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Navigators, debaters or information architects? How library, museum and archive professionals perceive their role in the future society

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Curriculum Vitae

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Abstract

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing political interest in archives, libraries and museums (ALM) as memory institutions, their role as shapers of the future society and providers of access to public information. At the same time, some of the proponents of digital information technologies have heralded the Internet age as their end. Even if it might be too early to doom ALMs altogether, even many professionals have acknowledged a need to change the traditional work at the institutions. In spite of the scale of the debate, the general understanding of that what is happening seems to be rather fragmented. The aim of this study is to map the future role of librarians, museum and archive professionals as it is conceptualised by the professionals themselves. The analysis is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of a web survey of Nordic librarians and information professionals conducted in February-March 2011. The analysis of the results shows that the views of the professionals epitomise three widely diverging and contradictory ideas of the future of their professional roles, described in this article as navigators, debaters and information architects.

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing political interest in memory institutions (archives, libraries and museums, ALMs) and their role as shapers of the future society (Trant, 2009; Gram, 2002). At the same time, some of the proponents of digital information technologies have heralded the Internet age as their end (Usherwood et al., 2005) similarly to

Thompson (1983) who predicted computers to mean the end of the libraries. Even if it might be too early to doom ALMs altogether, even many ALM professionals have acknowledged a need to change the traditional tenets of the institutions. The relative significance of physical collections at the libraries is likely to diminish (Baker, 2007). Museums are developing a digital presence and breaking out of their traditionally monumental walls (Marstine, 2006). In the digital age, 'archiving' is not anymore a monopoly of professional archivists (Featherstone, 2006).

After the early observations of the potentially revolutionary nature of new technologies in the 1980s (e.g. Thompson, 1983), the voices have become louder after the shift of the millennium. An emphasis of increased user orientation and the notions of Library 2.0 (Holmberg et al., 2009), Museum 2.0 (Srinivasan et al., 2009) and Archive 2.0 (Ridolfo et al., 2010) have all stressed the inevitability of change. Researchers, policy makers and ALM professionals have all stressed the need to embrace new technologies, follow more closely the needs and desires of current and potential users and the to adapt to the contemporary society (Pastore, 2009).

In spite of the scale of the debate, there is only a little empirical research on how the professionals and the public perceive the future prospects of the ALMs. The earlier works consist primarily of opinion pieces, political programmes and theoretical literature (e.g. Anderson, 2007; Baker, 2007; Barry, 2010; Boonin, 2001). The most of the existing empirical research has been conducted with the visitors or users of the institutions, not with professionals (e.g. Usherwood et al., 2005; Julien & Genuis, 2011).

The aim of this study is to map the central themes pertaining to the future role of ALM professionals as it is conceptualised by professionals working at the institutions. The analysis is based on a quantitative analysis of the results of a web survey of 131 Swedish ALM professionals conducted in February-March 2011. The analysis shows that the views of the professionals epitomise diverging and contradictory ideas of the future role of their work. Considering the findings, it seems necessary that the institutions and the society begin to articulate their mission in much more concrete terms than in the hitherto consensual discourse of adaptation to the current and future societal context.

Methods and material

The data were collected using a survey questionnaire directed to Swedish professionals working in archives, museums and in libraries and information service. The survey was conducted online using Lime Survey 1.90+ open source survey software. The material was gathered in February-March 2011. This paper is based on a analysis of the comments on the role of ALM professionals in answers to two open ended questions included in the survey: 1) *What archives, libraries and museums (ALMs) can offer to the contemporary society other public and private institutions, individuals and communities can't? i.e. if libraries, archives and museums are important and relevant, why?*, and 2) *Describe your own vision of a perfect museum, library or archive in the year 2020 and how it is different from today?* The analysis of the texts was based on the use of the constant comparative method (B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Respondents were assigned codes from R1 to R131. The codes are used later in the text to refer to their answers.

The sample consists of 131 Swedish ALM professionals with 80/131 (61%) females and 44/131 (34%) males (7/131, 5% with no answer). 87% (114/131) of the respondents were 31-64 years old with 35% (46/131) being between 51 and 64 years. 55% or 72/131 had an undergraduate degree and 50/131 a master's degree. Only three (2%) had acquired a doctoral

degree and one had no formal education. 54/131 (42%) identified themselves primarily as librarians or library professionals, 8% (10/131) as information specialists, 29% (38/131) as archivists and 14 (11%) as museum professionals. The 14 (11%) respondents who did not identify themselves in the four groups worked in archives, libraries and museums related governmental, administration, education, development and consulting duties. The studied sample is a convenience sample and there is an unknown bias in the material that makes it impossible to generalise the results as is and special care has to be taken when discussing the conclusions of the study in the contexts outside Sweden and the Nordic countries.

Analysis and discussion

The general trend of the responses was rather unsurprisingly that ALM institutions and ALM professionals have a significant societal role to play even in the future. At the same time, the respondents were considerably less unanimous about the essence of that role and especially about the means to maintain, increase and reassert it. The findings are consistent with the earlier literature (e.g. Gilliland-Swetland, 2000; Rosa et al., 2011; Sundqvist, 2007).

The analysis indicates the existence for three major scenarios of the future role of ALM professionals. Partly, the ALMs are seen as a public good and a service with societal implications and ALM professionals as *'navigators'* that help visitors in their pursuits of knowledge and experiences. The professional role of a navigator was clearly related to an idea of an empowering role of ALMs. Many respondents pointed the role of ALMs as meeting places (R68, R76, R84, R91) and where people can act by themselves without being unwantedly interfered by others (e.g. R63, R72). The respondents were inclined to emphasise a necessity of maintaining an absolute 'neutrality' of ALMs (e.g. R17, R55, R105).

Secondly, some of the respondents had a propensity to emphasise the intrinsic value of the institutions and the continuing relevance of a historical judgment. This view is coupled with a perception of the role of professionals as *'information architects'*. Their role is to organise and provide tools for accessing materials for visitors who independently seek what they are looking for. ALM professionals play an important role in systematizing knowledge and materials and in maintaining the institutions as "the most important search instrument" (R25). ALM professionals should help people in information seeking and cultural questions (R35) and more indirectly offer their expertise in content analysis, storage, mediation (R38) and preservation (R109) instead of nurturing an idea of a knowledge monopoly (R80).

Thirdly, some of the respondents were strongly in favour of taking an active role as *'debaters'* with a proactive role in the society. In the view, ALMs need to be institutions with an explicit social agenda and ALM professionals should view themselves as harbingers of a certain collective political ideal. They should engage actively in the societal debate (e.g. R2, R72, R77, R79, R115) and advocate for equality, solidarity and the public control of ALMs (e.g. R62, R95, R143), an agenda that is close to traditionally social-democratic ideals in the Swedish context (Andersson, 2010). The political orientation of the agenda is not surprising considering the historical development of the ALMs and the society in Sweden (e.g. Hansson, 2010).

The findings of the present study indicate clearly the existence of several competing ideas of the future role of ALM professionals. The emergence and conflict of diverse philosophical and ideological underpinnings for ALMs is nothing new (e.g. J. R. Glaser & Zenetou, 1996; Duranti, 1989; Given & McTavish, 2010), but it seems that at the moment many of the central

tenets of being an ALM professional are under debate. The approaches are based on contrasting ideological and theoretical underpinnings. It is possible that different individual archives, libraries and museums can pursue their missions from different ideological and practical premises. Realising them all in a single archive, museum or library is, however, bound to be difficult, if possible at all. In order to solve the present conflict of ideals, it seems necessary to make an explicit decision of the leading principles of the institutions. It is impossible to foresee whether all of the strategies and anticipated roles provide a way to reassert the role of the ALMs in the future society. However, in spite of the uncertainties, it seems necessary that the professionals take a stance, are explicit about the role they are playing and how they see their chosen role in relation to its alternatives. Attempting to keep a balance between directly competing approaches without articulating their fundamental differences is unlikely to be a successful way forward.

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