

public library: Public library (an essay)

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In *What Was Revolutionary about the French Revolution?*ⁱ Robert Darnton considers how a complete collapse of the social order (when absolutely everything – all social values – is turned upside down) would look. Such trauma happens often in the life of individuals but only rarely on the level of an entire society.

*In 1789 the French had to confront the collapse of a whole social order—the world that they defined retrospectively as the Ancien Régime—and to find some new order in the chaos surrounding them. They experienced reality as something that could be destroyed and reconstructed, and they faced seemingly limitless possibilities, both for good and evil, for raising a utopia and for falling back into tyranny.*ⁱⁱ

The revolution bootstraps itself.

In the dictionaries of the time, the word *revolution* was said to derive from the verb *to revolve* and was defined as “the return of the planet or a star to the same point from which it parted.”ⁱⁱⁱ French political vocabulary spread no further than the narrow circle of the feudal elite in Versailles. The citizens, revolutionaries, had to invent new words, concepts . . . an entire new language in order to describe the revolution that had taken place.

They began with the vocabulary of time and space. In the French revolutionary calendar used from 1793 until 1805, time started on 1 Vendémiaire, Year 1, a date which marked the abolition of the old monarchy on (the Gregorian equivalent) 22 September 1792. With a decree in 1795, the metric system was adopted. As with the adoption of the new calendar, this was an attempt to organize space in a rational and natural

way. *Gram* became a unit of mass.

In Paris, 1,400 streets were given new names. Every reminder of the tyranny of the monarchy was erased. The revolutionaries even changed their names and surnames. *Le Roy* or *Leveque*, commonly used until then, were changed to *Le Loi* or *Liberté*. To address someone, out of respect, with *vous* was forbidden by a resolution passed on 24 Brumaire, Year 2. *Vous* was replaced with *tu*. People are equal.

The watchwords *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (freedom, equality, brotherhood)^{iv} were built through literacy, new epistemologies, classifications, declarations, standards, reason, and rationality. What first comes to mind about the revolution will never again be the return of a planet or a star to the same point from which it departed. Revolution bootstrapped, revolved, and hermeneutically circularized itself.

Melvil Dewey was born in the state of New York in 1851.^v His thirst for knowledge was found its satisfaction in libraries. His knowledge about how to gain knowledge was developed by studying libraries. Grouping books on library shelves according to the color of the covers, the size and thickness of the spine, or by title or author's name did not satisfy Dewey's intention to develop appropriate new epistemologies in the service of the production of knowledge about knowledge. At the age of twenty-four, he had already published the first of nineteen editions of *A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library*,^{vi} the classification system that still bears its author's name: the Dewey Decimal System. Dewey had a dream: for his twenty-first birthday he had announced, "My World Work [will be] Free Schools and Free Libraries for every soul."^{vii}

His dream came true. "Public Library" is an entry in the catalog of History where a fantastic decimal^{viii} describes a category of phenomenon that—together with free public education, a free public healthcare, the scientific method, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Wikipedia, and free software, among others—we, the people, are most proud of.

The public library is a part of these invisible infrastructures that we start to notice only once they begin to disappear. A utopian dream—about the place from which every human being will have access to every piece of available knowledge that can be collected—looked impossible for a long time, until the egalitarian impetus of social revolutions, the Enlightenment idea of universality of knowledge, and the exceptional suspension of the commercial barriers to access to knowledge made it possible.

The Internet has, as in many other situations, completely changed our expectations and imagination about what is possible. The dream of a catalogue of the world – a universal approach to all available knowledge for every member of society – became realizable. A question merely of the meeting of curves on a graph: the point at which the line of global distribution of personal computers meets that of the critical mass of people with access to the Internet. Today nobody lacks the imagination necessary to see public libraries as part of a global infrastructure of universal access to knowledge for literally every member of society. However, the emergence and development of the Internet is taking place precisely at the point at which

an institutional crisis—one with traumatic and inconceivable consequences—has also begun.

The internet is a new challenge, creating experiences commonly proffered as ‘revolutionary’. Yet, a true revolution of the Internet is the universal access to all knowledge that it makes possible. However, unlike the new epistemologies developed during the French revolution the tendency is to keep the ‘old regime’ (of intellectual property rights, market concentration and control of access). The new possibilities for classification, development of languages, invention of epistemologies which the internet poses, and which might launch off into new orbits from existing classification systems, are being suppressed.

In fact, the reactionary forces of the ‘old regime’ are staging a ‘Thermidor’ to suppress the public libraries from pursuing their mission. Today public libraries cannot acquire, cannot even buy digital books from the world’s largest publishers.^{ix} The small amount of e-books that they were able to acquire already they must destroyed after only twenty-six lendings.^x Libraries and the principle of universal access to all existing knowledge that they embody are losing, in every possible way, the battle with a market dominated by new players such as Amazon.com, Google, and Apple.

In 2012, Canada’s Conservative Party–led government cut financial support for Libraries and Archives Canada (LAC) by Can\$9.6 million, which resulted in the loss of 400 archivist and librarian jobs, the shutting down of some of LAC’s Internet pages, and the cancellation of the further purchase of new books.^{xi} In only three years, from 2010 to 2012, some 10 percent of public libraries were closed in Great Britain.^{xii}

The commodification of knowledge, education, and schooling (which are the consequences of a globally harmonized, restrictive legal regime for intellectual property) with neoliberal austerity politics curtails the possibilities of adapting to new sociotechnological conditions, let alone further development, innovation, or even basic maintenance of public libraries’ infrastructure.

Public libraries are an endangered institution, doomed to extinction.

Petit bourgeois denial prevents society from confronting this disturbing insight. As in many other fields, the only way out offered is innovative market-based entrepreneurship. Some have even suggested that the public library should become an open software platform on top of which creative developers can build app stores^{xiii} or Internet cafés for the poorest, ensuring that they are only a click away from the Amazon.com catalog or the Google search bar. But these proposals overlook, perhaps deliberately, the fundamental principles of access upon which the idea of the public library was built.

Those who are well-meaning, intelligent, and tactfull will try to remind the public of all the many sides of the phenomenon that the public library is: major community center, service for the vulnerable, center of literacy, informal and lifelong learning; a place where hobbyists, enthusiasts, old and young meet and

share knowledge and skills.^{xiv} Fascinating. Unfortunately, for purely tactical reasons, this reminder to the public does not always contain an explanation of how these varied effects arise out of the foundational idea of a public library: universal access to knowledge for each member of the society produces knowledge, produces knowledge about knowledge, produces knowledge about knowledge transfer: the public library produces sociability.

The public library does not need the sort of creative crisis management that wants to propose *what* the library should be *transformed into* once our society, obsessed with market logic, has made it impossible for the library to perform its main mission. Such proposals, if they do not insist on universal access to knowledge for all members, are Trojan horses for the silent but galloping disappearance of the public library from the historical stage. Sociability—produced by public libraries, with all the richness of its various appearances—will be best preserved if we manage to fight for the values upon which we have built the public library: universal access to knowledge for each member of our society.

Freedom, equality, and brotherhood need brave librarians practicing civil disobedience.

Library Genesis, Aaaaarg.org, Monoskop, UbuWeb are all examples of fragile knowledge infrastructures built and maintained by brave librarians practicing civil disobedience which the world of researchers in the humanities rely on. These projects are re-inventing the public library in the gap left by today's institutions in crisis.

Library Genesis^{xv} is an online repository with over a million books and is the first project in history to offer everyone on the Internet free download of its entire book collection (as of this writing, about fifteen terabytes of data), together with the all metadata (MySQL dump) and PHP/HTML/Java Script code for webpages. The most popular earlier repositories, such as Gigapedia (later Library.nu), handled their upload and maintenance costs by selling advertising space to the pornographic and gambling industries. Legal action was initiated against them, and they were closed.^{xvi} News of the termination of Gigapedia/Library.nu strongly resonated among academics and book enthusiasts circles and was even noted in the mainstream Internet media, just like other major world events. The decision by Library Genesis to share its resources has resulted in a network of identical sites (so-called mirrors) through the development of an entire range of Net services of metadata exchange and catalog maintenance, thus ensuring an exceptionally resistant survival architecture.

Aaaaarg.org, started by the artist Sean Dockray, is an online repository with over 50,000 books and texts. A community of enthusiastic researchers from critical theory, contemporary art, philosophy, architecture, and other fields in the humanities maintains, catalogs, annotates, and initiates discussions around it. It also as a courseware extension to the self-organized education platform The Public School^{xvii}.

UbuWeb^{xviii} is the most significant and largest online archive of avant-garde art; it was initiated and is lead by conceptual artist Kenneth Goldsmith. UbuWeb, although still informal, has grown into a relevant

and recognized critical institution of contemporary art. Artists want to see their work in its catalog and thus agree to a relationship with UbuWeb that has no formal contractual obligations.

Monoskop is a wiki for the arts, culture, and media technology, with a special focus on the avant-garde, conceptual, and media arts of Eastern and Central Europe; it was launched by Dušan Barok and others. In the form of a blog Dušan uploads to Monoskop.org/log an online catalog of curated titles (at the moment numbering around 3,000), and, as with UbuWeb, it is becoming more and more relevant as an online resource.

Library Genesis, Aaaaarg.org, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Dušan Barok show us that the future of the public library does not need crisis management, venture capital, start-up incubators, or outsourcing but simply the freedom to continue extending the dreams of Melvil Dewey, Paul Otlet^{xix} and other visionary librarians, just as it did before the emergence of the Internet.

With the emergence of the Internet and software tools such as Calibre and “[let’s share books],”^{xx} librarianship has been given an opportunity, similar to astronomy and the project SETI@home,^{xxi} to include thousands of amateur librarians who will, together with the experts, build a distributed peer-to-peer network to care for the catalog of available knowledge, because

a public library is:

- *free access to books for every member of society*
- *library catalog*
- *librarian*

With books ready to be shared, meticulously cataloged, everyone is a librarian.

When everyone is librarian, library is everywhere.^{xxii}

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ⁱ Robert H. Darnton, *What Was Revolutionary about the French Revolution?* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1996), 6.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

iv “Slogan of the French Republic,” France.fr, n.d., <http://www.france.fr/en/institutions-and-values/slogan-french-republic.html>.

v Richard F. Snow, “Melvil Dewey” *American Heritage* 32, no. 1 (December 1980), <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/melvil-dewey>.

vi Melvil Dewey, *A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library* (1876), Project Gutenberg e-book 12513 (2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12513/12513-h/12513-h.htm>.

vii Snow, “Melvil Dewey.”

viii “Dewey Decimal Classification: 001.”, *Dewey.info*, 27 October 2014, <http://dewey.info/class/001/2009-08/about.en>.

ix “American Library Association Open Letter to Publishers on E-Book Library Lending,” *Digital Book World*, 24 September 2012, <http://www.digitalbookworld.com/2012/american-library-association-open-letter-to-publishers-on-e-book-library-lending/>.

x Jeremy Greenfield, “What Is Going On with Library E-Book Lending?” *Forbes*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeremygreenfield/2012/06/22/what-is-going-on-with-library-e-book-lending/>.

xi Aideen Doran, “Free Libraries for Every Soul: Dreaming of the Online Library,” *The Bear*, March 2014, <http://www.thebear-review.com/#!/free-libraries-for-every-soul/c153g>.

xii Alison Flood, “UK Lost More than 200 Libraries in 2012,” *Guardian*, 10 December 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/10/uk-lost-200-libraries-2012>.

xiii David Weinberger, “Library as Platform,” *Library Journal*, 4 September 2012, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/09/future-of-libraries/by-david-weinberger/>.

xiv Shannon Mattern, “Library as Infrastructure,” *Design Observer*, 9 June 2014, <http://places.designobserver.com/entryprint.html?entry=38488>.

xv See <http://libgen.org/>.

xvi Andrew Losowsky, “Library.nu, Book Downloading Site, Targeted in Injunctions Requested by 17 Publishers,” *Huffington Post*, 15 February 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/15/librarynu-book-downloading-injunction_n_1280383.html.

xvii “The Public School,” *The Public School*, n.d., <https://www.thepublicschool.org/>.

xviii See <http://ubu.com/>.

xix “Paul Otlet,” *Wikipedia*, 27 October 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Otlet.

xx “Tools,” *Memory of the World*, n.d., <https://www.memoryoftheworld.org/tools/>.

xxi See <http://setiathome.berkeley.edu/>.

xxii “End-to-End Catalog,” *Memory of the World*, 26 November 2012, <https://www.memoryoftheworld.org/end-to-end-catalog/>.

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Before and after Calibre >

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