Archives, libraries and museums in the Nordic model of the public sphere

Håkon Larsen

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of ALM-organizations within a Nordic model of the public sphere.

Design/methodology/approach: This is a conceptual article discussing the role of archives, libraries and museums in light of a societal model of the Nordic public sphere. Throughout the discussions, I draw on empirical and theoretical research from sociology, political science, media studies, cultural policy studies, archival science, museology, and library and information science, to help advance our understanding of these organizations in a wider societal context.

Findings: The article shows that ALM-organizations play an important role for the infrastructure of a civil public sphere. Seen as a cluster, these organizations are providers of information that can be employed in deliberative activities in mediated public spheres, as well as training arenas for citizens to use prior to entering such spheres. Furthermore, ALM-organizations are themselves public spheres, as they can serve specific communities and help create and maintain identities, and solidarities, all of which are important parts of a civil public sphere.

Research implications/implications: Future research should investigate whether these roles are an important part of ALM-organizations contribution to public spheres in other regions of the world.

Originality/value: Through introducing a theoretical model developed within sociology and connecting it to ongoing research in archival science, museology, and library and information science, I connect the societal role of archives, libraries, and museums to broader discussions within the social sciences.

Keywords: public sphere, civil sphere, archives, libraries, museums, freedom of speech, Nordic model

Paper type: Conceptual paper

Introduction

Even though there is an emerging literature on libraries (Widdersheim and Koizumi, 2016) and museums (Barrett, 2011) as public sphere institutions, and archivist have started to actively engage with their communities (Theimer, 2011b, Cook, 2013), most of the literature on these topics is too general to account for regional differences in the role of ALM-organizations for national public spheres. One region of Europe that is commonly described as comprising a specific societal model is the Nordic region. However, most of the research done on the Nordic Model of social democracy has tended to focus on the welfare state and working life (i. e. Dølvik et al., 2015, Esping-Andersen, 1990, Ryner, 2007, Alestale et al., 2009), and in large part neglected to take into account the important role that the public sphere and the culture sector play for this societal model. Although there are a few notable exceptions, these have instead focused solely on the media (Syvertsen et al., 2014, Hallin and Mancini, 2004) or cultural policy (Duelund, 2003, Mangset et al., 2008) in discussing the Nordic model, and have not payed sufficient attention to how these are connected to larger societal structures.

Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, and Moe (2014) do have an intention of demonstrating that the media sector and media policy in the Nordic countries share a lot of similar traits with how the welfare state and working life is organized, but their discussion nevertheless becomes too focused on specific aspects of the media sector. In the book, they discuss media use, the press, public service broadcasting, and media companies more generally. These are, no doubt, important issues to discuss in relation to the Nordic model, but there still remains many blind spots to be covered. Peter Duelund covers several of these in the ambitious project of the Nordic cultural model (Duelund, 2003), but this is again too focused on arts and culture, not taking into account the media. Still if we combine these, there are important aspects of a Nordic public sphere that are not covered.

As argued by Engelstad, Larsen, and Rogstad (2017-a), to be able to fully understand the role of the public sphere in the Nordic countries, we need to incorporate religious organizations, voluntary organizations, and organizations of research and higher education, in addition to media organizations and arts and culture organizations. In this model, the Nordic public sphere is comprised of five organizational fields (media, arts and culture, research and higher education, religion, voluntary organizations), all of which are dependent on the institution of

freedom of speech. The term institution is in this context relying on its use in mainstream sociology, where it refers to "social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience … [and are] composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements" (Scott, 2001). "An institution is principally a set of rules or norms regulating the behaviour of individuals, as well as organizations and other corporate actors. It is a framework for action with relatively high stability—more than a convention or informal common understanding (Thelen, 1999)" (Engelstad et al., 2017-b). When I refer to organizational fields, I also rely on a common sociological definition, as provided by Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983): "By organizational field, we mean those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products".

In developing this model, Engelstad, Larsen, and Rogstad (2017) have been trying to cover all fields of civil society that are contributing to spheres where citizens come together as audiences (Habermas, 1989) to discuss issues of public concern. This does not entail that the spheres are solely dedicated to discuss issues related to ongoing or future democratic processes and that the discussions are only rational in content. Most certainly, discussions in some of these spheres are related to political and democratic issues, but a lot of the discussions and social activities going on in these public arenas are also related to issues of identities, beliefs, emotions, and solidarity, all of which are crucial both for individuals and for society. When these elements are considered to be part of the public sphere, this sphere becomes a place for creation and maintenance of solidarity, belonging and a feeling of we-ness amongst the citizens, as well as it being a place for rational discussions on issues of importance for our democratic societies.

In the original model of the Nordic public sphere Engelstad, Larsen, and Rogstad (2017) argued that it consists of five organizational fields, but they did not go into detail about organizations contributing to the public sphere via their respective organizational fields. In this article, I will therefore pay special attention to some crucial organizations within the organizational fields of arts and culture, and research and higher education. The organizational field of arts and culture consists of organizations dedicated to performing arts, the visual arts, music, film, literature, and cultural heritage. It is the latter that I will discuss in this article. Organizations dedicated to cultural heritage are usually categorized as ALM-organizations – archives, libraries, and museums. These organizations comprise all forms of archives, research and public libraries, and historical and ethnographic museums (art

museums are considered as belonging to the visual arts). Being part of universities and colleges, or otherwise serving researchers, some of these organizations are part of the organizational field of research and higher education. What the ALM-organizations have in common is that they collect, secure, maintain, exhibit, promote, and make available for public use our national cultural heritage. As such, they are an important part of the infrastructure of the public sphere, providing information that the citizens can use in their identity or solidarity projects or as part of public deliberations. By including both archives, libraries, and museums in such a discussion, I am able to make a more principled argument about the role of cultural heritage for the public sphere than is common in either archival science, museology, or library and information science, where one tend to focus solely on one of the organizational types making up the ALM acronym.

Freedom of speech and the state in the Nordic model of the public sphere

The Nordic countries have been in the forefront in introducing laws securing freedom of speech (Sweden in 1776, Norway in 1814, and Denmark in 1849) (Engelstad et al., 2017-a). Paragraph five of Article 100 (the freedom of speech article) of the Norwegian Constitution has an infrastructure requirement, stating that "The State authorities shall create conditions that facilitate an open and enlightened public discourse". In order to facilitate such an open and enlightened discourse, the state shall ensure that citizens are given access to information and given an opportunity to take part in public discourse (NOU, 1999:27, Rønning, 2016). The state is obliged to provide for the citizens' positive freedom (Berlin, 2013[1969]), through being given access to relevant information pertaining to their interests (Engelstad et al., 2017-b, Dahl, 1989). Where providing for the opportunity to take part in public discourse is mostly the responsibility of media organizations, the other organizational fields (arts and culture, research and higher education, religion, voluntary organizations) are important in providing arenas where citizens can obtain deliberative skills before entering the sphere of the mass media.

The ALM-organizations also play a particularly important role in providing information to the public, which is crucial for an enlightened public discourse, especially if we think of the "good citizen" as an informed individual making rational decisions on election-day (Schudson, 1998). But, as already pointed out, the public sphere is just as much about inclusivity and social solidarity (Alexander, 2006), as it is about rational deliberation

(Habermas, 1992, Habermas, 1989), and public libraries play a particularly important role in creating and promoting such an inclusive public sphere, through being low-intensive meeting places (Audunson, 2005) for a wide range of citizens. Such a civil public sphere depends on arenas where citizens can learn about national history, and be exposed to majority and minority perspectives on the nation's history and cultural practices (Tisdel, 2017). Historical, ethnographic and anthropological museums are important in this regard. In a time where our natural climate is going through dramatic changes and environmental issues are high on the agenda in society, also the museums of natural history are important public sphere organizations, in that they provide for the citizens' relevant information to be activated in public deliberations.

The role of the state in this model of the public sphere takes on the (somewhat contradictory) role as both strong and liberal. In the Nordic countries, the state is often characterized as neo-corporatist, meaning that the state strongly intervenes in civil society, but that it at the same time upholds a liberal disposition; it intervenes in civil society in order to secure a semi-autonomous public sphere (Engelstad et al., 2017-a). That is, the state is, through its cultural policies, securing the infrastructure of the public sphere, but at the same time organizations and funding bodies in the culture and education sectors have editorial/artistic/research freedom. The state can influence what topics are to be promoted by social actors in the sector, but only on a macro level, i.e. through thematic programs in the arts or research councils. It is experts in the research and artistic fields that actually allocate the money to concrete projects, in line with the arm's length principle guiding cultural policy (Mangset, 2013, Larsen, 2017).

I will now turn to the three forms of organizations making up the acronym ALM, discussing one for them at the time, and their contribution to the public sphere, before closing the article by approaching them as a cluster and relating them to the Nordic public sphere as such.

The role of archives

Archives are related to both the organizational field of arts and culture, and the organizational field of research and higher education. The national archives are dealing with cultural heritage, which (in Norway) is under the administration of both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Climate and Environment. But which administrative sector they belong to is

not the most important issue for this article, as I am more interested in discussing their contribution to the public sphere.

As some of the most frequent users of archives are researchers and students, archives as organizations are part of the organizational field of research and higher education. They are particularly important for researchers working within the humanistic disciplines, as well as the social sciences. But researchers from most disciplines will from time to time need to consult archival material related to subjects being studied. With the massive digitalization taking place in the national archives, the threshold for consulting the collection when needed is potentially lowered. Although archivists have started to use digital media to reach their users (Theimer, 2011a), most archival organizations are still in need of intensifying their efforts in order to make themselves visibly to potential users.

In addition to belonging to the organizational field of research and higher education, archives are also part of the organizational field of arts and culture. Archives are important for libraries, and especially museums, in supplementing their collections and being a partner in administering the national cultural heritage. Compared to libraries and museums, archives do however take on a more passive role in communicating with the citizens, although dissemination is emphasized in national policies (Meld.St., Nr. 7, 2012-2013), and scholars have argued that archivists have taken on a more active role in their communities (Theimer, 2011b, Cook, 2013).

Even though archives rarely function as a meeting place in the community, they nevertheless make important contributions to the infrastructure of the public sphere, and when large parts of the archives are digitalized and made freely available for everyone to use on the web, it has the potential to be made relevant in public sphere discussion irrespective of the intermediary roles of libraries and museums. Although archives and archivists are moving in the right direction (Theimer, 2011b, Cook, 2013, Hosar et al., 2016), there still remain a lot of work to be done for archives in realizing this great potential for contributing to an enlightened public discourse.

The role of libraries

Libraries can be divided into two main categories: research libraries and public libraries. Similar to archives, libraries as organizations are part of both the organizational fields of

research and higher education, and the field of arts and culture, with research libraries belonging to the former and public libraries to the latter (with the exception of national libraries, being part of both). Where research libraries, such as university- and college libraries, are serving specific research communities, public libraries are serving their local communities, with all of its manifold inhabitants. Even though all types of libraries at present are seeking to become more open (Anderson et al., 2017), regarding the activities taking place within the libraries, and in its communication with the public, it still makes sense to think of the core of the community which they serve to be divided along these lines.

As with archives, digitalization is changing how the research libraries are collecting material, as well as making its collection available to the users. They thus have the potential of making the collections into a resource to be consulted in online public spheres that have no ties to the actual libraries. This is, however, mostly the case with national libraries as part of their societal mission is to make the material in their possession freely available to all citizens. In university- and college libraries, on the other hand, most of their digital collections are only available to individuals connected to the university server due to copyright issues and the policies of the large international publishing houses. The digital material (except for open access publications) is thus being available only to the students, employees and visitors of the particular university or college. In some instances, the digital publications of these libraries are available to fewer potential users, than the hard copy books and journals. This is because e-books cannot be borrowed by library users through other university and college libraries within the country, as is the case with hard copy books (Colbjørnsen, 2017). Thus, digitalized knowledge is not always a move towards more openness to the public.

Also in public libraries, the number of e-books available for the users are increasing, but e-books are currently making up only 1-2 percent of the total amount of material borrowed by users in Norwegian public libraries (Colbjørnsen, 2017, Rambøll, 2015). Besides, as has already been documented (Aabø et al., 2010, Aabø and Audunson, 2012), public libraries contribute to the public sphere as meeting places, as physical arenas within their local communities, and librarians play an important role as cultural intermediaries between private citizens and public culture (Buschman, 2003). This meeting place function gets intensified with the ongoing digitalization, as it frees up space in the libraries. Furthermore, in Norway national policies on public libraries have over the last years emphasized the meeting place function of libraries (Kulturdepartementet, 2015), urging public libraries to further develop this aspect of their work. Being perceived as low-intensive and inclusive arenas public

libraries are important for teaching citizenship and prolonging social solidarity, especially in multicultural urban areas (Audunson, 2005, Fagerlid, 2016).

The role of museums

The term museum covers a whole range of different organizations, from small niche museums dedicated to specific items, to national museums for art. The types of museums usually included when discussing ALM-organizations are historical museums, i.e. museums dedicated to cultural heritage and natural history. Art museums clearly belongs to the organizational field of arts and culture, but so does the ALM-type of museums, as cultural heritage is an integrated part of national cultural policies and the collection consists of cultural objects (such as arts and crafts). Like the previously discussed elements of the ALM acronym, the museums are also part of the organizational field of research and higher education. Highly trained professionals work in these organizations, with research activities being a part of their job description (as is also the case for some of the employees at the national and university libraries). Furthermore, many of these museums are an integral part of universities. In addition, there are many museums of cultural heritage that are not affiliated with such organizations, like local historical museums.

As for the other ALM-organizations, digitalization is also changing aspects of the work within these museums, and how they potentially can contribute to the public sphere. Similar to the other types of organizations, digitalized parts of the collection of the museums can be made relevant by citizens in public sphere arenas that are not affiliated with the museums themselves. In addition, museums (as well as some archives and national libraries) are encouraging citizens to contribute to the development of the organizations' collections, for example through submitting privately owned material to the collections, or through helping the employees in determining the origin of specific artifacts, or the locations represented in specific photographs. Many of these activities are carried out via social media (Jørgensen, 2011, Stuedahl, 2001). That citizens can contribute to the collections is nothing new, but the threshold for doing so is significantly lowered with such online communication. Furthermore, Norwegian cultural heritage organizations have since the beginning of the 21st century been encouraged through state policies (St.meld., nr. 48, 2002-2003; NOU, 2013:4; St.meld., nr. 16, 2004-2005; St.meld., nr. 49, 2008-2009; Meld.St., nr. 35, 2012-2013) to become

dialogical organizations, and actively involve the audience in developing its collections (Løkka, 2014, Berkaak, 2003, Stuedahl, 2001, Jørgensen, 2011).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that ALM-organizations are an important part of the infrastructure of the Nordic public sphere, as it has been theorized by Engelstad, Larsen and Rogstad (2017-a). As a cluster of organizations, they belong to both the organizational fields of arts and culture, and research and higher education. Where the organizational field of the media is the most important field for open and enlightened discussions, the other fields in the Nordic model of the public sphere provide important information that can be activated in these discussions, and they are important training arenas for citizens aspiring to take part in media discussions.

In addition, I have argued that public sphere arenas are important for creating and maintaining a sense of social solidarity and of we-ness at local, regional or national levels. Only by considering both rational, emotional and cognitive aspects of public spheres activities will we be able to fully understand these arenas and how they are contributing to a common and civil public sphere (Alexander, 2006, Larsen, 2016).

The ALM-organizations are both physical arenas for a whole range of public sphere activities, as well as providers of information that can be activated and consulted by citizens when engaging in deliberative activities in other public sphere arenas. As such, they are important in fulfilling the infrastructure requirement of the Norwegian freedom of speech legislation (NOU, 1999:27, Rønning, 2016).

Through relating ALM-organizations to freedom of speech and the public sphere, I have discussed the role of these organization in a wide societal context. Through such a discussion it has become evident that ALM-organizations have multiple functions in the public sphere, as it is theorized with the Nordic societies as the reference. Future research should investigate whether these roles are an important part of the ALM-organizations contribution to society also in other regions of the world.

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