

Short Summary in English

This book examines the understanding of the national aspect during the political process which led to the founding of the National Library in Mo i Rana in 1989 and in Oslo in 1999, and how this is reflected in National Library practice today. The point of departure for this analysis is that a nation state not only represents a cultural and political community, but also comprises a set of institutions. Emphasis is attached to a clear distinction between the formation of a nation and its maintenance. In established nation states, government institutions uphold and adjust national categories. This process is known as ‘national reproduction’.

This study of the national aspect in the National Library takes two questions as its starting points. The first question is why Norway established a national library in a time when the significance of a nation state as an economic, political and identity-shaping entity had changed. By adopting an institutional approach, the establishment process is analysed from political actors’ economic and administrative understandings of the functions of a national library, and the actors’ arguments for establishing the National Library as a national, cultural, interpretative institution. The underlying sources for this analysis comprise public documents such as parliamentary records, reports to the Storting (the Norwegian parliament), committee reports, speeches, hearing statements, etc.

The second question concerns how the National Library has delimited the national aspect through its institutional practice since its establishment. Based on theories on nation and nationalism, the National Library’s delimitations of national library functions are analysed through its visions and daily business. This analysis is based on National Library public documents such as strategy documents, visions, actions plans and policy documents. These texts are discussed in relation to the institution’s collection, preservation, access facilitation and dissemination of Norwegian cultural products.

The history of the National Library can be divided into three main phases. The first phase, from 1811 to 1980, is described as a subordination phase. The University of Oslo, along with the University Library, was a national institution. By virtue of this fact, it was considered natural that it also should take care of the national library functions, and therefore functioned

as a national library. A consciousness of the fact that there were functions which differed from the needs of the University existed. Nonetheless, prior to 1895 no one raised the issue of whether this should be communicated to the outside world, even though the Norwegian Department was established in 1882. In 1895, Axel Drolsum formulated the first proposal to change the name of the library so that it also reflected the national dimension. This was effectively torpedoed by the University's leadership, and this obstruction characterised the situation right up until the 1980s.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the establishment phase of the National Library began, lasting until 2005. This period was characterised by changes of institutional and ideological character and by developments in media technology. In the 1980s, the authorities set up three public committees and one working group, all of which concluded that Norway needed a new national library. The committees reduced the national library functions to ones of pure storage. This was in line with the technical and administrative form of argumentation which dominated the political debate of the day. The motivating factor behind the establishment of the National Library's branch in Mo i Rana in 1989 was regional policy. The branch was located on the ruins of Norsk Jernverk. Parallel with this, a new Legal Deposit Act was passed, which covered written, audio, photographic, film and electronic media. Both the geographical location and the Act of Legal Deposit were in keeping with the expanded concept of culture and underlined the ideals of both geographical and cultural equality. The National Library's branch in Mo i Rana is a powerful example of how ideological decisions were made, presented as solutions to technical and administrative problems.

While the technocratic and administrative elite of the 1980s discussed identity and national community to only a negligible degree, this became an important topic for the authorities in the 1990s. State responsibility for the national cultural heritage was to be exercised by reinforcing national institutions. It was in this cultural policy climate that the National Library's branch in Oslo was established in 1999. This new institution in the capital city was to function as an academic administrator of national cultural heritage and an institutionalised storyteller. Establishment in Oslo was achieved by dividing the collection and staff at the University Library in Oslo. The division of the collection followed principles that were associated with a narrow interpretation of the concept of nation as a category.

The period since 2005, when the Library moved into renovated premises at Solli plass, has been termed the positioning phase. The National Library has invested substantial resources in distinguishing itself politically, technologically and culturally. This has become particularly apparent in two types of activities: greater emphasis on the cultural functions of a national library and the establishment of a national digital library, NBdigital.

Dissemination lies at the centre of the cultural functions of a national library, and presupposes knowledge and interpretation. Since the National Library is not directly connected to an interpretative academic institution, it must build up some of this competence itself. To achieve this, the Library created a separate department for academic disciplines and research. The National Library's dissemination activities clearly demonstrate that it is consensus-oriented in terms of its interpretation of Norwegian culture and tradition. In 2007, the National Library was given the task of keeping an overview of and arranging national anniversaries in the cultural domain. This explicitly links the Library to the maintenance of a national identity.

The National Library's digitalisation project comprises two main elements. First, as a continuation of the national library's storage functions, the Library created a secured digital repository, and it plans to digitalise and store all its material. The reason for the digitalisation strategy goes back to a technical and administrative understanding of the national library functions, on a par with that for public documents of the 1980s. In practice, the secured digital storage repository serve as the dominant repository of digital cultural products in Norway, which in the long term could be used for distribution. The national aspect is made clear by the fact that the development of the digital repository is placed under state control. Distribution of material from such a database is limited by copyrights. Secondly, the National Library has made two agreements with copyright holders over the Library's dissemination of their works over the Internet. This entails treading new legal ground, which is being conducted under the mandate of the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs. The creation of NBdigital could therefore be interpreted as a government-initiated strategy to augment the Norwegian and Norwegian-language presence on the internet inside a nation-state framework.

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