Geir Vestheim (1946–2021)

Linnéa Lindsköld
Associate Professor, The Swedish School of Library and Information Science, University of Borås. Member of the Scientific Committee for NCCPR.
Linnea.Lindskold@hb.se

Heidi Stavrum
Associate Professor, Department of Culture, Religion and Social Studies, University of South Eastern Norway. Member of the Scientific Committee for NCCPR.
Heidi.Stavrum@usn.no

Early January 2021 the sad news arrived that Professor emeritus Geir Vestheim had passed away unexpectedly. His passing is a great loss to the Nordic community of cultural policy researchers.

Geir Vestheim started his academic career in Norway. After several years of teaching in high schools, he was employed at Hedmark University College in 1993. He got a grant from the Research Council of Norway that resulted in the publishing of the book *Kulturpolitikk i det moderne Noreg* (1995). As Geir states in the foreword of the book, his ambition was to present a broad picture of the development of Norwegian cultural policy throughout the 20th century, as well as to reflect on the relationship between national and international cultural policy (1995, p. 9). The book was and still is one of the main contributions to the cultural policy research literature in Norway.

Geir came to Sweden with a finished dissertation, *Fornuft, kultur og velferd: ein historisk-sosiologisk studie av norsk folkebibliotekpolitikk*, and received his PhD in Library and Information Science in 1997 from the University of Gothenburg. He worked at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS), University of Borås from 1997 to 2009. During this time, he was an important key factor for the development of the subject, as well as cultural policy research in Sweden and in the Nordic countries. In Borås, he became the director for The Centre for Cultural Policy Research and immediately set to lay a foundation for a cultural policy research environment in Sweden and abroad. He became professor in Library and Information Science in 2000.

Geir was a builder of infrastructure and a creator of networks. He transferred the Swedish journal *Kulturpolitisk Tidsskrift* into *The Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy* that we know today. As the editor of the Nordic journal for its first three years, 1998–2000, he put a Nordic editorial committee in place along with a peer-review process, and described his vision for a lively Nordic cultural policy research community in his editorials. To be able to publish
academic texts in the Scandinavian languages was a core issue for the Nordic journal according to Geir, not at least to strengthen the cooperation between the countries. He defined cultural policy studies as a field of research rather than a discipline, meaning that it is multidisciplinary at its core: “Cultural policy is the research object, not the perspective” (Vestheim 1999). To make this distinction was, according to Geir, also to make it possible to distance the researcher from the politician. In his first editorial, he wrote that the contributions to NJCP should focus on the “policy” part of cultural policy: “Research on cultural policy should, in my opinion, put the main emphasis on studying the social, economic, organizational, educational and ideological conditions for art and cultural life in society” (Vestheim 1998). To achieve this, the researcher would need a broad understanding of culture, covering civil society as well as the public and business sector when studying cultural policy. These key issues are still the foundation for our research field.

Apart from the work with the journal, Geir achieved great success with the research programme “Kulturen i kunskapssamhället” funded by Riksbankens jubileumsfond. The programme was a result of his work together with three other professors, Sverker Sörlin, Stockholm University, Svante Beckman, Linköping University, and Folke Snickars, The Royal Institute of Technology. Under Geir’s leadership, SSLIS was responsible for the sub-programme “Kulturliv, kulturpolitik och demokrati”. This project financed several PhD students, one of whom was Jenny Johannisson, and also resulted in two anthologies. The programme, along with the journal, was the starting point for a cohesive academic study of cultural policy in Sweden. Geir was good-humoured, and always enthusiastic towards junior scholars and PhD students. At the SSLIS, he was especially appreciated for his speeches to new PhDs at their dissertation dinner.

Apart from anthologies and monographs, Geir was a frequent contributor to the Nordic journal, as well as the International Journal of Cultural Policy. He discussed the concept of instrumental cultural policy early on, in an article that was read and referred to by many (Vestheim 1994). In 2008, his article “All cultural policy is instrumental” was published in KulturSverige 2009. It was an important contribution to the contemporary debate on instrumentalisation of cultural policy in Sweden.

In 2009, Geir left Borås for the position as Professor of cultural studies and cultural policy at Telemark University College, now the University of South-Eastern Norway. In Bø, Geir continued his productive career of both research and institutional work. One of his main tasks during his years in Norway was to lead the process of establishing a new interdisciplinary PhD program in cultural studies, including both cultural policy studies as well as other forms of cultural studies. Due to Geir’s steady hands, the work was successful. The way he managed to connect different research groups and interests at different campuses illustrated his diplomatic and strategic abilities. The PhD program eventually became an important milestone in the process of establishing the new University of South-Eastern Norway. In Bø, Geir also continued to teach and supervise both MA and PhD students. Several of Geir’s previous students have reached out to us, describing a supportive professor, always helpful and encouraging. Geir was also a friendly and open colleague. We remember his laughter, his jokes and his dancing, as well as his serious and caring attitude towards all of us.

Geir retired from his position at USN in 2015. However, he did not retire from his research, or from the encouragement of Nordic cooperation. The 10th Nordic Conference of Cultural Policy Research will be held in Borås in November 2021. Geir was part of the

1. All quotes from the editorials were translated from Norwegian by Lindsköld.
scientific committee and was supposed to hold a keynote on the history of the Nordic cultural policy research community. He looked forward to meeting his peers at his old workplace.

When writing this, we have observed just how important Geir was to very many people in our research community, and just how much all of us liked him. He did a lot both to establish our network and to keep our community together during many years.

On behalf of the Nordic community of cultural policy researchers and the Scientific Committee for the Nordic Conference on Cultural Policy Research, we want to honour Geir’s memory. In his spirit, we encourage you all to continue to strengthen the cooperation between Nordic scholars and discuss, socialise, and interact with each other with the same amount of interest, enthusiasm, and joy that Geir always did.

References