

Clifford A. Lynch, “The Public Library in 2020,” *Library 2020: Today’s Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow’s Library*, edited by Joseph Janes. Scarecrow Press, 2013.

The American public library in 2020 will be a mirror of the broader society’s questions and discontents about the evolution of the marketplace for cultural materials – and indeed the nature and scope of these cultural materials -- in response to the growing acceptance and even embrace of networked information. It will be an institution in profound transition, rebalancing and restructuring its portfolio of services and investments.

Some things won’t change much: the role of the library in helping people to access social services, to find jobs and start businesses, to acquire and refine various forms of literacy, to learn how to discover and evaluate information. Connections and partnerships with K-12 education and community colleges will continue to be important.

Physical materials – books, periodicals, video (DVDs), sound recordings (CDs) and similar materials will still be purchased for the library’s collection, and will continue to circulate as they have for decades. But in 2020 that now very large sector of library patrons who want to download borrowed e-books, music or video onto their readers, tablets, players or computers, either in person at the library or from home across the Internet, are likely to be disappointed. Many works, particularly the new best-selling materials from the big content providers, may simply be unavailable from the library in electronic form; patrons will have to settle for a circulating physical copy. Or the library electronic versions may come with such long wait lists that they might as well be unavailable.

And by 2020 some gaps will begin to appear in public library collections: important works of broad public interest that are *only* available as electronic downloads, but that aren’t offered to libraries by their publishers in electronic form, or are embargoed for long periods. In 2020 this will be still be rare, at least for books, where the physical artifact is loved and honored

by much of the public, perhaps much more commonplace for video and for music, but the trendline is clear and troubling....ⁱ

It's not clear how much damage this is doing to the public's ability to get access to information and cultural material. How many people genuinely *depend* upon the public library for access, and need access to the materials that the library can't get for its collections – how much do the emerging collection gaps matter? Obviously it's annoying, frustrating, for patrons when they can't download an electronic version of a work from home, and that if they want to borrow from the library they have to go there and be satisfied with physical works; this may shift some patrons to patterns of more purchase and less library use. But to what extent is this a genuine *barrier* to access?ⁱⁱ It is also not clear yet how many of the patrons who can't get what they want, or, more commonly, can't get what they want in the format that they prefer, will punish their public library by voting to reduce its public financial support.

What's happened here? As content has moved to the network, it has been shifted to an economic framework based on license rather than sale. Content licensing for electronic works circumvents the traditional doctrine of first sale and related copyright provisions that allow libraries (and consumers) both to circulate and to preserve materials that they purchase in a common public market for information and cultural works. This change has allowed the major commercial content providers (particularly book publishers) to realize a very long term objective: to totally prevent libraries from competing with their sales, or to make sure that they pay for every sale that the publishers feel they have been deprived of. And some of the content providers have done exactly that, creating discriminatory pricing for library use of their works when they choose to permit such use at all under their licensing terms. Electronic public library collections, such as they are, exist entirely at the pleasure of the content industries.

In some cases, content providers have made electronic materials completely unavailable for circulation (and preservation) by public libraries. In other cases, they've allowed libraries to acquire electronic content for circulation, but under conditions that reduce its value (for example, availability embargos that keep new content out of libraries for the first six months that it's on the market) and increase its cost (for example, materials that are licensed to circulate, but priced at 100 times the cost of a personal copy in the consumer marketplace; or materials that are only rented to the library for a limited time or a limited number of uses, and thus cannot be preserved or made part of a permanent long term collection, but are still priced at a premium to the cost of personal copies). When electronic content is available, but only under bad terms, public libraries have had to make hard choices about how much investment in electronic versions is appropriate, as opposed to investment in traditional physical materials. ⁱⁱⁱDifferent libraries have made different choices, based upon and trying to balance their understanding of the needs and preferences of their patron base, their concerns about the importance of long held library values involving reader privacy, permanent collections, and preservation, and their judgments about the best use of limited funds.

Indeed, in many ways it's a good time to be a big publisher – along with finally getting control of the ways library might acquire and use your electronic content, they've also basically eliminated the used resale market for purely electronic content, as well as a tremendous amount of the unorganized social sharing and lending among individual consumers that they felt used to steal away additional sales. And there are amazing amounts of data to be had about who is engaging and enjoying what content, and how often, though it's sometimes complicated to get this data. The only clouds on the horizon for the publishers are that the populace overall seems to be reading fewer of books, and it's proving devilishly difficult to fully monetize content assets in

the very complex, ever changing collection of business models and ecosystem of aggregators, intermediaries and others that are enabled by the Internet; profits aren't always what they used to be.

But back at the public library in 2020 there's much more going on here than a painful and ultimately doomed rear-guard action against a marketplace structure turning against libraries and consumers, in the face of a legal and legislative system that's apparently unwilling to protect libraries from the changes, no longer supporting provisions in intellectual property law and policy to honor and enable historic library roles (or indeed the historic purposes of copyright itself). There are signs of a series of quiet, modest revolutions and shifts that will have longer-term ramifications. Public libraries in 2020 have been forced to be much less about access to current best sellers; this creates a huge opportunity to bring other content to the attention of their public. Smaller publishers (including mostly nonprofit publishers of academic and research materials, but also vast numbers of niche commercial publishers) and a fast-growing sector of independent authors (only some of whom are trying to make a living, or even a meaningful direct income stream, from their writings) are negotiating comfortable and mutually advantageous arrangements to make their works available through public libraries, *particularly* in electronic versions (which are all that are offered in a growing number of cases for these materials, since the small content creators don't have the budget to invest in print). High profile, popular, independent authors, having broken relations with their publishers and gone to direct sales to the public, have emerged by 2020 as a critical "swing" group; public libraries need their works, and to some extent they need public libraries as a marketplace and as a way to find ever-broader audience, but the negotiations are contentious and difficult, and made more problematic by the

lack of mechanisms for either side to negotiate at scale --- too often it's still one or a few libraries talking with one or a few authors at a time.

Local connections have become particularly important and particularly vibrant: materials of local interest for historical, genealogical or cultural reasons; local authors; local musicians and performers, documentary materials, playwrights and partnered theatrical directors and troops. Many of these artists, creators and scholars are seeking a public, and they have found that partnerships with public libraries, including participation in live events of various kinds hosted at the library, are very effective in building such an audience. Vast amounts of older, public domain materials are readily available in digital form, and can be explored by libraries for local relevance. And, oddly, non-textual materials have become more mainstream and more heavily used as part of the library's collection; while the biggest textual publishers have essentially viewed libraries as enemies, this perception is less deeply held among the music, film and video content providers, who in some cases have offered much better terms than the large publishers. At the same time, public perceptions have changed over the past few decades: audio and video are now far more legitimate and welcome both as art forms and as vehicles for communicating information, and the historically privileged role of texts has diminished somewhat. The conjunction of good acquisition terms, changing societal bias and changing patron preferences has altered usage patterns in unexpected ways.

There are some odd market dynamics that are starting to emerge around the edges, making the big content providers a bit nervous and keeping the consultants to these big content providers very busy: more frequently than in the past material that did not come from these big content providers goes mainstream and prominent; analyses suggest it's in large part because of the involvement (coordinated or not) of various public libraries in bringing the material into the

public eye, coupled with genuine grassroots activity in the social media sphere (as opposed to a calculated marketing campaign).

The nature of the public library collection is changing. As is the role of the library – it's no longer mainly a provider of access for well-known new mass market material, or at least the most prominent, most popular parts of this. Rather, it selects material and makes a lot of introductions to less well known content old and new. Collections are getting larger, and less volatile (no longer are such large numbers of new mass market works acquired, then mostly discarded after a year or two); they are getting more diverse and distinctive from one public library to the next.

In recent decades, public libraries have been all about access. Stewardship and preservation of the cultural record have been mainly left to research libraries and other cultural memory organizations such as archives. In 2020, a series of subtle social changes are beginning to take hold that are returning stewardship to the public library agenda. The public broadly has now recognized that a great deal of their own personal and family history is embodied in digital materials that they have come to understand are in many ways very fragile; they are reaching out to public libraries for help in organizing and curating these materials, and in preserving them. Through hard experience, the public has become appropriately skeptical of having much confidence in the stewardship commitments of commercial actors, be they sharing and social media sites, archiving services, or content marketers. In a world where consumer products are streamed or locked to platforms such as e-book readers, where they are ephemeral and vendor-dependent, we see a populace that also starts to sense how greatly mass market cultural materials are at risk; a corporate failure, for example, might mean losing one's long-developed (and expensive) personal library of texts, music and/or videos. They are resigned to the notion that it's

unlikely they'll be able to pass these collections to their children and grandchildren (or to contribute them to stewardship organizations like libraries) in the way that earlier generations passed on physical books and sound recordings. While they may not expect the public library to *solve* these problems, they do expect libraries to at least help. And these perceptions of fragility and ephemerality everywhere in the digital world will increase sensitivity about the fate of materials that they can control, or that are controlled by sympathetic parties that share in these concerns about stewardship and continuity of access. Digital representations of the lives of local community members ("digital lives"), local history, local culture of all kinds are becoming integral parts of public library collections, and these public libraries are asserting and undertaking a stewardship and preservation role over these materials, even as they have been blocked from taking a similar role with regard to national and international "blockbuster" commercial media materials, which can only be handled, to the extent that they are handled at all, by copyright deposit requirements involving national libraries or *noblesse oblige* type arrangements with particular research libraries or other memory organizations. With this new emphasis on stewardship comes a complex of new or rejuvenated alliances and partnerships. These include historical societies; government entities at the state and local level maintaining public records, particularly in electronic form, without the capability to manage these for the long term; local businesses that might want to make certain business records or databases part of the cultural record; the local cultural heritage and arts sectors broadly. Some alliances will be more complex and include competitive elements: for example, there will be natural partnerships with universities and their libraries and archives, which bear so much of the burden and host so much of the expertise and infrastructure surrounding digital stewardship, but there will also be some amount of competition as research libraries also pursue the development of new and unique

collections in the digital world; academic libraries will invoke prestige, expertise, and scholarly specialization that can be brought to the collection development and stewardship processes in place of the public library's appeal to local connections in trying to attract content. Hopefully, links, replicated copies and other technologies will help keep the competition at a constructive rather than a counterproductive level here.

There will also be very powerful forces towards centralization, or reliance upon collectives of libraries because of the economies of scale and the need for high levels of technical skills for curating digital materials; public libraries will want to rely upon and share platforms for mounting, offering and curating digital content. Applications as network-based services, offered by organizations that the libraries trust (particularly for stewardship), will be the order of the day.

It has been clear since at least the early 1990s that the evolving Internet undermines geography as an organizing and structuring principle; futurists in those years spoke of the "death of distance." Public libraries in the United States, circulating physical object to their patrons and most often primarily funded through local taxes, have always been institutions based on geographically defined communities. It has taken the large scale consumer adoption of network-delivered electronic content and the predictable business choices of the big content companies, combined with the Great Recession and the accompanying extraordinary public disinvestment in education and culture to finally force public libraries to deal with many of the implications of the weakening of geography as structure. Interestingly, to the extent that popular commercial works continue to be available in public libraries only in physical form due to content provider policies, this will serve to reinforce the old geographic models (and, in some quarters, the perception that libraries are outdated, archaic organizations). In 2020, we begin to see some public libraries grapple more seriously with serving communities of both patrons and content providers that are

not necessarily defined by geographic proximity. Ultimately, it seems possible that some public libraries will move towards membership-based funding strategies as a means of financial survival, where members don't need to be in close geographic proximity; possibly the first explorations will be hybrid public and membership funding models. Of course, challenges will be raised – are these in fact public libraries, or some re-invention of the historic subscription/membership model library? Do they retain the public policy roles of traditional public libraries? Should memberships for the poor be subsidized, and if so how?

Moving away from entirely geography-based user communities sets up new competitions among public libraries based on collections, services, and expertise (and cost), and between public libraries and other players, both commercial and non-commercial. In 2020 or shortly thereafter these strategic questions will start to emerge in a serious way: public libraries (or former public libraries) will be exploring the range of alliances and nature of various potential specializations, and making a variety of different choices about how much weight to continue to assign geographic proximity as a structural principle. One of the most interesting prospects will be the possibility – indeed, the likelihood – of library mergers or close alliances among libraries where the libraries involved are geographically distant, as opposed to the historic collaboratives made up of geographically proximate public libraries. It's not clear how this alters the negotiations for content, either from large commercial content providers or from other content creators (who may now be “local” in the sense of common interests rather than geography, if libraries are willing to specialize in appropriate ways), but it will reshape them.

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ⁱ What we can see emerging here is a new kind of digital divide issue: content that is *only* available in digital form, that is not made available to libraries (possible because it's in digital form), that is costly, and that is important to the public, but only available to those who are both relatively well-off and comfortable with the digital environment. This is different from the classical digital divide, which is largely concerned with important digital material that people can't get access to because of some mix of lack of expertise, lack of network connectivity, or cost – but that the public library has been in an ideal position to help people with, and where it routinely and essentially provides that help. On the bright side, in 2020 the continued drop in the price of consumer technology and the continued proliferation of at least mediocre internet connectivity have served to whittle down some of that traditional digital divide in terms of raw access, though the effects of the Great Recession and continued problems around education and literacy among the poor have proven much more difficult to overcome

ⁱⁱ There is also a “green” issue here, particularly for libraries that are not in easy walking distance for most of their patrons; as awareness of the environment and climate change grows, and the perceived social cost of travel increases, the need to physically visit the library in order to transact business that in a more “sensible” world could be done over the net will be seen as increasingly irresponsible, and become a target of criticism. Most likely libraries, rather than publishers, will unfortunately bear the brunt of this criticism. In addition, the growing actual expense of the transportation involved (e.g. gas, transit fares) in the physical visit will deter borrowing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Differential pricing is nothing new; academic and research libraries have suffered with this in the journal sphere for many decades (indeed even before journals went electronic), but there are important differences in the situation the public library world faces with books. Research journals are a closed system: libraries are by far the dominant purchasers of academic journals, and most of their authors are in universities. The notion of journal publishers wholesale withholding access by refusing to license to academic libraries – opposed to extracting as much money as possible – is unlikely. Public libraries don't buy a lot of periodicals, relatively speaking, though by 2020 they are going to find access to these growing ever more problematic, and important “crossover” journals like *Nature* or *Science* that make the news and often draw the attention of the broader public may well be priced out of the public library market's reach. And, of course, public libraries are not the primary market for general interest fiction and nonfiction. (Though they argue they are a significant marketplace, too significant to ignore in the transition to e-books; based on their behavior to date, many of the major publishers don't seem to agree.) There are also examples of discriminatory pricing that have been used at various points in the evolution of the consumer video market; libraries will face challenges in this sector as well.