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Book review:

Libraries, archives and museums as democratic spaces in a digital age

Libraries, archives and museums as democratic spaces in a digital age. (2020). Edited by Ragnar Audunson, Herbjørn Andresen, Cicilie Fagerlid, Erik Henningsen, Hans-Christoph Hobohm, Henrik Jochumsen, Håkon Larsen and Tonje Vold. De Gruyter Saur, Munich, Germany. ISBN: 9783110629545

This anthology presents results from the research project ALMPUB ('The ALM-Field, Digitalization and the Public Sphere'), with participants based in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Hungary. The international perspective is well reflected in the anthology, where some chapters additionally cover Poland, Switzerland, Iceland, Czechia, and Slovakia. It presents as its main question: are libraries, museums and archives functioning as "democratic public spaces" in the contemporary digital age?

How are these aims met in the anthology? After the editors' introduction, there are 16 chapters on specific topics, divided into three main categories: (national) policies, professionals, and users. Despite the international and comparative departure, there is a certain weight on Norway – of the 16 chapters, ten are single-country studies where nine use Norwegian examples, while six chapters consist in cross-country comparisons. Four of the latter are based on surveys sent out to professionals or users.

As often the case with anthologies, the contents are rather heterogeneous. Among the authors, most belong to library and information science. The anthology can be said both to reflect an 'L' perspective on the LAM (libraries, archives, and museums) field, as well as the full width of the LIS field, both concerning study topics as well as regarding theory and methods. Some chapters are more 'social

science' oriented, stressing methodological rigour, and some are rather to be placed in the 'humanities' field with a more interpretative and holistic approach.

There is also a discrepancy between the theoretical perspectives presented in the introductory chapter, which discuss Jürgen Habermas's perspectives on the public sphere, Richard Sennett's theories on cultures of civility (forming behaviour and social skills in interacting on LAM institutions), and Roy Oldenburg's perspectives on community making where LAM institutions are important examples of places outside both of homes and workplaces that he labelled third spaces. Most chapters do not follow up on these perspectives, rather leaning on the authors' own theoretical positions – which is fully normal for this kind of publication. However, even though there are many theoretical perspectives – there is a general lack of 'grand theories' aiming at interpreting society as a whole.

In the first part, national policies are covered in six chapters. The first one is a comparison of LAM legislation and overall statistics in eight countries. The findings of similarities and differences in the specific laws on museums, libraries and archives are interesting, but it can be suspected that some of the interpretations would be different if *all* relevant legislation had been used. For example, in many countries the regulations of openness, secrecy or privacy in archives are to be found in other laws than the specific one on archives, which makes the point that the Hungarian archival law includes these topics a bit weaker.

Three chapters are case studies of digitalisation policies in Norway and Sweden during the last decades. There is a general critical edge that is welcome – challenging the dominating view on digital transformation as something that in itself has positive effects on society. In one of the chapters, Henningsen and Larsen aim at revealing a 'digitalisation imperative' in Norwegian governmental documents and inquiries which sacralises the digital as something on forehand good and progressive. The approach is fruitful and complements earlier similar studies (e.g., Swedish scholar Nina Wormbs who uncovered a 'digital imperative' in Sweden.) In the following chapter, similar views on the digital are shown to be in effect in Sweden: further digitalisation is associated with democracy and participation. A certain rift between policy aims and implementations is also evident.

After a chapter which shows that the four Visegrad countries in Central Europe have not had any common strategy vis-à-vis digitisation policies, the section on policies ends with a chapter on the Norwegian government policy to merge the library, archives, and museum sectors through the government agency *ABM-utvikling* from 2003 to 2010. The project was based on the argument that digitalisation would bring archives, libraries, and museums closer to each other, since differences between records, publications and artifacts were deemed to be vanishing in digital contexts. All the same, apart from the fact that the existing L, A and M institutions had their own traditions and practices that were difficult to bridge, other more conceptual differences between archives, libraries and museums proved to be something more than remnants from the analogue age. This chapter is a welcome addition to the necessary problematisation of the relations between the L, A and M fields.

The next section, on professionals, is internally rather disparate. There are two individual studies; one of them can be characterised as a philosophical essay on the versatility (*allsidighet*) concept in the Norwegian library tradition, and the other is an in-depth analysis of likes and comments on the Facebook pages of some Tromsø libraries and museums, the results implicating that users seem to interact the most with nice pictures and videos with familiar content. The other two are analyses of surveys to professionals in different countries, that show certain examples of differences in general attitudes, such as that Swedish archivists seem to be the ones most hailing ideals of neutrality and (here with a rather peculiar comment from the authors that this is surprising due to 'the impact of

identity politics in Sweden') and that Danish museum professionals are having the most positive attitudes to national identity.

The chapters in the last section, on users, are also covering quite varying themes. It is introduced by another chapter based on an international survey, this time on users that were asked of the frequency to visit LAM institutions either physically or online. The results underline that the relative amounts of digital visits increase when such infrastructures are more developed. The following chapter is also based on surveys, this time on library users who were asked for their views on the role of libraries for democracy and other values. It shows that users tend to generally hold the democratic aspect of libraries in high regard, perhaps not surprising given the long tradition in national politics to hail the inherent democratism of libraries.

After that follow two ethnographic studies on a micro-level, based on observations at two Norwegian libraries respectively. The chapters reveal aspects of democracy on a practice level, the first focussing on learning processes in different ages as a form of citizen education. Next in line is one of the most non-typical chapters, which focus on the Sami population of Norway. For some reason it deals not with contemporary contexts, but instead with events around the year 1900 and the role of libraries in the struggles between Norwegian assimilation politics and Sami resistance.

The anthology ends with another case study, this time on a wiki project in the Norwegian local history movement. This grassroots project is presented as a stream of light in an otherwise bleak landscape of digital infrastructures dominated by powers that are or may be threats to democracy, not least the large mass surveillance dinosaurs such as Facebook, Google, and different governments. In the wiki projects, the authors claim (as others before), people freely work on collecting and storing information, driven by joy and flow.

Anthologies are generally difficult to appraise due to their general heterogeneousness, and this one is no exception. Still, there are some general topics that may be commented upon. The LAM perspective as such, is one of them. The centre of gravity lies well into the 'L' field, and I myself – being most at home within the 'A' area – can sometimes feel that archives are predominantly treated as more similar with libraries and museums than what they really are. In the book, archives are with few exceptions equated with archival institutions – places that store archives that already have passed into a historical phase. Archivists as a professional group are also treated as those that work at such institutions, for example in the survey-based chapters. Even if it had been more explicitly discussed in the anthology that it excludes records or document management within organisations – a task that many if not the most archivists work with in some of the countries included (such as Sweden and Norway; in other countries, such as Germany, 'archivists' and 'records managers' have been different professions) – it is still problematic to create boundaries between archivists working with 'old' archives and those working with 'becoming' archives. Many do both at the same time. And for those working in archival units in for example government agencies or large municipal housing companies, the anthology's preconception that archives just as libraries and museums constitute "local meeting places" (p. 6) would probably seem a little odd.

Concerning the digitalisation theme, the anthology is fairly well-balanced. The tendencies in the LAM field a number of years ago, where a general optimism corresponding to the 'digitalisation imperative' was well spread, are not all dominating here – rather the opposite. Occasionally, the authors aim at developing a metaperspective on the tendencies (over many decades) to regard the digital as either good or bad, either as a road to paradise or as the mass surveillance apocalypse. However, the scope of the anthology is an example of the still thriving tendency to regard 'the digital' as a demarcated field of study in various ways. To some extent, stressing differences between the analogue and the

digital in LAM practises and in society at large, may partly add fuel to normative conceptions of the digital as something that has inherent values.

Concerning the other cornerstone of the anthology – democratic or public spaces – the contributions give different perspectives, both on a national policy level and on a small-scale level within institutions. First of all, the ambition not to regard libraries (or archives and museums) as automatically linked to democracy is of course welcome. That perspective – dominating in the political legitimisation of the sector for a century or so – has also occurred within the LAM academic fields, as well as in similar fields such as education or civil society studies. The editors stress that it has not been empirically proven that there is a link between libraries and democracy. It is no surprise that this anthology does not prove any such link either – the opposite would have been surprising.

The initial question, “how do these institutions function as public spaces in the digitalized society”, is answered throughout the chapters in various ways, but perhaps not on a more general level. For that to be (at least partly) accomplished, I suspect that it would have been necessary to more thoroughly discuss LAM institutions as parts of societies as a whole, and at least more consistently relate to overall social, economic, political and cultural structures of our age. Typically, when authors relate to theorists with these ‘total’ perspectives on society, they still use them for discussions on the somewhat limited sphere of LAM institutions. For example, Marxist theorist Nancy Fraser is quoted on a couple of occasions for her emphasis that marginalised should be welcomed and included in the public sphere, but only at the level of making room for the marginalised within LAM institutions. Such inclusions may have little or no effect on the relations between the powerful and the marginalised in society as a whole – on the contrary some would probably argue that it would function as rather the opposite: a hegemonic instrument of including the marginalised in ‘safe’ fields such as the cultural sphere, while keeping the social and economic divides in the rest of society.

Nevertheless, the anthology is still a welcome addition to the scholarly discussions on the contemporary LAM institutions, not least thanks to its comparative international framework. The somewhat ambitious aims presented by the main editors are not quite followed throughout the various chapters, but that is not to be expected in the present form. However, there are many (although limited) empirical results and points of departure for future studies, both concerning digitalisation and the LAM institutions’ relations to democracy.