Netherlands (<https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/70763ned/table?ts=1520466068473>), last accessed 8 March 2018; own calculations.

Another trend in the physical appearance of the library is the increase in so-called 'multifunctional buildings'. Ideological motivations giving rise to multifunctional spaces in the 1970s and the *Kulturhus* in later years following Scandinavian examples were often the reason for building collective accommodations for libraries and for other community organisations and associations (Middelveld 2002). Currently, efficiency and effectivity are often cited as a cause of (sometimes forced) cohabitation. In 2016, 87% of all library organisations managed one or more branches housed in a joint building. The institutions with which they share the building are very diverse and range from schools to municipalities, from theatres to welfare institutions and from community centres to museums. The different institutions in such a building usually share space and functionality. To a lesser extent, they organise joint activities. Further integration, such as in the areas of shared personnel and subsidy management, is even more rare (Koninklijke Bibliotheek 2017).

9.9 A New Performance Story: Broader Functions Monitored

With the new Public Library Act (WSOB) coming into force in 2015, the five core functions of public libraries became legally fixed. In the perceptions of many, however, the library is still mostly a place with books and information. The relevance of such a place in our modern world is increasingly being called into question. As the pace of digitisation accelerates and as visitor preferences change over time, important questions are being raised regarding the role that libraries still play in a society overloaded with information. What will happen as the shift from print to digital continues? Will people still borrow books in a couple years? Is there still a role for public libraries in the Google era?

Motivated by the continuing pressure on government's budgets, both politicians and taxpayers want to know more strongly than before what value they are receiving for 'their' money. Libraries increasingly feel a need to make visible their contributions to community and policy issues such as combating low literacy and loneliness, bridging the digital divide, and stimulating social cohesion and community empowerment. This cannot be done solely in words and attractive policy statements but must be supported by a strong body of evidence based on facts and figures.

In taking up new tasks that were previously carried out by other institutions, libraries have been increasingly obliged to establish their accountability and legitimacy. For quite some time, evidence supporting their

accountability and legitimacy consisted mainly of traditional statistics such as the number of registered users and visitors (and the percentage of the target population reached), the number of organised events, the number of books borrowed and the sizes of collections. Together with customer satisfaction surveys, these easy-to-count quantities gave a shallow impression of the quality of the services libraries provide to their users. In recent years, there is an increasing awareness that these traditional and easy-to-count statistics provide an incomplete picture of the broad role that libraries play in the community. At all governmental levels, the need for a better understanding of the roles of libraries—in line with their statutory tasks—has emerged. At the national level, instruments were developed to monitor the development and professionalisation of library services, particularly in the educational and social fields. These initiatives provide local libraries with better data for their evaluation and accountability. In conforming to the wishes of the national government, they also contribute to an all-encompassing overview of the state of affairs in the library system.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the Public Library Act includes an obligation (in Article 11) for all organisations within the national public library network to deliver data to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to support policy development. The nature of these data, their frequency and their time of delivery are elaborated in an additional ministerial ruling (Ministerie van OCW 2014). What stands out in this ruling is an emphasis placed on gathering data on the broad social functions of today's public libraries (see section 9.6).

Although the expansion of data collection on the wide variety of library services gives a more accurate impression of the broad functions that libraries fulfill, the data still provide scant information about the social impact that libraries actually have. When considering the value and contributions of libraries to society, if the focus is only on output and performance statistics, the most important question—what good does a library bring to its patrons and society as a whole?—remains unanswered. Thus, besides measures that better reflect the broad functions of libraries, new measures are also needed to provide better insight into the social value of libraries. The search for such measures has resulted in a growing body of studies on the social value, outcomes or impact of libraries that use various terms to describe the effects of library activities and services (see Huysmans & Oomes 2013, ISO 2014, Oomes 2015).

It goes without saying that measuring the effects of library services extends beyond what can easily be measured within library walls. Counting the numbers of participants in e-government courses does not reveal much

about the benefits that these participants derive from their participation, the changes it has brought about in their daily lives, or about the extent to which the goals of the library programme have been achieved.

To determine the effects and value of public libraries, different approaches and methods come into play. Many international studies have used an economic approach, where valuation studies have attempted to assign a monetary value—known as ‘return on investment’—to the benefits brought about by the library (Aabø 2005). Another economic approach is one offered by so-called impact studies that try to demonstrate how libraries contribute to the economic performance of a community by creating and stimulating employment or a creative knowledge environment while contributing to the quality of life and attractiveness of cities and villages as places of residence (Poll 2012, Urban Libraries Council 2007).

Most studies conducted in the Netherlands employ user surveys to measure outcomes and the perceived value at the level of individual library users. In these surveys, people are asked to give their estimations of the experienced benefits from the library (such as their improvement in digital skills or the reading skills of their children) or to provide their subjective opinion on the potential impact of libraries. Some studies examine the improvement of language skills or digital skills as the result of a library programme by using language tests or self-assessment questions. The scope of such studies ranges from evaluating the outcomes of individual library programmes or libraries to surveying public library outcomes at a national level (Hartkamp 2017, Kleijnen 2017, Nielen 2016, Oomes 2015, Van den Berg 2015).

The growing number of studies that try to quantify the inputs, outputs and/or outcomes of public libraries cannot be separated from the trends of ‘new’ public management putting emphasis on evaluating the effects of policies judged against their original intentions. A need to justify the invested taxpayer money has, as we have shown, affected the public library sector as much as it has other cultural sectors at the local, regional and national levels of government.

9.10 Conclusion

As primarily local institutions, public libraries are supposed to (or expected to) have a strong bond with their local communities and citizens. As this overview of policies and developments of the Dutch public library system from the mid-1970s has attempted to show, a curious fluctuation between centralisation and decentralisation of governance took place. The Public

Library Act of 1975 dictated by the central government was dropped after only a few years due to the economic recession of the early 1980s, which required substantial cuts in the state budget, and the new decentralisation trend in public administration studies. But towards the end of the 1990s, the pendulum swung once again as awareness grew that the challenges faced by the library sector would benefit from a more centralised approach. This notion led to the Library Renewal programme (2001–2008), which led to the mergers of library organisations. Soon thereafter, the national government took on a more dominant role by investing in and regulating a national digital content platform, well aware of how inefficient it would be if all library organisations had to connect separately to service providers.

Under the Cultural Policy Act that was the legal basis for public library policy from 1993 to 2015, public libraries were regulated only lightly. Library policy makers had to resort to covenants between the three levels of government to complement library legislation, especially during the phase of the Library Renewal programme. During these two decades, it was not always clear who was actually in charge. The Act itself did not fix the respective responsibilities of local, regional and national governments for the library system as a whole, and neither did the covenant between the three levels of government (2001–2004) and its supplement (2005–2007). Only in a new Library Charter (*Bibliotheekcharter*) for the 2010–2012 period were responsibilities clearly assigned (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, Interprovinciaal Overleg & Ministerie OCW 2009). There is without doubt a great degree of truth in the assertion that the Dutch tradition of ‘polderen’ (negotiating at length until consensus is reached and a ‘soft’ regulation is attained) was in full swing in the public library sector in this period.

Public library policy is, both traditionally and internationally, primarily local policy. Municipal councils determine to a large extent what services local public libraries should provide to citizens through local subsidies. As in many other countries, the public library system in the Netherlands is organised and regulated from the bottom up, with regional and national governments supporting what occurs at the local level. Since the end of the Library Renewal Programme in 2008 and with the new Act of 2015, a tendency towards re-centralisation can be observed. To a large extent, technological developments have made this necessary, as efforts to establish digital portals and offer e-content are more efficiently undertaken at the national level for all libraries in the national public library network. The Royal Library currently plays a pivotal role in this network.

This central position extends to efforts to develop and implement national programmes to foster the broader—especially the more ‘social’—functions

that the public library network is to perform according to the 2015 Act. Not only are these functions *performed*, but indicators and measurement programmes are being developed and implemented to *assess* the extent to which libraries are succeeding at reaching the desired outcomes. Furthermore, library *innovation* is stimulated at the national level in agreement with the national network of regional library support organisations. Both from a practical and a policy perspective, therefore, the public library has been adapting to the changing environment. There is no evident reason why this will not be the case in the decades to come.

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