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Institutional convergence in the libraries, archives and museums sector: a contribution towards a conceptual framework

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Introduction. This paper presents and discusses a historical institutional framework for studying in-stitutional change processes in library, archives & museum institutions. A limited application of this framework is applied to the case of modern public libraries in Norway and Sweden, for illustrative purposes.

Method. We conducted a literature review on institutional and organizational convergence among library, archives and museums, which is contextualised and discussed in the context of literature on institutional theory. A historical institutional framework developed through these methods is then applied to the case of modern public libraries in Norway and Sweden.

Analysis. Qualitative analysis was carried out, using institutional theory and a review of previous literature to develop and apply a novel approach to understanding the convergence of these institutions.

Results. The studies conducted on institutional change during convergence processes are few, limited in empirical scope and under-theorized. Drawing upon institutional theory presents new ways to approach this topic, as illustrated in this paper's limited application to the Swedish and Norwegian contexts.

Conclusions. Additional historically oriented research is needed to comprehensively understand the multiple ways the institutional bases of libraries, archives and museums and related institutional change processes unfold.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, digitalization and the digital convergence of document types have led to increased scholarly and policy focus on the convergence of libraries, archives and museums (hereafter, LAM institutions). The relationship between digital convergence and LAM institutional change is reflected within LAM research ([Given and McTavish, 2010](#); Huvila, 2016; Rayward, 1998; Warren and Matthews, 2018a,b). Nevertheless, the institutional change processes & the particular driving forces in these processes, have received limited attention within this research. Central questions relating to institutional change processes in LAM institutions need in-depth study.

What are the characteristics of actual LAM change processes over the last two decades? What are the drivers of these processes & what is the present status of knowledge on this topic? What research gaps exist? These questions are important for the study of LAM institutions & for the study of the information and documents they contain. Ideally, to elucidate these questions, a review of key research contributions on institutional development among LAM institutions would be essential to such a review paper. However, extensive searches of the literature have produced very few relevant papers, which indicates the fruitfulness of moving one step back in the chain of theory development and examining relevant theoretical frameworks from other research fields and disciplines, for example, from political economy and organizational studies; and from political science and sociology.

This paper contributes to a conceptual framework for studying LAM institutional development. Secondly, it contributes to the development of institutional theory. The concept of digital convergence has been much used in rationales for converged LAM services and practices & as a rationale for LAM institutional convergence and reform. Institutional theory provides proven theoretical tools to study these processes, as the concept of institutional isomorphism and the empirical research-based theoretical development in the years following DiMaggio and Powell's seminal article ([Beckert, 2010](#); [DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#)).

Within institutional theory, the historical-institutionalist theory of gradual transformative institutional change complements the theories of isomorphism and the theory of a path-dependent institutional development trajectory towards convergence and isomorphism ([Streeck and Thelen, 2005](#); [Thelen, 2004](#)). The transformation approach presents compelling tools that can be used to study how, why & if institutions converge over time. Within institutional theory, there is a bias, or has been a bias, towards interpreting institutional change as a process that inevitably leads towards convergence or isomorphism ([Beckert, 2010](#); Hall and Soskice, 2001; [Mahoney and Thelen, 2010](#)). However, examples of institutional convergence and divergence abound & also in LAM institutional uptake and transformation of, for example, the policy ideas of digitalization and neo-liberalism.

This study clarifies the concepts of digital convergence and institutional convergence for the development of theoretical frameworks for studying LAM institutional change processes. The sectoral characteristics of LAM services and their role(s) as public sphere infrastructure across national policy regimes also have potential import for institutionalist theory development.

Convergence and LAM institutional development

The research literature on the institutional/organizational convergence of LAM institutions is, overall, limited both in terms of numbers of publications and in terms of theoretical development. A topical literature search for (“librar* OR archive* OR museum*) AND *vergen* AND (*institution* OR *organiz**) within relevant research fields for articles and in conference proceedings in the databases SCOPUS and Web of Science retrieved 206 documents excluding duplicates. After having reviewed titles, abstracts and full-texts for topical relevance, eight documents remained—Cannon, (2013); Davis and Howard, (2013); Duff, Carter, Cherry, MacNeil & Howarth, (2013); Given and McTavish, (2010); Klimaszewski, (2015); Robinson, (2012, 2016, 2018) (see Vårheim, Skare & Lenstra, (2019) for a discussion of literature review approaches).

If they define institutional convergence, these authors define it in different ways. Some see institutional convergence as full integration, a merger between two or more existing institutions (e.g., [Cannon, 2013](#), p. 64). Others discuss or tacitly imply a convergence continuum that encompasses different degrees and forms of integration/collaboration, including the actual spatial or “physical” convergence of the institutions.

We find two main themes in the four papers that report empirical results ([Duff et al., 2013](#); Robinson, [2012, 2016, 2018](#)): The motivations for institutional convergence & the outcomes for institutions and the users.

First in the literature, the motivations for institutional convergence and reforms in the LAM sectors are studied and discussed ([Duff et al., 2013](#); [Robinson, 2012](#)). Within these discussions, one argument for convergence is digitalization & its effects on the LAM institutions. The second argument is that all LAM institutions organize documents as their primary task. A third related reason is that they are all memory institutions. The fourth argument found is that users have difficulties with the distinctions between the institutions & want one institutional interface ([Cannon, 2013](#)). A fifth motive is that the staff of LAM institutions are all in essence information professionals that could in theory inter-changeably work in any of these institutions. A final motivation mentioned is a need for cost savings due to new public management principles.

The second central theme found in the empirical studies is discussion of the impact of convergence policies for the differentiated outcomes of the work of converged institutions, for example, for the LAM professions and the public ([Duff et al., 2013](#); [Robinson, 2018](#)). We find surprisingly few studies of impact (three case studies) given the 20-year focus on convergence in institutions in research and policy development. The three studies are all explorative case studies. The research literature is limited regarding the impacts of convergence, in terms of how the reorganization processes have unfolded, the impacts on work processes, on how converged institutions function and carry out their tasks, as well impacts on institutional effectiveness and external effectiveness, that is, outcomes for users.

Duff et al. ([2013](#)) investigated the motivations for convergence processes among LAM institutions in planning and implementing processes & outcomes in the form of positive and negative convergence experiences. The planning process is not described in any great detail, but the impression presented in the article is of a relatively rational process with little conflict. However, no data is presented regarding the actual implementation process. None of the interviewees wanted their views used in research. This could indicate some discord regarding implementation. Duff et al. ([2013](#)) found that problematic results after convergence are related to diverging professional practices and institutional boundaries. Positive outcomes are related to a broader menu of user services, staff learning from other professions & the co-development of new methods of work.

Robinson ([2016, 2018](#)) raises the question of whether the results of LAM convergence initiatives have been following expectations. They ask to what extent can domain-specific institutional goals and professional practices be integrated? What cross-disciplinary skills are developed through convergence? How do these skills benefit outcomes in '*collection research, in interpretation and provision of programmes*' ([2016](#), p. 142) & to what extent has the convergence of LAM institutions benefited museum interpretative practices (collection documentation, research & exhibition development) underlying most museum activities including exhibitions, cultural impact and visitor experiences ([2018](#), p. 522)?

Robinson ([2016](#)) found that convergence promoted internal institutional communication as the formalization of communication patterns. Robinson also found poor planning and organizational design of both the new structures and of the implementation processes. Synergies of cross-professional interaction and cross-learning were rarely found. More often, under-qualified leaders and underfunding hampered institutional development. Personnel retreated to pre-convergence work tasks, disregarding the new structures. Taken together, convergence problems lead to a reduced emphasis on developing local museum collections. The author suggests LAM educational initiatives as a remedy for convergence problems, but fears dilution of expertise and skills necessary for collection development and research. Also, constant demands for an increase in programs and exhibition activities, with limited resources, made the situation difficult for interpretative museum work and collection development.

Robinson ([2018](#)) found that convergence often affects interpretive museum practices negatively, although for many small museums—voluntarily funded and run by historical societies—incorporation of collections in a larger, converged organization was seen as necessary for implementing better collection management. On the other hand, museum components of converged LAM units tended to receive less than their even share of the overall budget. Convergence implied requirements to work with several types of collections, some outside the area of disciplinary expertise & to work with a wider and more extensive program portfolio, meaning less capacity for locally-driven interpretative work. Poor organizational designs and budgeting precluded the development of the positive interpretive practice outcomes expected from the bigger and potentially more efficient converged institution & thereby obliterated the link between professional interpretative efforts and exhibitions & outcomes for the public.

Whether we find convergence or divergence in institutional development is dependent upon the actual circumstances and the different cases. The sweeping trends that totally alter institutional landscapes are rarities. Concrete institutional transformations are shaped by local institutional politics. One way of studying these processes is by focusing upon specifying and studying the specific and sometimes subtle mechanisms through which the transformative change of institutions and policies happen.

Convergence in institutional theory

Libraries, archives & museums have long institutional histories. Through history, they have collaborated and integrated with each other (and with other trades/professions). Over time they have sometimes moved away from each other and at other times they have converged ([Given and McTavish, 2010](#)). Will they move farther from or closer to each other in the future? To consider these questions, this section briefly summarizes dominant perspectives on institutional change.

At the peak of the age of globalization in the 1990s, it felt like the world had become a smaller place—increased contact between economies, organizations and people inevitably (or so we were told) made technologies, products, policies, knowledge and value systems & almost everything seemed more similar. Fukuyama, in 1989, proclaimed the end of history ([Fukuyama, 1989](#)). For analysing the processes of convergence or homogenization among organizations, theorists of sociological institutionalism constructed the theory of institutional isomorphism ([DiMaggio and Powell, 1983](#)), which posits that organizational forms and behaviour proliferate within and across organizational fields, making organizations more similar over time. Actors are constrained within institutional cognitive scripts that constrain institutional innovation and reduce variation, leading to convergence.

Within the information studies context & among Nordic researchers, processes of organizational change often have been studied from a sociological institutionalist perspective & in particular, the theory of institutional isomorphism has been exploited. This is evident in studies of public library institutional change ([Audunson, 1999](#); [Eyjen, 2015](#); [Kann-Christensen, 2006, 2008](#)). In particular, the introduction of New Public Management reforms in government has been a popular research topic also within the study of libraries.

However, from the analysis Beckert's ([2010](#)) it is evident that there is no inevitability of institutional convergence in the mechanisms of institutional change expounded by DiMaggio and Powell—depending on the empirical circumstances, the mechanisms can explain both divergence and convergence in institutional development.

Institutional theories, whether rational, sociological or historical, have all been better at explaining stability than change ([Thelen and Conran, 2016](#)). A main theory of institutional development frames change as sudden exogenous shocks (punctuations) that interrupt long stretches of stability or stasis (equilibria) ([Krasner, 1988](#)). These shocks mean a wholesale change of institutional structures unrelated to former institutional regimes. This theory of punctuated equilibria originated in palaeontology and evolutionary biology. The dramatic events in the history of the earth could be read from the fossil record ([Eldredge and Gould, 1972](#); [Gould and Eldredge, 1977](#)).

Path-dependent institutional development theories allow actors little leeway for variation, particularly in change processes. Change theorists grant the possibility of incremental change in the form of routine adaptations. The main task of institutions becomes reproducing static equilibria in the long periods between punctuated equilibria caused by exogenous shocks, also known as critical junctures ([Lipset and Rokkan, 1967](#)). In crises, actor choice can turn development trajectories. The paradox is that “real” institutional change is created by circumstances external to actors and is not itself institutionally constricted ([Thelen and Conran, 2016](#)), while social actors more or less relate to rules & are constricted by rules ([Ostrom, 1990](#)).

Transformative change

In a historical perspective, it is reasonable to surmise that institutions converge and diverge and can also be relatively stable over long stretches of time. Moreover, if we want to explain institutional change, we need to adapt the theoretical toolbox according to the phenomena and processes we observe & not the other way around. This simple reasoning is the basis for the historical institutionalist perspective: institutions vary, they

structure politics, but they do not determine outcomes or the path of history ([Steinmo, 2008](#); [Thelen, 1999](#)). Actors follow rules & they can be more or less rational, altruistic & habitual (rule-following) in their behaviour. This openness to variation also applies to institutional change processes and outcomes. We need to study the empirical evidence to provide descriptions claiming validity.

Institutions are socially created creatures and as such, not perfect. Institutional creators are faced with the usual limitations on rational decision making. A distance between the expectations of institutional designers and what can be achieved through institutional design & the actual results achieved through implementation on the ground, is almost necessarily present ([Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984](#)).

No actor can take into account all possible alternative outcomes of decisions, due to limited access to information & limited cognitive capacity. Actors are subject to bounded rationality ([Simon, 1947](#)) & therefore follow standard operating procedures (rules) ([March and Simon, 1958](#)). Also, groups with different interests are affected differently by change & this inspires unclear compromises, conflict & blocking strategies ([Cyert and March, 1963](#)).

Institutions have structural conflict lines. Institutions distribute resources and exercise power. "Losers" in change processes come back and find opportunities and ways to use and change institutions to serve their cause. Over time, the "terrain" can change (e.g., new technology) and the impact of institutional rules and policies can be quite different than originally thought ([Pierson, 2004](#)). This description suggests that also the period between revolutionary changes can involve drama. Thelen, Hacker, Mahoney, Streeck & others have shown how incremental changes can have transformative effects through specific institutional mechanisms ([Hacker, 2005](#); [Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003](#); [Mahoney and Thelen, 2010](#); [Streeck and Thelen, 2005](#); [Thelen, 2004](#); [Thelen and Mahoney, 2015](#)). This perspective different from the theory of sudden exogenous shocks discussed above. In the former, change comes from the outside and is sudden, with internal actors having little agency. In the latter, change can come from within, change can be gradual and incremental & internal actors can have agency in shaping the impact of societal-wide institutional change processes.

Mechanisms of transformative change

This literature also considers mechanisms by which institutions change over time. These mechanisms include the following.

Conflicting institutional logics and time of origin. Institutions are children of their time and display different vulnerabilities. Public libraries and other publicly funded cultural institutions, compared to, say, opera houses were established during different historical epochs and subjected to different cultural policy regimes. In the digital age, both institutions are challenged by the new media, but in different ways. Still, when it comes to the legitimacy of government funding, it is comparatively easier to advocate the cause of libraries because of the democratization of culture that has taken place since the era of princely benefactors.

Institutional reproduction and change. The factors that make institutions durable are also their Achilles heel. For example, stable public funding of LAMs is easier to sustain in social democratic regimes until neoliberal agendas appear. Furthermore, the effects of neoliberalism become more difficult to endure than in liberal regimes, where existing systems of private donations and patronage could alleviate unwanted state budget cuts.

Layering and drift. Layering and drift are strategies for institutional change intentionally employed by actors. Layering means that new institutional structures, rules, or policies are put on top of existing structures, rules, or policies ([Schickler, 2001](#)). This is much used when a change of existing structures, rules, or policies cannot be achieved outright. Over time, layering can produce the intended outcomes. The establishment of a Norwegian central government institution for the LAM sector, while keeping the national library and the national archives as independent institutions, can be seen as a layering strategy focused on gradual integration over time ([Skare, Stokstad & Vårheim, 2019](#)), but one that ultimately failed, with the dissolution of the central government LAM institution.

Drift describes a situation when rules stay the same, while contextual change make outcomes different ([Hacker, 2005](#)). One example is when universal welfare benefits are paid to clients in another country with a lower cost of living, as from Norway to Eastern and Central European countries. Another example involves

technological change, e.g., when Norwegian library users cannot access library e-books on the most popular digital devices—Kindle e-readers—and thus are constricted from universal access.

Conversion. Conversion means that institutions, rules, or policies change through the process of applying, using, interpreting, or implementing rules or frameworks over time. Supreme court decisions are prime examples. Another example could be an outcome resulting from the implementation of the Norwegian library law describing public libraries as ‘*independent meeting-places and arenas for public conversation and debate*’ ([Norway. Act Relating to Public Libraries 2014](#)). For public libraries, one strategy of adapting to this new statute would be to hold on to the traditional programs of book circles and author meetings, rather than venture into the more unfamiliar territory of facilitating debate arenas or structuring local meetings of, say, groups focused on recreational pursuits like music, fitness, or crocheting.

An illustration of historical institutional analysis: The origins of modern public libraries in Norway and Sweden

Genesis

A fascinating story of institutional change processes appears in the introduction of the model of the modern public library in the Nordic countries. This illustration does not claim to be historically exhaustive, as it does not go into detail, but instead uses secondary literature to illustrate how a historical institutional approach could be productively utilized to understand change processes within LAM institutions, particularly regarding convergence processes.

After a few years working in U.S. libraries, Haakon Nyhuus—who was to become a Norwegian public library pioneer—in 1897 came to Oslo from Chicago and deployed the American modern public library concept to reorganize the Norwegian library field in a few years. In 1902, this library reform, proposed by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs and based on a report from Nyhuus and colleagues, was passed unanimously and without any comments in parliament ([Byberg, 1993](#); [Byberg and Frisvold, 2001](#)). After this rupture, the institutional development of Norwegian libraries transitioned into a situation of stability, with few path-breaking events at the national stage during the rest of the 20th century.

The Swedish library pioneer, Valfrid Palmgren, was a Stockholm local government conservative politician and library activist. She was one of the first Swedish women with a doctoral degree and graduated from Uppsala University in 1905 at the age of 28. In 1907, funded by Swedish authorities, Palmgren toured U.S. public libraries doing what social scientists in the 21st century would call fieldwork. Palmgren met with Andrew Carnegie, president Theodore Roosevelt & the Librarian of Congress ([Jönsson and Samuelsson, 1996](#)). She published a book based on her study of American libraries, ([Munch-Petersen, 1909](#)) (Palmgren married Munch-Petersen), as well as a government white paper ([Munch-Petersen, 1911](#)), in which she advocated strongly and convincingly in favour of the US modern public library model ([Frenander, 2012](#); [Torstenson, 2012](#)).

In Sweden, the organization of public libraries involved the establishment of government funding for libraries, beginning in 1905, as well as a structural reform of the public library system. Palmgren’s white paper (1911) & the library reform of 1912, was the subject of thorough political discussion over several years. Sweden already had many libraries connected to several civil society organizations, such as the temperance movement and the labour movement. A discussion of the relationship between the different models for public libraries took place. Also, the name of the new libraries was considered: should they be *folkbibliotek* (“libraries of the people”), *kommunbibliotek* (named after the common name for the local government district), or *allmänna bibliotek* (“public libraries”)? *Folkbibliotek* became the official name for public libraries.

Interpretation of the cases

From this description, we see that both the Norwegian and Swedish public library systems were strongly influenced by the North American public library model. However, the way the North American model was institutionalized varied considerably between the two countries. In Norway, we see a relatively sudden arrival

of new ideas and rapid implementation with limited discussion or debate. In Sweden, we see a more rational process characterized by in-depth evaluation and documentation, participation from different groups & with an ongoing discussion over several years.

The Swedes left room for debate & potential conflict—the process of implementation still went reasonably smooth— while the Norwegians promptly approved the library reform proposal. Clearly, the Norwegian change process seems more abrupt in character, signalling a critical juncture type of change. In the Norwegian case, we can argue for an exogenous shock model. In Norway, the ground must have been ripe for the new ideas & the arguments for the new library system were convincing. After all, the Norwegians received the whole package of institutions, a package that was working in & came from what was seen as the land of prosperity and opportunity. Also, what were the alternative solutions in the fast-moving modernization process underway in Norwegian society at large ([Sejersted, 2001](#))?

In contrast, the Swedes already had a library modernization process going when they decided to have an evaluation of the American model for adoption and adaptation to the Swedish context. This suggests that we, in the case of Sweden, see a process more similar to a process of transformative change. In Sweden, endogenous factors contributed to shaping the course of events from different angles. An elaborate model for the library system at large, from children's libraries through school libraries to public libraries, coupled with a system of organization grounded in the scientific management ethos of the time was introduced, while Swedish society was ridden with prolonged conflict over the modernization process and democratization. The public library was seen as an institution of economic growth, education & progress, while also being an institution that could offer agricultural workers and household servants hope for the future and promise of a better life.

Nyhuus and the Norwegian library reformers were to a lesser degree than the Swedes bound by existing institutional structures. Still, Swedish library system structures and Swedish society were shaped by pressures to converge to models of library and societal modernization. On the one hand, in Sweden the new public libraries represented new organizational forms. But, on the other, they cooperated with and supplemented the existing popular movement libraries, so they were partly a new institutional layer, but a layer received as mainly a positive contribution, not a competitor to existing structures. In this analysis, actors' contributions as catalysts and enforcers in shaping events are clear: In Norway, Nyhuus was an enforcer, pushing ideas from abroad with little local push-back or debate, while in Sweden, Palmgren operated more as an entrepreneur who must have had extraordinary political skills and persuasive skills on top of her academic talent and achievements & was able to sustain this level of activity over time.

Conclusion

This paper has presented and discussed a historical institutional framework, as well as concepts for studying institutional change processes and transformative change in LAM institutions. Furthermore, an example of the empirical application of a historical institutional perspective has been employed in an interpretation of what most probably can be described as the most significant events in Nordic library history. Finally, the paper is a starting point for developing a research effort into the institutional development of LAM institutions—how they work & how they change. In particular, a historical institutional perspective suggests much closer attention to how actors in specific contexts grapple with pressures to change or stabilize institutions along different paths. Such a perspective foregrounds both exogenous pressures towards institutional change as do endogenous factors that shape change processes.

The studies thus far conducted on institutional change regarding LAM convergence or divergence processes are few, limited in empirical scope & under-theorized. Further empirical study focusing on creating a basis for theory development within the field is needed. This additional scholarship will in turn enable more understanding of the particular mechanisms shaping LAM institutions & the information, spaces & documents they contain and make accessible to the public.

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