

# **Community building for public libraries in the 21st century: examples from The Netherlands**

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## **Summary**

Community building is high on the agenda of the public library sector at this moment. However, there is a lack of innovative examples of community building in the practice of public libraries. In this article, we focus on two famous Dutch examples of innovative community building in public libraries. The first example is The Stalwart Readers, a community of readers, in Dutch called 'Lezers van Stavast', guided by librarian Hans van Duijnhoven. The Stalwart Readers is not a traditional book club, but a community of readers around a collection of (non-fiction) books selected by the librarian. Every member is expected to read every week one book (but choice is free: not everyone reads the same book). Once a month the group comes together and discusses the themes in the books. The project started in September 2012 and lasted for one year. However, because of the very positive evaluations by the group members, the community still comes together. One of the innovative elements of the Stalwart Readers is the fact that the community also looks outside the boundaries of the library; together, they visit lectures or theatre plays if there is a relation with the themes in the books. The community is an example of an innovative way of highlighting the library collection and providing context around it.

The second example of an innovative public library community is a community formed around a project called 'Wisdom in times of crisis', guided by librarian Marina Polderman. Unemployed people came together for a period of seven months in 2013, to talk about

the values for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as proposed by philosopher Alain de Botton in his manifest “10 virtues for the modern age” (2013). These values were linked to the library collection and people were asked to link stories to these values and discuss them together. This community shows the library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a place for good conservation.

After discussing these two communities, the role of the librarian in starting and guiding such a community is highlighted. In the appendix practical recommendations about the role of the librarian in public library communities are given.

## **1. Introduction**

Many books about today’s public libraries stress the importance of the building of communities in and around the public library. Well-known is the work of David Lankes with his vision on a librarian as someone having the task “*to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in communities*” (Lankes, 2011, p. 31). It has been cited many times in policy and strategy papers in the public library field and many people in the field recognize the importance of this vision. However, there are only a few concrete examples of innovative library communities. In this article we will have a look at some of the concrete examples.

Our paper consists of six sections. After this introduction, we start with a short overview of literature about community building in public libraries. In the third paragraph, we zoom in to view two programs of library community building from The Netherlands. Next, we will examine the important role of the librarian in building these communities. In section five we try to formulate an answer on the question how this community building legitimates the function of the public library in the 21st century. We conclude with some recommendations and a call for more research in this field. An appendix with practical recommendations is added.

## **2. Community building in public libraries**

*The new view of the library is not as place, or as collection, but as a community platform for knowledge creation and sharing. This is more than just a rhetorical shift. It has real implications for how libraries organize themselves and how they use technology.* (Lankes, 2012, p. 76)

In early 2014, the Dutch Library Institute (SIOB) published a book about the future of the public library (“The library of the future: junction of knowledge, contact and culture”, Cohen et al., 2014). This publication stresses the importance of “less collection, more connection” in the library of the future; less collection meaning less physical books, and more connection in four different ways:

- Connection between people and information: the library as portal to knowledge,
- Connection between people: the library as platform,
- Connection between and within the community: the library as societal heart,
- Connection between information sources: information in context.

*In the future, the library needs to focus on creating, stimulating and facilitating valuable connections.* This can be achieved in many ways, one of which is the building of communities.

In recent years many books and articles have appeared about public libraries and communities. There is no undisputed definition about what a community exactly is. Moreover, there is an extensive sociological tradition discussing conceptions of community, both in the unmediated (e.g., ‘communities of practice’) and the mediated (e.g., ‘communities of interest’) sense. Within the limits of this paper, we will leave that discussion aside and adopt Lankes’ pragmatical definition (Expect More, 2012, p. 75): “Communities are groups of people that have come together around some common variable”. Raymakers (2014) mentions eight characteristics of communities: sense of belonging, reciprocity, relations and social networks, construction of identity, exceeding the individual, exploration, cohesion and listening and dialogue.

Scott (2011) describes five areas in which libraries allegedly contribute to building thriving communities:

1. Libraries serve as a conduit to access information and to learn.
2. Libraries encourage social inclusion and equity.
3. Libraries foster civic engagement.
4. Libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement.
5. Libraries promote economic vitality within the community.

While providing information access is still an important function of the public library, the past twenty years have brought a shift back to the roots of libraries as community builders (Scott, 2011, p. 193). There is agreement about the fact that libraries in community building can help ameliorate some of today’s social ills, including isolation, a lack of well-being, a lack of access, and the inability to engage (Scott, 2011).

However, as is the case with the areas described above, most of the literature about public libraries and communities is literature about the role of the library in existing communities. These groups of people constituted themselves outside of the library. On the other hand, not so much has been written about the building of communities by public libraries, that is: by the librarians of a public library. To be sure, from their early years on public libraries have gone at great length to include the socially disadvantaged in their services through ‘extension’ or ‘outreach’ programs (Black et al. 2009). These programs were geared more at connecting people with the library collection than to connect them with each other, in the sense discussed here. How can we build new communities around our own public library: communities of readers, of story lovers, of knowledge creators, and in so doing transform the public library into a platform? In this paper we will give some tentative answers derived from experiences in the Netherlands, mainly in two successful library-initiated communities.

### **3. Two programs from the Netherlands**

*Books and materials are really secondary in a library. The most important aspect is the human interaction. The library experiences cannot be viewed as just an information transaction, but rather as an opportunity to touch and connect lives. (Napsha, quoted in Scott, 2011, p. 195)*

Building a new community around the public library was the aim of the two initiatives described in this chapter. We will explain the original idea, have a look at what happened in the communities and try to formulate the goals of the communities from a library point of view.

When in this chapter “the library” is used, we mean the Noord Oost Brabantse Bibliotheeken, a library organization in the south of the Netherlands, covering five municipalities (Bernheze, Landerd, Oss, Uden, Veghel), with a service area of roughly 200.000 inhabitants, of which about one quarter are library members. In total, there are fourteen branches spread across the five municipalities. About 150 people are employed in the libraries.

This library organization plays an active role in the Netherlands in asking the question how the library of tomorrow can be more valuable to the communities they serve. In an essay, published by the library in 2012 under the title “About libraries and involvement” (van Creij et al., 2012) this question was central. Although of course there is no one good answer to this question, the direction in which the authors formulate the answer forms the background of the start of the next described two communities. To quote the end of the essay about the value of the public library in the new society: “We started with the big ideal of libraries. We arrived at involvement, at involved libraries, having an active participation in the community. To stimulate the individual, the subject, to think about his or her place in the world, about the question how one bears to the other subjects in the world, to the face of the other. That is our careful try to formulate an answer on the question how libraries can become again of value in the new society. The library unveils, the library build a bridge between subject and object” (Van Creij et al., 2012). With this in mind, we will have a look at the two communities as part of this library organisation.

#### **3.1. The Stalwart Readers**

##### *Idea*

According to our library, one of our vital tasks is to inform people in the local library environment about the developments in society: to pay attention to newly published books about these developments, to inspire people to read, to prompt them to think, to broaden their perspective.

Therefore the library called in the summer of 2012 for 40 people to meet the challenge of reading one non-fiction book per week, from september 2012 till june 2013 (so 40 books in total). 40 people, 40 books, and monthly meetings to discuss the themes addressed in the books. We envisioned no traditional reading group, where everyone reads the same

book at the same time. Instead, readers were offered a list of non-fiction titles from which they could freely choose, according to their own interests. The list was composed of books centering around three themes: stories about our era, about being human, and about the future (and the problems we should overcome). There were two conditions to be part of this experiment: participants had to be (or become) a member of the library, and they had to pay a small fee for the monthly meetings (€40,00 for one year). In return, every reader received one book from the list.

### *Goals*

The goals of this community from a library point of view are:

- To generate attention to the collection in an innovative way,
- To provide context around the library collection,
- To talk about the collection together (both librarians and library patrons),
- To inspire and to share ideas,
- To get people more involved in the library.

### *What happened*

Almost 40 enthusiastic people committed themselves to this challenge. It was a variety of people, both men and women, ranging in age from 30 to 70. In September 2012 the first meeting took place. The readers were told clearly that this was an experiment, so that it would be a surprise for all how the stalwart reading year and the meetings would develop.

The books on the reading list were selected by a librarian (Van Duijnhoven, one of the authors of this paper) who specializes in non-fiction and himself reads at least two non-fiction books per week. When the group first met, there were about 80 books on the list (which today has grown to over 200 titles). The books were put in a reserved bookcase in the library and were endowed with a special logo, so they were easily recognised as "a Stalwart Readers title".

A special weblog was created for the Stalwart Readers. On this website, every book from the list got its own blog entry. These consisted of a short summary, a quote from the book and most of the time also an explanation why this book is relevant for the Stalwart Readers. An overview of the titles can be found on <http://lezersvanstavast.blogspot.nl/> (in Dutch).

The Readers met in the library every month on Thursday evenings from 19h30 - 22h. These meetings were led and prepared by two librarians (co-authors of this article). Since this was an experiment, each meeting was different. Sometimes important newspaper articles were highlighted and interpreted in relation to books on the list, but at other times discussion among the readers was more prominent. They were, for example, asked to talk about a specific theme in the books they read, in small groups or as a whole. Every time, books that were new on the list were introduced and related to other listed books.

As time went by, the readers got to know each other better and the discussions got more inspired, lively and enthusiastic every time.

Next to the monthly meetings, the Stalwart Readers were allowed free entrance to a series of lectures by writers and philosophers as organized by the library during the year. Over time, a steady group of Stalwart Readers grew, who visited almost all the lectures organized by the library. During the monthly meetings these lectures were discussed, criticized, and related to the books on the list.

The Stalwart Readers community did not restrain itself to the library space. For example, they visited a play which criticized our time and our way of living. The final meeting in June 2012 was in fact also outside the library walls: the Stalwart Readers attended a lecture by Martha Nussbaum together.

#### *Not the end*

After the cycle ended, the Stalwart Readers proved to be very satisfied and in fact they asked for a new season of stalwart reading themselves. One reader said: "during this reading adventure I was surprised by new and highly original ideas, I learned to see connections and I was exposed to new opinions. In short: my view was broadened."

Although at first we planned to stop the experiment in June 2012, the readers insisted a new cycle be organized by the library. So in September 2013 the second year of the Stalwart Readers was kicked off. Again a group of over 30 people took the challenge. Most of them had already participated the year before, but new members were welcomed as well. In this second season, a short philosophy course was added at the beginning of the year. In all other aspects, the concept remained the same: monthly meetings with collection and connection. Again, the readers also undertook activities outside of the library; for example, they attended a lecture by Tomas Sedláček and Joseph Vogl. In June 2014, the last meeting in this cycle took place. However, once again the question was asked to continue with stalwart reading. So in September 2014 a third year of the Stalwart Readers community will start.

### **3.2. Wisdom in times of crisis**

#### *Idea*

This community started from the notion that due to the credit crunch, a lot of people have lost their jobs and might be in need of reflection of their new life situation. Many people are affected by the economical crisis, both young and old. On the other hand, in libraries you can find a rich collection full of humour, sense of perspective, knowledge of life and, in short, wisdom. Wisdom attained by older and younger thinkers, wisdom that can help people to stay resilient in times of uncertainty. So why not have a conversation about the wisdom in the collection, combined with personal wisdom from our everyday lives? From this idea, the 'Wisdom in times of crisis' experiment originated. In the spring of 2013 the library asked unemployed people to participate, with a maximum of 15 people, to ensure

a balanced conversation. There were no conditions to be part of the group, other than actively participating during the meetings.

### *Goals*

- To pay attention to the collection in an innovative way,
- To provide context around the library collection,
- To talk together (librarians and library users) about the collection,
- To inspire and to share ideas,
- To get people more involved in the library,
- To develop the library as a place for good conversation.

### *What happened*

In June 2013 the first meeting took place, with 15 participants (2 men and 13 women), all aged between 35 and 75. After a first introduction meeting, the meetings that followed were organized by theme, for which a text of philosopher Alain de Botton provided a guideline. In early 2013 de Botton had published a manifest containing his "10 virtues for the modern age" (see <http://www.theschooloflife.com/blog/2013/02/ten-virtues-for-the-modern-age/>). In every meeting, one of these ten virtues - resilience, empathy, patience, sacrifice, politeness, humour, self-awareness, forgiveness, hope and confidence - was linked to the library collection. More importantly, people in the group were asked to provide stories that could be linked to any of these virtues. Meetings took place once every three weeks on Monday afternoons and were presided by two librarians (one of the authors and a colleague).

In every meeting two sets of questions were central:

- What is your opinion about this virtue, how would you define it, is it important to you, is it important for society, etc.
- Which stories (books, films, music) represent this value for you? Bring them along and talk about them to the other group members.

One important element was the discussion of new and sometimes older collection titles by one of the librarians. She composed reading lists for every meeting, centered around the virtue, and explained her choices to the participants: what are these books about and why are they connected to this virtue? People highly appreciated this part of the meeting because they learned about books, music and movies in the library collection they had not heard of before.

After some meetings the conversations, after finishing the meeting in the library (which took two hours), were spontaneously continued in a cafe nearby. The members of the community wanted to spend more time talking together; about stories, about personal wisdom, about their lives.

January 2014 was the last meeting. People were asked to evaluate the cycle and the evaluations were quite surprising. Some quotes:

- I got more respect for people.
- I learned to be mild, to have more tolerance.
- It broadened my view.

- I started to read more.
- I talk about these virtues with all kinds of people.
- It keeps on working very long.
- It was a perfectly chosen item.
- It helped me to freshen up my own knowledge.
- It did me so good.
- I think we all got a little richer.

#### *Not the end*

As was the case with the Stalwart Readers, the members of the community asked for a continuation. In June 2014, a new cycle started, under the new title "Wisdom of stories". The group is made up from both people that were in the Wisdom in times of crisis community and 'new' readers. Again, the meetings are modelled after a text of philosopher Alain de Botton. In his new book *Art as Therapy* De Botton explains the seven functions of art from his point of view. In the Wisdom of stories meetings, these seven functions are linked to the library collection and the participants share stories that represent these functions: how do stories inspire people in life? How do stories help us to stand firm in life? How can stories help to make better decisions? In total, eight meetings are planned from June to December 2014.

### **3.3. Lessons learned**

Although these two experimental programs described are different in background and implementation, the goals and the underlying ideas are quite similar. When we look at the five areas as defined by Scott earlier (although these were defined as areas for existing communities), the two communities mainly focus on area 3, *Public libraries foster civic engagement by providing space and information*, and area 4 *Public libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement by empowering the public*.

Important is that in both communities the connection between the collection and the group members is guideline. Although the focus on the collection in the Stalwart readers community was mainly non-fiction, as in the Wisdom cycle the focus was on stories in broad sense (fiction, non-fiction, poetry, films, movies).

A central role in both communities is played by the librarians who work as a linking-pin between the collection and the community. In section 4 the role of the librarian is looked into more detail.

The most important lessons learned in these communities are the following:

- It is not possible to plan the whole cycle. You just have to start, and see what is happening. How does the group develop, do the group members participate actively, do they respect each other's points of view - factors like these cannot be captured in advance.
- It is important to make clear to the group members that they are embarking on an adventure, that everything is open and that their own contribution and active participation is highly appreciated and, moreover, is key to the success of the meetings.

- Having profound knowledge of the collection is essential for the librarians guiding the communities. Therefore it is essential to actively seek more knowledge and to read as much as possible (see also next section).
- Group members highly appreciate the guiding role of the librarians in providing context to the collection, and members stimulate each other to read and talk about the collection.
- Members of the community as feeling engaged into the library spontaneously become ambassadors of the library. This was an unanticipated side effect.

#### **4. Role of the librarian**

*Community building remains an art (Hill, in Scott, 2011a, p. 337)*

In our point of view, the key to a successful library community is the role of the librarian. It is the librarian who makes or breaks it.

In his pamphlet “Stop Stealing Dreams: What is School for?” (2012), Seth Godin, an American author, dedicates one paragraph to the different roles the (new) librarian has in his vision of society. He describes: “The librarian isn’t a clerk who happens to work at a library. A librarian is a data hound, a guide, a sherpa, and a teacher. The librarian is the interface between reams of data and the untrained but motivated user.” (p. 171) What follows, is: “We need librarians more than we ever did. What we don’t need are mere clerks who guard dead paper. Librarians are too important to be a dwindling voice in our culture. For the right librarian, this is the chance of a lifetime.” (p. 174)

Based on our experience in the two experiments described, in successfully starting and leading a community as a librarian, all of these roles as described by Godin should be taken up. Most important is the role as a connector; connecting people, connecting people with the collection, and connecting one’s own knowledge as a librarian with the group members’ knowledge. This last point, in our view, is key. It is the knowledge of the collection, the knowledge about what is happening in society, about what is relevant news, about new books, movies, music, and the knowledge to communicate it (sometimes as a teacher, sometimes simply as a conversation partner) that makes the role of a librarian in these communities relevant. Many members explained in evaluations that they highly appreciate the guiding role of the librarian, the guide in a world with so many new books, stories, information available. As Godin wrote: take the world of data, combine it with the people in this community, and create value. Only with a high level of knowledge about the collection and about the developments in society this value can be created (2012, p. 174).

This role of librarians can be difficult for people who have already worked in the library field for many years, as explained by Hildreth (in Scott, 2011a, p. 343): “Some professional staff that have been in the library field for a while did not come in to engage the community or do the work that they might think of as a “social worker”. Current demands and goals of libraries push the traditional role of librarian beyond some people’s comfort zones”. It is exactly what our main point is about the role of the librarian

in the role of building a community; go outside your comfort zone. We must be engaged librarians, or, in the words of Rodger, librarians have to become players, not just be advocates. “Advocates go out into the community solely focused on promoting the library’s agenda, always looking for what others can do for the library. Players, on the other hand, listen to the community and when they hear ‘economic development, child safety, literacy, or health care’ expressed as a community concern, they respond ‘Here’s how the library can help” (Rodger, cited in Willingham, 2008, p. 101).

This ‘player’ role, in our experience, is exactly what is asked for from librarians in the current era.

Our practical recommendations as asked for in a separate appendix will therefore be about the role of the librarian, in the roles as noticed by Seth Godin, and in the role as a player, as described by Rodger.

## **5. Relevance of community building for the mission of public libraries**

The question if and how this community building legitimates the function of the public library in the 21st century is a difficult one. When looking at the scope of these communities, they serve only a small part of the library public. However, a comparison with public broadcasting may be in order. Public broadcasting systems alternately aim at broad ('mass') audiences and at small segments of the population ('special interest groups'). The mainstream programmes of the public broadcasters are similar to the library lending function (many people reached on a more superficial level), while these communities are more like programmes for specific segments (less people reached more intensively).

Furthermore, this community building fits very well into the vision of the library focussing on creating, stimulating and facilitating valuable connections as proposed by Cohen et al. (2014). It is part of the personal development of the community members in a society.

## **6. Concluding words**

In times of declining lending figures, as is the case in the Netherlands and elsewhere, community building by public libraries is growing in importance. Members of public library communities become involved library members with a deepened sense of ownership of their own library. This leads to pride in and advocacy for the library: “When people love the library and what it has done for their community, they are more likely to do what they can to support it in good times and bad” (Scott, 2011a, p. 320).

The communities as described in this paper show the library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a place for connection around the collection (as proposed by Cohen et al., 2014) and as a place for good conservation. In building these communities, the role of the librarian is crucial. This will be stressed and worked out in the appendix with practical recommendations.

Our community building projects have only been described in this paper. More thorough case study research is needed on these and comparable projects to nail down what are the outcomes of such programs (Huysmans and Oomes, 2013). Moreover, more practical knowledge is needed about community building by public libraries. With more

practical examples, success and failures of building library communities can be compared, and public libraries can learn how to optimize the role of the librarian in these communities. In library education, it is important to pay attention to the role of the librarian in building public libraries communities. As it asks for so different competencies as the traditional task of librarians, we highly recommend putting this part of future librarianship at the core of library education programs.

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<http://lezersvanstavast.blogspot.nl/>

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## **Appendix: Practical recommendations: The role of a librarian in building a library community**

As explained in the paper, Seth Godin describes the roles for the librarian of the future. These roles highly correspond with our view of the role of the librarian in building a new library community: a data hound, a guide, a sherpa, a teacher and the interface between reams of data and the untrained but motivated user (the librarian as a “connector” in our words). To successfully start and keep up a library community, a librarian should take these roles seriously. As in the words of Rodger: as a librarian, be a player, and not just an advocate. You are part of the group and not just a teacher in traditional sense. A librarian must be open to everything what happens in the community and be part of it just as the other members. Very important is the role as a guide, to select and provide context to the collection. This task can only be done with enough knowledge. So it is very important to keep your collection knowledge up to date, to inform yourself daily.

Maybe our most important practical recommendation is a somewhat vague recommendation, as it is about following your heart as a librarian. Starting and keeping up a community asks time, effort, free evenings, weekends, and therefore, it is very important to do something what is near to your heart. Do you like mostly films? Start a community around films. Do you prefer fiction books from the 19th century? Do something with that! You cannot successfully do this when the subject of the community doesn't correspond with your own passion.

So we propose to change the quote of Lankes “take the world of data, combine it with the people in this community, and create value” into:

*“As a librarian, follow your passion, take the collection, find people in the local community to share it and create together value”.*

Besides that, it is important as a librarian to go outside your comfort zone. Don't say “I've never done that before, I don't know how to do it”, but just try it! And don't be shy to fail. It is part of the process. Therefore it is needed that library management give some space and confidence to their librarians to try to build communities.

We highly recommend all librarians interested in going into community building, to read the “V is for Vulnerable: Life outside your comfort zone” picture book of Seth Godin, as this book represents exactly the attitude one needs as a librarian in the 21st century.