**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Libraries as Public Sphere Infrastructure in the Digital Age: A Review of Research**

**Ragnar A. Audunson,** Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, ragnar.audunson@hioa.no

**Andreas Vårheim,** UIT The Arctic University, Norway, andreas.varheim@uit.no

**Roswitha Skare,** UIT The Arctic University, Norway**,** roswitha.skare@uit.no

**Sunniva Evjen,** Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, sunniva.evjen@hioa.no

**Svanhild Aabø,** Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, svanhild@oslomet.no

**Henrik Jochumsen,** University of Copenhagen, Denmark, hjo@hum.ku.dk

**Casper H. Rasmussen,** University of Copenhagen, Denmark, c.hvenegaardrasmussen@hum.ku.dk

**Kerstin Rydbeck,** Uppsala University, Sweden, kerstin.rydbeck@abm.uu.se

**Keywords: public libraries, public sphere, digitization**

# Introduction

# Today, digitization/digitalization is projected as an all-encompassing phenomenon transforming most social institutions and human interaction.

This paper reviews the research literature on the public sphere and public libraries. The study aims to identify interesting research questions regarding how public libraries change and develop as public sphere institutions in a digital environment.

The paper is a first approximation to further quantitative studies and in-depth case-studies on the impact and possible impact of digitization on the public sphere role of public libraries. The paper is part of the international research project ALMPUB: Archives, libraries and museums, digitalization and the public sphere.

The ALMPUB project, financed by the Research Council of Norway, investigates the changing role of public libraries, archives, and museums as institutions underpinning and sustaining the public sphere. Historically, archives, libraries, and museums (ALM-institutions) have been recognized as instrumental in providing universal access to cultural expressions and to knowledge and information which and an informed citizenry and an informed public discourse presuppose. Their role as an infrastructure for the public sphere is linked in particular to their almost-universal public accessibility as local cultural institutions. More specifically, ALM institutions can be described as

- providers of knowledge and cultural expressions

- agents of enlightenment

- local meeting places and arenas for participation in the public sphere.

Taking libraries as an example, the library laws in the Nordic countries underline that public libraries shall promote democracy, the free formation of opinion and civic skills. To what extent do libraries and the other ALM-institutions fulfill this obligation, and what are the effects of different ways of trying to do it?

Two profound societal developments – digitization and migration – raises new challenges for maintaining a working public sphere, thus creating new external conditions and contexts for the ALM-institutions in fulfilling there traditional public sphere role, and at the same time affecting libraries, archives and museums fundamentally from within.

As digitization and migration promise to broader participation and for integrating a wider spectrum of perspectives in public discourse, these trends may lead to fragmentation (Dahlgren 2006) and echo chambers (Sunstein 2001), where people are exposed to values and perspectives confirming and not challenging their prejudices. Creating opportunities for bridging diverse publics in increasingly more socially and technologically complex societies is challenging, but is still a precondition for having working democracies. How can libraries, archives, and museums contribute in this respect? At the same time, digitization fundamentally affects the core with which libraries, archives, and museums work, for example, the concept of documents and ways of culture consumption.

**Theoretical framework**

This paper is a survey of the literature with the purpose of describing research themes and research question, methodology and research methods employed, and point to avenues for further empirical research and theoretical research.

**Research questions**

This paper summarizes the present status of research and findings from the research for the role of public libraries as public sphere institutions and points to research gaps and novel research questions. Similar reviews are underway on the roles of archives and museums.

**Methodology**

A systematic literature review based on searches on “public sphere” AND librar\* in Web of Science and Scopus. NVivo 11 (NVivo 2017) is used for analysis.

**Research Results**

The research results will consist of an overview of the relevant literature focusing on research themes, research questions, and findings.

**Discussion**

The discussion relates to questions regarding research gaps and interesting topics for further research.

**Conclusion**

The public sphere role of public libraries is an underresearched research area. However, many interesting topics for further research have been identified.

# REFERENCES

Dahlgren, Peter. 2006. “Doing Citizenship The Cultural Origins of Civic Agency in the Public Sphere.” European Journal of Cultural Studies 9 (3):267–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549406066073>.

NVivo. 2017. NVivo 11 for Windows. Daresbury, UK: QSR International Limited.

Sunstein, Cass R. 2001. Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the Research Council of Norway, grant no. 259052, for financing this research.