KB on the web

An investigation of the Swedish National Library website 1998-2018

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Introduction
The practices of national libraries have changed profoundly with the development of digitalization, the Internet and the World Wide Web. A specific aspect of the digital transformation in recent decades concerns strategies chosen to develop a website. This is a common challenge for all organizations with relative longevity, but of particular concern for institutions tasked with accessibility issues.

The current article is concerned with how the Royal Library/National Library of Sweden (KB) over time has developed strategies for making services accessible during the recent 20 years (1998-2018). The investigation therefore starts with the 1998 website at a pioneering stage of web development. Several trends within web design have come and gone since then. In addition, during this time there has been a dramatic development of resources digitized as well as born digital. Notions regarding how various types of material should be displayed have become more sophisticated during these years, also involving higher standards regarding aesthetics. The development of aesthetically pleasing design can also involve tensions with ambitions to produce serious content for professional audiences.

We found it interesting to scrutinize how a website for such a complex institution as a National Library, locally situated in Stockholm, dealt with the intricate responsibility of developing an adequate web service which, of course, constitutes a national service. The main part of this text involves a discussion of six different versions of the website. However, the text starts with some brief comments on method, followed by a presentation of a theoretical perspective. This involves postulation of a, by necessity, constant tension between three different perspectives in the production of the various versions of the website.
Method
The material for this text has been taken from the Internet Archive, also known as “The Way Back Machine” (https://archive.org/web/). This resource has allowed us to analyze snapshots of web pages at various points in time. The ambition has been to sample web pages during the months January-March in years where the overall structure of the website has been transformed. This has allowed us to select web pages from six different years: 1998 (January, first archived page), 2000 (March), 2005 (February), 2008 (January), 2013 (January), 2018 (August, most recent found).

The review of each version of the website is preceded with a screenshot of the main page. The screenshot for 1998 is the English version, simply mirroring the Swedish content. However, as the web structures became more complex over the years, there were increasing differences between Swedish and English version. Therefore, for versions after 1998 the Swedish version screenshot will be used.

As already noted, 1998 is the first version of the website captured by the Internet Archive, which started collecting data in 1996. The World Wide Web was launched already in 1991, making surfing on the Internet more accessible to a wider public. However, the broad breakthrough of the Internet is usually dated to the mid-1990s. Another pivotal point in history was the creation of the search engine and Corporation of Google in 1998. During the 2000s there were dramatic developments in web design, for instance involving a shift from HTML to XHTML, involving separation of content from stylesheets.

Three perspectives
After a review of all the sample webpages, it was possible to identify a constant tension between three different perspectives. These will be presented here in order to guide the reader through our discussions. Arguably, such a tension is quite common in web pages for cultural heritage institutions. The argument here is not that work on the website is organized according to these perspectives. Rather, from an analytical review, it is possible to identify these as implicit conflicts regarding how the website should be constructed.

The building perspective is concerned with utilizing web resources as a way of getting more traffic to the physical library. It is a distinct professional librarian perspective directed at users as visitors to the library in Humlegården. From this vantage point, it is important that the website prominently displays opening hours, clear directions how to get to the building (ideally in form of both address and map) as well as highlighting of services only available on site (e.g. rare books). The building perspective can also be characterized as the Royal Library perspective, which emphasizes a place in Stockholm, part of a number of elite cultural organizations situated in the nation’s capital. As such, the building perspective is also implicitly in conflict with the task of being a National Library. An indication of a strong position for the building perspective is when the brand of Royal Library is emphasized over that of the National Library.

The web perspective is concerned with services autonomous from the resources of the physical library. This is also a distinctly professional librarian perspective. Nonetheless, there is a conflict with
the building perspective as successful development of the web perspective threatens the traffic to the physical building. There is less need to go to the Royal Library itself if what is needed is readily available by keyboard. If successful, the web perspective also serves to lessen cultural advantages of Swedish citizens living in Stockholm, with easy access to the Royal Library building. The web perspective can therefore also be characterized as the National Library perspective, attempting to make as many of the locally accessible resources as possible available to citizens outside Stockholm as well. An indication of a strong position for the web perspective is when the brand of National Library is emphasized over that of the Royal Library. The National Library perspective further underlines KB as the National Library Authority with a responsibility of coordinating and supporting Swedish library development.

In addition to the tension between these different librarian perspectives, there is an important third perspective: the marketing perspective. This perspective focuses the aesthetic dimensions of the webpage and is less concerned with content. From this vantage point, the webpage should include many visual elements, be pleasing to the eye and appeal to the broader public. According to the other two perspectives, a successful page should be logically structured and relevant information should be easy to find. From such librarian vantage points, it is assumed that users come to the website with a clear idea of finding some piece of information. The marketing perspective is more concerned with selling information to the users. Visual instruments are used in order to catch the interest of the browsing users, helping them discover unexpected content, keeping them on the site as long as possible. While the librarian perspectives (building and web) are to a large extent focused on professional users such as librarians and researchers, the marketing perspective takes aim at the broader public. Therefore, language use is also less formal and research oriented.
1998: the pioneering website

Welcome to

The Royal Library - National Library of Sweden

News

Information about the Royal Library

Services / Royal Electronic Library

Links to information sources outside the Royal Library

KB selects ALEPH 500
Better service with new local library system

The 1998 page is labelled “The Royal Library - National Library of Sweden”, clearly articulating the conflict between on the one hand being a physical resource for those living in Stockholm and at the same time a resource for the whole country. In order to strengthen the national service, online services have been branded “Royal Electronic Library”. From the web perspective, users are viewed as professionals within the Swedish library landscape, insiders in the library world, with specific interests in professional library issues. From the web perspective there are links to information sources outside the Royal Library, to a range of institutions (book stores, libraries, museums, online daily newspapers, a variety of internet resources, courses on Internet, etc.). It is worth observing that one of four portals to information resources point to information outside KB.

There is also a link providing access to the National Library catalogue (LIBRIS) with templates for searching. In addition there is a list of a large number of library collections with guidance about where to find them and how to search them, with databases listed under a separate heading. Special
services include information to visitors, and topics like organisation of Swedish libraries, book-binding, library conferences, EU’s library program and on legal issues, e.g. duty delivery and copyright..

There is some representation of the building perspective within these links. “Services” is connected to the building perspective as this link includes practical information on opening hours, rules about access to collections and library loans. Furthermore, one main link is “Information about Royal Library”, including content on the building itself, the organisation, the annual report, etc. The history of the National Library is presented in an extensive article authored by eminent historians. Quite substantial information is devoted to BIBSAM, the department commissioned to co-ordinate resources and services within KB and among Swedish academic and research libraries.

Although the building perspective appears to have a strong presence, opening hours and directions to the physical building are not present on the main page, only through clicking on a link such as “Services”. However, there is an artistic rendition of the physical building itself. It is a large image which covers the top half of the screen. This feature of the page can also be connected to the marketing perspective. It is a creative and visual device that would be a constant presence for at least seven years forward. As we reviewed many samples, we saw a great wealth of variations of this drawing. It was intentionally redesigned to reflect the changing seasons. As we selected websites early in the year, the images that we found were of the snowy library grounds. However, sometimes staff forgot to change images. For instance, the library in winter, below, was found in June 2005.

![Image of library in winter](image.png)

The “news” link is prominently displayed. News items are usually highly informed by the marketing perspective. However, in 1998 this link appears to be controlled by library professionals. Here we find information about a new digital library system, committee reports on duty delivery of electronic documents, the final committee report on the situation and future of printed books, EU proposals on copyright directives, updated list on classification terms, etc. Notably, one individual news item, the selection of the new local library system ALEPH 500, is highly emphasized at the bottom of the website. This, again, makes manifest the strong presence of the building perspective.
In the 2000 website, we find more advanced ideas of structuring. At a glance, we have on the left side a clear representation of the web perspective. On the right side, we have the building perspective, strategically allied with the marketing perspective. There is a striking, seemingly symbolic, wide gap between these two fields of information. On the right side, the two terms Royal Library and Sweden’s National Library are displayed. However, while they earlier were in the same typeset and size, there is now a vast asymmetrical situation. ROYAL LIBRARY is in all caps and Sweden’s National Library is in relatively small print. An important change from the 1998 version is also prominent display of visiting address and various contact data. The link “short about KB” contains two bullets; first, information emphasizing KB as an institution with national responsibility. second, a statement on KB being a central institution. Here, again, we find an explicit reference to the tension between KB as both a local and national resource.

From the web perspective, on the left, there is a list of headings, similar to a table of content; these serve to open up sub headings through clicks on one side and direct links to core information and services, like user guide, in the centre. There are also cross references between listed headings and information itself. Substantial care has been devoted to presenting content in six different languages, in addition to the Swedish version.

The “news” link is surprisingly absent within the many links on the left. However, news has been creatively integrated into the image of the library building itself, making it clickable. This strengthens the impression of an alliance between the building perspective and the marketing perspective.

Moving back to the (external) resources on the left side, there is a list of links to web resources such as search tools (e.g. Evreka, Excite), encyclopaedias (Nationalencyklopedin), dictionaries (Glossaries), databases (Nord Guide), portals and collections of links from other sources like libraries, and other institutions (e.g. Högskolebiblioteket i Skövde), general and specific databases and search tools/services (Evreka; Find that art book). The “portal strategy” in which websites positioned themselves as an entry point into larger information resources was popular in the early days of the web. However, this kind of strategy became to some extent obsolete with the emergence of the search engine of Google, broadly perceived as effective for all needs.
Under the heading “Libraries” we find a seemingly random mixture of links or addresses to Swedish libraries and institutions within librarianship. One observation is that two institutions (BIVIL in Lund and ABM in Uppsala) are mentioned on the topic of education and research in LIS. SSLIS in Borås, by far the national leader, is missing. This probably reflects a common strategy at the time to exchange links with other organizations that asked for such a trade-off. In that case, BIVIL may have asked for such an exchange while SSLIS might have missed that opportunity.

Under the heading “link collections and information seeking services” we find one link to “quality assessed scientific information” indicating that in the year 2000 there were ideas about libraries and librarians taking on the role of controlling and evaluating information on the internet. This notion is not visible in later versions of the website. Altogether, the links provided on the left side of the page offer a wide span of information, not limited to KB itself, instead opening up to worldwide resources of libraries, information and culture, national and international.

For both the building perspective and the web perspective, users are still seen mainly as professionals within the world of librarianship, which is evident under most headings. Other services listed are directed to publishers and printers. Press releases appear not to be controlled by a marketing perspective as they are long and detailed.
2005: the three column design

At a glance, we find three columns. From the vantage point of our reading, this allows for a clear separation between the three perspectives. From left to right, there is the web perspective, building perspective and the marketing perspective. As earlier, the left side contains web resources. The middle column features the drawing of the actual building. Here, opening hours and contact data are even more highlighted than earlier. However, the marketing perspective appears to have its own dedicated space, a third column featuring heavy emphasis on news. This section was earlier integrated into the image of the library building. However, the image is no longer clickable.

By 2005 six different target groups have been identified and information and services have been structured as portals for these within the left column. Target groups identified are Visitors, Libraries, Publishers and Editors, Press and Media, Printers and “Uppdragsgivaren” (loosely referring to those in charge of KB policymaking). Earlier versions of the website mentioned a number of similar user groups but the information available was not structured according to these.

Several links associated with the building perspective have also been integrated into the left column. Among the six target groups, “Visitors” stands apart. From the web perspective it sounds strange as
anyone visiting the website is a visitor. However, this link implicitly refers to visitors to the physical building. Therefore, this top target group reflects the building perspective. The “about KB” link has also been positioned within the left column.

As noted, the marketing perspective has taken control over the news section, situated at the far right. Nonetheless, it is also a bit confusing that press and media have their own portal (on the left) while specific news events are situated on the right.

There is still a sense of the web perspective positioning the (left part of the) site according to “the portal strategy”. However, a link to Google is displayed prominently, subtly indicating surrender to the sophistication and ubiquitous presence of that search engine.
By 2008, the marketing perspective has become clearly dominant. Seemingly, there has been a revolution in both aesthetics and ideas for structuring information. The main webpage presents dispersed information in bits and pieces, many accompanied by a little picture. The overall character of the 2008 home page is the modern web page with an emphasis on being pleasing to the eye with designed visual elements. “News” is now placed in the centre, implicitly signalling the importance of having a news site identity. One news item concerns the appointment of Gunilla Herdenberg, responsible for BIBSAM (the department of coordination) as head of LIBRIS, the national bibliographic database, implying a merger between the two departments. While news and calendar issues earlier were integrated, they are now separated and calendar items are also prominently displayed.

The building perspective is now marginalized, reduced to a brief note on opening hours. Address and contact data have been dropped. Once again, the two brands Royal Library and National Library are
typographically on the same level. One possible explanations to the weak manifestation of the building perspective is that the building itself is being reconstructed at the time.

The web perspective is allowed much more space in 2008 compared to earlier versions. A web map is provided with A-Z links on three levels for searching. The six target groups have been reduced to three: libraries, publishers, and media. In addition, they are displayed twice, both at the top of the page and below opening hours. Furthermore, the top right provides a portal to the KB catalogue (Regina), the national library catalogue (LIBRIS) and various databases.

With the dominance of the marketing perspective, the 2008 home page is less clearly structured than that of 2005 according to user groups. Assumptions about users seem less distinct, maybe indicating uncertainty about who the users are or what interests they may have in KB. Less pronounced labelling of user groups may also denote efforts to reach broader groups.

A surprising part of the website is the picture of a woman’s face underneath the opening hours. It is unclear what this photo represents. She has not been given any name and the image does not seem to illustrate any particular part of the surrounding content. It is an example of a lack of professionalism visible in other parts of the 2008 version of the site as well.
Visually, the 2013 home page is rather similar to the 2008 version, but we now find a more cohesive and less fragmented page. However, the marketing perspective is increasingly dominant, now in charge of four centrally positioned sections: news, courses and conferences, programs and social media. What was earlier “calendar” has now been demarcated into two separate sections (programs and courses & conferences). Images connected to news have become larger and more professional in character. There is also a visual play with colour and black and white, symbolically referring to the responsibility to take care of old material.

The web perspective appears to be still strong. The six target groups have been removed and the number of links reduced in number. Instead, headings are termed as nouns or actions (collections, co-operation between libraries, duty delivery). There is a clear contrast between the various news items situated centrally and the links at the top part of the page which appear to be directed toward Library professionals. These topics contain library statistics, courses on Dewey classification, e-books in libraries, the cataloguer’s tool box, and much more. The building perspective has not changed. It is still an emphasis on opening hours with no address supplied. The building is still being reconstructed.
As mentioned above, the 2013 home page seems to have profoundly shifted viewpoint on intended users. There now seems to be a specific target of library professionals and an emphasis on technical matters in current librarianship. Nonetheless, the largest and most central parts of the website “real estate” belongs to the marketing perspective. This tendency of the marketing perspective to dominate large spaces was to be considerably expanded during the years to come, as becomes obvious as we move to 2018.

2018: hegemony of the marketing perspective

In order to properly visualize the contemporary homepage of KB, we have included four screenshots (the first above). KB has now shifted to the contemporary trend of homepages which require users to scroll down in order to overview structure and available content. Therefore, the design has changed dramatically according to principles of advertisement or marketing rather than information seeking. This is a striking departure by a national authority/institution of culture compared to strategic ideas of earlier websites.

Visual elements dominate. The first screenshot is one single image, emphasizing a broader and popular take on culture than previously, with focus on (pop) music rather than books. The image is from the popular Stockholm based sing-along show *Allsång på Skansen* (as is shown by the text held in one of the singers’ hands). Every show is closed with sing-along to “Stockholm in my heart”. Notably, the image that dominates the website changes at times. However, the Stockholm centrist choice of image is persistent. One image is from a popular children’s TV series based on a manuscript by beloved children’s literature author Astrid Lindgren. However, the TV series is geographically situated on a fictional island outside of Stockholm (Saltkråkan). It would have been easy to instead
choose an image from other renditions of Lindgren’s work, usually situated in rural Småland e.g. Pippi Longstocking. Similarly, two alternate images are of historical encounters between Swedish political party leaders engaged in discussion. Of course, party leaders need to live in Stockholm. Still another image is a black-and-white photo of a group of people glancing at the camera in some kind of city location (our guess is that it is Stockholm).

What unfortunately is communicated with the various images dominating the landing page is that historically important events in culture and politics are situated in Stockholm. This is a surprising image choice, given the ongoing Swedish controversy about most cultural institutions in Sweden being situated in Stockholm. This broadly acknowledged political problem has even led to the physical move of several authorities dealing with national culture being moved away from Stockholm.

It is notable that on this landing page the brand of “National Library” is emphasized. However, the logo itself combines both of the brands with the Royal Library in the brand and the National Library below it. The logo is situated at each of the four segments of the main web page.

Scrolling down to the second screenshot of the main website, we find the following.

This segment contains three distinct parts. First, there are two main in-roads, one to KB’s collections; the other on KB itself as “not an ordinary library”. These mingle web and building perspectives. However, “not an ordinary library” is specifically directed toward new visitors of the physical building who have never been there before. Despite such a target audience, no details are given about how to
get to the physical building. For such information, we have to wait until the fourth segment of the main web page. Again, there appears to be a heavy emphasis on the broad public as targets of information, rather than, as previously, researchers or professionals. Assumed users are directly spoken to in a lax and typical every-day language (“du”, “funkar”).

The second part of this segment, below the two main in-roads, is a list of portals to library loans, opening hours, and ways to find the right search tool. These are provided in a discreet size and in pale font, i.e. marked as less important. Again, this signals that the building perspective is deemed of lesser importance. It is interesting that “opening hours” is a clickable link rather than direct information about actual accessibility to the building.

The third part of the segment is devoted to the themes we associate with the marketing perspective. Each item is connected to a colourful illustration. There are now three categories: news, blog comments and events. Attention-grabbing pictures from digital collections appear next to each news item and blog comment.

The third screenshot (above) is another all-encompassing large image. As with the main image on the top segment, the image circulates carousel style. Each image represents a specific digital collection. The image taken above represents the Swedish transition to right-sided driving. Four other images circulate. One concerns collection of children book illustrations. Another features classical posters. The third deals with an historical sea expedition and its role in the construction of world maps. Finally, one image features medieval bookbinding. Notably, neither of these focuses collections of texts, something we otherwise associate with the National Library. Selection of these five images appears to strategically steer away from an image of KB primarily dealing with texts. This is evident in other parts of the web page as well.

Scrolling down to the fourth and final screenshot, we find information that we traditionally associate with the building perspective.
Here, at last, there is a map to guide the new visitor to the physical building. However, there is still no address to the building, an omission that is quite striking. The links here appear to be both useful and important, although in very small print.

It is surprising that a link to the website in other languages is positioned here and not at the top. Obviously, it is quite easy to miss, in the middle of a list of small print links in Swedish language. In many earlier versions of this site, they have instead been visual representations through flags. This is much easier to grasp for those not understanding Swedish. As is currently the case, non-Swedish speaking users have to wade through large amounts of Swedish text in order to find these two words in English: “other languages”. The marginalization of this link is additionally startling as KB has placed huge amounts of work in preparing the website in 13 different languages or dialects, as becomes visible once we click the link.

KB has also put in a lot of work in creating an “easy to read” version of the site. One wonders how easy it is for those with reading difficulties to find this very link in this the fourth segment of the page, in a list, just above the link to other languages.

Another of the headings in small print is to “the library authority”, which opens up for more traditional and substantial information on KB’s mission, responsibilities, programmes and services. A comment tells visitors that this is a temporary page, while a new web platform is being developed. Thus, a division between KB as the national library and KB as the library authority has been set up. The national library design has the character of advertisement and eye-catching visuals – distant from a national cultural institution linked to research, studies and text. On the authority page readers are informed that work on redesigning the authority web platform is under way. This division establishes, perhaps, a distinction between groups of users, where the library web provides information to non-professionals and the authority web assumes professionals and institutions within librarianship as users. It is too early to see how this strategy works out as the authority web platform is still in development.

Despite the strong presence of the marketing perspective in this version of the page, it is interesting to note that the social media links, quite prominent in 2013, have now been marginalized to figure at the absolute bottom of the page.
Concluding discussion: in which ways have assumptions about users changed?

It has been interesting to review the varying trends of structuring KB websites 1998-2018. There have been several radical shifts regarding how building, activities, resources and external links have been displayed to variously represent content to intended user groups.

At the outset, in 1998 as well as in 2000 all users were given the same content and structuring of available resources. There appeared to be an ambition to serve as a portal for other libraries as well as other national and international resources. However, in 2005 six target groups were identified and these were then provided with separate forms of content. In 2008, these target groups were reduced to three. For 2013 and 2018 such notions of supplying separate websites to different user groups have disappeared. This supplies a kind of circular progression allowing websites of 1998 and 2018 to both uphold ideas of the same website for all users.

Perhaps the most striking development is the radical shift away from textual dominance starting in 2008 and the emerging dominance of the marketing perspective. In part, this reflects shifts in trends within Web design when notions of marketing have become dominant, even, as in this case, for websites of government authorities. All the readings of homepages for this article have been done on the large screen. However, contemporary websites are commonly built upon the notion that the much smaller screen of the smartphone is more prioritized, i.e. “mobile first”. Small screen users are accustomed to scrolling down to receive an overview of full content. Nonetheless, another explanation for this shift can be found in the move from the earlier focus on professional users to the general public and the emergence of a strong marketing perspective.

From 2008 and onwards it is possible to observe a growing desire to use pictures to catch the users’ attention. This is in accordance with the general trend in web design at the time, utilizing various tricks of the trade to seduce the user to stay as long as possible on the website. However, such ideals were developed for commercial web pages with the intent of either selling goods or on-site advertisements. Neither of these is appropriate for a national authority.

Despite the various strategic moves away from text and toward the visual from 2008 and onwards, the web pages also reflect the numerous emerging professional concerns. The need for professional discussions is partly handled through blogs. There is also an emphasis on KB’s mission of co-ordination among all publicly funded Swedish libraries, for instance on open access, Dewey classification, the national catalogue Libris, and library statistics.

The 2018 information on the KB library page appears to be specifically angled toward communicating the library and collections to the broader public. The KB authority page concentrates on duties, programmes and services connected to KB as the Swedish library authority, and is clearly targeted toward library professionals and institutions, and possibly to other people with a particular interest in the field. The division of the webpages, one on KB as the national library, and the other one on KB as the national library authority, demonstrates a strong cleavage between assumptions about user groups linked to the dual missions of KB. At the same time less specific target groups are mentioned in both web environments compared to earlier versions from 2005 and 2008 respectively, possibly indicating more blurred assumptions about various user groups.
The design of the 2018 KB web seems to attempt liberation from the image of a library and cultural institution environment through adaption of the visual styles of marketing. Although something else may be in the makings within the new KB authority pages, there is a risk that a website building further on the same stylesheet can undermine, so to speak, the authority of the authority.

The current investigation has been solely focused on the historical development of one government authority. Further examination of webpages of other national authorities are needed to find out if this type of design of web pages is fashionable or in current use. In addition, there is a need to discuss what possible consequences the choice of styles and of presentation might have for communication between citizens and institutions.

At the outset of this article, we situated the 1998 website as a pioneering attempt at displaying relevant content. However, Web design connected to cultural heritage institutions such as KB are arguably still in a pioneering stage. A successful balance between the national oriented web perspective, the local oriented building perspective and the marketing/design perspective is difficult to attain. The 2018 version is with our reading too heavily angled toward the marketing perspective. It is likely that the website will undergo regular redesigns of a dramatic character in the years to come.