Drag story hour at public libraries: the reading child and the construction of fear and othering in Swedish cultural policy debate

Lisa Engström

Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Lund, Sweden, and

Hanna Carlsson and Fredrik Hanell

Department of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University, Vaxjo, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to produce new knowledge about the positions that public libraries both take and are given in the conflicts over politics and identity that play out in contemporary cultural and library policy debates. Using conflicts over drag story hour at public libraries as case, the study seeks to contribute to an emerging body of research that delves into the challenges that public libraries as promoters of democracy are confronting in the conflictual political landscape of today.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents an analysis of debates reported in news articles concerning Drag story hour events held at Swedish public libraries. Utilizing the analytical lenses of discourse theory and plural agonistics, the analysis serves to make visible the lines of conflicts drawn in these debates – particularly focusing on the intersection of different meanings ascribed to the notion of the reading child, and how fear is constructed and used as an othering devise in these conflicts.

Findings – Different imaginings of the reading child and the construction and imagination of fear and safety shapes the Drag story hour debates. The controversies can be understood as a challenge to the previous hegemony regarding the direction and goals of Swedish cultural and library policy and the pluralistic democratic society these policies are meant to promote.

Originality/value – The paper offers new insights into the consequences of the revival of radical right politics, populism and societal polarization, and the different responses from public libraries.

Keywords Drag queen story hour, Drag story hour, Public libraries, Radical right, Discourse theory, Plural agonistics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In autumn 2022, a heated debate arose in the local parliament of the small municipality of Kalmar in southern Sweden. The dispute was initiated by a representative of the radical right party the Sweden Democrats (SD) and revolved around the event *Drag story hour* – a touring event in which drag queens read stories to children – that soon was to take place at the local public library. The representative from SD scorned the activity in clearly derogative terms and demanded the event to be stopped. Political opponents, backed up by journalists and scholars, not only questioned the ideological grounds for SD's position but

also their right as politicians to interfere in detailed decision-making concerning the content and practices of cultural institutions such as libraries. The SD representative in turn defended his actions by claiming that the so-called arm's length principle was no longer applicable "when clearly perverted material is not kept at arm's length reach from children" (SVT Nyheter, 2022).

The debate in Kalmar is but one example of heated discussions taking place in several Swedish municipalities in relation to the event Drag story hour (DSH) at public libraries. Thereby, Sweden follows an international trend where similar performances have been the target of right-wing outbursts in recent years (Ellis, 2022; Anderson, 2024). The reactions can also be related to current events in the US where the numbers of attempted and successful bans of reading material are higher than ever, and where the most reported reasons for challenging books are LGBTQ + content (Clark-Hunt and Creel, 2023; Tucker, 2023). Hence, the debates sparked by DSH are not coincidental. At the same time as the story telling events are appreciated and loved, both in Sweden and elsewhere, they are the focal point of tensions and ideologically laden conflicts concerning the relationships between politics, culture, and the position of children in contemporary society. As Davis and Kettrey (2022, p. 26) explains: "by showcasing artistic performances that challenge the boundaries of gender and sexuality in public space and in front of audiences of children, DQSH [Drag queen story hour] pulls a number of culture war triggers". Recent conflicts over DSH have in this way contributed to placing public libraries in Sweden, and especially their reading promotion activities for children, at the center of those polarized conflicts between the radical right and their opponents, sometimes described as "the culture wars" (Harding, 2022; cf. Usherwood and Usherwood, 2021).

That public libraries are turned into ideological symbols raises concerns about how this affects the institution's capacity to advance democratic governance and ensure access to information and culture for all. We therefore argue that there is a need to further our knowledge of this ongoing development and the societal and political conflicts it is part of. In this paper, we seek to do so by presenting an analysis of debates reported in the news media concerning DSH events held at Swedish public libraries. Using DSH as case, the analysis aims to make visible the lines of conflicts drawn in these debates – particularly focusing on the intersection of different meanings ascribed to the notion of the reading child, and how fear is constructed and used as an othering devise in these conflicts. Using the analytical lenses of discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) and plural agonistics (Mouffe, 2005), the purpose of the paper is to produce new knowledge about the positions that public libraries both take and are given in the conflicts over politics and identity that play out in contemporary cultural and library policy debates. Thereby, the study seeks to contribute to an emerging body of research that delves into the challenges that public libraries as promoters of democracy are confronting in the conflictual political landscape of today, characterized by the resurgence of the radical right and a questioning of core democratic values (cf. Carlsson et al., 2023; Kitzie et al., 2022; Tucker, 2023).

The investigation is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What meanings are ascribed to "the reading child" in the analyzed debates?

RQ2. How is fear constructed and used as an othering devise in the conflicts over Drag story hour events held at Swedish public libraries?

RQ3. How can different responses to Drag story hour controversies at public libraries be understood through the analytical lens of plural agonistics?

The discussions surrounding DSH at public libraries in Sweden are a tangible example of an ongoing politization of this institution (see Carlsson et al., 2023; Hanell et al., 2023). The trend

is also observed in other countries and political contexts (e.g. Crowley, 2021; Kann-Rasmussen, 2023; Usherwood and Usherwood, 2021). Gaining knowledge of different positions given and taken, and the responses from public libraries to this development, is relevant not only for the Swedish library sector but also for a broader discussion on the consequences of the revival of radical right politics, populism, and societal polarization.

We will now provide a background that more thoroughly describes the social and political context in which the controversies over DSH are situated. We then seek to position the study, and its contribution to existing research on public libraries and their relations to contemporary conflicts over politics and identity, often referred to as "the culture wars". Thereafter we introduce five cases in Sweden where DSH at public libraries have been subject to heated debates. We also present the empirical material and the analytical tools we have used to deconstruct and make sense of these debates considering current political developments. In the analysis we focus on two central nodes that give rise to discursive struggles: meanings ascribed to the notion of the reading child and different understandings of fear and safety. We conclude with a discussion and suggestions for public libraries on how to move forward.

The revival of radical right politics

The obvious backdrop of this study is the ongoing political shift where "[t]he resurgence of strong radical right-wing parties and movements constitutes one of the most significant political changes in democratic states during the past decades" (Rydgren, 2018, p. 1; see also Norris and Inglehart, 2019). This is evident in Europe, including Sweden where this study is situated, but also in countries such as the United States, Australia, and Japan (Rydgren, 2018, p. 1; cf. Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Simultaneously, democracy itself is questioned and supposedly consolidated democratic countries have experienced challenges to core democratic values during past years (Mounk, 2022, p. 151). These challenges, including anti-pluralistic sentiments and nationalistic agendas, disrupt politics in several countries worldwide as authoritarian populist leaders grow in popularity and in political power. This development is caused by growing economic inequalities but also by a cultural backlash where voters react against progressive cultural change (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). It is against the background of this global trend we situate the present study and frame the ongoing political development in Sweden that public libraries are currently experiencing.

Radical right parties in different countries are heterogenous in character and stems from different political backgrounds and ideologies, but they are united by their ethnonationalism and aggression towards Muslims in particular, and in their advocacy for traditionalism and "family values" (Rydgren, 2018). Rydgren (2018, p. 2) distinguishes between "right-wing extremism" and the "radical right"; while right-wing extremists oppose democracy openly, the radical right argues that they defend democracy, but opposes pluralism. Following this line of argument, the Swedish political party representing the trend described above, the Sweden Democrats (SD), is here defined as a radical right party. SD was officially formed as a party in 1988 and "stems from an explicit racist background" (Lindsköld, 2015, p. 11). SD gained political representation at the municipal level for the first time in 1991, and in 2010 they were voted into the national parliament. In the 2022 national election, SD got the second most votes and the incumbent government depends on their support. The party has a strong anti-immigration stance (Dal Bó *et al.*, 2023, p. 680) and Mulinari and Neergaard (2014) define SD as cultural racist. Thus, instead of referring to biological differences or talking about "race", SD and similar parties refer to culture and religion "in a racialising manner that often recreates the content of biological racism through different words" (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014, p. 3).

Othering and the construction of threats and fear

In the context of condemning LGBTQ-communities, the radical right and right-wing extremists – prominently male environments – have a long history of viewing non-heterosexuals as threats to the traditional (white) family (Daniels, 2009). The radical right position multi-culturalism and pluralism in direct opposition with peaceful co-existence in contemporary democratic societies, and sexual ambiguity as a threat to traditional family values (Davis and Kettrey, 2022; Rydgren, 2018). With the rise of the LGBTQ-movement and strengthened societal ambitions to safeguard minority rights, LGBTQ-issues become increasingly important for the radical right to push back against and to construct their collective identity around. That said, radical right parties also present a paradoxical stance on gender politics as they both preach traditional family values of femininity and motherhood, and at the same time supposedly defend "women's rights against Muslim migrants" (Hajek and Dombrowski, 2022, p. 2). Thus, they safeguard "liberal democratic values" including "emancipation of homosexuals and women", and simultaneously claim gender equality to be an overarching state ideology to defeat (Erel, 2018, p. 175). In these cases, the main conflict lines are drawn between supposedly Christian and Muslim values, and immigrants and non-immigrants. A form of "liberal illiberalism" is articulated as the radical right pose as defenders of liberty and free speech, and opportunistically use selected liberal ideas to attack Muslims and "the elite" (Moffitt, 2017).

This paradox is evident in the politics of SD (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2014). In SD's *Program of principles*, the binary relation between men and women is described and male and female characteristics are said to generally complement each other, and therefore "all children should have the right to both a male and a female role model in their lives" (Sverigedemokraterna, 2019, p. 15). In contrast, in the election manifesto SD emphasize the progress made for persons of different sexualities and lifestyles and cherish Sweden as a country where you can organize your personal and family life as you wish (Sverigedemokraterna, 2022). Immigration is depicted as the threat towards this "progressive view on sexual life" (Sverigedemokraterna, 2022).

Constructing "the other" as a threat is a common strategy in radical right rhetoric. Recent research shows how right-wing extremists and persons who subscribe to radical right ideas construct collective identity online through uniting against common perceived "threats" (Gaudette *et al.*, 2021; Scrivens *et al.*, 2020). Historically, the radical right has targeted Jews, people of color, and LGBTQ-communities as such "threats", in effect perceiving these groups as "enemies" (Scrivens *et al.*, 2020; cf. Polletta and Jasper, 2001). In the cases analyzed in this article, radical right actors use queerness, represented by storytelling drag queens, as bogeypersons in a similar manner to inscribe fear of the "other" (cf. Abbas, 2019).

The opposition against pluralism from the radical right can be traced to ideas of authoritative conservatism (Mouffe, 1997). According to the conservative philosopher Carl Schmitt, democracy requires a homogenous demos which makes pluralistic democracy impossible (Mouffe, 2005). Additionally, Schmitt argues that democracy involves a distinction between "us" (the demos) and "them" (the others), and true equality can never be universal but is always contextual, as with political or economic equality (which in turn allow for inequality). Similar to Schmitt, the radical right, combining ethno-nationalism and populism (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019), sides with "the people" or "the demos" and perpetuate an antagonistic relationship to those groups, individuals or ideas that are constructed as "the other". However, as argued by Mouffe, the construction of a difference between us and them – which is unavoidable – does not have to be a difference between friend and enemy characterized by antagonism (Mouffe, 2005). Instead, this difference can take the form of an agonistic relation between conflicting parties who "recognize the legitimacy of their opponents", and thereby make a pluralist democracy possible (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20). Nonetheless, the current situation is characterized by antagonism from all parties, including

the political opponents to the radical right. The "culture wars", that we now turn our attention to, has indeed turned into a bitter conflict between enemies that public libraries and the notion of the reading child have been drawn into.

"The culture wars"

There is a paradoxical development in many western societies, including Sweden, regarding attitudes towards sexual minorities and trans persons. On the one hand, radical right movements and conservative parties gain political influence promoting family values and practices that violates the rights of LGBTQ-persons, and violence and hate crimes against queer and trans persons continue (Ellis, 2022). On the other hand, television shows like RuPauls Drag Race win huge popularity, and in Sweden a national version of the show was successfully broadcasted on a national public service channel in 2023. This contradictory development exemplifies an increasing polarization between different positions in many western societies concerning identity politics, which ultimately manifests itself in the so-called "culture wars". Davis and Kettrey (2022) describe how the term was established in the early 1990s, but social media has influenced how the conflicts play out. "Culture wars" often intensify during times of social, political, or economic changes (Davis and Kettrey, 2022, p. 27). Previously, a cultural conflict was often specific to a certain community, for example concerning a work of public art displayed on the town square. However, social media enables populists and the radical right, as well as their opponents, to build communities with like-minded individuals across geographical distances (e.g. Haider and Sundin, 2022; Scrivens et al., 2020).

Internationally, conflicts labeled with the "culture wars" etiquette reflect the cultural backlash where conservative voices react against progressive cultural change (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). In North American political debate "culture wars" often denotes a new kind of polarization following the rise of the so called "Alternative right movement". Influenced by this understanding of the concept, Swedish press has used it to describe similar ideological tensions and divides in Swedish society and politics reflected by the increased influence of SD. However, Tobias Harding (2022) notes an interesting difference between the North American and Swedish utilization of the concept. In American political debate, "culture wars" infers a broad understanding of culture in an anthropological sense, where culture refers to a particular way of life and, in this case, also to specific understandings of national identity and values. In the Swedish debate, conflicts have so far mainly arisen over arts and culture or cultural policy (Harding, 2022). Although these conflicts have been situated in a broader ideological context, a narrower, aesthetic understanding of culture has been predominant in the Swedish culture wars debate. The conflicts over DSH analyzed in this article imply a change as the critique of the events heavily builds on the construction of drag as a threat to "core family values", "our way of life" and ultimately to "the soundness and future of the nation". The reactions to DSH thus suggest a more intense conflation of activities and practices of cultural institutions and formal cultural policy with ethno-nationalistic identity politics in Swedish society and political debate.

Public libraries and the culture wars

Public libraries in Sweden are funded by the municipality, and this funding is primarily derived from taxes. The fact that DSH are hosted by a publicly funded institution makes it particularly problematic for SD, questioning if taxpayers" money should finance such events (Nilsson, 2022b). However, the Swedish Library Act and national policies regulating public libraries explicitly state that the mission of the institution is to promote and uphold the democratic society and the rights of minorities. In existing research, the democratic and

societal roles of public libraries have been thoroughly explored from different perspectives (Audunson *et al.*, 2019; Buschman, 2003; Widdersheim and Koizumi, 2016; Seale, 2016) and the support for plurality is also reflected in the ways libraries organize their work. Studies of multicultural library services connect the democratic importance of public libraries to how libraries contribute to the social integration of individuals and groups with plural cultural identities (García López *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, research shows how different library activities, and the creation of welcoming library spaces, can support the political integration of immigrants (Johnston and Audunson, 2019), and the well-being of people of non-normative gender, particularly children and youth (Grafelman and Barriage, 2022; cf. Huttunen *et al.*, 2020). In this study we build upon this strand of existing research that points to the democratic and inclusive potential of public libraries to make sense of the positions given and taken by the public libraries in the cases studied. However, we do recognize that previous research also highlights that libraries are far from being inclusive spaces. For example, Wagner and Crowley (2020) criticize academic libraries for their excluding and misrepresenting practices in library resources. Even though these libraries make amends to signal welcomeness with singular actions, they continue to structurally exclude trans and gender nonconforming individuals (Wagner and Crowley, 2020). In addition, in a literature review on informational barriers for the LGBTQ community, Pierson (2017) depicts several barriers to information, which underscores that access to information is not free and equal. By exploring different positions taken by public libraries to radical right challenges of plurality, and how this may involve navigating between inclusive ideals and excluding structures, this paper seeks to further the nuances in existing research on the library institution's support of core democratic values.

The view of plurality as something intrinsically good, and instrumentally beneficial to society, is central to common understandings of liberal democracy (see Mouffe, 2005). However, this very idea is what is presently challenged by the radical right and their notions of an illiberal democracy in which diversity and pluralism are believed to stand in direct opposition to peaceful co-existence, and where sexual ambiguity is perceived as threatening "our way of life" (Davis and Kettrey, 2022; Rydgren, 2018). Previous research shows that contemporary political conflicts and controversies pertaining to public libraries commonly arise in relation to this clash between contradictory and often ideologically polarized positions on what constitutes a good society, what threatens it and how it should be promoted. For example, in Great Britain the radical right uses misinformation and misrepresentation to challenge both public libraries and public service companies, portraying these public institutions as vehicles for the "liberal elite" (Usherwood and Usherwood, 2021). These attacks illustrate how institutions conveying fact-based knowledge are challenged by anti-pluralist and anti-expert sentiments from the radical right (Waller *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, Carlsson *et al.* (2022) show how library programming activates promoting diversity, in particular LGBTQ issues and the rights of sexual minorities, are often the main sources of ideologically motivated conflicts around library activities in contemporary Sweden (see also Carlsson *et al.*, 2023; Hanell *et al.*, 2023). The study presented in this paper adds new insights to these findings by providing an in-depth analysis of the lines of conflicts drawn in the "culture war" discourse that the public library is drawn into.

As will be further developed in the analysis, the well-being of children is at the heart of the DSH debates in Sweden, but also elsewhere. In a North American context, DSH events at public libraries have been criticized by conservative media for endangering American children, coinciding with acts of vandalism and even violence. Several states have also proposed and passed anti-drag bills (Anderson, 2024). Furthermore, previous research shows how some US libraries are inhibited from engaging in work to include materials and resources for the LGBTQ population due to unfavorable or antagonistic local political climates (Mehra and Jaber, 2023). Also, research into the perceptions and experiences of DSH at public

libraries point to mixed but highly polarized reactions. Whereas library staff in general are supportive of DSH, responses vary among other community members (Barriage *et al.*, 2021), ranging from either fully embracing the event and what it stands for, to violently protesting accompanied by library self-censorship (Stone, 2019; Kitzie *et al.*, 2022). Exploring perceptions of library neutrality and core values of librarianship among American public librarians, Oltmann *et al.* (2023) found that DSH was often perceived as supporting such values by promoting democracy trough the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in library programming. However, they found disagreement on whether hosting DSH was compatible with the contested concept of library neutrality. By closely analyzing the Swedish debate, this study contributes with new insights into diverging reactions to DSH controversies from public libraries in a different yet comparable national setting. It also furthers understandings of the ideological foundations and values underpinning the various responses to DSH and offers explanations to the subject matter under contention.

The practice of so-called book bans is a related issue that in a similar vein as DSH has put libraries at the center of what is being described as "bitter and widening" "culture war" conflicts in the US (Harris and Alter, 2022a). According to the American Library Association, instances where books are challenged and even removed due to supposedly offensive content are increasing in numbers (ALA, 2023). Furthermore, efforts to ban are also becoming more well-organized by "nation-wide advocacy groups and politicians authoring legislation that seeks to outlaw or criminalize making so-called controversial books available to children" (Tucker, 2023, p. 2). The bans are thus motivated by the idea that children as readers must be protected from dangerous impressions that may influence them in a non-desired direction (Tucker, 2023). The urge to protect children is also manifested when challengers demands that books are relocated from the children or young adult section to the adult section of the library (Knox, 2014). The challenged books often deal with issues that have been framed as "culture war" triggers, such as the experiences of marginalized communities, in particular LGBTQ + content (Harris and Alter, 2022b; see also Anderson, 2024). Although the promotion of literature and reading has always been related to questions concerning which books to read and how to read (see Lindsköld *et al.*, 2020), these questions are presently connected to the polarization between different positions connected to identity politics that characterize "the culture wars".

The narrative of the innocent child in need of protection is also present in the critique of DSH as a reading promotion activity in Swedish libraries. However, in the Swedish case it is not primarily the literary content but the practice of reading promotion that has been the focus of debate. In this study we seek to provide explanations for this symbolic position of the reading child by showcasing the different but also corresponding meanings that this sign is ascribed in the Swedish DSH-debates. In the analysis, we continue to explore how the controversies surrounding DSH events can be understood as a clash between different contradictory and often ideologically polarized positions on what constitutes a good society, what threatens it and how it should be promoted, centering on the notion of the reading child, the construction of fear and the meanings of safety. Before the analysis, we introduce five selected instances of heated debates over DSH and the analytical tools we use for deconstructing these debates.

Five cases in Sweden: responses to hostility and hate

We use news material reporting on controversies around DSH held at public libraries as a starting point for our analysis. To collect material, we conducted searches in the database *The Media Archive* (Retriever Research) which includes printed and online material from mainly Swedish newspapers, journals, television, and radio. We limited the time span to January 1st, 2015, to April 26th, 2023 (the date the search was conducted), and we only searched Swedish publications. The search string used was "'drag story hour' OR 'drag queen story hour'",

which generated 898 articles. The search results statistics clearly show how the debate has played out in Sweden. Before 2022 there were relatively few articles on the topic, with a top of 33 hits in 2019 and 46 in 2020. In 2022 the number of hits raised dramatically to 553 and on April 26th, 2023, there were already 235 articles published during the current year. We translated the news material quotations used in the analysis into English.

The first time hatred and violence in relation to DSH is mentioned in the material is in an article published in June 2022 in the paper QX, which targets the LGBTQ-community in Sweden. The article describes a situation outside San Francisco, USA, where a story telling event was interrupted by aggressive members of Proud boys, a group associated with former US-president Donald Trump (Thorén, 2022). The earliest signs of an increasingly heated discussion concerning Swedish DSH events was published October 17th, 2022. This day, a letter to the editor in a local newspaper protests against an upcoming DSH which is to take place at the library in the village Olofström. The same day, an article is published in another local newspaper reporting a debate in the city council of Kalmar in which representatives of SD asked the chair of the municipal cultural board to cancel an upcoming DSH event at the public library (Nilsson, 2022a). These two occasions mark the starting point of an escalation of harsh comments and hatred against arranging DSH at public libraries in Sweden.

We browsed all the retrieved articles and identified five instances where DSH gave rise to heated debates that the libraries in question and/or the municipal council chose to respond to in different ways. Briefly and simplified, these five ways of handling the controversies can be described in the following way:

(1) Olofström municipality. A DSH event is planned to take place in October 2022. Hatred and threats are posted on Facebook and the library manager receives threatening e-mails and phone calls. The library consequently chooses to cancel the event at the library; however, DSH proceeds with the storytelling in a digital format. From the total number of 898 articles, 299 included "Olofström".

(2) Kalmar municipality. The person representing SD in the municipal council strongly pushes for the canceling of a planned DSH at the public library. Despite this, DSH is organized November 26th, 2022. However, the SD-representative continues his critique and initiate a plan of action to prevent similar events to be held in the future. Our search result includes 338 hits for "Kalmar".

(3) Älmhult municipality. In March 2023 the library announces having discussed to arrange DSH but opted not to due to safety concerns. Our search result includes seven hits for "Älmhult".

(4) Malmö municipality. DSH is held as planned October 29th, 2022, with enforced security including security guards, due to threats against the event and with the incidents in Olofström in mind. Our search result includes 385 articles on "Malmö".

(5) Trelleborg municipality. In December 2022 two SD-politicians in the municipality succeed in canceling a planned DSH-event at the library although they were not representatives of the cultural board at the time. However, through informal conversations with the cultural affairs director, SD succeeds to prevent the event from taking place. The actual canceling of the event as well as the obscure circumstances around the decision causes strong political reactions, and several politicians from other political parties demand the event to be reinstated. Political representatives from three political parties request that the cultural board formally decides that DSH should be held, with only SD representatives opposing the proposal (Trelleborgs kommun, 2021). DSH is arranged at the public library in February 2023. Our search result includes 275 articles mentioning this controversy.

Most of the retrieved articles mentions one or several of the instances of debates and controversies described above. The total number of articles mentioning these controversies exceeds the number of total hits of our search since multiple articles deal with more than one controversy. The selected cases are located in the south of Sweden. Arguably, this is related to the historically strong position of SD, and the presently strong representation of the party at the municipal level in this part of the country. In addition, DSH Sweden is based in the city of Malmö, also located in the south of Sweden. One limitation of the study concerns representativity and whether the five instances selected for analysis can be said to provide a representative depiction of current debates concerning public libraries in Sweden (it is also mainly four of the selected examples that are reported by the media with high frequency). However, previous research shows that libraries adjust their programming based on controversies and incidents in other municipalities (Carlsson *et al.*, 2022), so while fairly limited in frequency, the impact of the analyzed incidents warrants closer examination. Additionally, and as indicated above, the selected examples are part of an international trend where LGBTQ-rights are challenged by the radical right.

The analyzed articles are published in media outlets and intended for public use. However, given that DSH is an issue of controversy and targeted by threats and violence, we acknowledge the sensitivity associated with the chosen research subject. To minimize the use of identifiable data, we have sought to avoid quotes from library staff and DSH-performers. The research has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Analysis

The selected news articles were read repeatedly, and their content were analyzed looking for both how the controversies played out and the arguments put forth. In the analysis of arguments, we made use of discourse theory as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), focusing on the analytical concepts of nodal points, floating signifiers, and hegemony. A nodal point is a particularly significant sign in the web of signs that constructs the discourse and around which the meaning of other signs is ordered (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). The meaning of any sign is never completely fixed, but dependent on the discourse in which it is used and the relation to the other signs in this context (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Some signs are more disputed than others. A crucial part of achieving dominance for one specific perspective is to articulate and fixate floating signifiers, that is discursive signs that are particularly open to different attributions of meaning (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002; Rear and Jones, 2013).

In our analysis, we use discourse theory to identify the nodes around which the debates over DSH are arranged. We identified two nodes that also constitutes signs whose meanings at present are particularly disputed and therefore can be understood as floating signifiers. The first node is "the reading child". Around this nodal point, discourse is organized through assigning meaning to elements such as reading, role models and the public library. The second identified node is "safety" understood as an opposite and response to the construction or imagination of "fear". Our analysis shows how othering through fear is pivotal for stabilizing the meaning of elements in an antagonistic discursive struggle such as this. The construction and imagination of fear and correspondingly different meanings of safety is central to the second part of the analysis, where we focus on different responses to hatred and threats against DSH events, manifested by the five selected examples of debates, and their consequences.

In the first section of the analysis, we mainly discuss the cases of Trelleborg and Kalmar where local SD representatives tried to stop storytelling events at the public library, and we focus on the meaning ascribed to the (reading) child that is illuminated in these debates. Here, statements from SD representatives are central to the analysis. In the second section of the

analysis, we utilize all five cases and analyze how libraries responded differently to the arisen controversies and the role of fear and the desire for safety in these situations. In this section, statements from the library sector as well as from SD representatives are used in the analysis.

Below we explore how different actors struggle to fixate the meaning of "the reading child" as well as the meaning of "safety". We perceive these debates as a discursive struggle, not merely over the meanings ascribed to these nodes but also as a conflict over what constitutes a good society, in effect a struggle over hegemony.

The reading child
The cases of Kalmar and Trelleborg bear many similarities since local SD spokespersons in these municipalities tried to stop the DSH events from being arranged at the libraries. In the case of Trelleborg, it first appeared as if SD had been successful in their endeavor, but as described above, the event was later reinstated after a heated political debate. In Kalmar, the SD representative who argued for the banning of the storytelling event at the library never got any acceptance for his demand. The SD-representatives in both Kalmar and Trelleborg clearly focus on the audience of children when condemning DSH. For example, the SD representative in Kalmar states that they must make sure that the material is "age appropriate" and that material that is "gender creative, gender critical or norm critical" should not target young children (Nilsson, 2022b). In a similar manner, a SD-representative in the Swedish parliament comments the controversies in Kalmar on X: "Let children be children and don't expose them to this" (Källén, 2022). According to SD, the threat to children that DSH and similar activities present is sexualization. The representative for SD in Kalmar states: " . . . [DSH] is nothing else than indoctrination and sexualization of children who are sensitive and easily influenced" (Källén, 2022). This argument implicitly postulates the innocence of children and the binary of childhood and adulthood, and thereby it strives to stabilize the meaning of the child as defenseless and in constant danger. Faulkner (2010, p. 107) describes how the fantasy of the innocent child depict children as "different in kind from adults' and sexuality as exclusive for adult life. This fantasy is manifested when individuals in the US who argue for the labeling and relocating of books with explicit sexual content from the children section in libraries assume that certain content is harmful for children but not necessarily for adults (cf. Knox, 2014). The argumentation echoes enlightenment notions of the child as an empty vessel and romantic ideas of the child as uncorrupted by culture (cf. Tucker, 2023). Moreover, while SD highlights the purity of children, they portray drag artists and queer individuals as excessively sexualized or perverted. For instance, a representative from SD in the national parliament accused the Pride parade of, "involving children and legitimizing pedophilia" (Christensen, 2023).

The argumentation from SD representatives corresponds with a radical right rhetoric used in other countries and slogans like "We must defend our children", which is commonly heard from these actors (Rakusa-Suszczewski, 2021, p. 69). Schmincke (2020), who has researched European right-wing movements, describes how they claim to fight for the family and therefore argue against "the sexualization of children" since it allegedly results in confused gender identities. Thereby, the arguments presented by SD representatives connect to a wider context in which the meaning of "the child" as innocent and in need of protection is fixated (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). From a queer theoretical perspective, the image of "the child" (as the image of the future) shapes the logic that forces an ideological limit on political discourse and privileges heteronormativity (Edelman, 2004). In fact, all politics claiming to fight for the children confirms the truth of reproductive futurism, namely the "coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity" (Edelman, 2004, p. 6).

While "the child" in political visions of futurity is commonly used in discursive struggle to counter queer inclusive politics, it is crucial to note that not all children are depicted as the

future and not all children are seen as innocent in radical right discourse. Thus, Thompson (2018, p. 287) states that "[t]he innocent child is commonly assumed to be white". Thompson draw this conclusion in an Australian context, but other research broadens the perspective. For example, Dyer (2017) concludes that the imagination of the innocent child and the future it holds is restricted to white heterosexual children, but the cisgender heterosexuality is to be realized in adulthood. Children are then seen as *becomings*, that is as adults-to-be, rather than *beings,* that is individuals in their own right (cf. Hedemark and Jonsson, 2021). To the radical right movement, reading promotion at libraries is therefore of great importance since it is assumed to educate and mold the child into becoming the adult they envision (cisgender and heterosexual). In contrast, DSH encounters children as beings and encourage children to play and explore their identity and self-perception and highlight drag as a playful and engaging way to promote reading (cf. Balling *et al.*, 2022, p. 162). However, although the child as "being" is endorsed by DSH, it should also be noted that the reading promotion policies that DSH supports equally entail ideas of what sort of future society the reading child will contribute to, that is a democratic and empathetic society (cf. Hedemark and Jonsson, 2021). The contradicting views of opponents and proponents of DSH thereby reveal the tensions between different imaginings and meanings of the child, childhood, and the future of society that collide in the debates over these storytelling events.

Moreover, the perception of children as innocent and in need of protection is not limited to the radical right but is rooted in narratives of childhood that are deeply ingrained in European and North American culture. Although the perception of childhood has evolved over time (Sandin and Halldén, 2003), the notion of the innocent, malleable, and universal child is deeply embedded in Western thought (Tucker, 2023). Furthermore, the fear of harmful influences on children, particularly the sexualization of childhood, has been prominent for decades (Thompson, 2018). However, the meaning of childhood has historically been part of a discursive struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) between those who perceive children as innocent and those who perceive them as individuals in need of education and discipline. Reading promotion moves between these perspectives. For example, Hedemark (2020) shows that Swedish reading policies of the 1970s made public libraries responsible for educating children to read quality literature, but also to protect children from harmful literature which could have a "demoralizing influence". At that time, the demoralizing influence was exemplified with sensational fiction and contrasted to quality literature (Hedemark, 2020). Thus, the reading child must be disciplined to become a well-behaved adult by consuming the right literature, and books are then perceived as potentially either beneficial or dangerous.

Today, debates over the content of children's literature, like the book challenges in the US, are uncommon in Sweden. This can be explained by a pragmatic and influential turn in cultural policies for reading promotion in Sweden during the 20th century; from promoting the importance of quality literature, to promoting the activity of reading (Hedemark, 2020; Hedemark and Jonsson, 2021). Contemporary Swedish national policies on reading convey a commonly held idea that reading and literacy promotes empathy and democracy (Lindsköld *et al.*, 2020). The act of reading is therefore endorsed as a desirable activity for children and young people as they, through reading, will be fostered into becoming democratic citizens, with compassion and understanding for others. This turn manifests a change of the meaning given to reading in the discourse of reading promotion, from an activity which both can have positive and negative outcomes depending on the content of the book, to an activity which in itself is seen as positive. From this perspective follows a focus on the ability to read and the activity of reading, rather than the form or content of literature (Hedemark, 2020). DSH fits well with this perspective by celebrating the act of reading and endorsing values of acceptance, diversity, and positive self-identification. As such, the event clearly corresponds with democratically decided goals that ideally should represent the will of the majority. However, as clearly expressed by the SD representatives, DSH clashes with the politics of the radical right and their view on the will

and right of "the demos". This loss of political consensus on what constitutes a good society, and who is to be included in that society – that is the meaning of "demos", once again turn the issue concerning what sort of experiences and content children should be exposed to or protected from into a matter of controversy and conflict.

When reading as an activity is stressed, reading promotion, and reading role models are considered important (Hedemark and Jonsson, 2021). This draws attention to what constitutes good reading practices; "in public debates and in policy texts some reading practices are constructed as risks, while others are presented as beneficial for society" (Lindsköld *et al.*, 2020, p. 257). Thus, the attributes and identities of those reading for, or in front of, children are perceived as significant, also in national policies (Lindsköld *et al.*, 2020). A prominent aim of DSH is to offer children positive queer role models through reading promotion by celebrating "reading through the glamorous art of drag" (Drag story hour, 2023). This is celebrated by those supporting the storytelling events who are in favor of presenting children with role models representing diversity and the experiences of minorities. For the SD representatives this is instead seen as harmful to children, as they fear the breakdown of gender binaries. The queer and boundary-crossing drag queen thereby manifests the "harmful influence" the radical right oppose. Thus, the polarized political landscape is manifested in a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes a desirable role model and a good reading practice turning the identity of those disseminating the literature into a matter of controversy. SD representatives' condemnation of DSH-events at public libraries and their rhetoric on protecting children from harmful influence can thus be seen as a revival of previous discursive struggles over the meaning of reading promotion, although adjusted to contemporary conditions, illuminating the character of the child as both a nodal point and a floating signifier (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The meaning of the child is here clearly related to a wider discourse, in which the struggle for fixating the meaning of "harmful influence" and the desired society is ongoing.

Responses to fear and the meanings of safety

We identify two manifestations of fear in the material; the fear for what might happen if certain activities are held and the outcomes thereof, and the construction of fear for "the other". Both these fears capitalize on sentiments of uncertainty and distrust that stretches into an unknown future (Wodak, 2015). In the above analysis we discuss how the construction of fear for the other inform the meaning of the child and the discourse of reading promotion. Below we analyze how fear for what might happen, and discursive struggles over the meaning of safety, influence the public libraries' responses to hatred and threats.

The libraries in Älmhult and Olofström decided to not arrange the DSH-event in the physical library room. At both public libraries, the reason for not arranging the storytelling events in the library room is related to safety concerns. In Olofström, the DSH-event was publicly announced, and people had registered to attend. But due to threats against the library on e-mail, phone, and social media, the activity was canceled and instead a recorded version was distributed digitally (Domellöf-Wik, 2022). Against the backdrop of the controversies and threats in other municipalities, the library in Älmhult decided not to arrange DSH due to the security arrangements they saw as necessary to hold such an event: "We should not let hate or intolerance deter us. But the visitors" safety and the openness [of the library] are most important. This would be completely at odds with security guards in the premises' (Larsson, 2023).

In these cases, the radical right movement successfully invoked fear and thereby managed to prevent the activity of DSH from taking place at the libraries. The fear is both related to potential aggressive or even violent actions from radical right actors and to library users' potential experiences of unease due to the security measurement needed to prevent such actions from taking place. Thus, in contrast to fear constructed to separate "us" from "them",

it is explicit hatred and threats directed at certain public libraries who plan to organize DSH that underlies the fear that resulted in this outcome. In this context, it is worth noting that threats of violence from radical and extreme right-wing actors have been carried out in Sweden, as well as in other countries. For example, the number of hate crimes related to sexuality in Sweden is increasing since 2016 (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2019) and in the US a man opened fired at a LGBTQ venue, killed five and injured 18 people (Anderson, 2024).

Also in Malmö, fear was a factor influencing the arrangement of DSH, but the library handled it differently. Malmö public library decided to proceed with their plans despite the hatred and threats being directed at the library prior to the event. To arrange DSH despite the heated situation, the library increased its security and hired security guards (Fritze, 2022). Thus, fear of what might happen affected the arrangement, but the outcome was the opposite compared to Olofström and Älmhult. Despite the different outcome, all three libraries emphasize in media that they would not let hatred or threats influence their activities.

In Trelleborg and Kalmar, SD-representatives tried but failed to prevent the respective libraries from organizing DSH. During these controversies, the selected news articles do not include statements from concerned librarians or library management. However, as soon as the political hurdles were removed, the libraries did not hesitate to arrange DSH. The popularity of the event even resulted in an extra show in Trelleborg, since the two planned events quickly filled up (Thulin, 2023).

From the different responses and outcomes described, it becomes clear that the construction of fear is intertwined with different meanings ascribed to the node "safety" and to what constitutes a "safe space" for children (cf. Tucker, 2023). In Olofström, and even more so in Älmhult, a requirement for clearly noticeable security measures is put forth as incompatible with "a safe space" to such a degree that it trumps the arrangement of an event aiming at promoting the library as a safe space for minorities and others. In Malmö, similar security measures seem to be perceived as necessary to be able to provide a safe space. The perception of libraries as safe public spaces open for all is deeply rooted in both library research and policy documents (Johnston and Audunson, 2019; Del Mar, 2021). Thus, it is noticeable that the libraries understand and practice safety differently. For some libraries the actions taken in relation to DSH are directly focused on safety arrangements and the hosting of the event. A need to hire security guards is then perceived as not coherent with the library as an open and safe space. For other libraries, the library as safe space is understood in a broader sense in which the library and its activities potentially can promote a safer society by resisting attempts to construct fear and othering processes. This is done by producing different counter narratives to the radical right imaginings. DSH is an example of such resistance, and it can therefore be seen as important to host the event as planned, despite the security measurements needed to do so.

From a wider perspective, the meaning of the library as a safe space is even more disputed. The proponents of DSH frame the event as a safe space for children to, among other things, encounter, discuss or play with assumptions of gender identities and sexuality (cf. Dyer, 2017). It is also connected to an understanding of safety as a process to produce a secure society for all, regardless of identity, lifestyle, or sexuality (Anderson, 2024). For the radical right however, these very attempts of promoting pluralism are what endangers the safety of children. As expressed by the SD spokesperson in Kalmar: "To let an extreme woke culture get priority over the safety of children and proper upbringing is absurd" (Källén, 2022). According to this radical right logic, to stop DSH is to protect children from gender fluidity and (non-hetero) sexuality (Shenton, 2023), or in other words, the perceived threat of pluralism advocated by authoritative conservatism (Mouffe, 1997). Again, the debates over DSH relate to a discursive struggle that goes beyond what is presently at stake and falls into an antagonistic strife over hegemony concerning the worldview that will ensure the good of present and future society.

Concluding discussion

Before the above-described conflicts started, public libraries had seldom been the target of heated political controversies in Sweden and DSH had for years been a much-appreciated and uncontroversial reading promotion activity hosted by this cultural institution. Encouraging reading "through the glamorous art of drag" (Drag story hour, 2023) and at the same time promoting acceptance and diversity, the event corresponds well with the objectives of Swedish cultural policy and library regulations. As children are especially prioritized in these policies, targeting children has further strengthened DSH's political legitimacy. However, in the current Swedish political landscape where the field of cultural policy increasingly is turned into a zone of conflict and where culture is used as a political object (Harding, 2022; Lindsköld, 2015) this very legitimacy is what has turned the events, and the libraries who host them, into a target in the "culture wars". Drawing on discourse theory and plural agonistics, we argue that the DSH debates, as an expression of these "culture wars", can be understood as a challenge to the previous hegemony regarding the direction and pluralistic goals of Swedish cultural and library policy and the sort of society these policies are set in place to promote.

Deconstructing five instances of heated debates over DSH reveals how two signs are particularly disputed in these discursive struggles. As shown in the analysis, "the reading child" is both a nodal point and a floating signifier, and as such ascribed divergent but paradoxically also clearly intertwined meanings from the opposing parties. This is no coincidence. The focus on children in reading promotion but also in radical right discourse is anchored in wide-spread ideas of children as the future (Dyer, 2017; cf. Edelman, 2004). Analyses of Swedish reading policies from the late 19th century until today clearly show how the role of the reading child is construed as instrumental for the development of the good society (Hedemark and Jonsson, 2021; Lindsköld *et al.*, 2020). Children are perceived not primarily as "beings" but as "becomings" where the benefits of reading are instrumental for purposes that will unfold in the future rather than here and now (Hedemark and Jonsson, 2021). Ideas of children as the builders of a future good society are also clearly present in radical right ideology. What is at stake in the discursive struggles over DSH are different meanings ascribed to the nature of this good society, who it should include and what threatens its realization. For those safeguarding DSH, it is pivotal that children are taught the values of plurality, anti-discrimination, and empathy that the event seeks to promote. This is how the democratic good society will be upheld or realized. For the DSH antagonists, giving children queer role models instead constitutes a threat to a future good society.

An image of the reading child as a "being" entitled to his or her own experiences and enjoying reading for autotelic rather than instrumental reasons is also present in the debates. This view underpins some descriptions of DSH as a reading promotion event where children may encounter deviance from cultural norms in a playful manner. Dyer (2017, p. 293) uses the concept queer to both "classify sexuality" and to "reference deviance from cultural norms". Similarly, drag does not presume that there is a "true" gender identity to imitate, but instead plays with assumptions of gender identities and can thereby be seen as the utilization of art to problematize or question gender and sexuality. A queer childhood thereby allows for play and exploration and events such as DSH can enable children to encounter stories on their own terms (cf. Anderson, 2024; Dyer, 2017). The playful character of these reading promotion events is also what Swedish libraries put forth as a reason for arranging DSH. In contrast, the play with gender identities is perceived as potentially harmful for children by the radical right. Gender fluidity and boundary-crossing are then depicted as threats against family values and drag queens are constructed as the other. The idea that the safety of children is compromised and the adjoining construction of fear of the other is then used to justify political measurements taken to prevent DSH from taking place. This outcome is comparable to controversies over DSH and the book bans discussed in previous research (Anderson, 2024;

Kitzie *et al.*, 2022; Stone, 2019; Tucker, 2023). Equally, different meanings ascribed to safety as a response to fear of radical right hatred and violence is what guides the different reactions from the five libraries.

As shown, opponents and proponents of DSH infuse the antonyms "safety" and "fear" with different meanings in their quest to promote their own conception of the desirable future. But the different sides in the DSH conflict do not promote their views in similar ways. One important difference that should be noted is the fact that promoters of the radical right perspective consciously construct fear through threats and intimidations. This is not the case with their opponents. We argue that it is primarily illegitimate political actions and pressure such as these that prevents the conflicts around DSH from taking on an agonistic form. Constructing extreme and tangible fear results in an antagonistic battle between friend and enemy rather than an agonistic relation between conflicting parties who "recognize the legitimacy of their opponents" (Mouffe, 2005). Moreover, the construction of fear of the other, for example by depicting sexual minorities as enemies of a good society, further promotes antagonism at the expense of agonism. Processes of othering "common enemies" are known to be essential components of collective identity formation among supporters of radical or extreme ideas (Scrivens *et al.*, 2020). While a strong sense of community develops among those who participate in these othering processes, those on the receiving end are de-humanized and constructed as viable targets for hateful speech and actions.

However, while the causes and strategies differ significantly, the DSH promoters' othering of their opponents in this conflict, and the construction of DSH opponents as enemies to the good society are not acts of agonism either. As the growing support for authoritarian populism and authoritarian values is rooted in the increasing polarization, where class-based polarization gradually has shifted towards value-based polarization (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), efforts to mitigate antagonism should be considered. As Mouffe's notion of plural agonism suggests, we need to find ways to approach our opponents as adversaries rather than enemies. In this process, public libraries as publicly funded institutions tasked with promoting democracy have important roles to play in providing arenas for agonistic debates, as pointed out in previous research (Carlsson *et al.*, 2023; Hanell *et al.*, 2023; Rivano Eckerdal, 2018). This is not achieved by avoiding certain library activities, such as DSH, but through continuously offering ideologically informed arguments for choices made and a willingness to host and discuss also potentially controversial phenomena. We recognize that this is a normative stance and not always an easy task to take on in practice. The openness suggested by a radical democratic position must of course be accompanied by strategies and measures to provide security for library staff and users to enable the basic conditions of safety that agonistic practices require, and the involved actors must acknowledge the ethico-political values underpinning institutions of liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2009). This act of balance is a challenging but important part of public libraries' work to promote democracy.

References

Abbas, T. (2019), *Islamophobia and Radicalisation in a Vicious Cycle*, Oxford University Press, New York.

ALA (2023), "Censorship by the numbers", available at: https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers (accessed 3 May 2024).

Anderson, G.C. (2024), "The prevalence of children's programming related to gender identity in North Carolina public libraries, including drag queen story hours or other drag events", *Public Library Quarterly*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print, pp. 1-18, doi: 10.1080/01616846.2024.2302238.

Audunson, R., Aabø, S., Blomgren, R., Hobohm, H.C., Jochumsen, H., Khosrowjerdi, M., Mumenthaler, R., Schuldt, K., Rasmussen, C.H., Rydbeck, K., Tóth, M. and Vårheim, A. (2019), "Public libraries as public sphere institutions A comparative study of perceptions of the public library's role in six European countries", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 75 No. 6, pp. 1396-1415, doi: 10.1108/jd-02-2019-0015.

Balling, G., Ejgod Hansen, L., Hedemark, Å. and Juncker, B. (2022), "Indledning", *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 161-164, doi: 10.18261/nkt.25.3.1.

Barriage, S., Kitzie, V., Floegel, D. and Oltmann, S.M. (2021), "Drag Queen Storytimes: public library staff perceptions and experiences", *Children and Libraries*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 14-22, doi: 10.5860/cal.19.2.14.

Brottsförebyggande rådet (2019), "Hatbrott 2018. Statistik över polisanmälda brott med identifierade hatbrottsmotiv", Rapport 2019, pp. 13.

Buschman, J. (2003), *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy*, Libraries Unlimited, Westport, Connecticut.

Carlsson, H., Hanell, F. and Hansson, J. (2022), "Det känns som att jag bara sitter och väntar på att det ska explodera': politisk påverkan på de kommunala folkbibliotekens verksamhet i sex sydsvenska regioner", *Nordic Journal of Library and Information Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 26-43, doi: 10.7146/njlis.v3i1.131852.

Carlsson, H., Hanell, F. and Engström, L. (2023), "Revisiting the notion of the public library as a meeting place: challenges to the mission of promoting democracy in times of political turmoil", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 79 No. 7, pp. 178-195, doi: 10.1108/JD-03-2023-0061.

Christensen, T. (2023), "Björn Söder (SD) menar Pride legitimerar pedofili – möter kritik från regeringsföreträdare", *SVT Nyheter*, 3 August, available at: https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/bjorn-soder-sd-menar-pride-legitimerar-pedofili-moter-kritik-fran-regeringsforetradare

Clark-Hunt, L.K. and Creel, S. (2023), "Interviews with public librarians on their experiences in cases of censorship", *Public Library Quarterly*, Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 1-23, doi: 10.1080/01616846.2023.2243201.

Crowley, B. (2021), "Progressive librarianship in 'red' America", *New librarianship symposia series: Fall 2021, symposium 1: Post-neutrality librarianship*, available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/newlibrarianshipsymposia/newlibrarianshipsymposia/post-neutrality/10/

Dal Bó, E., Finan, F., Folke, O., Persson, T. and Rickne, J. (2023), "Economic and Social Outsiders but Political Insiders: Sweden's Populist Radical Right", *The Review of Economic Studies*, Vol. 90 No. 2, pp. 675-706, doi: 10.1093/restud/rdac037.

Daniels, J. (2009), *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham.

Davis, A.J. and Kettrey, H.H. (2022), "Clear and omnipresent danger: digital age culture wars and reactions to drag queen story hour across diverse subreddit communities", *Social Currents*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 25-44, doi: 10.1177/23294965211050019.

Del Mar, K. (2021), "Public sphere institutions or safe spaces - can libraries be both?", *New librarianship symposia series: Fall 2021, symposium 1: Post-neutrality librarianship*.

Domellöf-Wik, M. (2022), "Bibliotek tar in väktare inför queer sagostund för barn", *Göteborgs-Posten Plus*, October 28.

Drag story hour (2023), "What is drag story hour?", available at: https://www.dragstoryhour.org/about (accessed 28 January 2024).

Dyer, H. (2017), "Queer futurity and childhood innocence: beyond the injury of development", *Global Studies of Childhood*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 290-302, doi: 10.1177/2043610616671056.

Edelman, L. (2004), *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.

Elgenius, G. and Rydgren, J. (2019), "Frames of nostalgia and belonging: the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden", *European Societies*, Vol. 21 No. 4, pp. 583-602, doi: 10.1080/14616696.2018.1494297.

Ellis, J.R. (2022), "A fairy tale gone wrong: social media, recursive hate and the politicisation of drag queen storytime", *Journal of Criminal Law*, Vol. 86 No. 2, pp. 94-108, doi: 10.1177/00220183221086455.

Erel, U. (2018), "Saving and reproducing the nation: struggles around right-wing politics of social reproduction, gender and race in austerity Europe", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 68, pp. 173-182, doi: 10.1016/j.wsif.2017.11.003.

Faulkner, J. (2010), "The innocence fetish: the commodification and sexualisation of children in the media and popular culture", *Media International Australia*, Vol. 135 No. 135, pp. 106-117, doi: 10.1177/1329878x1013500113.

Fritze, G. (2022), "Sagostund med dragshowartister på biblioteket i Malmö fick övervakas av väktare", *SVT Nyheter Skåne*, October 29.

García López, F., Caridad Sebastian, M. and Morales Garcia, A.M. (2012), "Analysis of the development of multicultural library services in the Spanish public library network (2007-2010)", *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 4, p. 554.

Gaudette, T., Scrivens, R., Davies, G. and Frank, R. (2021), "Upvoting extremism: collective identity formation and the extreme right on Reddit", *New Media and Society*, Vol. 23 No. 12, pp. 3491-3508, doi: 10.1177/1461444820958123.

Grafelman, K. and Barriage, S. (2022), "No finish line: creating inclusiveness in children's programs", *Children and Libraries*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 3-11, doi: 10.5860/cal.20.3.3.

Haider, J. and Sundin, O. (2022), *Paradoxes of Media and Information Literacy: The Crisis of Information*, Routledge, London.

Hajek, K. and Dombrowski, V. (2022), "Contesting the meaning of gender: right-wing populism and gender in Germany", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 95, pp. 1-9, doi: 10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102633.

Hanell, F., Carlsson, H. and Engström, L. (2023), "The public library as a political symbol: a post-political reading of the demise of the consensus-model in Swedish cultural policy", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, pp. 1-15, doi: 10.1080/10286632.2023.2289174.

Harding, T. (2022), "Culture wars? The (re)politicization of Swedish cultural policy", *Cultural Trends*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 115-132, doi: 10.1080/09548963.2021.1971932.

Harris, E.A. and Alter, A. (2022a), "With rising book bans, librarians have come under attack: caustic fights over which books belong on the shelves have put librarians at the center of a bitter and widening culture war", *New York Times*, July 18, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/06/books/book-ban-librarians.html (accessed 28 January 2024).

Harris, E.A. and Alter, A. (2022b), "Book banning efforts surged in 2021. These titles were the most targeted", *The NewYork Times*, April 4, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/books/banned-books-libraries.html (accessed 4 February 2023).

Hedemark, Å. (2020), "Constructing the literate child: an analysis of Swedish literature policy", *Library and Information History*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 73-88, doi: 10.3366/lih.2020.0018.

Hedemark, Å. and Jonsson, E. (2021), "Läsning för framtidens samhällsmedborgare: en studie av dåtidens och nutidens svenska kulturpolitiska debatter om barns läsning", *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 120-138, doi: 10.18261/issn.2000-8325-2021-02-03.

Huttunen, A., Hirvonen, N. and Kähkönen, L. (2020), "Uncomfortable in my own skin – emerging, early-stage identity-related information needs of transgender people", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 76 No. 3, pp. 709-729, doi: 10.1108/JD-09-2019-0193.

Inglehart, R.F. and Norris, P. (2016), "Trump, brexit, and the rise of populism: economic have-nots and cultural backlash", HKS Working Paper No. RWP16-026, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2818659, available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2818659

Johnston, J. and Audunson, R. (2019), "Supporting immigrants' political integration through discussion and debate in public libraries", *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, Vol. 51 No. 1, pp. 228-242, doi: 10.1177/0961000617709056.

Källén, M. (2022), "Så blev sagostund med dragartister en politisk stridsfråga", *Dagens Nyheter*, November 28.

Kann-Rasmussen, N. (2023), "When librarians speak up: justifications for and legitimacy implications of librarians' engagement in social movements", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 79 No. 1, pp. 36-51, doi: 10.1108/JD-02-2022-0042.

Kitzie, V., Floegel, D., Barriage, S. and Oltmann, S.M. (2022), "How visibility, hypervisibility, and invisibility shape library staff and drag performer perceptions of and experiences with drag storytimes in public libraries", *The Library Quarterly*, Vol. 92 No. 3, pp. 215-240, doi: 10.1086/719915.

Knox, E. (2014), "The books will still Be in the library': narrow definitions of censorship in the discourse of challengers", *Library Trends*, Vol. 62 No. 4, pp. 740-749, doi: 10.1353/lib.2014.0020.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985 [2001]), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London.

Larsson, J. (2023), "Ingen sagostund med dragqueens på biblioteket: kan inte ha det på ett säkert sätt", *Smålandsposten*, March 8.

Lindsköld, L. (2015), "Contradicting Cultural Policy: a comparative study of the cultural policy of the Scandinavian radical right", *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 8-26, doi: 10.18261/issn2000-8325-2015-01-02.

Lindsköld, L., Hedemark, Å. and Lundh, A. (2020), "Constructing the desirable reader in Swedish contemporary literature policy", *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 256-274, doi: 10.3384/cu.2000.1525.20200527c.

Mehra, B. and Jaber, B.S. (2023), "'Don't say gay' in Alabama: a taxonomic framework of LGBTQ+ information support services in public libraries—an exploratory website content analysis of critical resistance", *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, Vol. 74 No. 8, pp. 954-970, doi: 10.1002/asi.24768.

Moffitt, B. (2017), "Liberal illiberalism? The reshaping of the contemporary populist radical right in northern Europe", *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 5 No. 4, pp. 112-122, doi: 10.17645/pag.v5i4.996.

Mouffe, C. (1997), "Carl Schmitt and the paradox of liberal democracy", *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 21-33, doi: 10.1017/s0841820900000217.

Mouffe, C. (2005), *On the Political*, Routledge, London.

Mouffe, C. (2009), "Democracy in a multipolar world", *Millennium*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 549-561, doi: 10.1177/0305829809103232 (03058298).

Mounk, Y. (2022), "The danger is real", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 150-154, doi: 10.1353/jod.2022.0053.

Mulinari, D. and Neergaard, A. (2014), "We are Sweden Democrats because we care for others: exploring racisms in the Swedish extreme right", *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 43-56, doi: 10.1177/1350506813510423.

Nilsson, F. (2022a), "Sagostund med dragqueens – då ser SD rött: motbjudande", *Barometern*, 17 October.

Nilsson, Å. (2022b), "Efter sagostundsbråket – SD ser över bibliotekens utgifter", *Dagens Samhälle*, 8 December.

Norris, P. and Inglehart, R. (2019), *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Oltmann, S.M., Kitzie, V. and Barriage, S. (2023), "'For me, it is an intellectual freedom issue': drag storytimes, neutrality, and ALA core values", *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, Vol. 55 No. 3, pp. 734-743, doi: 10.1177/09610006221100853.

Phillips, L. and Jorgensen, M. (2002), *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Sage, London.

Pierson, C.M. (2017), "Barriers to Access and Information for the LGBTQ Community/Obstacles à l'accès et à l'information pour la communauté LGBTQ", *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 245-262.

Polletta, F. and Jasper, J.M. (2001), "Collective identity and social movements", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 283-305, doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.283.

Rakusa-Suszczewski, M. (2021), "Children as an object of the right-wing populist politics and discourse in Poland", *Studia Europejskie*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 67-91, doi: 10.33067/SE.2.2021.4.

Rear, D. and Jones, A. (2013), "Discursive struggle and contested signifiers in the arenas of education policy and work skills in Japan", *Critical Policy Studies*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 375-394, doi: 10.1080/19460171.2013.843469.

Rivano Eckerdal, J. (2018), "Equipped for resistance: an agonistic conceptualization of the public library as a verb", *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, Vol. 69 No. 12, pp. 1405-1413, doi: 10.1002/asi.24069.

Rydgren, J. (2018), "The radical right: an introduction", in Rydgren, J. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Political Right*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 1-14.

Sandin, B. and Halldén, G. (2003), "Barnets bästa: en antologi om barndomens innebörder och välfärdens organisering", Eslöv, B. (Eds) *Östlings bokförl. Symposion*.

Schmincke, I. (2020), "Sexual politics from the right. Attacks on gender, sexual diversity and sex education", in Gabriele, D. and Roth, J. (Eds), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and beyond*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, pp. 59-75.

Scrivens, R., Davies, G. and Frank, R. (2020), "Measuring the evolution of radical right-wing posting behaviors online", *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 216-232, doi: 10.1080/01639625.2018.1556994.

Seale, M. (2016), "Compliant Trust: the public good and democracy in the ALA's 'core values of librarianship'", *Library Trends*, Vol. 64 No. 3, pp. 585-603, doi: 10.1353/lib.2016.0003.

Shenton, J.E. (2023), "#KeepKidsInnocent: what Twitter discourse on drag queens, Disney, and dolly parton teaches us about the intersection of anti-queerness with parenting politics", *Public Anthropologist*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 30-52, doi: 10.1163/25891715-bja10045.

Stone, D.R. (2019), "Drag queen storytimes", *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 65-78, doi: 10.5860/jifp.v4i2.7195.

Sverigedemokraterna (2019), "Principprogram", available at: https://sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-principprogram-2019.pdf

Sverigedemokraterna (2022), "Valmanifest", available at: https://sd.se/sverigedemokraternas-valmanifest-2022/

SVT Nyheter (2022), "SD-politikern: Armlängds avstånd gäller inte för 'direkt perversa material'", November 24, available at: https://www.svt.se/kultur/sd-politikern-armlangds-avstand-galler-inte-for-direkt-perversa-material

Thompson, J.D. (2018), "The country of Sexualised children: whiteness, innocence, and the 'sexualisation of childhood'", *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 285-296, doi: 10.1080/14443058.2018.1485724.

Thorén, M. (2022), "Drag Queen Story Hour stormades av 'extremt aggressive män'", *QX*, 15 June.

Thulin, L. (2023), "Rusning. Biblioteket sätter in extra sagostund med 'Drag story hour'", *Trelleborgs Allehanda*, 19 January.

Trelleborgs kommun (2021), "KFN Dnr 2021/171", *Protokoll Kultur- och fritidsnämnden*.

Tucker, T. (2023), "Dangerous reading: how socially constructed narratives of childhood shape perspectives on book banning", *Public Library Quarterly*, Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 135-149, doi: 10.1080/01616846.2023.2232289.

Usherwood, B. and Usherwood, M. (2021), "Culture wars, libraries and the BBC", *Library Management*, Vol. 42 Nos 4/5, pp. 291-301, doi: 10.1108/lm-12-2020-0175.

Wagner, T.L. and Crowley, A. (2020), "Why are bathrooms inclusive if the stacks exclude? : systemic exclusion of trans and gender nonconforming persons in post-trump academic librarianship", *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 159-181, doi: 10.1108/RSR-10-2019-0072.

Waller, R., Hodge, S., Holford, J., Milana, M. and Webb, S. (2017), "Political populism and adult education", *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 36 No. 4, pp. 383-386, doi: 10.1080/02601370.2017.1343346.

Widdersheim, M.M. and Koizumi, M. (2016), "Conceptual modelling of the public sphere in public libraries", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 72 No. 3, pp. 591-610, doi: 10.1108/JD-06-2015-0079.

Wodak, R. (2015), *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, SAGE Publications, doi: 10.4135/9781446270073.

About the authors

Lisa Engström is Senior Lecturer in Library and Information Studies at Lund University, Sweden. Her research interests stretch from library studies to medical humanities, with a particular focus on public libraries, democracy and critical library studies. Lisa Engström is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: lisa.engstrom@kultur.lu.se

Hanna Carlsson is Associate Professor in Library and Information Science at Linnaeus University, Sweden. Her research interests include cultural and library policy, democratic governance and public library development.

Fredrik Hanell is Senior Lecturer in Library and Information Science at Linnaeus University, Sweden. His research focuses on public libraries as actors in a democratic society, media and information literacy in digital settings and digital methods.