

Monitoring Norwegian museums

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INTRODUCTION

This case is investigating an evaluation tool developed and implemented by Arts Council Norway (ACN) - an annual evaluation of all Norwegian state-subsidized museums. This annual evaluation of Norwegian museums is an administrative attempt to capture the different forms of cultural value that might be attributed to heritage management. The evaluation methodology uses a combination of numbers and qualitative judgment to measure the levels and development of different kinds of museum work. This kind of evaluation process is highlighting the intersection between administration and bureaucracy on the one side and heritage management and professionalism on the other side.

The main part of the Norwegian museum sector is constituted by around 60 museums. These belong to a national network of state-funded museums. Most of these museums have been subject of a large-scale museum reform, instigated by the Ministry of Culture in 2000 to create larger and better museum institutions. This reform entailed a massive reorganization of the Norwegian museum sector, i.a. through a large reduction in the number of museum institutions. From being made up by more than three hundred and fifty individual museum institutions, the national museum network today consists of around sixty administrative units. This reduction has come about through various forms of mergers, referred to as consolidations.

The administrative body in charge of museum subsidies and reporting is Arts Council Norway (ACN). ACN have developed an evaluation tool and process whereby they annually evaluate all institutions in the national museum network.

OBJECTIVES

We ask the following questions:

- What values of heritage and museum work is evaluated in what way by public administration?
- How does this kind of evaluation look from the side of the museum professionals being evaluated?
- How does the reporting and evaluation procedures influence the work and priorities of the museums?



The National Museum, Oslo.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our main empirical data are the ACN museum reports from 2015 to 2020. The evaluation categories and indicators between 2015 and 2020 have been compared, to identify changes and development in the implementation of the evaluation routine.

We have also conducted an interview with the administrative executive at ACN in charge of the annual evaluation. The topic for this interview was the choice of indicators, the development and implementation of the indicators; the relation between museum policy and performance measurement, potential future change of museum evaluations etc.

We also conducted three interviews with museum leaders, all with extensive experience from the Norwegian museum sector. The main topic for these interviews was how the representatives from the museum institutions experienced the valuations from their perspective. Did they see any tensions between the values they attribute to their own work as museum professionals and the attempt to evaluate this work by their funders? Did they see this kind of assessment and evaluation as a necessary (or unnecessary) evil, or do they use the mandatory reporting as tools to develop their work?

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The evaluations are based on a series of quantitative and qualitative indicators: **outreach/communication**, including visitor figures, **strategic documents and audience development**; **collection management**, including documentation and conservation, and **research**, which includes publication figures and levels of competence.

ACN describes the evaluation as a way of measuring the achievement of goals for these institutions, based on “expectations towards a professionally run museum”. This annual evaluation of Norwegian museums is an administrative attempt to capture the different forms of cultural value that might be attributed to heritage management.

The quantitative side of evaluation measures the following:

Different sources of *income*, different kinds of *public subsidies*, costs and expenses and man-years, including voluntary work. There are also numbers on *publications* (specifying the numbers on peer-reviewed ones) and on *public meetings*. Furthermore: the size and the growth of different kinds of collections is measured, as well as on storage conditions for the collections.

All museums also get a *qualitative* assessment of their performance on *Dissemination/Communication*, *Collection Management*, *Conservation* and *Research*. The assessment uses a four-point scale, from *Very satisfactory* to *Unsatisfactory*.

Our analysis uncovered a set of tensions:

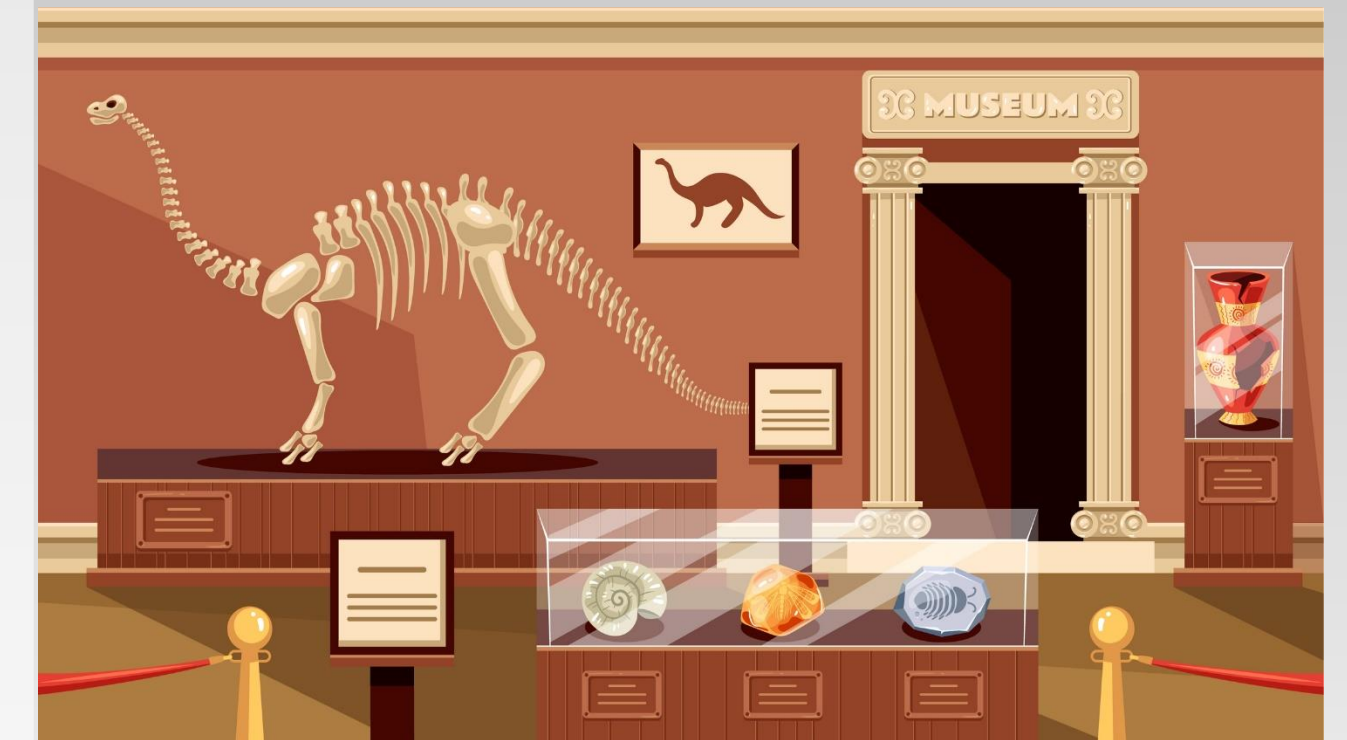
- a potential tension inherent in the responsibilities of all modern museums: being responsible for both technical conservation, audience development and scientific publications.
- a tension between being measured against a national average, an expected minimum or against their own previous results and institutional goals.
- a tension between quantitative indicators and the general attributed values of heritage and museum work. There is a certain shift to be noted on developing measurement to capture these latter values.

CONCLUSIONS

The museum professionals acknowledge the necessity of evaluations, while they also see evident shortcomings in them. The evaluations are to a large degree based on trust, and low scores do not affect the funding of the museums.

In general, the evaluations are characterized by a high level of formality, but this is accompanied by informal and ad-hoc communication between the museums and the Arts Council.

There is a certain tension between all the different expectations these museum institutions are met with. In short, they are responsible for tasks as diverse as e.g., technical conservation of fragile objects, development of audiences and a diversity of dissemination forms, and scientific projects and publications. This variety of responsibilities tend to create a more or less permanent challenge of prioritization, a challenge that clearly also is a value-based challenge.



This kind of museum evaluation process is highlighting the intersection between administration and bureaucracy on the one side and heritage management and professionalism on the other side. Museum work is characterized by a complex set of goals and the values attached to these, as museums are expected to be audience institutions, research institutions, heritage institutions, identity institutions, tourist institutions etc. There is a complex interplay between how these values are experienced by heritage and museum professionals on the one side and measured by public administration on the other side.