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Means before purpose – the development of cooperation between cultural heritage institutions in Sweden

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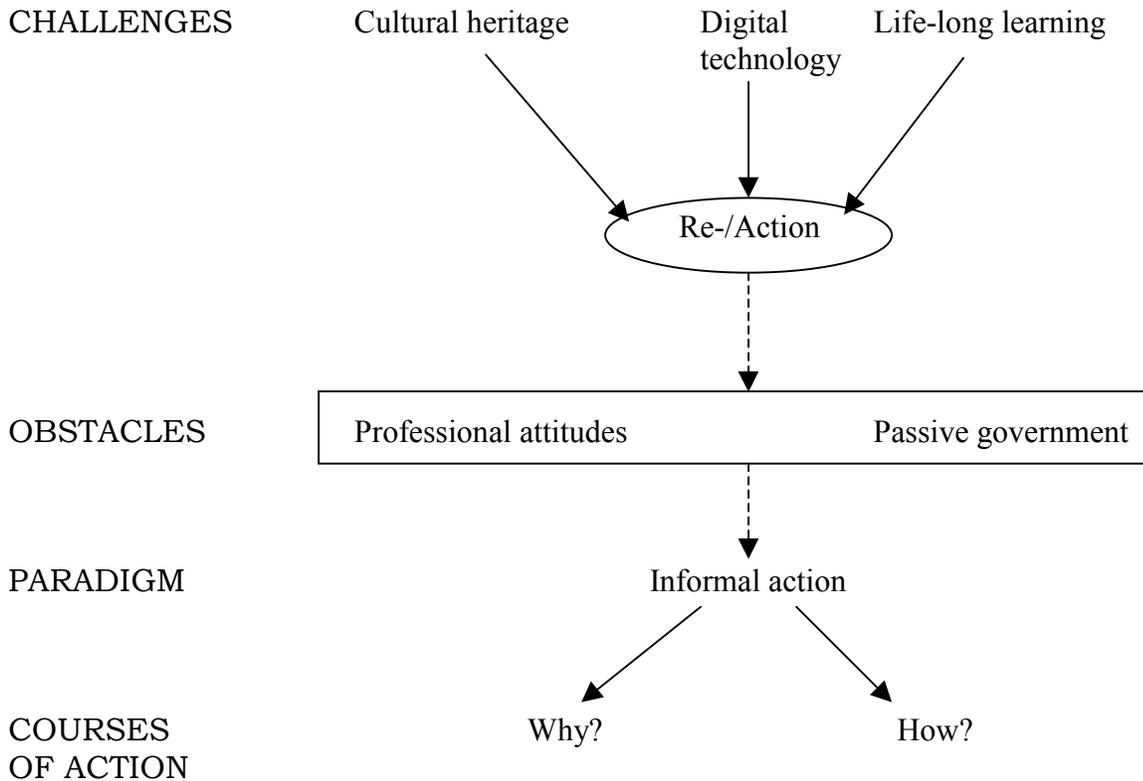
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Abstract:

Cooperation between archives, libraries and museums is on the cultural policy agenda in Sweden as well as it is in other countries. Yet there are some characteristic features which this paper emphasizes by means of a theoretical structural analysis of Swedish cultural politics and actions. What characterises the development in Sweden is the lack of an overlapping political plan. Instead, informal actions with all their short-comings have tried in order to give satisfactory answers to the challenges that emerged on the scene during the 1990ies. The author analyses challenges, obstacles, paradigms and courses of action which are constitutional for the situation today as well as for the future.

In my paper, I want to describe the development of cooperation between libraries, museums and archives in Sweden (ALM cooperation) since the beginning of the 1990ies. I will show you, I hope, what happened in Sweden when cultural heritage institutions were confronted with external and internal challenges, obstacles, and paradigms.

My account will not be chronological, because the development in Sweden hasn't even once run in a straight line. Instead, I have chosen a theoretical structure to analyse actions that have taken place.



CHALLENGES

Some cooperation between **cultural heritage** institutions in Sweden, i.e. archives, museums and libraries, naturally fits within a long tradition of scholarly contacts. There have always been certain, though singular, themes and items which have provided a ground for cooperation. This may be seen as a “purpose before means”-way of collaborating. In the past, museums have opened their galleries for medieval book paintings or artistic book bindings. Book historians sometimes have been invited to participate in preparation of these exhibitions. The highlights of contemporary Swedish book arts are regularly shown at both libraries and museums. On the other hand, in the last years, some major exhibitions at the National Museum of Arts on the topic of cultural relations between Sweden and foreign countries have included books from various historical periods.

Such singular content-based contacts have, though, never led to the establishment of enduring tight connections between institutions with the aim of providing access to content-based intertwined information systems for mutual information on holdings of cultural heritage institutions. So far, cooperation meant traditional, analog relations, either personal relations or event-based contributions.

In later years, the question of preservation of and information about the national cultural heritage has reached a higher priority on the political agenda. The question has been raised whether cooperation on an institutional level could be the answer to all kinds of problems and challenges, as there is shortage of money, closely related public missions, higher complexity with regard to the physical cultural heritage and the dynamics of the digital information society. Both the enormous potential of **digital technology** and its impact on how cultural heritage can be administrated more effectively, and the political focus on the concept of **life-long learning** have great impact on universities and schools as well as on public libraries, museums and archives. It is interesting, then, to realize that libraries, archives and museums first launched serious ALM cooperation initiatives as a reaction to the explosive development of electronic communication technology. Almost all ALM institutions have realized the economical profitability of cooperation and that it does not inevitably lead to renunciation of individual professional attitudes.

Archives, libraries and museums have also been moving closer to each other in reaction to greater demands on cost efficiency and accessibility raised in their environment.

OBSTACLES

Today Sweden is able to show examples of cooperative initiatives. This development started only about 10-15 years ago. Most of the initiatives started from municipal or regional libraries and include local archives, less common is the participation of local or regional museums. Many of the people involved are driven by their conviction that cooperation and coordination of information in libraries, archives and museums is technically possible at reasonable costs. This has been confirmed at least of a pilot study at the Regional Archive in Lund 1993.

Nevertheless, compared to the point of departure in Great Britain or Norway, it is easy to state that Sweden has not come very far on its way towards a modern cooperative cultural heritage sector.

One explanation lies in the fact that the three different branches for a long time have been professionally isolated from each other. The ALM sector is characterized by highly differentiated institutional and **professional attitudes**. For example, the professional education of librarians has been institutionalized very early, followed by that of archival staff. Museums on the other hand continue to employ academics with a Ph.D. or MA in their special topics, i.e. art history, archaeology etc., without any of the information technical or educational knowledge that is characteristic for librarians. They are backed up by administrative staff that lacks professional museological education. Most of the regional or local museums even lack professional staff to work in their libraries and archives. Another aspect is the keeping up with individually defined institutional aims, administrative routines and technical means amidst the fact that, within a wider cultural heritage perspective, the borders between different institutions are more or less historically grown constructions. In reality, there are numerous overlapping features. All cultural heritage institutions are part of a complex system with the aim of preserving the cultural heritage. In spite of all this, doors and windows have remained shut for a long time.

Now, things are slowly changing: Not long ago, the Department of ALM, Aesthetics and Cultural Studies at Uppsala University has started an MA education in library and information science as well as courses in archival science, museology and cultural information. **(1)**

The formula "Information and service first" I think contains the essence of librarianship in a nutshell. This characteristic professional attitude has resulted in historically grown and technically matured experience databases, standards and the internet. We just cannot help it: as soon as we see a book, we feel we have to catalogue and register it, making every one aware of a new acquisition! Magdalena Gram states in the latest report on (in translation:) "ALM Cooperation between Archives, Libraries and Museums. A Report by Order of the Swedish Government on the Situation at the National Library, the National Archives, the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs and the National Heritage Board", published in March 2002 **(2)**, that the museums that have come furthest with regard to registration of

non-object collection are those employing professional staff to take care of their internal libraries and archives. On a local level, public libraries in Sweden often feel that their knowledge in information and registration is missing in archives and museums. According to Magdalena Gram's report, they, therefore, in general have a very positive view on ALM cooperation.

Archivists have been more and more aware of the growing interest in their collections and are trying to keep pace with libraries, for example by joining forces with municipal libraries in order to meet up with public interest in genealogy and local history. (3) The beforementioned report by Magdalena Gram states, though, that while cooperation is welcomed, archivists feel uncomfortable about the risk that too much of it might lead to the creation of superior governmental bodies which might restrict the independency of the Swedish archives.

When we look upon the cultural heritage sector as a whole, we cannot help noticing that the most conservative part are the museums. The peculiarity with museums is their keeping their registers hidden from the public, preferring to address academic researchers while restricting access of the ordinary public to objects to the visual experience of short-lived exhibitions. According to the Gram-report, museums simply appear to be not interested in or equipped for a more substantial ALM cooperation or even for cooperation with other museums.

Another explanation lies in the fact that the Swedish **government** is much more **passive** compared to other countries. The responsibilities for archives, libraries and museums are divided among a number of state departments and municipalities. Despite investigations and official reports which clearly point at the fact that the cultural heritage sector is in need of enduring financial as well as political support, so far the government has restricted itself to only few short-lived preservation and registration projects. The government and municipalities so far have not been able to reach consensus on the more fundamental questions the cultural heritage sector is raising today, such as a need for an analysis of and answer to the apparent lack of sector overarching or even central political steering. Even the simplest but most powerful incitement for development, money, is lacking in today's Swedish cultural political vocabulary.

PARADIGM

The paradigm for Swedish ALM cooperation so far is "**Informal action**".

In 1992, an informal peergroup, called "ABM-gruppen", was formed as a platform for archivists, librarians and museum staff for information on and lobbying for common solutions to technological challenges. (4) The members of this group meet irregularly to discuss common issues. Unfortunately, the ABM-group never established itself as a major player on the cultural heritage scene. Characteristic for the situation in Sweden and the lack of interest from the government is the fact that the group never acquired formal authority. Another proof of the lack of formal authority in the cultural heritage sector are the results of a project financed by BIBSAM, the National Library's Department for National Co-ordination and Development. (5) The previously mentioned Lund pilot study had a few years earlier, in 1993, put the stress on the continuing work with authority files. The aim of the BIBSAM project was the preparation of rules for sector-overlapping authority files. After three years, in 1997, it was back from where it started with a recommendation that resources should be placed at disposal for the preparation of an instruction for sector-overlapping authority files. Due to the lack of funding from either the government or non-government institutions, this instruction still hasn't seen the light of day. Also local initiatives have had difficulties in successfully integrating projects with their ordinary work due to communication and technical problems.

A number of institutions of national importance have lately emerged on the scene with greater success, among them the National Library, the National Museum of Cultural History, the National Archives and the National Heritage Board. Their activity on the field of cooperation is a result of the fact that most of

them have certain official or self-assumed national responsibilities. For example, the National Museum of Cultural History has been very active in the field of documentation and preservation of image and photographic collections in museums. (6) Lately, even the trade union of cultural workers, DIK, and the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs have become active propagating cooperation. (7)

So far, every one of these national initiatives has retained in a state of informal, more or less short-lived projects without obligations. It is true, awareness is rising in the cultural heritage sector. The National Librarian writes in an internal statement from May this year, that despite agreement upon goals and visions there is need for more structured and well thought out coordination. But neither the Swedish government nor other clients have considered it their duty to exert pressure upon the institutions within their area of responsibility to change attitudes and means. Without a strong all-embracing client leadership, moderated by means of economical incitements, the process which the Swedish cultural heritage sector is in today maybe will need another decade or two before changing attitudes with long-lasting effect. Only then, the national paradigma that characterizes the Swedish development will change to formal action.

COURSES OF ACTION: WHY?

In the last chapter of my paper, I want to look briefly into the ways Swedish cultural heritage institutions have responded to the challenges posed upon them.

One way of response is to define “**why**” institutions want to cooperate and then they just go ahead with it. Once institutions have reached consensus about the purpose of their work, it will soon become quite clear to them which way they best should achieve it. In this scenario, institutions know why they are doing things and will be able to present collaborative projects in answer to actual needs and ideas without delay. This way, there have emerged a number of local (sometimes regional) projects, though hardly compatible to each other as long as they insist on individual technical and technological solutions. Purpose orientated collaborative projects are intended to meet actual needs and, for example, combine museum image databases with library book catalogues and online texts. In other cases, a library and an archive may share bibliographical and biographical databases searchable from a shared website. (8)

Here, today, we find almost solely local or regional initiatives. There is strong focus on the improvement of accessibility to the written cultural heritage preserved in archives, libraries or museums as a source for learning, education and scientific research. The search for an adequate answer to the question “why” has led to innovative answers. For example, I want to refer to a number of “facts rooms” or “knowledge rooms” projects that in the future might combine libraries’ expertise in information research and mediation, original archival sources and the experience of education and form typically found in museums. (9)

COURSES OF ACTION: HOW?

Another alternative is the answer to the question “**how**”, usually by building a common, firm ground of technical means to base any future cooperation upon. Once you know “how” to use computers, scanners, databases, the internet and other modern image and communication technology, and how to correctly register images in one and the same way in different cultural heritage institutions, the aim is to easily adapt different kinds of purposes to an agreed catalogue of means. Registration of images in libraries and museums surely is the most prominent example for such a course of action and it’s the way cultural heritage cooperation seems to be understood on a national level today.

“Image Databases and Digitisation - platform for ALM cooperation” is an informal joint project between the National Library, the National Museum of Art, the National Heritage Board, and the National

Archives of Sweden. **(10)** These institutions have been working together for a number of years in a number of successive joint projects in order to come forward to an informal national agreement on the principles of registration of images in databases and on digitisation as a platform for ALM cooperation. The current project is supposed to be finished by the end of this year- you will hear more about it tomorrow by my colleague, Kate Parson. It remains to see if this project results in instructions or recommendations with any practical impact on the daily work of more than the institutions involved.

Generally speaking, such a procedure needs great staying power. Everyone knows from experience, that it takes long time for professionals from different cultural heritage (as well as from other individual professional) branches to come forward to a common language of standard descriptions, database formats and commonly acceptable technological solutions. But, once this project has succeeded, the institutions involved might easily apply these agreements to a whole bunch of projects which both now and in the future might lead to shared resources.

Nowadays, many librarians, archivists or museum staff are aware of the importance of cooperation and they react quite naturally in an informal way to the challenges posed to them. But confronted with cost-conscious clients or the ministry responsible, they may have difficulties to justify the hours of work and the money spent. There will be a certain amount of resistance against spending money and allowing staff to work on standards with hardly any practical project in sight, unless this work is done informally or is supported within the context of a government's cultural ideological framework. And one may never be sure there will be more ideas for cooperation just because there is the means for it.

In reality, today, even successful projects have little if any chance to result in reinforced economical engagement, not even by the state. Maybe certain institutions, therefore, will feel economically exhausted after a project has been successfully finished and it will take a long time to take up again the line of action which initially led to the project. The National Library of Sweden in 1999 launched an investigation of different digitisation projects going on within its organisation, (in translation:) "Platform for Image Databases". Contacts were sought with other institutions in the cultural heritage sector. One of its aims was the establishments of uniform rules for digitisation and registration of digital images. The National Library's Unit for Maps, Pictures, Music and Posters had expanded with staff which was taken away from it as soon as the project was brought to an end.

If ALM cooperation is not supported by economical incitements and a strong governmental or regional and local leadership, implementation of new rules into daily routines is hardly to happen. So far, I haven't seen any example for this in Sweden at all. With regard to different institutional cultures and the organisational and financial situation of the Swedish cultural heritage institutions today, I am afraid ALM cooperation on a national level will fail part due to professional attitudes, part due to the lack of imagination and innovation with regard to political response to new challenges within this sector. The Swedish government has refused to investigate the current state of affairs of preserving the cultural heritage and to even consider a stronger commitment to a consistent and strong sector overlapping national cultural policy on a long-term basis. This leads to at least a delay in implementation of practical applications of agreements and standards and fundamental aspects of national cultural heritage policy.

CONCLUSION

Discussion of ALM cooperation on a national level has been concentrated on informal aspects of agreements concerning methods for registration of images and can, therefore, be characterized as a policy of "**means before purposes**".

However, a paradigmatical change in favour of a formal political solution has become more likely now than only a few years ago. Magdalena Gram's report is strongly in favour of a more powerful national coordination of the cultural heritage sector already in the near future. She recommends the building-up of

a national framework of rules, recommendations and standards to support ALM work, a national plan for digitisation, collection and preservation of digital material. She also recommends the construction of a national authority file as well as research and education in this particular field. Most important, she, too, proposes the establishment and successive extension of an ALM function with a coordinating mission. This may finally remove the obstacles which meet ALM cooperation in Sweden today and lead to a change of paradigm. It still remains to see if her report will be accepted as a ground for formal action. But, maybe, even the future of the Swedish cultural heritage might one day lie in the hands of a central coordinating government body.

(1) Department of ALM, Aesthetics and Cultural Studies, Uppsala University

<http://www.abm.uu.se/>

(2) Magdalena Gram: *ABM samverkan mellan arkiv, bibliotek och museer: En lägesrapport på uppdrag av regeringen från Kungl. biblioteket, Riksarkivet, Statens kulturråd och Riksantikvarieämbetet* (ALM Cooperation between Archives, Libraries and Museums. A Report by Order of the Swedish Government on the Situation at the National Library, the National Archives, the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs and the National Heritage Board). In Swedish only. Published March 2002.

<http://www.kb.se/Index/a.htm>

(3) *ABM – det fjärde rummet* (ALM – the fourth room) is still more of an idea than reality.

<http://www.bibl.vgregion.se/z/abm>. Read the report (in Swedish only) at

<http://www.bibl.vgregion.se/z/abm/abm.htm>.

(4) Read a short English description of the ALM group at

<http://www.kb.se/BIBSAM/english/alm/first.htm>. There is more information in Swedish only at

<http://www.kb.se/BIBSAM/abm/grund.htm>.

(5) Göran Kristiansson: *Namn på Nätet: Slutrapport från projektet auktoritetssamarbete mellan arkiv, bibliotek och museer*. In Swedish only. Published April 1997.

<http://www.kb.se/bibsam/bidrag/abmrapport.htm>

(6) Fotosekretariatet vid Nordiska museet. Information in Swedish only at

<http://www.nordm.se/nm/fotosekr/fotorad.html>.

(7) Two reports have been published containing papers from two national conferences reflecting the state of art as well as the future of ALM cooperation in Sweden:

Arkiv Bibliotek Museer: Rapport från ABM-forum 2000. Ed. by Peter Almerud. Published 2001, and

Kunskapens källor: om samarbete mellan arkiv, bibliotek och museer. Ed. by Peter Almerud. Published 2000.

(8) One of the examples mentioned in Magdalena Gram's report is museum and library cooperation at the Dalén-museum in Stenstorp, Falköping, but there is no information about it accessible via the internet.

<http://www.dalenmuseet.org/>

(9) The initial ALM cooperation project in southern Sweden has not been documented then. Its successor, the so called ABM-Skåneprojekt (ALM Scania Project), has resulted in at least in a modest website:

<http://www.lub.lu.se/lub/abm/MZabm.htm>

There is no information on the digital room for ALM-institutions in the region of Västernorrland which dates from the end of the 1980ies. It is continued by the ABM-Y group: <http://abm.ylm.se/>

The facts room at the Henry Dunker Cultural Centre in Helsingborg has so far not been made accessible online. <http://www.dunkerskulturhus.com/intro.html>

ALM cooperation in Eskilstuna which is aimed to result in a facts or knowledge room has not been realized yet (Magdalena Gram, p 72).

(10) *Bilddatabaser och digitalisering: plattform för ABM-samverkan* (Image Databases and Digitisation - platform for ALM cooperation). Project leader is Kate Parson.

http://www.kb.se/ABM_plattform/Default_Start.htm

This project is based on the results and experiences with the project *Plattform bilddatabas* (Platform for Image Databases). Report published by Magdalena Gram and Ulrika Kjellman in August 2000 as Royal Library, Report 27. <http://www.kb.se/DoIT/bilddbas.htm>