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## Libraries, democracy, information literacy, and citizenship

### An agonistic reading of central library and information studies' concepts

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# **Libraries, democracy, information literacy, and citizenship: an agonistic reading of central library and information studies' concepts**

**Johanna Rivano Eckerdal**

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

The aim of this paper is to advocate and contribute to a more nuanced and discerning argument when ascribing a democratic role to libraries and activities related to information literacy.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

The connections between democracy and libraries as well as between citizenship and information literacy are analysed by using Mouffe's agonistic pluralism.

One example is provided by a recent legislative change (the new Swedish Library Act) and the documents preceding it. A second, more detailed example concerns how information literacy may be conceptualised when related to young women's sexual and reproductive health. Crucial in both examples are the suggestions of routes to travel that support equality and inclusion for all.

### **Findings**

Within an agonistic approach, democracy concerns equality and interest in making efforts to include the less privileged. The inclusion of a democratic aim, directed towards everyone, for libraries in the new Library Act can be argued to emphasize the political role of libraries. A radical and a liberal understanding of information literacy are elaborated, the former being advocated. Information literacy is also analysed in a non-essentialist manner, as a description of a learning activity, therefore always value-laden.

### **Originality/value**

The agonistic reading of the central concepts in library and information studies, namely library and information literacy, is fruitful and shows how the discipline may contribute to strengthen democracy in society both within institutions as libraries and in other settings.

**Keywords:** Politics; Democracy; Libraries; Information literacy; Citizenship; Critical; Radical; Agonistic pluralism; Information studies

## **Introduction**

The notion that tax-funded libraries are important prerequisites of a democratic society is firmly rooted in western culture. This relationship between democracy and libraries is included in the professional values of librarianship (Smith, 2013, p. 22) and an important tenet in many national and international policy documents (e. g. IFLA and UNESCO, 1994; IFLA and UNESCO, 2002; UNESCO and IFLA, 2005; IFLA, 2011). It is also a fundamental reason why many

students and active librarians choose librarianship as a profession. The argument sustaining this notion can be sketched as follows. Tax-funded libraries provide services, activities and media of various kinds, which together contribute to equip citizens with resources that enable them to engage in society in an informed manner, thereby contributing to democracy. Librarians in their turn are dedicated to shaping the collections and activities that are offered in and through the library, in ways that are most beneficial for the community; many information literacy programs are designed with the aim of strengthening the information literacy within the community to ensure that people master the abilities required for learning and engaging as students, employees and citizens. However, the connection between tax-funded libraries and democracy drawn in this argument often goes unquestioned and so does the related relationship between information literacy and citizenship. A recent exception is Lauren Smith's research on the political information experiences of young people (2013; 2016). It is argued here that in order to understand and promote a democratic role for libraries it is necessary to critically examine whether these connections exist and if so, how they are constituted.

The democratic role of libraries becomes even more important in today's politically turbulent times (cf Smith, 2016). The outcome of many recent political elections have resulted in extreme right populist parties gaining majority or holding the balance of power: *Jobbik* in Hungary, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* in Poland and *Front National* in France are just a few examples. The 2014 general election in Sweden led to a parliamentary difficult situation as the Swedish extreme right party *Sverigedemokraterna* expanded its influence at national, regional and local levels. Since the other political parties rejected the idea of forming a government supported by or including *Sverigedemokraterna*, majority rule was not possible neither in the parliament nor in many municipalities. Instead, the social democratic party, *Socialdemokraterna*, formed a weak minority government (Orange, 2014). Nevertheless, there was a change of direction for political parties both to the left and to the right, indicating that *Sverigedemokraterna* had influenced the political agenda. At the local council in Ludvika one of the representatives of *Sverigedemokraterna* also holds a leading position within *Nordiska motståndsrörelsen*, a neo-nazi movement (Habul, 2014). This can be argued to constitute an example of how a representative within a democratic institution holds a deeply antidemocratic worldview. At the end of the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, the republican candidate Donald Trump made ambiguous announcements as to whether he would or not accept the election's result (Healy and Martin,

2016), exemplifying how the rules of the democratic institutions might not be unquestionably accepted by some of their representatives.

John Buschman (2007) noted the widespread absence of discussion and theorising about democracy within library and information studies. John Budd (2015) provides a recent exception in a broad overview of what he calls informational structures (p.4), which includes but is not limited to libraries, in nowadays United States, with the premise that capitalism, democracy, and the public good are “are inextricably connected at this time in US history” (p.2). James Elmborg – who engages specifically in advancing critical information literacy, remarks that: “[m]uch of the conflict inherent in information literacy as a critical project can be traced to contested definitions of “democracy.”” (2006, p. 196). The aim of this paper is to advocate and contribute to a more nuanced and discerning argument when ascribing a democratic role to tax-funded libraries and activities related to the concept information literacy. It does so by presenting an analysis of two Swedish examples, using the theory of agonistics, or agonistic pluralism, developed by Chantal Mouffe (2005a; 2005b; 2013). The first example, emanating from the cultural political field, is provided by a recent legislative change and the documents preceding it. The second example focuses on how information literacy may be conceptualised when related to an empirical study concerning young women’s sexual and reproductive health. Crucial in both examples are the suggestions of routes to travel that support equality and inclusion for all.

This paper is organised in the following manner: First, the theory of agonistic pluralism, specifically the analytical concepts pertinent to the analysis here are introduced. Next, the two examples are presented before moving on to the discussion in which relevant features relating to democracy and citizenship, present in each example, are scrutinized. A starting point for this paper is that democracy is understood differently depending on the theoretical basis adopted, and therefore the understanding of information literacy differs too. Two understandings of democracy and information literacy are elaborated in the paper: a liberal and a radical one. Particular emphasis is put on the radical understanding to which agonistic pluralism subscribes. The second example, being related to a larger study, is discussed in more depth than the first one. Both are nevertheless used as they shed light upon each other since any given view of democracy includes a particular view on citizenship. Hence, when focussing on the democratic definition that libraries contribute to it is also possible to discern the civic opportunities that libraries may open to the community.

## **Understanding democracy and citizenship**

### *Democracy*

Democracy is defined and practiced in various ways (Budd, 2015). Three different understandings of citizenship and democracy developed within political theory are: the liberal, the communitarian, and the republican ones (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 65ff.). Peter Dahlgren presents Mouffe's agonistic theory with its radical view of democracy and citizenship as lying at the edge of the republican understanding (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 67). In the following the discussion will focus mainly on the liberal and the radical understandings with emphasis on the latter and more precisely on the theory of agonistics. This is the author's choice standing as a feminist, viewing democracy and its institutions as important phenomena for providing equality for all.

Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau developed a theoretical approach to understand social movements not based on class (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2013, p. 130). Mouffe continued to elaborate this approach into what she calls the theory of agonistics or agonistic pluralism (2005a; 2005b; 2013). Mouffe makes a clear distinction between two aspects of democracy: "on one side, democracy as a form of rule, that is, the principle of the sovereignty of the people; and on the other side, the symbolic framework within which democracy is exercised." (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 2) Nowadays, when we talk about democracy we usually refer to the symbolic framework, to a large degree shaped by liberal discourse. This framework involves many positive traits, including the democratic institutions. But it also holds a tension between two traditions, the liberal tradition that stresses "the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty" (Ibid., p. 3) and the democratic tradition with a focus on "equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty" (Ibid.). According to Mouffe, the strong focus on the liberal tradition, which she calls the neoliberal hegemony, has created a democratic deficit and a questioning of the liberal-democratic institutions (Ibid., p. 4). As political life has meant a switch from formulating conflicts between the right and the left to formulating them in moral terms, as between bad and good, it is bringing forward a change from politics to moralism that Mouffe finds highly problematic (Mouffe, 2005a, p.5). Conflictive phenomena like unemployment and widened income gaps, have not been sufficiently addressed in political terms by the established political parties, leaving the floor open to new or reborn populist parties. Mouffe embraces several of the achievements of the liberal tradition but opposes

the neoliberal hegemony that prioritizes liberty at the cost of equality, calling the tension between the two traditions the democratic paradox (2005b). Her theory of agonistic pluralism can be viewed as an attempt of solve the paradox and it will be elaborated in this paper.

Budd focuses also on the two aspects of democracy pointed out by Mouffe, calling them liberty and justice (Budd, 2015, chapter 1). Budd categorizes views on democracy into classical liberalism, libertarianism, conservatism, summarizing contemporary views in the United States. Budd's scope is thus broader than the one provided by Dahlgren (2009) who discusses views on liberalism. It is also worth noting that liberalism is located on different places on the political scale (left-right) depending on the temporal and geographic positions; Radical theory is formulated in part as a reaction to liberal theory, and the political landscape in the United States is placed more to the right on the scale than the one in Europe, specifically in the Nordic countries (Hansson, 2010, p. 257 note 1). This constitutes an important background for the, from a Scandinavian perspective, surprising statement about neoliberalism: "The first thing that must be mentioned is that neoliberalism is not a Leftist stance; it is a development of the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century tinged with twentieth-century economic theory." (Budd, 2015, p. 80). Budd argues for the importance of a public sphere for democracy to unfold and draws attention to how it relates to information:

"Deliberation, reason, and reflection are all essential to the full workings of democracy. However, those elements rely on something even more fundamental. [...] There must be a presentation of facts, places for citizens to turn to receive the facts – and even opinions – regarding the happenings of the locality, the nation, and the world. Without informing sources, deliberation and reflection are not fully possible." (Budd, 2015, p. 37).

Libraries are included in the set of information sources presented by Budd. Buschman has also stressed the important role that libraries have for society (2003; 2012). The emphasis these authors place on the key role of information, and thus of libraries and librarians, in strengthening democracy is shared in this paper although the view on democracy presented below partly differs from the deliberative understanding that they represent.

### *Democracy and citizenship*

Individual freedom is a key issue in a liberal view of democracy and citizenship (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 65f.). Individual rights are emphasized. The role of government is to ensure that individuals who are citizens live in freedom without hurting each other. The law is instrumental to maximize citizens' freedom. Citizens follow their interests by making rational choices. In the radical understanding diversity and differences in social life are emphasized. Citizenship becomes one of many identities: "The idea of composite identities also pertains to citizenship, which can thus be understood as a significant dimension of our multiple selves, though interlaced with other dimensions" (Ibid., p. 64). In the radical view, as in the republican, the understanding of the citizens' agency is central, involvement in public life being for the common good (Ibid., p. 67). The different understandings of democracy and citizenship have varying approaches to the role of the law (Ibid., p. 65ff.). For liberals the law is "geared to maximizing the freedom of the individual" (Ibid., p. 66) while for republicans it is "seen as a collective mechanism for setting limits in the interest of all" (Ibid.). Legality is emphasized, but equally so an ethical individual attitude, by which citizens will work to defend their own and other citizens' agency. In the radical understanding democracy is an on-going, conflictive work (Mouffe, 2005a; 2005b; 2013). Within this understanding it is possible to act as citizens to influence society to become more democratic. Since the cause of conflicts may depend on issues that relate to the different identities that citizens enact (Mouffe, 2005a; 2005b; 2013), the radical understanding implies that the private and public life are viewed as interconnected. A closer presentation of the theory of agonistic pluralism is presented below. Key concepts such as antagonism, pluriverse, counter-hegemonic practices, adversary, chain of equivalences, and the understanding of institutions will be briefly introduced.

### *Agonistic pluralism*

*Antagonism* is a key concept in agonistic pluralism, used to denote the central idea that "negativity is constitutive and can never be overcome. The idea of antagonism also reveals the existence of conflicts for which there are no rational solution." (Mouffe, 2013, p. 130). Laclau and Mouffe combined antagonism with the gramscian notion of hegemony:

"To speak of hegemony means that every social order is a contingent articulation of power relations that lacks an ultimate rational ground. Society is always the product

of a series of practices that attempt to create a certain order in a contingent context. These are the practices that we call ‘hegemonic practices’. Things could always be otherwise.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 131).

Establishing a *we* distinguished from something else (a *they*), unites groups. This process does not concern essentialist identities (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 18); Instead the collective identities are shaped in opposition to what they are not – the constitutive outside - a concept proposed by Henry Staten (Ibid., p. 15). The collective identities thus created are central for the development of the theory of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2013, p. 5f). Another key statement in Mouffe’s writings that explains why difference and conflict are constitutive is that our society is pluralistic (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 60-79). Mouffe argues for a *pluriverse* instead of a universe (Mouffe, 2013, p. 22).

Mouffe distinguishes the political from politics (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 101). The political grasps the idea of antagonism as a basis for understanding society; there is no final endpoint or goal to be reached when power loses its grip. Politics is the practical organising and arrangements of practices and institutions shaped by the political (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 9), indicating “the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’.” (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 101)

At every moment there is a hegemonic order existing at the expense of other orders. “A particular order is always the expression of a particular configuration of power relations.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 131). Mouffe calls this the ineradicability of antagonism (Ibid., p. xii) or radical negativity (Ibid., p. 1). Every order can thus be challenged by other articulations, “*counter-hegemonic practices*” (Ibid., p. 2).

The idea of antagonism has a strong impact on Mouffe’s view on radical democracy. As conflicts will always be a part of society, room should be made for conflict within the democratic institutions. “What is important is that conflict does not take the form of an ‘antagonism’ (struggle between enemies) but the form of an ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries).” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7). Accordingly, an *adversary* is considered to be a legitimate enemy (2005b, p. 102).



“The adversarial model has to be seen as constitutive of democracy because it allows democratic politics to transform antagonism into agonism. In other words, it helps us to envisage how the dimension of antagonism can be ‘tamed’, thanks to the establishment of institutions and practices through which the potential antagonism can be played out in an agonistic way.” (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 20f).

Mouffe argues that the agonistic struggle is “the very condition of a vibrant democracy” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7). It is therefore crucial to uphold clear political alternatives and avoid consensus, according to her radical democratic view. This is partially achieved by formulating adversaries and engaging in debates with them (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 135).

Another concept elaborated by Mouffe in collaboration with Laclau that remains important in her theory is the *chain of equivalences* (2013, p. 133). Recognizing that many groups in our times strive for equality, it is necessary for these groups to establish a chain of equivalence, across different democratic demands and to articulate them politically (Ibid., p. 74). Mouffe argues that there are limits to pluralism (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 20), for example, when heterogeneity is stressed without establishing any chain of equivalence. In those cases there is no shared political articulation across differences, leading to a loss of political force (and potentially to violence). Budd (2015, p. 38) includes agonistics in his discussion of democracy taking up the first part of Mouffe’s reasoning, that of the existence of a limit to plurality, but not the second one, that about recognizing antagonism as the solution to the problem.

Agonistic pluralism, is found here to be clear-sighted and invigorating as it takes into account that there are no single truths that holds for everyone. This ontological proposition is chosen over other liberal theories here due to its recognition of democracy as an ongoing, often conflictual process. Every order is a result of specific power relations, always coming into existence at the expense of some other order. The recognition that every articulation is an expression of power that excludes is a humble one as it acknowledges that even the proposed one holds oppressive force. I find this self- reflexive stroke of agonistic pluralism to be an ethical one even though Mouffe herself is very critical about tendencies to lean on ethical arguments (Mouffe, 2013, p. 16).

Mouffe formulates her theory in opposition to both liberal and radical theories, criticising their focus on the idea of striving to reach a universal, rational consensus (Mouffe, 2013, p. 3, 10, 54f). Instead, Mouffe puts forth the important role played by passion in the various conflicts that arise in a pluralist society (Ibid., p. 6). As opposed to advocates of deliberative democracy “the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.” (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 103) Budd opposes Mouffe’s critique of the deliberative model of democracy regarding the achievement of consensus:

“Consensus, in practice, is seldom achieved on important issues without coercion; deliberation is intended to minimize coercion and allow for reasoned consideration. Acceptance of a decision is not the same as consensus, and acceptance is more likely to occur than is consensus.” (Budd, 2008, p. 166).

According to Mouffe compromises (2005b, p. 102) and consensus are achieved in politics but it is important to discern, correctly emphasized according to this paper, whether they are understood in relation to an ontological understanding of the underlying antagonism or not (Mouffe, 2013, p. 79): “Consensus is no doubt necessary, but it must be accompanied by dissent.” (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 31).

Contemporary western society is described by Mouffe as being under neoliberal hegemony, with its “contingent articulation of democracy” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 27). The tension between the two traditions causes, as mentioned above, a paradoxical situation (Mouffe, 2005b). Presently emphasis is on one of the traditions:

“...[T]he history of liberal democracy has been driven by the tension between claims for liberty and claims for equality. What has happened under neoliberal hegemony is that the liberal component has become so dominant that democratic values have been eviscerated.” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 124).

Mouffe argues for a "counter-hegemonic offensive against neoliberalism" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 127) and for changing the democratic institutions from within. We are currently witnessing a number of changes in institutions "from within" but coming from a very different direction than the one suggested by Mouffe. Examples were given in the introduction about how the rules of democratic institutions are not fully accepted by some of its representatives. This is in stark contrast to the agonistic view of democracy in which the democratic institutions are highly valued, emphasizing that a starting point is to recognize the legitimacy of one's adversary. We are therefore faced with a political situation in which people, including librarians and information scholars, who strongly believe in democracy and its institutions as a way to promote inclusion of all, need to make their voices heard. There is a need to form counter-hegemonies to defend the dimension of equality within the democratic institutions, an opposition against both the neoliberal hegemony and the strong counter-hegemonies from the extreme right that currently challenge democracy both from within and outside its institutions.

At this point it is worth noting that Mouffe discusses 'institutions' in two senses. In the first one, institutions form directly part of a representative democracy, i. e. government and the elections of representatives from political parties. Mouffe defends these institutions in opposition to those that argue that representative democracy is no longer a tenable route for radical democracy, too flavoured by neoliberal capitalism (2013, chapter 4). They, which she calls the ones suggesting an exodus, in turn propose extra-parliamentary activities as the solution for the problems facing democracy. According to Mouffe extra-parliamentary activities are possible complements, but it is crucial to engage with and change the institutions from within (Ibid., p. xiii, chapter 4).

"Rather, through a combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles we must bring about a profound transformation of those institutions, so as to make them a vehicle for the expression of the manifold of democratic demands which would extend the principle of equality to as many social relations as possible. This is how radical politics is envisaged by the hegemonic approach, and such a project requires an agonistic engagement with the institutions. "(Mouffe, 2013, p. 75).

In the second sense, institutions within society are understood as indirectly being part of and crucial for the representative system. In this second sense, libraries are included (cf Budd, 2015;

Buschman 2012). Joacim Hansson suggests that Mouffe's theory is a fruitful framework for library and information studies, pointing out libraries as one of the democratic institutions in society (Hansson, 2010, p. 253; Hansson, 2011). He suggests agonistic pluralism as a theoretical perspective for questioning neutrality in libraries:

"It also places a lot of responsibility on the libraries themselves, as their role in a vital democracy based on agonistic pluralism is not one of neutrality and kindness, but one of political activity and pro-action. The library can be analysed as a social arena for competing legitimate struggles of ideas and political positions." (Hansson, 2010, p. 255)

I agree with this argument, if libraries are understood as institutions in the second sense. In order to foster democratic individuals, the plurality of society needs to be recognized, offering multiple institutions, discourses and forms of life (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 96) because democratic citizenship needs an "emphasis on the types of *practices* and not the forms of *argumentation*" (Ibid., italics original). Public libraries have in many ways already a prominent role as an institution in which democracy is practiced, a role that might be further enhanced.

As presented earlier, a law governs the tax-funded libraries in Sweden. Political assemblies on national, regional and local levels rule them, showing how direct and indirect types of democratic institutions are connected. In the rest of this paper an agonistic reading of two examples from Sweden follows: Policy documents concerning tax-funded libraries, related to the preamble in the new Swedish Library Act and information literacy related to a particular setting outside the library. The two examples are first presented and then analysed and discussed.

## **Two examples from Sweden**

### *Example 1: the preamble in the Swedish Library Act*

Since 1 January 1996 there has been a Library Act (SFS 1996:1596) in force in Sweden. A new Library Act (SFS 2013:801) came into effect on 1 January 2014. The first one was a framework law stating that all municipalities must have a public library. Amendments were made to the first Library Act, and due to societal changes such as the increase in digital resources the government decided to inquire about whether there was need for further revision (Eide-Jensen, 2010). With

the inquiry chair's report as a starting point, the Ministry of Culture wrote a Memorandum (Ds 2012:13) with a draft for a new law. Following the procedure for introducing new laws the report was sent for consultation to government agencies, municipalities and other stakeholders (in this case 118 different stakeholders) (Ku2012/836/RFS). A Government Bill (Govt Bill 2012/13:147) was then issued. In the Bill a revised draft of a new Library Act was presented including summarized responses of the consulted stakeholders (Govt Bill 2012/13:147). For the purpose of this paper focus will be on changes, both those suggested in the draft and the final version, in the writing of the second paragraph of the Library Act. The second paragraph can be considered in both the previous (SFS 1996:1596) and the present law (SFS 2013:801) as the preamble of the Library Act.

The second paragraph in the first Library Act (SFS 1996:1596) concerned public libraries although the Act as a whole concerned all tax-funded libraries, including e. g. libraries within the educational sector and special libraries.

The paragraph reads as follows:

*2 § To promote interest in reading and literature, information, learning, education, and other cultural activities, all citizens shall have access to a public library.*

*Public libraries shall ensure that digital information is made available to all citizens.*

*Each municipality shall have a public library.*

(SFS 1996: 1596)[1]

In the phrasing suggested in the inquiry report the focus in the preamble is kept on public libraries:

*2 § To promote interest in reading and literature, free formulation of opinions, knowledge and information provision, education and cultural activities in general, everyone shall have access to public library activities.*

(Eide-Jensen, 2010, p. 6. Translation by the author.)

Instead of the statement in the first Library Act that mandates every municipality to have public libraries, the suggested preamble concerns *public library activity*. This can be understood as relating to definitions of libraries that emphasize that libraries are more than physical places

storing collections of books; libraries must include activities. But it can also open up for municipalities to close down physical public libraries. Other kinds of libraries are not mentioned in this suggestion.

Another key change is that *citizen* in the former law is replaced with *everyone* in the suggested version. When we move on to the memorandum the proposed version of the preamble reads as follows:

*2§ Libraries shall promote reading and access to literature. They shall also promote information, learning, education and cultural activities in general.*

*Library services shall be available to everyone.*

(Ds 2012:13. Translation by the author.)

The shift from *citizens* to *everyone*, suggested in the inquiry report, is kept in the proposal presented in the memorandum. Furthermore, the proposal in the memorandum opens up for the preamble to include all types of libraries, not only public ones. Another change to be mentioned is that the wording in the proposal is *library services* instead of *library activities*.

The stakeholders' views are taken into account in the process of deciding the final version. The change from *activities* to *services* was criticised as reflecting an economic 'speak' and it was withdrawn in the final text in the Bill. The widening of scope from *public libraries* to *libraries* was criticised by stakeholders for being too large. The critique was met by introducing in the Bill the phrase *the public library system*. An argument supporting the suggestion of the government would be about the importance of emphasizing that the new preamble, in contrast to the old one, encompasses all types of tax-funded libraries (Govt Bill 2012/13:147, p. 12). The shift from *citizens* to *everyone* is kept in the Bill: "In accordance with the proposition in the memorandum it is further suggested that the word citizen, which could be comprehended as including a demand of Swedish citizenship, is replaced by the word everyone. (Ibid, p.14. Translation by the author.) The reason to the change is related to accessibility: "It is important that there will not be any doubt that accessibility to libraries not is limited on basis of citizenship." (Govt Bill 2012/13:147, p.21. Translation by the author.)

An understanding of citizenship related to nationality is presented and the change is proposed to avoid excluding people based on them not being Swedish citizens.

In order for the paragraph to cover all types of tax-funded libraries one more change is introduced. The first two suggestions kept the first sentence from the Library Act from 1996, stating that libraries shall promote reading and make literature available. Stakeholders argued in their responses that reading promotion is an activity related to public and school libraries (Govt Bill 2012/13:147, p. 11). Major stakeholders such as the Swedish Library Association and the Swedish Arts Council suggested instead to include democratic aspects of library work such as fostering free exchange of information and freedom of opinions (Govt Bill 2012/13:147, p. 11). In the Bill the government argues that libraries' role for strengthening democracy is at the basis of all libraries and therefore should be included in the preamble side by side with the means to achieve this goal that is through providing knowledge and freedom of opinions (Govt Bill 2012/13:147, p. 13). The final version of the preamble reads as follows:

*2§ The libraries in the public library system shall promote the development of a democratic society by contributing to the transfer of knowledge and the free formulation of opinions.*

*The libraries in the public library system shall promote the status of literature and an interest in learning, information, education, and research as well as other cultural activities. Library activities shall be available to everyone.*

(SFS 2013:801)[2]

Considering the varying versions of the second paragraph – from the draft presented by the inquiry chair, over the memorandum to the Act that is in force today – it is possible to follow the changes in the preamble to become a paragraph concerning all tax-funded libraries, with a primary aim, that of promoting democracy. The people for whom the libraries are open and available have changed from being Swedish citizens to including everyone. Worth noting, even though this is not further discussed in this paper, is the absence, both in the first and the second Library Act, of people handling or arranging the collections and the activities taking place in the library: librarians are absent.

*Example two: Information literacy within sexual and reproductive health - choosing a contraceptive*

In the following a qualitative study of young women evaluating information sources before choosing a contraceptive is presented (Rivano Eckerdal, 2011a; 2011b; 2012a; 2012b; 2013). One of the aims of the study was to obtain knowledge about how information literacy is enacted in everyday life and whether it relates to citizenship, and if so, how. The study can be included into what was called a new theoretical framework of information literacies (Sundin, 2008, p. 29), an understanding that questions skill-based approaches as presented in standards like the very influential ones advocated by ALA (1989) and ACRL (2000; 2015). This framework, no longer a new one, still delivers new analytical insights, although research is mainly taking place “in what might be considered mainstream educational and workplace contexts, with some emerging work in community settings” (Bruce et al., 2013, p. 224). Christine Bruce and colleagues (Ibid.) studied information literacy outside mainstream settings, but did not relate their research to citizenship. The interest on understanding information from the perspective of the user is shared here (Ibid. p. 226) even though the research object differs (Ibid, p. 235). Information literacies are here viewed as plural, contingent and both shaped by and shaping the settings in which they are enacted in various practices.

In order to empirically allow for an investigation of information literacy practices outside educational settings the study used here as an example focused on a choice and the evaluation of information and information sources related to making that choice. Studying a choice situation is also well suited to discuss the relationship between information literacy and citizenship, as democracy is frequently linked to instances of political choice making: elections (c f Smith, 2013; 2016).

In Sweden young people's right to their sexual life is supported by the public health system. Since 1955 sexual education is mandatory in all public schools (Ekstrand, 2008). Sexual intercourse is legal for people over the age of 15, contraceptives allowed and in many counties a variety of contraceptives available at no cost for young people. Youth centres exist in many municipalities and young people come to these for counselling about sexual and social life (Swedish Society for youth centres). Swedish midwives are allowed by law to prescribe contraceptives, but only for contraceptive purposes (hormonal contraceptives may also be used for treating e. g. acne or painful periods). The study described here concerned how young women evaluated information



sources before choosing a contraceptive. The study consisted of two parts. In the first one, individual meetings between young women (18-23 years old) and midwives at youth centres were recorded. The young women and midwives were interviewed after their meeting, focussing on the information practices and evaluations conducted during the meetings. Ten meetings and nineteen interviews were included. During a period between the first and second part of the study, the researcher attended group information meetings at youth centres asking young women about examples of information sources on contraceptives that they knew of. In the second part of the study individual interviews were conducted with some of the young women (five) already met by the researcher. These interviews were conducted between two to seven months after the young women's first meeting with a midwife and they were asked to tell about the information sources that they used before making a choice about contraceptives.

The empirical material has been already analysed and reported in a compilation thesis (Rivano Eckerdal, 2012a) consisting of four articles in English (Rivano Eckerdal, 2011a; 2011b; 2012b; 2013) and an introduction in Swedish, briefly presented here. The aim of the investigation as a whole was to study the manner in which young women's information literacies are enacted in practices related to evaluation and use of information sources before choosing a contraceptive and thereby to discuss how these practices relate to the young women's sexual and civic identities (Rivano Eckerdal, 2012a). A sociocultural perspective, which brings with it a view on information literacy as contingent and enacted in practices, was adopted. Guiding research questions were: 1) How is information negotiated in decisions about contraceptives during counselling meetings between young women and midwives at youth centres? 2) How is knowledge produced and what roles do their bodies play, during the midwives' and the young women's interaction? 3) What information literacy practices do the young women talk about when telling their stories about evaluation and use of information sources? 4) How can interviewing be designed to study information literacy in everyday life within a sociocultural perspective? 5) How can the stories told by the young women about choosing and using a contraceptive be related to their stories about themselves and their sexual and civic identities? An ethnographic approach was used (Rivano Eckerdal, 2013). Counselling meetings were found to have a specific structure and choices were made in careful negotiations although expressed as if made solely by the young women (Rivano Eckerdal, 2011a). Furthermore, the knowledge produced during the meeting was a combination of actions and wordings, forming

representations of the young women's bodies. Both parties were involved but the midwife had the deciding power to interpret and describe the young woman in ways that fit this specific sexual and reproductive health setting (Rivano Eckerdal, 2012b). The most important affordances were close relations, attributed authority through trust. The most useful affordances were midwives and youth centres, authority based on their professional training (Rivano Eckerdal, 2011b). The predominant understanding of information literacy practices as related to texts only, which often implies causal relations between information literacy skills and actions, was critically examined in the Swedish introduction to the thesis. It was there also discussed that information literacy is mostly understood in relation to a (neo)-liberal understanding of democracy and citizenship in which good citizens are supposed to make well-informed choices. In the introduction it was suggested that a radical take on democracy and citizenship implies that information literacy has a political potential. Hence, when telling their stories, the young women develop their civic and sexual identities. Here these ideas are further elaborated drawing on the same empirical material.

Much of the standard rhetoric about information literacy can be viewed in light of the increased responsibility placed on citizens to be well informed in a society ordered by a neoliberal hegemony (Enright, 2013; Seale, 2013). This is also the case when it comes to healthcare; to take responsibility for making informed choices becomes a duty and an expression of how to be a good citizen (Henderson and Peterson, 2002, p. 2; Bella, 2010; Wyatt *et al.*, 2010). How this shift is portrayed in healthcare has by Annemarie Mol (2008) been described as a transition from activities performed according to a *logic of care* to activities conducted according to a *logic of choice*.

Healthcare-givers use a variety of approaches in their meetings with patients. The logic of choice is an approach found in many policy documents and political decisions reflecting a neoliberal approach to patients as customers that should make active and informed choices. For example, this approach is expressed in the model of Motivational Interviewing, presented by the National Board of Health as a suitable model for counselling meetings at youth centres (National Board of Health, 2009). The logic of care is an approach that places great emphasis on providing patients with assistance and support in the situation in which they are found.

The way in which the logic of care (Mol, 2008) facilitates interaction at a counselling meeting was exemplified in the study by describing the meetings with two young women, whose lives were greatly influenced by their religion. For one of them, it did not affect the choice of a contraceptive. The religious community additionally supported the woman's sexual identities. For the other, her religious belief presented a major obstacle for using birth control. In the meeting with the midwife the woman communicated her need for contraceptives as emanating from her severe period pains, not due to having an active sex life that included intercourse. By asking questions the midwife learned that the young woman had a boyfriend with whom she had sexual intercourse. They did not use contraceptives but she did not want to get pregnant. By obtaining this information, the midwife could meet the requirements in order to prescribe contraceptives. This careful and flexible negotiation demonstrates how a person's different identities can be conflicting and how the midwife's way to guide the conversation resulted in the negotiation reaching a correctly expressed need (for this specific situation).

### **Agonistic reading of the two examples from Sweden**

In the rest of the paper the examples will be analysed by means of agonistic pluralism. The second example will be more extensively analysed as it shed light on the ways by which information literacy may enable participation in society in varying degrees depending on the view on democracy that is drawn upon, and illustrates how information literacy may be enacted in other informational settings than libraries.

#### *Public libraries as (radical) democratic institutions*

Sweden, like other contemporary western societies, is strongly influenced by neoliberal tendencies dominant since the 1980's (Harvey, 2007). Libraries have not been unaffected and tendencies described in British (Goulding, 2013; Greene and McMenemy, 2015; Lawson, Sanders and Smith, 2015; Quinn and Bates, 2017), and North American (Buschman, 2012; Gregory and Higgins, 2013a; Enright, 2013) contexts are nowadays also valid in Sweden. By experiencing the social consequences of neoliberalism and by recognising that these consequences are shaped by a hegemonic order, possibilities for change and resistance are opened up. Social order can be designed in several ways. Mouffe argues for producing other kinds of articulations than the dominant ones, articulations that include more groups, giving them better possibilities to express dissent. The existing representative institutions are crucial to challenge the existing order by

producing counter-hegemonies (Mouffe, 2013, p. 124f). Libraries are, in the second sense of understanding institutions presented above, important institutions within society well suited for such activities (Hansson, 2010). Hansson (2011) investigated by means of a survey whether Swedish public libraries offered services to five national minority groups suggesting that if so, such work is important not only for those groups but also for strengthening their position in society. The results showed that the activities targeting these groups were very limited, if existing at all. Drawing on agonistic pluralism Hansson argues about the importance of engaging in such activities: “Engaging in critique and well-informed discussion on the multi-cultural character of Sweden that is actually there is one of the democratically most important issues that public libraries can do.” (Hansson, 2011, p. 413). The Swedish Library Act is an important articulation, in itself an institution in the first sense presented above, which has immediate effect on the working conditions for public libraries in the coming years. The inclusion of a democratic aim for tax-funded libraries in the new preamble can be argued to successfully emphasize in explicit terms the political role of all libraries, not only public libraries. Whether this will have any bearing on future developments of libraries in Sweden remains to be seen.

#### *Strengthened democratic role for libraries by letting go of ‘citizens’ in the preamble*

A second change, first suggested and later decided upon, in the preamble of the new Library Act – was that from the previous formulation in which tax-funded libraries targeted *citizens* to the new one targeting *everyone* – might at first be viewed as a step back, taking away from libraries their social and political roles as the word *everyone* not has the same immediate political connotation as *citizen*. But the opposite can be also argued now from an agonistic reading of the change. Within an agonistic approach, democracy concerns equality and interest in making efforts to include the less privileged. Large numbers of migrants seeking refuge in European countries and the closing of borders to prevent people from entering Europe and seeking citizenship are two of several recent events creating a situation in which people with and without citizenship live side by side in European countries, like Sweden. Possibilities and services available to us are to a very high degree linked to whether we hold or not a citizenship. Both the connection between possibilities and citizenship and the fact that people with and without citizenship live side by side imply that there are large differences in the opportunities available to us. The inequalities are literally fatal. By formulating in the preamble that tax-funded Swedish libraries are directed towards *everyone* the political role for libraries is not diminished. On the

contrary, the formulation strengthens the tax-funded libraries' political role. With the former formulation, the adversary could be formulated as *non-citizens*, opening for the possibility of exclusion of very vulnerable people. Instead *everyone* is welcome – at least everyone that have managed somehow to enter Sweden and not only Swedish citizens, as in the former law. The new wording has been criticized by the extreme right and four members of the Swedish Parliament, belonging to *Sverigedemokraterna*, have proposed a motion that included a suggestion to tie access to libraries to Swedish citizenry (Emilsson et al, 2016). The motion was not passed. The legal application of citizenship is of interest here and the consequences it may have for to whom libraries in the Swedish library system are open. Annemaree Lloyd points to the importance to differentiate between refugees and migrants in research and draws up the specific and particularly vulnerable situation of refugees: “the term refugee is political, and the designation comes with resources and protections” (Lloyd, 2017, p. 37). Lloyd mentions the attainment of citizenship as one “key normative marker of integration” (Ibid., p. 41). The often traumatic experience of fleeing involves grasping the new conditions in the adopted country and Lloyd suggests the concept fractured information landscape as fruitful for studying refugees' experiences and practices (Ibid., p. 39-40). Research from Norway has shown the important role played by public libraries for refugees (Audunson, Essmat and Aabø, 2011; Vårheim, 2011). Many public libraries in Sweden provide support to refugees and immigrants by, for example, offering so called language-café, and opening their doors for initiatives like *RådRum* ([www.radrumskane](http://www.radrumskane)) thanks to which, based on the British Citizen Advice Bureau, legal and social advice is offered. These initiatives in Sweden specifically target newly arrived immigrants including refugees.

To summarize, the agonistic reading of the new Library Act shows that libraries clearly are part of the democratic institutions in society. When the democratic aim is interpreted agonistically libraries are important places for producing counter-hegemonies and enabling equality of the less privileged. The changed wording from citizen to everyone in the Library Act gives the institution a strengthened democratic role from an agonistic point of view by not opening the possibility to formulate non-citizens as adversaries to libraries.

### *Liberal information literacy*

We are now proceeding to the analysis of the second example in the paper. It concerns information literacy in an everyday life setting specifically how young women evaluate

information sources before choosing a contraceptive. The examples relate to each other in practice and theoretically. The second example is about a situation that libraries and the resources they offer, including librarians, are supposed to prepare their users for. A substantial part of what libraries and librarians are engaged in today consists of different kinds of activities related to supporting information literacy of their users. It is argued here that the meaning of information literacy changes according to the view on democracy that is drawn upon. The analysis will be made in relation to the concepts of liberal information literacy and radical information literacy. These concepts will therefore be introduced first. To sum up two ideal types of information literacy are developed out of two different understandings of what is democracy and citizenship. These ideal types have been presented elsewhere in a Swedish publication (Rivano Eckerdal 2012a, pp. 98-100).

In a liberal understanding of democracy and citizenship, citizens have a number of universal obligations and rights (Dahlgren, 2009, p.65). Being a citizen means meeting obligations towards the state, such as paying taxes and participating in elections by casting a vote. As a citizen, you have the responsibility to make good, rational choices to ensure that the state is reproduced. Citizens are consumers of the services provided by the state to ensure their good life. Within a liberal understanding of democracy and citizenship information literacy is viewed as an individual property of citizens. As an information literate citizen you participate and engage in activities to fulfil your obligations and to enjoy your rights as a citizen. This view on information literacy implies that you keep yourself informed about your obligations and aware of your rights as a citizen. It is essential to adhere to the laws and, e. g. by mastering information retrieval and evaluation of sources, to be well prepared for choices to be made in different situations. The state provides citizens with training and education, such as searching for and evaluating information in a proper manner, to prepare them for their commitments. Liberal information literacy can therefore be said to constitute the basis for "correct" behaviour that of following laws and regulations. Paul Zurkowski (1974) is often mentioned as coining the concept information literacy (Hepworth and Walton, 2013, p. 2-3). After estimating that only one-sixth of the population in the United States were information literate he argued for a national program to ensure universal information literacy in the population within a decade (1974, p. 27). An important part of the program was "a massive effort to train all citizens in the use of information tools now available as well as those in the development and testing states" (Ibid.). The reason

advocated was to ensure national economic growth, which shows that information literacy from the start was articulated as a concern for the state and clearly related to a liberal understanding of democracy.

### *Critique of (neo-)liberal information literacy*

The liberal view in western societies has been prominent since the 1980s, the concept of ‘neoliberalism’ being used to define this particular period and its strong influence in society (Harvey, 2007). The usual ways of attending to information literacy nowadays, focusing on individual behaviour according to standards listing a specified set of generic skills, have been described as neoliberal (e. g. Buschman, 2012; Enright, 2013; Smith, 2013; Quinn and Bates, 2017). Maura Seale, commenting on the report that introduced the American Library Association’s standard, states that “ [t]he most striking aspect of this report is how completely and uncritically it embraces neoliberalism”(Seale, 2013, p. 47). The very influential ACRL description of what is an information literate student met the same criticism. Taking the critique into account the description was recently replaced by a framework (ACRL, 2015). Nevertheless the framework was described as: “still articulated in the rhetoric of neoliberalism” (Tewell, 2015). Seale’s paper is included in *Information literacy and social justice: radical professional praxis*, (Gregory and Higgins, 2013a) a compilation in which several authors discuss the potential held by information literacy to be empowering as long as it is combined with a radical pedagogy as formulated by Paolo Freire and Henry Giroux (Samek, 2013). The compilation focuses mainly on libraries in higher education in North America, with examples on the empowering potential being provided, but it is clear that these examples are exceptions to the rule. The neoliberal challenges to academic librarianship has also been criticized in a British context (Lawson, Sanders and Smith, 2015). Katherine Quinn and Jo Bates presents a gramscian analysis of the work done by the Radical Librarians Collective (2017). They suggest critical information literacy as a particular relevant way to resist the present hegemony:

“The ability for LIS practitioners to be aware of, and enable others to reflect upon, the dominant positions within knowledge production, offers an opportunity to disrupt the structures that position information as an economic commodity and enable people to engage with information on a political and ideological level.”  
(Quinn and Bates, 2017, p. 18)

Smith also suggests critical literacy with reference to Freire and Giroux as providing “an opportunity for IL [information literacy] to make a real contribution to the democratic goals of library and information science” (Smith, 2013, p. 20). The difficulties inherent in creating an alternative, in articulating a counter-hegemony, are openly discussed in a contribution of Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski, introduced as follows:

“How does one engage in a radical pedagogical praxis when constrained by a growing awareness of the ways in which academic libraries and librarians have become institutions of hegemonic order and often serve the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism that have dominated political and social discourse for the last thirty years?” (Ryan and Sloniowski, 2013, p. 275)

They draw on David Harvey (2007) but their statement can be equally analysed by means of an agonistic reading. Toni Samek in her foreword to *Information literacy and social justice: radical professional praxis*, (Gregory and Higgins, 2013a) writes that she has: “on a number of occasions, said publicly that information literacy is far too often realized in service of the state. This is rarely a popular observation. (And so I have been told.)” (Samek, 2013, p. vii) By reading this foreword from an agonistic perspective, the state becomes the neoliberal state that ought to be challenged by counter-hegemonies to offer possibilities of better opportunities for those oppressed by the current regime. When information literacy is taught in a traditional way, these tools for questioning current social conditions for the production, distribution and consumption of information are not made available (Andersen, 2006; Smith, 2016; Whitworth, 2014).

Andrew Whitworth (2014) argues in favour of keeping the various standards of information literacy but using them to teach and reflect upon their consequences. He makes thus a distinction between learning with a narrow focus on goals related to the learning activities themselves and learning in such a way that the goals for learning are scrutinized and approached in relation to contextual factors that shape the activities including the justifications of the goals, an approach that may lead to questioning the goals themselves (Whitworth, 2014, p. 55f). Whitworth suggests that the latter is the radical approach.



*Radical information literacy: Critical and/or radical?*

Most texts concerning information literacy, nowadays often called media and information literacy, MIL, still promote a skill-based, behaviouristic approach to information literacy, in spite of a considerable amount of critical research considering this approach to be highly questionable (e. g. Kapitzke, 2003; Tuominen *et al.*, 2005; Lloyd, 2006; Lipu, 2010; Lloyd, 2010; Luyt and Azura, 2010; Francke *et al.*, 2011; Limberg *et al.*, 2012; Rivano Eckerdal, 2012a; Smith, 2013; Quinn and Bates, 2017). Criticism comes also from professional librarians. The editors of the above-mentioned book *Information literacy and social justice: radical professional practice*, write:

“Critical information literacy differs from standard definitions of information literacy (ex. the ability to find, use, and analyse information) in that it takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption.” (Gregory and Higgins, 2013b, p. 4)

The examples above illustrate the labels *radical* and *critical* that often are used both in professional practice and research. A number of theoretical approaches that can be placed under the umbrella of critical theory are presented in *Critical theory for library and information science: exploring the social from across the disciplines* (Leckie *et al.*, 2010). The editors call for more critical research within library and information science. Even though a broad variety of approaches are presented in the introduction, the various approaches are considered to build a single unity because:

“Accordingly, critical theory questions the grounds of claims; it situates human action and structures within culture and history as contingent, it questions categories; and it insists that the critic/theorist is neither neutral nor above the social circumstances being theorized. At the same time, there is still a desire to uncover and distinguish between the just and the unjust, the reasonable and the irrational, the consensus/dialogic and the coercive and unspoken (McCarthy 1991, 54-55). “(Leckie and Buschman, 2010, p. viii)

Critical theories are linked to transformation and empowerment. In discussing and theorising about information literacy within library and information studies, research from several neighbouring disciplines has been drawn upon, their labels being usually adopted. Veronica Johansson and Louise Limberg show in their review that one strand is preferring “critical” and another is preferring “literacies” in plural (Johansson and Limberg, 2017). As shown above, radical is also used. It is argued here that as long as the different groups recognise each other’s work the variations in labelling should not be problematic. But that recognition is not always the case. In a recent review of critical information literacy (Tewell, 2015) research not using the wording defined by the review was left out, regardless of the critical approach of the excluded research.

### *Radical information literacy*

Within the radical understanding of democracy and citizenship proposed here, groups and society are viewed as heterogeneous; a community characterized by diversity and difference, or a pluriverse (Mouffe, 2013, p. 22). In a radical understanding of democracy and citizenship, citizens act for the common good but are also aware of the heterogeneity of social groups. A person may belong to several groups with different identities. Consequently, in any given group there are imbalances between those who have and those who have not access to resources.

Information literacy can then, in this understanding, be viewed as enacted in different practices related to information use, in which citizens engage in dialogue with each other and in relation to the information (Rivano Eckerdal, 2012 a, p. 99). In dialogues or debates, participants express different understandings of information depending on, among other things, the different identities affected by the information that are drawn upon in the dialogue. Citizens are involved in these practices and interact to manage each situation, which may be conflict-laden depending on connections to their different identities. Annemaree Lloyd, Suzanne Lipu and Mary Anne Kennan (2010) do not articulate any view on democracy in their proposition of how to study migrants, refugees and residents’ information practices and how they are related to social inclusion but share with radical information literacy an interest in relating information practices to citizenship and a dialogic research design.

In the introduction a reference was made to James Elmborg’s paper “Critical Informational Literacy: Implications for Institutional Practice” (2006). It is agreed here on that there is “conflict

inherent in information literacy as a critical project” (p. 196), and that it has to do with how “democracy” is defined. But it is argued here, contrary to Elmborg, that most of the time there is no definition of democracy at all, the concept being usually left undefined. Nevertheless, there are different takes on the meaning of democracy and hence divergent consequences whenever activities or institutions are referred to as “democratic”. If left undefined, it is argued here, there is a tendency to implicitly accept the liberal or the neoliberal view of democracy, given the neoliberal hegemony of western societies today.

The theory of agonistics is suggested here to be productive for understanding the various roles that can be attributed to the concept of information literacy. The suggestion is thus different to the one proposed by Andrew Whitworth (2014) who elaborates a theory of radical information literacy by combining ideas from Jürgen Habermas, Mikhail Bakhtin and phenomenography. Whitworth’s theoretic combination is an ambitious project although not convincing in making the combination fit well together. Nevertheless, Whitworth offers a variety of interesting arguments, especially his review of early writings on information literacy, contributing to enrich the concept. Whitworth states that the gap existing between theory and practice in relation to information literacy is problematic. He addresses the problem by combining information-as-practice and information-as-learning to arrive at information literacy as transformation, which is radical information literacy. It is argued here instead that it is possible to arrive at an understanding of information literacy connected to activism and everyday life practices by adopting an agonistic understanding of democracy and citizenship.

#### *Information literacy as an evaluation of a learning activity*

James Elmborg (2006) brings up another very important issue, concerning evaluation:

“The goal of this exercise in definition has been to create a usable definition of literacy, one which looks at literacy in pluralistic, nonjudgmental ways. Literacy has long involved value judgments, invested in part in differentiating who is literate from those who are illiterate.” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 195)

Elmborg points out that there are problems whenever *literacy*, and in other situations, *information literacy*, are used to judge individuals as either being (information) literate or not. Learning needs

to be understood as relational and situated. This complexity is not addressed by those using the sharp delineation brought into attention by Elmborg who also states that judgements often are made within schools in which certain literacies are favoured (Ibid.). We can only become aware of the wide range of literacies that are available to people in their lives if we do not favour specific literacies. This understanding is important for both research and practice. Furthermore, educational practice should not be mixed with theory when it comes to information literacy and evaluation. It is argued here that information literacy cannot be comprehended in a non-judgmental manner.

The approach to information literacy advocated here is a non-essentialist one. Information literacy is not something existing “out there” neither in people’s minds nor in the interaction between people in different physical settings. Anna H Lundh, Louise Limberg and Annemaree Lloyd (2013) discuss how research on information literacy is conducted in eight studies, attending to the roles that norms and values have in those studies. They argue that: “[t]he study of information literacy inevitably means that an approach to norms and values on what information literacy should be is taken, either implicitly or explicitly.” (Lundh *et al.*, 2013) This entails that information literacy is value-laden, bringing them to argue about the importance to address the theoretical perspective guiding a study (Ibid.). In their sample, they find the approach being mostly implicit. Focus on addressing studies’ guiding perspectives is in line with the ideas discussed here, even though their conclusion about requiring information literacy researchers to adopt a non-evaluative approach is contended (and deemed to be an illusion).

It is argued here that whenever information literacy is discussed, evaluation is enacted. The inevitability of evaluation is due to the fact that information literacy has no objective existence. Information literacy relates to practices whenever learning of some kind takes place. Information literacy is always a way to describe certain aspects, enactments, of that practice. It is normative as the description is brought up in relation to a specific set of norms. Someone makes the description. This someone must always be identified together with the norms that guides the description. Within educational settings the evaluations that we first and foremost talk about are the ones made by pedagogues, be it teachers or librarians in the case of information literacy. The norms guiding the evaluations are then often the learning outcomes in the curricula (Lundh *et al.*, 2013). But in settings other than educational ones the norms guiding the evaluation are not

evident, they often remain implicit as pointed out by Lundh and colleagues. This is a challenge to researchers:

“What information literacy might be in a particular setting is, as we pointed out in the introduction, a highly value-laden question. One challenge for information literacy researchers, then, is to describe how information literacy is enacted in different settings with a non-evaluative approach, but at the same time to be able to critically discuss how this enactment might take place.” (Lundh *et al.*, 2013)

Information literacy is thus a description of certain aspects of a practice and it is always value-laden. Both the judge and the basis for making the judgement, must therefore be identified and open to scrutiny. This is why transparency about what norms are guiding a study is pursued, not as a way to reach beyond evaluation. It is perhaps even more imperative to state who is doing the evaluation and what norms are guiding it in settings other than educational ones.

Understanding of the purpose of an interaction is crucial for its assessment (Wertsch, 1998, p. 32). Since several parties are involved in an interaction, each one with at least one but often several objectives, which might or not be antagonistic, it is very difficult, to say the least, to arrive at unambiguous assessments of the interaction. The empirical study presented here concerned young women's sexual and reproductive health and more precisely a choice of contraception. There were varying goals for the participants in the counselling meetings and interviews. Learning is central for research conducted in educational settings, but often there is lacking knowledge content for teaching activities that have information literacy as their goal, and this has been described as a problem (Limberg *et al.*, 2008, p. 85). In the study discussed here the knowledge content is obvious, it concerned the choice of a contraceptive. Whether the young women's learning is or isn't meaningful will depend on the perspective. But the young women first and foremost turn to the midwives because they need a contraceptive, this being the very reason for their meeting. The midwives' goals for the meetings are the provision of support and information and possibly the prescription of a contraceptive (Association of Swedish youth clinics). The results of the study showed that the young women already knew that they should use contraception. It was not a lack of knowledge that led some of them to previously use contraception in a non-consistent manner or not at all. This finding is in line with other studies

on young people's attitudes to contraceptives (Ekstrand, 2008). Knowledge does not necessarily lead to desired behaviour (cf. Haider, 2011).

### *Information literacy and empowerment*

Whenever the young women's evaluation and use of information sources for the choice of a contraceptive is described as practices in which information literacy is enacted, it will diverge depending on whether it is related to a liberal or radical understanding of democracy and citizenship. A related issue is about how the potential of empowerment is understood as being related to information literacy. With an intransitive use (Bella, 2010, p. 23f.), a person can only empower herself or himself; information literacy becomes a possibility for people to take control of their situation. A transitive use of empowerment on the other hand means that someone else creates the conditions for a person to empower herself or himself. Information literacy can be an offer of a chance to empower oneself. But it probably also contains an expectation or requirement that the opportunity is accepted; there is an assumed connection between having access to information of good quality and a subsequent good behaviour.

### *Choosing contraceptives evaluated as liberal information literacy practices*

Information literacy in this second example was viewed as situated and as a description of the different information practices, such as evaluation and use of information. The researcher made the description. The norm that the results are discussed in relation to, is the reason for the choice of study context; sexual and reproductive health are viewed as crucial. To be able to express one's sexual identities is intimately associated with the civic identities (Plummer, 2003). Viewed as information literacy within a liberal understanding of democracy and citizenship the young women's evaluation and use of information sources for choosing a contraceptive may be described in evaluative terms by which the young women are judged. Such assessments could describe the young women's information literacy as insufficient and ineffective. With a transitive understanding of information literacy the women are both offered the opportunity to take control and responsibility for their sexuality and are expected to do so. They were sexually active including intercourse but did not want to become pregnant. They should then have begun to use contraception since they already knew they should use it and also how to get it. Furthermore, in such assessments great emphasis could be put on whether the young women clearly meet the requirements of youth clinics and for midwives to prescribe contraceptives.

*Choosing contraceptives evaluated as radical information literacy practices*

The understanding of information literacy advocated in this paper is built upon a radical understanding of democracy and citizenship. In the analysis of how the young women's information literacy is enacted when they evaluate and use sources of information before choosing a contraceptive, an attempt is made to include the participants' own different objectives in the interaction. The description in the analysis is not primarily an evaluation of one of the parties but of how they jointly have been able to meet, giving their different identities a possibility to take place in the interaction. Together the young women and the midwives reached an agreement that stated that a young woman who wants to use a contraceptive gets the opportunity to do so. In the interviews with the author the young women were invited to engage in telling their stories about how their information practices related to choosing a contraceptive was connected to several of their identities and in the analysis of those information practices some of the practices are described as enactments of information literacy. In that description, it was conveyed how the young women evaluated and used various sources of information in ways that gave the interactions political potential. The interviews were designed in a manner that opened them up as opportunities for forming a chain of equivalence over the different collectives relating to their identities. Rosemeire Barbosa Tavares, Sely Maria de Souza Costa and Mark Hepworth (2013) also adopted the idea of using research for political change in a study with the aim of heightening the sense of citizenship in a community in Brasilia. They used Participatory Research and Action in order to foster the participants' information literacy in relation to problems that they collaboratively identified in their community. Two perspectives on citizenship were adopted, social rights related to having a job, and critical awareness needed for solving problems in their community (Ibid. p. 259-261), both perspectives differing from the understanding in this paper. Tavares and colleagues found that the research did enhance the sense of citizenship in the community by enabling the participants to work together to find information concerning social problems that they faced together (Ibid. p. 263).

In the sketch of two ideal types of information literacy linked to the different views on democracy and citizenship different expectations emerge on how a citizen's choice is to be understood. Mol's logic of choice (2008) is in line with a liberal understanding of democracy and citizenship while

the logic of care with its emphasis on dialogue responds to a radical understanding of citizenship. Several of the studied meetings between young women and midwives was characterized by a logic of care with a commitment from midwives to include the young women in the knowledge produced about their bodies. Meanwhile, the meetings and decisions took place in a constant friction against – or confrontation with – the logic of choice that is dominant in the language surrounding decisions and choices of different kinds. A logic marked by the neoliberal hegemony.

### **Concluding remark**

The aim of this paper was to offer empirical examples of political aspects of *libraries* and *information literacy*, two central concepts within library and information studies and provide a theoretical discussion of those examples beyond the much too often taken for granted connection between democracy and libraries as well as that between citizenship and information literacy. The examples were presented side-by-side since they throw light upon each other; libraries are an important component of the democratic institutions in Swedish society and a substantial amount of the activities that unfold in them are related to information literacy. One of the reasons for these is the notion that information literacy is of importance for enhancing the library user's possibilities to participate in society. Facing an important decision regarding contraceptives young women engaged with information sources and some of those information practices were described by the author as enactments of information literacy. This description thereby contributes to library and information studies with an empirically based theoretic discussion of information literacy in everyday life, a contribution that may have an impact on how information literacy and activities related to that concept is understood and performed in libraries and other informational settings. In this paper, it has proven fruitful to relate the theory of agonistic pluralism to these central concepts within library and information studies and thereby to how the discipline may contribute to strengthening democracy in society both within institutions as libraries and in other settings.

Libraries are spaces in which dialogues or debates can unfold, about different issues related to everyday life that involve peoples different identities – that recognizes the radical negativity of our pluralistic society. In such conversations, librarians can promote critical scrutinizing of information sources that goes well beyond evaluation according to standardised lists but involve how the information is produced and consumed. Librarians that engage in their community



already exist, inviting and supporting a radical use of their resources (see Gregory and Higgins, 2013a, Smith, 2013; Quinn and Bates 2017). With an agonistic approach, such dialogues could also be spaces for trying to form a chain of equivalence between various positions and attempting to produce counter-hegemonic articulations.

Libraries and the work of librarians have a crucial role in offering spaces and interactions important for upholding a democratic society. At times when democracy – understood radically as the constant struggle for equality for as many as possible – is at risk it is crucial to recognise this role not least to be able to defend it. This paper provides an agonistic reading of libraries and information literacy, concepts that are central to library and information studies, and their connection to democracy and citizenship. In doing so the aim has been to sharpen our analytical tools offering a supportive but critical reading of library and information practices and research. A call for more readings is also made; in tune with an agonistic approach I argue that it is important to keep the debate going.

## Notes

[1] Translation by the author. There are no official translations to other languages of Swedish laws.

[2] The translation of the paragraph is taken from an English introduction to the new Library Act, *Promoting the development of a democratic society: The Swedish Library Act according to the legislator*, published by the Swedish Library Association (2015).

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