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DO COLLECTIONS STILL CONSTITUTE LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES, AND MUSEUMS?

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Introduction

Libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) maintain collections of various kinds, which are stored, developed, and made available in various ways to people outside these institutions. In this chapter, we will discuss the contemporary status of collections within LAM institutions. Because of partly interrelated technological changes and new paradigms in cultural policy from the late twentieth century and onward, it is no longer as evident as it (perhaps) was before that collections function as the very constitution of LAM institutions. Digital collections are by their nature volatile while analog collections are physically fixed, and contemporary dominant narratives question the perceived narrow and inward-looking traditional LAM institutions where experts and professionals choose what parts of collections should be served to passive users. Instead, other targets are put forward for these institutions that are – or at least are intended to be – more or less independent of collections. For example, they are increasingly positioned as user-oriented centers for cultural and social activities, experiences, and learning, and for navigating in information that is not necessarily stored at the respective institutions. It is therefore worth asking: *Do collections still constitute LAM institutions?* In the following, we will not present definitive answers but rather explore and map relevant tendencies and areas of conflict, as well as differences and similarities within the LAM sector as a whole on this topic, and within the individual arenas of libraries, archives, and museums.

Collections in this chapter are defined as those holdings of artifacts, books, media, documents, and other materials that, at least traditionally, have defined the three institutions. In regard to archives, that means we speak of "collections" in a more generic sense than what is common within the archival community, where a distinction is often made between "archives" (or "fonds"), which are

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the sum of records amassed by a specific creator as the by-product of its activities and "artificial collections," which are typically brought together on the basis of a particular topic or media format (Johnston and Robinson 2002).

The forms of collections

Libraries, archives, and museums have historically been more or less determined by their respective collections. In the pre-digital age, museums were institutions with collections of artifacts (typically physical objects), while library collections consisted of books and other printed publications, and archives comprised mainly written records. From early on and up to the present day, it has not been unusual for collections to cross the LAM boundaries. For example, archival institutions and museums have had libraries, while artifacts and contemporary documentation collections can be found at archival institutions, and some archival collections (often manuscript collections and personal archives) are stored at libraries or museums. Nevertheless, collections have been regarded as the key component and raison d'être of LAM institutions. Larger LAM institutions were typically hosted by professional experts responsible for the respective collections, curating them (see Chapter 7, this volume), and organizing their items and finding aids (see Chapter 8, this volume). Not least, these professionals have traditionally decided what to collect (besides inheriting originally private collections) and what to make available to the general public (when such decisions were not made at higher levels, such as in legislation). The nature of mediation has differed among the fields. Typically, museums have made (small) parts of their collections available through public exhibitions, libraries have let users themselves choose what to read or borrow, and the same goes for archives. Many archival records, though, are largely not open to the general public at all (because of secrecy regulations and the like).

However, with technological development, the forms of LAM collections have become more diversified. The first waves of photographs and audiovisual recordings did not substantially change the overall hegemony of collections. However, digitalization, and especially the Internet, has led to a general challenge to the norm. Since the 1990s, digital collections have typically not been stored in particular places but have rather been shared and available online. Digitalization has meant new opportunities and challenges for LAM institutions and their collections. Nondigital collections have been increasingly digitized, that is, manifolded into digital surrogates with a view to increasing the availability of traditional artifacts, publications, and records, and in some cases also for preservation purposes. Digitization and the use of digital technologies in a broader sense have generally been favored in cultural policy in order to increase availability and introduce new forms of user-friendly interactions. A significant contributing factor is the certain status of digital technology as an end in itself that signifies such dominating values in contemporary society as progress, hybridity, renewal, and fluidity (Wormbs 2010; Henningsen and Larsen 2020).

Contemporary LAM institutions also have a rapidly increasing number of born-digital collections. The development has been perhaps the most dramatic in the archival sphere, since most contemporary records are digital from the very beginning. Also, museums gather, for example, social media content, and libraries are increasingly engaging in mediating born-digital publications. As we discuss in the next section, digitalization has partially led to new forms of ownership and responsibilities. The Internet and social media have facilitated interactions between users and institutions, which generally panders to the general trend for an increased user orientation.

In the early days of the Internet, there were those – mainly outside LAM institutions – that foresaw a future where traditional libraries, archives, and museums would no longer be needed, where everything would be available online for anyone to obtain anytime (see Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, and Skot-Hansen 2012, 587–588). Such narratives are heard less frequently today, but rather, LAM institutions have increasingly been regarded as meeting or access points where users can obtain some of the information or objects that are available but not necessarily stored in the institutions' collections.

Ownership and responsibilities of collections

In certain aspects, the traditional characteristic of LAM institutions, that of largely being dependent on "their own" collections, is becoming increasingly relaxed, due to both technological and social developments. LAM institutions increasingly function as "points of access" for digital collections that other institutions keep or are responsible for. E-books, e-journals, and databases with digitized newspapers, stored in national or international digital repositories, are typically freely available at libraries (as an alternative for users paying to gain access at home). Many archival institutions offer similar services. It is true that such point of access functions existed long before digitalization: Users have had opportunities to access analog books or records through systems of inter-institutional lending. However, with digitalization, these modes of accessing collections have shifted from the margin to the center of how LAM institutions operate.

Another trend that weakens the traditional connection between LAM institutions and their collections is underpinned by the general tendency in the Nordic cultural policy to shift from the notion of national homogeneity towards an open emphasis on cultural pluralism (see Chapter 14, this volume). This has had consequences regarding the ownership of collections (cf. Callison, Roy, and LeCheminant 2016). Artifacts and records concerning the Sámi population that have been made part of Norwegian and Swedish national archives and museums, often as a result of abuse and nationalist and racist policies, are increasingly becoming a matter of debate and repatriation demands. Similar questions have been raised concerning collections emanating from Danish colonialism in Greenland and the West Indies (Agostinho 2019).

Collections and/or user-oriented missions

In recent decades, a lively narrative has emphasized that the traditional roles of collections as the constituent force of LAM institutions have diminished. In academia, in cultural policy, and within professions, a strong opinion has developed arguing that collections as the self-evident raison d´être of LAM institutions belong to an older form of society with strict hierarchies between experts and users, and with a unilinear conception of relations between institutions and the outside world. In the past, users visited institutions and were passively presented with collections that experts had created and/or curated for exhibition. However, with new technology and new conceptions of the societal missions of LAM institutions, this older paradigm is being transformed, often summarized in catchphrases such as "from collection to connection."

There are different views of these matters among LAM institutions, professions, and academic scholarship. One is largely affirmative, taking as a starting point that society has changed in the post- or late-modern era. Old hierarchies have been dismantled in the current flexible, fluid, multicultural, and nonhierarchical world where information, knowledge, and experience, rather than industrial production, are the engines of societal change and development. In such a world, the choices of individual citizens are held in higher esteem. Proponents of such ideas tend to suggest that LAM institutions need to change in order to help them to adapt to evident societal changes. The traditional role of expert-curated collections is regarded as a remnant of an older, pre-digital society – a role that needs to be curtailed and replaced by a new and more externally oriented one. The binary opposition between active professionals and passive users is replaced by a vision of co-creation, where the needs and creative potentials of users are put at the center, as are generally the external functions of the institutions, such as offering arenas for social interaction and education.

In a typical expression of this narrative, museums are said to be in need of "reinvention." Traditional museums are labeled "elitist," "exclusive," "ethnocentric," and "collection driven," while the reinvented ones are "equitable," "inclusive," "multicultural," and "audience focused." Furthermore, the reinvented museum strives to achieve "exchange of knowledge" rather than being a "keeper of knowledge," and it is also "relevant and forward looking," not "focused on past." Consequently, the collections are moved from their primary position to a supporting role that "advances the educational impact of the museum." It is also stressed that the public has a growing impact; the museum must be regarded as "both customer and guest," and in order to achieve "visitor satisfaction" museums must engage in "market research" (Anderson 2004). Also, in the Nordic context, LAM institutions are increasingly discussed as having broader roles to play in society, not least as a part of the cultural economy. In order to foster "creativity and innovation," the so-called "four-space model" has been proposed for Nordic libraries as a way of stipulating their new role as spaces for meeting, performativity, inspiration, and learning (Jochumsen,

Hvenegaard Rasmussen, and Skot-Hansen 2012). In Malmö in southern Sweden, a traditionally industrial city that has officially aimed to redefine itself as post-industrial since the 1990s (see Holgersen 2014), the city library branded itself as a "darling library," pointing to a new library paradigm distinct from the "old" one characterized by hierarchies, passivity, and custodianship of collections. Instead of being a hierarchical collection-based institution, the library was to be a local cultural center open to citizens and a part of the story of the city's transformation to embrace the new economy (Carlsson 2013; see also Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, and Skot-Hansen 2012). Generally, cultural policy has shifted in recent decades in most European countries to increasingly emphasize culture and cultural heritage as part of the economy. LAM institutions are subjected to market and New Public Management logics that emphasize engaging as many visitors as possible, and taking part in efforts to make cities and regions economically attractive (Marling 2010; Svensson and Tomson 2016; cf. Kann-Rasmussen and Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2021) rather than maintaining and developing collections.

Another stance is more openly skeptical. In various ways, the away-from-collections narrative has been criticized or regarded as an effect of (nonbenevolent) external influence. Speaking of libraries, Scherlen and McAllister argue that the idea that libraries should stop focusing on collections is a dominant narrative, fueled by official cultural policy, that ought to be questioned. They claim that leaders of institutions tend to focus on what is considered new and modern, such as new technologies and various forms of user-oriented activities (Scherlen and McAllister 2019). Interviews with professionals indicate that the narrative of new, digital, and user-oriented activities is favored by administrators, the former sensing that their traditional collection-oriented work is perceived as antiquated and clinging to the past (Nicholson 2019, 143; see also Kann-Rasmussen and Balling 2015). An image of a general conflict of interests arises, where parts of the LAM sector reject the aims of some LAM institutions to foster user orientation according to overall trends in economic policies that also color cultural policy. This applies not least to the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 2019), which positions cultural heritage as one of many sites for nurturing experiences (e.g., see: Marling 2010; Hvidtfeldt Madsen 2014). Contemporary LAM studies point at conflicting interests or rationales, where aspirations of further democratization coincide with an economic rationale (Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen, and Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2017). Libraries that focus on the needs of their communities and community building are not only, or even mainly, preoccupied with traditional library collections. In their world, the lending of tools, seeds, toys, and sports equipment is just as natural an activity as the lending of books. Söderholm has coined the term "X-lending library" to describe this loosening of ties between libraries and traditional collections (Söderholm 2018).

Regardless of the position one takes in these debates, and no matter what role collections *should* have in LAM institutions, it is not controversial to claim that collections – both analog and digital – still have a central role in vast parts of the

LAM landscape. The past dominance of the old collection-oriented missions perpetuates them and keeps LAM institutions working according to them (Dempsey and Malpas 2018). Another reason why LAM institutions continue to stress the curation of collections is that they have a legal duty to do so in all Scandinavian countries. As Grøn and Gram (2019, 315) note, there is a "catch 22 of cultural policy" between the continued collection-oriented legal mission and the parallel imperative of increased user orientation. They argue that there is a "paradox of participation," claiming that when the role of collections is greatly reduced, the institution also loses the possibility of attracting users, since the collections often remain the main objects of interest within the institutions that appeal to users (Grøn and Gram 2019, 320–322).

The future of collections in the LAM sectors

Around the turn of the millennium and for some time after, there was a widespread belief that digitalization would lead to major convergences between L, A, and M institutions, an idea that has partly overlapped with the collection-to-connection discourse. The actual bits and data of digital collections look the same, regardless of whether they represent museal objects, library e-books, or digital records. In the digital world, all LAM institutions share the same challenges and possibilities of digital preservation, curation of metadata structures, etc. (cf. Duff et al. 2013). In Scandinavia, most notably in Norway, there have been multiple projects for practical LAM integration (Vårheim, Skare, and Stokstad 2020), which has evidently also deepened a kind of theoretical convergence between the sectors even if the success of these initiatives has been debated. Archivists, librarians, and museum professionals also increasingly look at the other sectors for inspiration. Moreover, the overall user-oriented paradigm is typical of the entire LAM sector. However, as the following closer look at sectoral discussions shows, the status of collections at LAM institutions is a good example demonstrating that in spite of partial convergence, there are still foundational differences between the L, A, and M sectors.

Do collections still constitute museums?

Even if the idea of a museum without collections still raises debate, an increasing number of museum theorists and practitioners are toning down the role of collections as an irrevocable constituent of a museum (Brown and Mairesse 2018). Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) notion of post-museum crystallizes much of the criticism of the Western Enlightenment paradigm of museums as encyclopedic institutions. Similar criticism has stemmed from non-European traditions (e.g., Morishita 2019). There is an increasing number of institutions around the world identifying themselves as museums despite having no collections. These include Fotografiska, a Stockholm-based gallery of photography with branches around the world, and the Fisksätra museum, a museum and cultural center located in a Stockholm suburb of the same name. Also, mobile and virtual sites

and places rather than collection-based museums (Schweibenz 2019; Driver, Nesbitt, and Cornish 2021) diversify museums' relation to collections. The decentering of collections was also visible in the debate on the proposal by the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) for a revised definition of "museum" in the late 2010s (Brown and Mairesse 2018). In this sense, the argument that a museum without collections calling itself a museum is not a proper museum is conspicuously losing its relevance.

At the same time, even if a museum without collections were no longer an oxymoron, collections are still valuable in different ways as building blocks, resources, records, and assemblies of knowledge, experiences, creativity, research, and cultural memory (Newell, Robin, and Wehner 2017). Moreover, a collectionless museum needs collections even if they would not be held for long-term preservation at that specific institution and the modus operandi of the museum would go beyond displaying its own collection of objects to utilize artifacts in a more diverse sense. The recent museology discourse is increasingly underlining the role of collections not only as evidence of the past but more and more as a resource for negotiating the present and envisioning the future (Newell, Robin, and Wehner 2017; Brown and Mairesse 2018). Their contemporary versus historical significations and the past and current perceptions of the legitimacy of their origins are raising questions about collections originating from foreign countries, and indigenous and vulnerable communities (Turnbull 2010; Savoy 2017). This has led to repatriation of collections – in Scandinavia especially from national to indigenous Sámi institutions, but also to other regions of the world.

The digitization of collections is frequently referred to as an opportunity not only for repatriation but also for management and sharing of museum collections in the future. Many museums are struggling with managing, preserving, and putting to use large historic collections and representing contemporary life where digitization and digital management of collection-related information unfold many opportunities (Cameron 2009). However, similarly to how Boast and Enote (2013) criticize virtual (i.e., digital) repatriation of being no real repatriation, digital collections and digitization is not a straightforward way of substituting physical collections. Interaction with digital artifacts satisfies many needs but not the actual presence of a physical object, similarly to how a physical copy is only sometimes equivalent to a physical original. Nevertheless, on the whole, there is hardly any doubt that the diversity of museums and their rapport with collections and collecting are continuing to increase, not only due to the opportunities presented by digital collections, collecting, and sharing but also through the (re)production of physical artifacts through digital documents.

Do collections still constitute libraries?

One of the authors of this chapter has defined libraries as institutions initiating social processes related to knowledge sharing, learning, and cultural experiences on the basis of organized collections of documents – physical as well as

digital (Audunson 2018). This definition, which has also found its way into the Norwegian Wikipedia (Wikipedia, n.d.), sees collections as a definitional characteristic of libraries. An institution not relying on collections as the fundamental tool for realizing its social mission related to knowledge sharing, learning, and cultural experiences is not a library. There are, however, developments that challenge this notion of a library.

The advent of e-books has changed the relationship between libraries and vendors and the relationship between libraries and collections, particularly the libraries' control over their collections. Collection development is frequently outsourced to commercial firms, which do the selection and acquisition, and thus, to a large extent, control the collections. Libraries increasingly serve as points of access for digital collections owned by commercial enterprises such as academic journals and book depositories. Paradoxically, one effect of this is that the traditional resource sharing among libraries in the form of interlibrary lending – a form of knowledge sharing that one should believe digitization facilitates – has become more difficult due to the commercial control and ownership of their collections.

There is no doubt that the concept of what libraries are has changed and expanded from the notion of framing them as institutions giving access to collections of books and other printed material. As previously mentioned, giving access to other kinds of material such as tools, toys, and seeds is seen as increasingly natural in a public library context. Some library theorists argue for a revised librarianship, whose role of fostering knowledge in the community can function without collections altogether (e.g., Lankes 2011). We can well foresee a future where the librarian does not manage a library collection but, as a member of a research or project group, is responsible for giving the project members access to adequate and timely information and knowledge sources available across the World Wide Web. We already have purely digital libraries without collections in the traditional sense – for example, the Health Library (Helsebiblioteket.no) in Norway.

In parallel to such trends, however, the traditional role of libraries related to managing collections of books and other traditional media is still among the most important reasons that legitimize that societal resources are used on libraries among the general public and library professionals (Audunson et al. 2019; Audunson, Hobohm, and Tóth 2020). When the library director in Malmö in the period 2010–2012 set out to develop the above-discussed new city library concept that fundamentally deviated from the traditional and collection-oriented one, it led to severe local conflicts and to the director resigning from her position (Carlsson 2013).

Do collections still constitute archives?

The development from collection to user orientation, both as an objective fact and as normative discourse, is not as far-reaching within archives as in the

library and museum sectors. The proper care of record collections is still widely regarded as the foundational mission for archives. While libraries and museums are predominantly outward-oriented institutions, archival institutions are that only to a limited extent, simultaneously retaining their "inward-looking" role as administrative and bureaucratic functions.

According to the still hegemonic principle of provenance, archival fonds are supposed to be amassed from the activities within creating bodies, with the dual mission of securing evidence and information that are crucial for the creators themselves, as well as for external users. The purpose of keeping records for "contemporary" reasons connected to administrative functions, legal security, etc. also continues to uphold a view that archives *are* collections of records, and that the interests of external users are sometimes regarded as secondary. Many archives are not supposed to be open to external users at all – for example, military records and medical records.

In archival scholarship, there are divided opinions on where to put the emphasis regarding the creation and appraisal of archives, where traditionally three agents are involved: creators, archivists, and users (Cox 2002). The varying opinions among archivists and archival scholars are spread along the overall memory vs. evidence axis that Cook (2013) has identified as a major difference of perspectives. Many contemporary archival theorists argue for a stronger emphasis on "evidence," that is, archival records as traces and witnesses of the occurrences that created the records in the first place. The argument goes that in the digital world, the care of records becomes more complicated, and all possible efforts must be put into securing digital records – which will become records of historical value in the future – that are as authentic as possible. With digitalization, the very demarcation of archival collections becomes more fluid, and a more holistic view of records from their birth and onwards becomes necessary (Upward 1996). However, such reasoning redefines collections rather than ruling them out.

At the other end of the spectrum, there has been, at least since the 1960s and 1970s, a more radical and activist notion of what archives should be. According to this view, archiving should to a larger degree be planned as a true documentation of society, which should cover especially sectors of society that hitherto have been under- or misrepresented in archives. Such a perspective is closely connected to the idea of the need to actively document contemporary society in the museum sector. Instead of archives keeping to their passive role of only receiving records, archivists ought to actively collect records according to specific schemes of planned documentation (e.g., Samuels 1986, 110–112). Such endeavors are normally constituent of the so-called "community archives" following the principle that archives should be actively created in order to strengthen the documentary heritage of particular, often subordinated, groups (Sheffield 2017).

As we have seen, archivists who stress the evidential value of contemporary born-digital records, and those who rather address the role of archives in memory and identity politics, both regard collections as the very reason for the existence,

and the mark, of archives. They serve historical research and the interests of memory and heritage, but also such contemporary aspirations as the freedom of information and keeping track of agreements, business transactions, legal verdicts, social welfare measures, and education.

Accordingly, there are few "archives without archival collections," if we brush aside the wider and sometimes metaphorical conceptions of "archives" that have gained prominence with the so-called "archival turn" (e.g., see: Ketelaar 2017). In the past few decades, there has also been a parallel development where archival institutions follow suit with museums and libraries in various ways of renegotiating the traditional top-down relation between professionals and users. There are numerous examples of crowdsourcing activities and so-called "participatory archives" (Huvila 2008) – a recent example being the project *Collecting Social Photography* where archives and museums in the Nordic countries aim to create new collections of individuals' digital photos (Boogh et al. 2020). Not least in the less legally regulated private sector, there is a growing interest in emphasizing the aspects of archives that border on museums or libraries, namely increased user contact and interaction, as well as transmission and mediation of archival collections to a wider audience. The focus is on access and heritage, and the digitization of analog archives tends to be emphasized as an important means of reaching out, not least to provide access online (e.g. see: Caswell 2014a). However, collections are the basis of such user-oriented archival orientations.

With the widening of the field of archival studies, a broader conception of archives has been put forward – not least in postcolonial and indigenous studies – that questions the materiality of archives and the traditional ideas of institutional ownership of archival records (Iacovino 2010; Fraser and Todd 2016). There, immaterial traces of memory and recollecting are also seen as "archives" (e.g., Faulkhead 2009; Caswell 2014b), e.g., proposing such new notions as "impossible archival imaginaries and imagined records" (Gilliland and Caswell 2016). These critical perspectives also often have a marked tendency to question the traditional role of archivists as professional guardians of collections, and instead to favor user involvement and co-creation of archives (e.g., Caswell 2014a). Even if the discussions on ownership and control as well as the (re-)conceptualization of collections of, for instance, Sámi- and Inuit-related archives are still dawning in Scandinavia, they are likely to continue and expand (cf. Maliniemi 2009). What is apparent, however, is that they are strongly connected to the understanding and framing of the notion of collections and that the emphasis is on other forms rather than on the traditional material and expert-organized ones.

Conclusion

There have been many discussions in recent decades about technological change and new social and cultural conjunctures radically transforming the traditional LAM institutions. They are often described as evolving from largely separated sectors, predominantly defined by their collections, into more user-oriented and

less hierarchical institutions, where old divisions among the LAM spheres are also withering away. The institutions have also seen many real changes in these directions, most visibly in libraries and museums, which are more predominantly oriented toward external users than are archives. The care and mediation of collections often becomes one of many missions, and in some cases is pushed into the background. However, in spite of these discursive and objective changes, there are many elements of continuity from the past. Moreover, pronounced user-oriented missions often depend on existing collections, and furthermore, many critics argue that the narratives of renewal and democratization connected to further user orientation sometimes coincide with contemporary doctrines in which information, culture, and heritage are increasingly regarded as important elements of the market economy.

The different institutional spheres of libraries, archives, and museums seem to have survived since they have – at least partly – different aims and missions. These are, to a degree, manifested in legislation, which particularly governs the institutions in the public sector, but institutional and professional identities are another aspect that fosters continuity. LAM institutions have historically developed with their respective notions of collections as the distinctive feature. To some extent, digitalization has loosened the boundaries between library publications, museum artifacts, and archival records, as well as enabling new opportunities for user involvement and mediation. Nevertheless, in the digital world, the notion persists that libraries, archives, and museums deal with conceptually different kinds of collections.

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