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**Museums as public sphere infrastructure in the digital age: A scoping review of research**

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**Introduction**

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 museums. The study aims to identify gaps in the research and interesting research questions regarding how museums change and develop as public sphere institutions in a digital environment. The paper is a precursor to further quantitative studies and in-depth case studies on the impact of digitalization/digitization on museums' public sphere role. The paper is part of the international research project ALMPUB: Archives, libraries and museums, digitalization, and the public sphere.

The ALMPUB project, funded 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, libraries, archives, and museums (LAM institutions) have been recognized as instrumental in providing universal access to cultural expressions and knowledge and information crucial for an informed citizenry and an informed public discourse. The LAM institutions' role as an infrastructure for the public sphere is linked to the almost universal public access to local cultural institutions. More specifically, LAM institutions can be described as providers of knowledge and cultural expressions and local meeting places and arenas for participation in the public sphere.

Three big slow-moving societal change processes—climate change, digitalization, and migration—raises new challenges for maintaining a working public sphere, thus creating new external conditions and contexts for the LAM-institutions in fulfilling their public sphere role, and thus affecting all aspects of being libraries, archives and museums (Vårheim 2017; Vårheim, Skare, Lenstra, Latham and Grenersen 2018).

While digitalization has been linked with broader participation and with integrating a plurality of perspectives in public discourse, current developments point to fragmentation (Dahlgren 2006) and echo chambers (Sunstein 2001), exposing people to values and attitudes confirming and not challenging prejudices. Creating opportunities for bridging diverse publics in increasingly more socially and technologically complex societies is challenging but is still a precondition for working democracies in the long run. How can libraries, archives, and museums contribute in this respect? At the same time, digitalization fundamentally affects the core with which libraries, archives, and museums work, for example, the concept of documents and the ways of cultural consumption.

This review on museums and the public sphere is a sequel to a review on the public sphere and libraries presented by the authors at LIDA 2018[]](#_ftn1), and later published in Library & Information Science Research  (Vårheim, Skare and Lenstra 2019)**,** stating that:

Compared to existing research, more focused and stringent research designs are necessary to enhance the understanding of libraries as public sphere institutions. A focused research program can create theoretical and actionable knowledge for knowledge-based policies, strategies, and activities at the international, federal, state, and community levels (Vårheim et al., 2019, 93).

From the preliminary searches and analyzes of the museums and public sphere literature, this advice regarding libraries and the public sphere is likely as relevant for museums and the public sphere.

**Research questions**

This paper summarizes the present status of research investigating the role of museums as public sphere institutions and points to research gaps and novel research questions. We have carried out a similar review for libraries and the public sphere.

We have four research questions for the mapping of research on museums and the public sphere:

 1. What are the research topics studied concerning the role of museums in the public sphere?

 2. Is the research mostly empirical or conceptual?

3. What research designs, theories and methods are employed?

4. What are the main findings of the research, what research gaps are identified, and what are or could be novel and interesting research questions?

**Theoretical and methodological framework for the review**

A scoping review of the peer-reviewed literature is required to identify strands of research and findings to unravel museums' challenges as public sphere institutions. Scoping reviews make it possible to conduct critical interpretive analyses, and at the same time, avoid the pitfalls and possible idiosyncrasies of the traditional author-based literature review by employing scientific procedures and formalization and by being comprehensive, unbiased, transparent, and replicable (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006; Dixon-Woods 2011). However, the research questions and the state of the research field ultimately determines the further specification of the review method (Gough 2015; Snilstveit, Oliver and Vojtkova 2012). Still, to ensure the quality of research, verifying comprehensive searches and transparent procedures are essential. For possibly fragmented and multi-disciplinary research areas as museums and the public sphere, an extensive approach for search is employed. Such an approach has implications for the choice of databases needed to cover a broad range of specialized and general databases. We use Nvivo 12 for systemizing the data (Nvivo 2018).

**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 museums is an underresearched research area. However, many interesting topics for further research have been identified.

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