Original Articles

The legitimacy of Scandinavian libraries, archives and museums as public spheres: Views from the professionals

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Abstract

This article analyses how library, archive and museum professionals legitimize the use of scarce societal resources for maintaining their respective organizations, with a special emphasis on their role as public-sphere infrastructure. Drawing on data from a survey among professionals in libraries, archives and museums in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the authors investigate whether professionals across these institutions have similar expectations of their organizations to serve as public spheres. The analysis is contextualized with references to current library, archive and museum legislation across the three countries. The authors conclude that there are many similarities across the three countries, although national library, archive and museum legislation differs. This is interpreted in light of new public governance being a dominant regime of governance.

Keywords

Public libraries, library and information science as a profession, society, culture, development, archives and records centres, western Europe

Introduction

Over the past few years, many have argued that libraries, archives and museums (LAMs) are converging due to changes in technology, policy or practice (Audunson et al., 2020a, 2020b; Henningsen and Larsen, 2020; Hvenegaard Rasmussen, 2019; Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Hjørland, 2021; Hvenegaard Rasmussen et al., 2023; Hylland, 2014, 2019; Marty, 2014; Robinson, 2019; Vårheim et al., 2020). Previous research also shows that this process has affected public librarians' perception of their professional role and the role of the public library in several European countries (Johnston et al. 2022). As memory institutions (Dempsey, 1999) and public-sphere infrastructure (Audunson et al., 2020b; Larsen, 2018), LAMs play important roles as community facilitators. However, due to the changing social and technological

landscape surrounding these institutions (Johnston et al., 2023; Larsen et al., 2023; Valtysson et al., 2023), how professionals working within these sectors view the legitimacy of the library, the archive or the museum might be changing. Consequently, we asked professionals employed in LAMs in Scandinavia to rank the importance of their institution in relation to central aspects of the social missions of publicly funded LAMs. We have chosen to focus specifically on how they evaluated the contribution of their institution to the public sphere, as this has emerged as a particularly important aspect of the

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social mission of LAMs over the last few years (Audunson et al., 2020a, 2020b). With this article, we seek to answer the following question: How do professionals in LAMs across Scandinavia evaluate the importance of their organizations' contribution to their community and a sustainable public sphere?

LAMs as public spheres

In recent years, library and information science scholars have set out to theorize LAMs as public spheres (Audunson et al., 2019; Larsen, 2018), as well as study them empirically (Audunson et al., 2020b). However, questions have been raised as to whether this has been successful, as there has been more theoretical than empirical work on the relationship between libraries and democracy (Jaeger et al., 2013), and case studies of museums and the public sphere have provided limited analytical or theoretical generalizations (Vårheim and Skare, 2021). With the research project 'Archives, Libraries, Museums, Digitalization, and the Public Sphere', researchers from a number of European countries set out to investigate empirically the function of public libraries, archival organizations and museums as democratic public spheres – that is, they investigated how such organizations could be said to underpin, be part of and develop sustainable public spheres within local and national settings.[1] This was investigated through a number of quantitative and qualitative studies. As part of this investigation, a survey was distributed to professionals within such organizations in the countries participating in the project.[2] From this investigation, we have chosen to scrutinize the results from questions related to the organizations' contribution to community-building and the facilitation of public discussions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. We find it particularly interesting to investigate such questions in these countries as LAMs in the three countries are regulated in quite similar ways, and seen as part of cultural policies within a Nordic model (Duelund, 2003; Engelstad et al., 2017; Larsen, 2018; Mangset et al., 2008). Still, there are variations in how the three institutions are regulated by law in each country (Rydbeck and Johnston, 2020), making for interesting comparisons.

Data and methods

The survey was distributed among professionals working in LAMs in Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 2018. The target group for the survey was employees working in public libraries, archives and museums who carried out professional duties. The employees were reached via the leaders of main libraries and particular

Table 1. Number of respondents.

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Librarians	817	332	782
Archivists	69	135	173
Museum professionals	229	138	193

archives and museums. Table 1 shows the number of respondents from the three types of institution in the three countries.

The strategy when recruiting the respondents was to distribute the survey as widely as possible within the three sectors in the three countries. As such, this is not a randomized sample from the target population, but instead a sizeable portion of the professionals staffing the organizations within the three sectors. Consequently, the numbers should be interpreted as indicators rather than representing the population of LAM professionals. From the results, we have chosen to focus on elements of relevance to LAMs as community facilitators and public-sphere infrastructure.

In the sample, librarians were defined as all employees in public libraries with a diploma in librarianship or any employee with a professional responsibility for developing and mediating library services for the public. Archivists were defined as directors of archives or employees within archives with a responsibility for archival appraisal, archival and historical outreach programmes, collection management, the curation of exhibitions, mediation, and archival pedagogy and/or research. Museum professionals were defined as leaders of museums or employees with a responsibility for collection management, the curation of exhibitions, mediation, and museum pedagogy and/or research (Audunson, Hobohm and Tóth, 2020: 166–167).

Results

Table 2 shows the results from a question concerning how the professionals in the three sectors evaluated whether the public library, archive or museum should serve as an arena for public debate. This dimension was one of several dimensions under the following, more general, question: How do you as a library/archive/museum professional evaluate these different dimensions of the role the library/archive/museum has in your community? (for the presentation of more results from this question, see Audunson, Hobohm and Tóth, 2020).

As we can see from Table 2, there was a strong consensus among the professionals in the three countries that the public library should serve as an arena

Table 2. Mean scores, on a scale from 0 to 10, in response to the question: How do you as a library/archive/museum professional evaluate these different dimensions of the role the library/archive/museum has in your community?

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Public library (N)	564	330	773
Should serve as an arena for public debate (M)	7.3	7.3	7.3
Archive (N)	61	135	169
Should serve as an arena for public debate (M)	5.9	8.0	5.3
Museum (N)	151	135	187
Should serve as an arena for public debate (M)	6.9	7.8	6.8

for public debate. For libraries, this can be related to recent changes in library laws, where the latest version (2014) of the Norwegian Law on Public Libraries (1985) states that 'public libraries should be an independent meeting space and arena for public conversation and debate' (Section 1, Paragraph 2), and the latest version of the Swedish Law on Libraries (2013) states that libraries 'must work for the development of a democratic society by contributing to the dissemination of knowledge and free formation of opinions' (Paragraph 2). The Danish Law on Public Libraries (2013) does not have specific statements about the contribution of libraries to the public sphere or democracy, but states that libraries should promote information, education and cultural activity by making various materials available. It further states that the library should be impartial, thus pointing to its contribution to democracy (Rydbeck and Johnston, 2020: 27).

As for archives, there is a strong emphasis on their contribution to serving as arenas for public debate in Norway (even higher than for libraries), while it is not viewed as very important by professionals in Danish (5.9) and Swedish (5.3) archives. The Norwegian Law on Archives (1992) does not state anything about the contribution of archives to democracy, the public sphere or citizens. And neither the Danish Law on Archives (2016) nor the Swedish Law on Archives (1990) states any obligation to contribute to the public sphere or democracy. The latter two laws nevertheless state (among other objectives) that archives should ensure preservation, make archives available for citizens and guide citizens in how to access records. However, a proposal for a new Swedish law on archives was presented in a governmental report in 2019, suggesting that the task of this new archives law should be to 'contribute to the existence

and development of a democratic society' (SOU 2019, 41, Paragraph 1). The report has not yet resulted in a bill to parliament.

Even for museums, there is a stronger emphasis on their role as arenas for public debate among professionals in Norway (7.8) than in the other countries. Sweden got its first museum law in 2017, and it emphasizes the importance for museums to promote the free formation of opinion – similar to the new Swedish library law (Swedish Law on Museums 2017, Paragraph 4). In Denmark, the museum legislation does not mention the public sphere or democracy, other than a formulation on the 'general enlightening activity' of museums (Danish Law on Museums, 2014). Norway does not have a law for museums and, as already mentioned, the Norwegian Law on Archives (1992) does not state anything about the contribution of archives to the public sphere. That the Norwegian archival and museum professionals still view it as important to serve as an arena for public debate can be viewed as an instance of mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), in that archival and museum professionals mirror recent developments within the library sector. Also, as of 2004, the Norwegian constitution (1814) states that '[t]he authorities of the state shall create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse' (Article 100), which might have contributed to the professionals perceiving it to be important to serve as an arena for public debate. Furthermore, this revision of Article 100 on freedom of expression was an inspiration for a reformulation of the mission statement of the Norwegian Law on Public Libraries being in effect since 2014.

In Sweden, there is also an element of isomorphism in that the museum law and the proposed new archival law mirror the law on libraries. Still, the professionals did not view serving as an arena for public debate to be as important as their colleagues did in Norway. Nevertheless, serving democracy through providing access to public records and promoting freedom of information is an integral part of the archival profession.

Table 3 contains the results from a question about how public libraries or museums can contribute to building a sustainable public sphere (for more results, see Audunson, Hobohm and Tóth, 2020). The data does not contain the same information for archives.

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 3, the professionals in public libraries and museums in all three countries rated the provision of knowledge to citizens and serving as arenas for physical meetings and discussions as important, while the provision of digital platforms for discussions was

Table 3. Mean scores, on a scale from 0 to 10, in response to the question: Can public libraries/museums contribute to building a sustainable public sphere?

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Public libraries (N)	564	330	767
Provide knowledge people need to make informed choices (M)	9.0	8.8	8.8
Serve as arenas for physical meetings and discussions (M)	7.6	8.4	7.8
Provide digital platforms for discussions (M)	6.0	5.8	5.9
Museums (N)	141	138	185
Provide access to knowledge people need to make informed choices via exhibitions (M)	8.2	9.2	7.8
Provide arenas for physical meetings and discussions (M)	7.3	9.0	7.9
Provide digital platforms for discussions (M)	5.5	7.8	6.5

rated as less important. The contribution of public libraries and museums to a digital public sphere will take a different form than simply providing a digital platform for citizens to interact (although some libraries and museums emphasized this during COVID-19 lockdowns). Through their missions of providing knowledge to citizens, public libraries and museums can nevertheless contribute to citizens making informed choices, which is most certainly a way to contribute to the public sphere in a digital age, regardless of whether the information is accessed in analogue or digital formats.

Discussion

The survey results show that the professionals in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish LAMs all thought that it was important that their institution contributed to the public sphere by providing information to citizens. Providing access to information and culture is at the centre of the traditional legitimacy of LAMs. However, the results show that the professionals also considered it important to host public meetings and thereby serve as an arena for public debate. Comparing the three sectors, librarians and museum professionals rated this aspect of the institutions' social mission to be more important than archivists did. This echoes the scholarly literature, where there are more discussions of libraries (Audunson et al., 2019) and museums (Barrett, 2012; Vårheim and Skare, 2021) as public-sphere institutions than archives. Professionals in both public libraries and museums considered it to

be of high importance to provide information to people so they can make informed choices. They also found it to be important to provide arenas where people can engage in discussions within the physical locales of specific libraries or museums. To provide such a space on digital platforms was considered less important.

In order to explain why the professionals in public libraries, archives and museums across the three countries agreed that their institutions should serve as arenas for public debate, even though the national legislation does not explicate it, we must look at how the professionals viewed this as part of the legitimacy of the institution, where legitimacy is defined as a 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' (Suchman, 1995: 574).

We view dominating rationales of governance as a 'socially constructed system of norms and values' that influence the perception of legitimate LAMs. For many years, the dominating governance regime in the western world has been new public management, the rationale of which is that public institutions can be governed more efficiently if they are treated as private companies. Consequently, performance indicators are set for public-sector organizations. For LAMs, important performance indicators have been visitor numbers and lending figures. In terms of legitimacy, new public management has meant that to appear legitimate as a public-sector institution, LAMs have been met with an imperative to demonstrate a high level of use.

In the Nordic countries, a movement from the new public management paradigm to a paradigm of new public governance is underway (Jensen and Krogstrup, 2017; Kann-Rasmussen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen, 2020; Osborne, 2006; Torfing and Triantafillou, 2013), which means that LAMs are facing an emerging set of values alongside the values of new public management. A difference between new public management and new public governance is that the administrative level (such as the Ministry of Culture or local administration) plays a more facilitating role under new public governance, as opposed to more rule-setting or monitoring roles under new public management. Consequently, public organizations (such as public libraries and museums) must behave more autonomously, and take more responsibility for goal-setting (Andersen and Pors, 2016). Under a new public governance regime, outputs (performance) are no longer the most important factor in legitimation. Rather, new public governance takes its point of departure in the imperative to solve the so-called

'wicked problems' of the public sector by trying to mobilize the knowledge, resources and energy of all relevant and concerned parties in the effort to create innovative solutions to urgent problems and challenges (Bommert, 2010; Torfing and Triantafillou, 2013). Where new public management is based on economics, new public governance is more network-oriented.

Fake news (Kalsnes, 2019) and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) are 'wicked problems' that give LAMs a new possibility to display social responsibility and use their high levels of trust among the population to help underpin a sustainable public sphere (Larsen and Solheim, 2020). Following Suchman's (1995) definition of legitimacy, contributing to building a sustainable public sphere, not only by providing access to information but also by serving as an arena for public debate, is a desirable, proper and appropriate path to follow for Nordic LAMs. The new public governance regime can explain why the library and museum professionals across the three countries found that their institutions should serve as an arena for public debate, despite the fact that only the Swedish and Norwegian library legislation mentions this function.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed how professionals in LAMs in Denmark, Norway and Sweden perceived their organizations' contribution to the public sphere, and how this was reflected in the perception of their own professional role. The results show that the ongoing convergence between the library, archival and museum sectors has also resulted in the professionals defining the legitimacy of their organizations in a fairly similar way. According to the professionals in all three countries, LAMs form an important part of the public sphere. By arranging public meetings in which citizens can take part, they are important as independent arenas for free and public debate – one of the foundations of a democratic society. Particularly, the library and museum professionals emphasized this as an important part of the role of public libraries and museums in the community.

The response patterns can only be partly explained by the existing legislation in the three countries defining the societal missions of LAMs. Generally speaking, the newer the legislation, the more emphasis is placed on the task of supporting and developing democracy. This can, in turn, be explained by the current change from a new public management regime based on economics to a network-linked new public governance regime with the aim of solving 'wicked problems', such as the dissolving of public spheres due to increased polarization (Fukuyama, 2018; Hochschild, 2016), fake news (Kalsnes, 2019), echo chambers (Sunstein, 2018) and digitally created filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011).

We argue that the implicit values and expectations of the new public governance regime, regarding taking responsibility for and acting according to society's requirements, have already been internalized among LAM professionals before they have been ratified in legislation – as illustrated by the proposal for a new Swedish archives law (SOU 2019:58, 41). The need for a sustainable public sphere is a 'wicked problem' whose solution is aligned with the traditional values of LAMs and Nordic cultural policy in general. At the same time, it also gives LAMs a possibility to demonstrate their social relevance in new ways that give them legitimacy in the regime of new public governance.

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Notes

1. The project was funded by the Research Council of Norway between 2016 and 2019. Since the project officially ended, the participants have produced a number of articles based on the data collected.
2. In addition to Denmark, Norway and Sweden, researchers from Germany and Hungary took part in the project and distributed a similar survey among the professionals in their countries.

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