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A Research Program for Studying LAMs and Community in the Digital Age

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Introduction

Comprehensive social changes expose the community to vulnerabilities. Examples of these social changes include the aging of the population, immigration, and technological change, for example, digitization. These are examples of social changes wherein which community resilience can make a difference in outcomes for the well-being of community inhabitants (Wilson, 2014). Other social changes include the neoliberal ideas and reform agendas that for more than 40 years have changed public policies, deregulated economies, and have impacted the welfare and security of people for better and worse on a global scale (Evans & Sewell, 2013). Environmental changes and the centralization of technology and digital documents in “server farms” increase the vulnerability of communities. This is the reality faced by communities and LAM institutions.

This is a matter, on the one hand, of the vulnerability of communities, and on the other hand, of the vulnerabilities of LAM institutions. Technological change, changing demographics, the economy, and public policies change the institutions and their organizational fields. LAM institutions need to be attentive and persevere to be relevant in the communities (Jaeger, Langa, McClure & Bertot, 2006; Veil & Bishop, 2014; Vårheim, 2015, 2017), and they have been described as community anchor institutions and even community catalysts challenged to transform how they collaborate with their communities (IMLS, 2015, 2017, 2018). Facing multiple change processes that affect LAM institutions and communities, the institutions need to prove their resilience regarding digitization, and the need to develop both their community anchor properties and community catalyst skills to help maintain community resilience.

LAMs’ role as public sphere institutions closely connects to their community footprint. This is one main idea of the research program of the ALMPUB-trg, which is introduced in this contribution. A focus on disaster recovery is prevalent within the community resilience literature—also the resilience literature on libraries (Vårheim, 2017). Together with community resilience, resilience concepts about information and culture have been developed directly referring to the role of LAM institutions and also relates to the everyday activities of the institutions (Vårheim, 2016). LAMs’ role as public sphere institutions closely connects to their community footprint. This is one main idea of the research program of the ALMPUB-trg research group, which is introduced in

this contribution. In this short paper, we briefly position the ALMPUB-trg research track within the research area and the multidisciplinary literature of our members.

By doing so, we illustrate some of the heterogeneous ways that scholars in different parts of the world, concerned with different types of ALM institutions, grapple with changes to these institutions precipitated by digitization-related social changes. The paper ends with suggesting starting points for studies benefiting from a resilience framework.

About ALMPUB-trg

Digitization of documents means change for document institutions. ALMPUB-trg, “Archive, Library, and Museum institutions, digitization, and the public sphere—Tromsø research group,” is a research group studying the impact of digitization processes on ALM institutions and their communities.

ALMPUB-trg focuses on how libraries, museums, archives, and Sami documentation centers develop and implement new strategies, priorities, models of cooperation, working methods, and activities challenged by digitization and digitization processes influencing their work and the daily lives of users. The emphasis of research is dual: We study how LAM institutions use and develop digital technology in their mediation work, and how the institutions contribute to community development in the digital age.

ALMPUB-trg is a research group originating from the international research project “The ALM-field, digitalization and the public sphere” (ALMPUB) in which the ALMPUB project group at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) and ALMPUB-trg make up the core group (ALMPUB, 2018). The ALMPUB project is led by Ragnar Audunson, OsloMet, and funded by the Research Council of Norway through the KULMEDIA program—Research programme on the culture and media sector (RCN, 2018). The project includes partner institutions and researchers from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The ALMPUB project started in October 2016 and runs through 2019; ALMPUB-trg is in full operation from 2018 and is to date funded through 2020.

Research Aims

As already stated, describing the change in LAM activities and policies are two of the main aims of ALMPUB–trg. Additionally, the change processes themselves are studied: how do activities, practices, strategies, policies, and institutions develop? Do the processes vary between ALM institutions and between national cultural-policy regimes? For explaining outcomes and change processes, a menu of different institutional theoretical approaches constitute fruitful starting points. Relevant theoretical perspectives will be discussed and developed in future research from the group.

LAMs in the Digital Age: Community Focus

In a recent analysis of public policies relating to whether or not individuals experiencing homelessness may or may not sleep in the Edmonton Public Library in Alberta, Canada, political scientists Lisa M. Freeman and Nick Blomley (2018) review the research literature on the public library as a “community-led” institution (p. 12). They conclude that: “the library has moved away from being a building with resources, to the building itself and the librarians becoming *the* resources” (p. 8, emphasis in original). They critically discuss this community-led approach to librarianship, which originally developed in the United Kingdom, but has since become widely adopted in North America. The premise of this approach is that to “demonstrate the on-going relevance of the public library” (p. 4), librarians need to allow themselves to be led by community needs and aspirations. They point out, however, that this open approach reaches its limits in the context of the surge of individuals experiencing homelessness in North American cities, who often seek in public libraries spaces to sleep during daytime hours. The desires of individuals experiencing homelessness for safe, warm spaces in which to sleep throughout the day conflict with middle-class aspirations focused on education and uplift.

In any case, in the context of the ALMPUB-trg research program, we find interesting Freeman and Blomley’s discussion of the different modalities that community-led librarianship takes. Their review of the literature reveals that although

public libraries have always been considered to be a public space (Krpic, 2007; Leckie, 2004; Leckie and Hopkins, 2002; May & Black, 2010; Pyati and Kamal, 2012), the way in which this publicness is enacted is altering.

As the need for collections decrease, and digital uses increase (Brewster, 2014; Krpic, 2007; May, 2011), ‘[t]he physical space of the library represents something more than a building in which services are housed’ (Brewster, 2014: 95), being redefined as a therapeutic space for those with mental illnesses (Brewster, 2014), a day centre for homeless individuals (Hodgetts et al., 2008), a meeting place (Audunson, 2005) and an inclusive public space (Brewster, 2014; Gehner, 2010; Gieskes, 2009; Irwin, 2012). The publicness of the library becomes focused on how multiple publics (from families to homeless individuals, to teenagers) use and access its physical space. (p. 7)

This discussion intrigues because it suggests that in the context of the digitization of documents, public libraries as concrete physical spaces have become less focused on circulating and providing access to documents or information, and more focused on managing contested claims to that public space, or, as Freeman and Blomley call it, public property. This suggests, in turn, that our attention should focus, at least in part, on the public library building as a type of public document itself, through which the divisions of urban society are inscribed in the form of public policies that favor some groups over others.

Simultaneous with this shift, other public librarians have realized that the roles of librarians in circulating and providing access to information are no longer restricted to the physical space of the library, which in any case is now being used for heterogeneous non-informational functions, such as sleep, or physical fitness (Lenstra, 2018). For instance, in 2007, in an interview the former Boulder, CO, library director, speaking about libraries as trust-building institutions, said that “the library’s mission was always to find the information people needed to lead better lives. But as the years went by, how you did that changed” (Vårheim, Steinmo & Ide, 2008, p. 878). In part, that role has changed when librarians leave the library behind and go out into their communities to offer pop-up services through Library Bikes, tents at farmer’s markets, and more.

The statement from 2007 also illustrates the informational role of libraries—helping people with useful information or even skills to better their lives. We could argue that this information perspective ultimately means that the physical presence of a library building or a library space is not required for information services. The library director focused upon outreach and community embeddedness in the form of librarians physically going into communities and people’s homes to “help people.”

Digitization, in many ways, seems to have been an eye-opener regarding the uses of the physical library space and of the possible uses of the public space that public libraries provide. The public space perspective literally places libraries in their spatial communities. Phrases as “the living room of the community” are not taken entirely out of thin air. The public space perspective, however, does not seem to cover that libraries also extend their space outside the physical buildings into the communities by, for example, coordinating and creating community cultural/learning/leisurely activities and events, and by bookmobiles moving the library space into the areas where people live. The question then becomes: Are public libraries, as physical buildings, merely the launching pad from which public librarians go out into their communities? Stated another way: What is the relationship between the public library as an actual physical space and public librarianship as a practice that expands over the entire service area covered by the district that funds that particular library service? If we are arguing that the public library encapsulates the entire community, then maybe we need to radically rethink how we study public libraries. Rather than spend time studying what people do in the physical space of public libraries, as Aabø, Audunson and Vårheim (2010, 2012) and others have done, we should instead focus our gaze on how public librarians add value to communities outside of the physical walls of their buildings, including in virtual spaces. This tension between the physical space of the library and the outreach or community engagement activities of librarians, and in particular how it informs how we study public librarianship, needs to be better discussed and thought about within the research literature.

The space or place perspective’s strong emphasis on the physical library building itself fails to acknowledge that the community itself is a place that the library place is part of. The library as place concept of Freeman and Blomley (2018) seems to lack the dimension of making the community a place for librarians. Thus, the innovative character of the interpretation of libraries as space in a property theoretic perspective (Freeman & Blomley, 2018), where public libraries are a commons that can be used by anyone for almost anything, can be questioned. The property theoretic perspective defines the library as a commons for rational discussion and knowledge acquisition as in Habermas’ public sphere, a commons for creative activities as makerspaces and music studios, and a place for social services for outsider groups as the homeless. This is not breaking news about what public libraries have been doing for many years. However, the research literature on the non-informational role of public libraries is scarce, and more research

analysis is needed. Too much of the public library literature pre-supposes that the function of public libraries relates to information, which a growing corpus of empirical studies shows that it does not (e.g., Bruce et al., 2017; Freeman & Blomley, 2018; Lenstra, 2018; Peekhaus, 2018). Public libraries as community-led institutions are being used for everything from fitness classes to sleeping to repairing bicycles to dance parties to the distribution of food. While it is true that the idea of the public library as a public sphere institution is not new, we have not kept pace with understanding how that publicness gets enacted in the form of disparate claims to the public library as public property, which is the argument of Freeman and Blomley.

Noah Lenstra has in several journal articles, highlighted and advocated the variety of programs offering physical activity and yoga that run in public libraries in several countries but have been studied the most in the United States (Lenstra, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b). This kind of activities may seem novel, but Lenstra cites Wiegand (2015) who describes a hybrid library/recreation center in Braddock, Pennsylvania, dating back to 1889 (Lenstra, 2018a). During the early years of public librarianship, the societal purposes for the new space represented by library buildings remained undetermined, and as such there were experiments that tied the space to social purposes such as the need for healthy, recreational activities such as sports (e.g., Stauffer, 2016). It is interesting to reflect upon the fact that in the context of digitization this undeterminedness returns to the fore. Once again we are in a context in which the social relevance and purpose of public libraries are being questioned, and in that context, new experimental models are being tried, some of which reflect experiments undertaken in the late 19th century. In any case, the evidence shows that physical activity services in North American public libraries are successful if the matrix of success centers on bringing people into library buildings. Time will show whether today's particular physical activity trends are sustainable in libraries, but the main questions for taking home are: 1) whether and how new services are integrated with community initiatives and organizations, 2) whether they are necessarily bound by physical library buildings; and 3) the close scrutiny of the public library building as a document can reveal broader changes and tensions in society.

It is in an elaborate, regular, and systematic outreach dimension of library practice that makes the library stand out as what the American IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) in its latest strategic plan for the years 2018–2022

and other policy documents calls community catalysts (IMLS, 2017, 2018), and that already has been a strategy of many public libraries for many years.

The implications of this discussion for our study of LAM institutions and their work in the digital age, in the age of aging, in the age of migration, and in the age of anthropogenic climate change, are that it is important not to forget that the institutions always are connected to their communities. Crucial research questions are what strategies, services, and activities that are given priority in the document organizations, in the physical buildings, and in community work and community organizing in the digital age: What kinds of community-related work is done, and what are implications for the LAM organizations and the professions? LAM institutions are physical and virtual places, and they are in places, in buildings and online, and within spatial and virtual communities. The centrality of buildings and communities probably vary over time, and probably between institutional types and activities.

Community Resilience

When it is said that LAM institutions, particularly libraries, and museums, build community, it does in most cases if not all, mean that LAM activity strengthens individuals and that the bonds between them are building trusting relationships, creating social capital. Social capital is defined as social networks and trust in others: “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action” (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). A stronger community is a community that better cope with social change and events that impact the community. Strong communities are resilient communities, they can react and adapt to change in ways that aim to minimize the effects from damage in physical infrastructure, and community social infrastructure, when hit by sudden shocks and the slower big change processes changing the social fabric and physical environment.

Community resilience has been defined as “the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise” (Magis, 2010). While Aldrich (2012) emphasizes the uniqueness of social capital for increasing community resilience and in disaster recovery, additional capitals are held as important for community resilience. Wilson mentions three community capitals: social capital, economic capital and environmental capital (2014).

Community resilience can be specified resilience and directed towards specific threats to the community, for example, in areas with a dry climate and vast forests, the community build resilience with wildfires in mind, that is, a lot more resources are allocated to the fire department. The ability to fight fires successfully also relies upon that the population they who need help, need to, and must be able to, trust their helpers—otherwise, there is little help in help. This capacity for generalized trust outside the immediate radius of family, friend, local setting or group is the basis for general resilience, the general ability to cope with change and uncertainty. Non-compliance with evacuation orders and shelters without people are of little use in disaster recovery and are expressions of a lack of general resilience. The advantages of general resilience are that it is useful in all cases, it is a hedge against the unknown and uncertainty (Carpenter et al., 2012; Folke et al., 2010). Specialization might create unintended vulnerabilities by creating a tunnel vision. General resilience is expressed in and originates from local communities where people trust each other. This trust is underpinned, maintained and created by local community institutions, for example, LAMs and voluntary community activities, initiatives, and organizations (Aldrich, 2012; Jaeger, Langa, McClure & Bertot, 2006; Vårheim, 2015; Veil & Bishop, 2014).

LAM Institutions and Resiliences

Public libraries know their impact on community development. As written on their website, the Denver Public Library mission statement is an illustration of how strongly libraries connect their core business, learning, and cultural work, to community resilience, and to resiliencies of information and culture: “The Denver Public Library connects people with information, ideas and experiences to provide enjoyment, enrich lives and strengthen our community.”

Research on LAMs and resilience is in short supply. However, recent research on some resiliences and their potential for development is presented in this section: community resilience, information resilience, and cultural resilience.

Community Resilience

Veil & Bishop (2014) studied public libraries during natural disasters in the U.S. utilizing community resilience theory. They found that libraries increased community resilience and provided essential disaster recovery assistance. Public

libraries gave information access to the outside world, provided meeting and working places, and were also local community information hubs.

Information Resilience

Information resilience as a concept in information science was first used by Hersberger (2011), and Lloyd (2015) offered a definition of information resilience as “the capacity to address the disruption and uncertainty, to employ information literacy practices to enable access to information relative to need, to construct new information landscapes, and to reestablish social networks” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 1033).

Lloyd (2015, 2016) develops the information resilience theory and relates to different social practice arenas (Lloyd, 2013), and health literacy among refugees (Lloyd, 2014). Public libraries are shown as safe and tolerant places suitable for developing information literacy and information resilience among disadvantaged groups (Lloyd, 2015).

Cultural Resilience

Cultural resilience refers to the impact of cultural values and customs in change processes. Cultural resilience originates from a variety of disciplines: theories are from socio-ecology, social psychology, and healthcare (Rotarangi & Stephenson, 2014); community cultural heritage (Beel et al., 2015); and local cultural economy (Pratt, 2015). Health studies focus on how resilient culture aspects can lead to positive health outcomes (see, e.g., Bals, Turi, Skre & Kvernmo, 2011). Local identities strengthened through heritage activities contributes to local cultural resilience, and to community resilience (Beel et al., 2015).

The community location of LAMs makes them on-site candidate tools candidates for creating cultural resilience. LAMs offer literature, exhibitions, cultural events, and meeting space for voluntary cultural and heritage organizations. Regarding research, few, if any, studies of LAMs from a cultural resilience perspective have been done.

Ongoing ALMPUB–trg Research

Four projects are studying policies, strategies, activities, and user experiences in LAMs in the wake of digitization. The projects vary between studies of digital mediation in museums, community organizing, and social media use, LAM development in communities of different sizes, in indigenous peoples’ and refugee

multicultural settings. Many resiliences and literacies come into play. A fifth project studies institutional change in the central government institutional setup for LAM policies. The concept of convergence, in this case, both media convergence and institutional convergence become interesting research themes. A sixth, seventh, and eighth project study the LAM policy formulation in Norway and Sweden on the central and local levels of government and the relationship between the central and local levels.¹

Another project studies change in LAM institutional policies and practices towards a specific indigenous group as part of the modernization processes and consolidation of the Norwegian state. Was this a process of abrupt change, a drawn-out process or both? Was it a national security policy question involving neighboring nations, or was it an expression of a policy for including the Sami population in the Norwegian industrial modernization process? Were knowledge of Norwegian culture and language among the Samis seen as instrumental for achieving this? What were the characteristics of policies, practices, and effects?

Published and forthcoming research from the ALMPUB–trg includes conceptual papers on the application of resilience perspectives in the study of public libraries and the public sphere (Vårheim, 2016, 2017); literature reviews on ALM's in the public sphere and in digital participation (Francke et al., 2018; Skare & Vårheim, Forthcoming; Skare et al., 2018; Vårheim et al., Forthcoming), papers discussing and reporting on several topics ranging from yoga in libraries to ageism in technology support services (Lenstra, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b; Lenstra & Baker, 2017), and on the public libraries in the media landscape (Skare, 2018); on museum crowdsourcing (Hajibayova & Latham, 2017); on the laboratory of museum studies (Latham, 2017); on the relationship between inspiration and information in the museum (Latham, Gorichanaz & Narayan, 2018); on digitization of Sami digital heritage, and libraries in the Sami public sphere (Grenersen, 2018a, 2018b); several in progress papers based on surveys to the general population, library and museum professionals, and local politicians in five European countries.

¹ At present we are preparing further data collection, in the form of document studies, quantitative studies in the form of questionnaires to the local level politicians (data has already been collected from the general population and professionals within LAM institutions), observation, interviews, and fieldwork, perhaps including strenuous physical exercise.

Where We Are Going

Rapid and slow-moving social and technological change processes are underway and affect ALM institutions internal decision-making processes and organizational design processes, and their work with users and in communities. Our goal is to seek knowledge about change processes, their impact on institutional practices, and for the outcomes for users and communities.

From our studies, ALMPUB-trg hopes to contribute to the research literature on LAMs, to the research on the public sphere and community resilience research, and in line with the KULMEDIA program, contribute to action-oriented knowledge suitable for the development and formulation of government cultural policies.

Until this point, we have mostly worked with getting an overview of the state of research in the field and an overview of what is happening in LAMs in the wake of digitization. Based on literature reviews conducted, and theories of the public sphere, of community/social resilience and institutional change, the project turns to empirical research, to people doing things and interacting with each other in different institutional and social settings.

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