Libraries as longstanding mutual aid community anchors

<librarian.net/talks/mutualaid>

Hello my name is Jessamyn West and I'll be speaking briefly on libraries and how they are often community anchors in mutual aid situations, or can be. Notes and image credits at this address

building on what Randy said…

Kropotkin

- collectives
- working-class survival
- non-monetary structures

de Toqueville

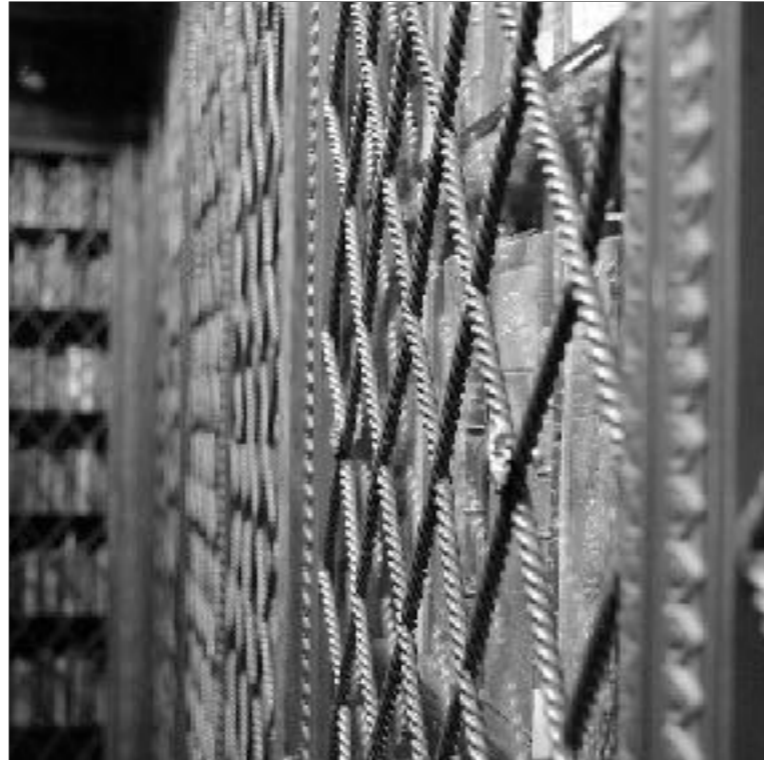voluntary private
associations

Libertarians?

underlying capitalist
principles

First I'll back up and tie in to what Randy was saying. These three dudes/principles, they all figure in. From Kropotkin we've got collective action, working-class survival and not usign money (though it's complicated, more on that in a bit). From de Toq we have the voluntary aspect of this, though let's be clear, taxes are not really voluntary, and from Libertarianism (which is complicated this word means something really different in US and UK contexts) we get the capitalism that underlies it. The library is free to YOU but we spend a lot of money, we buy more books than anyone else in the US.

Some history

So a quick backgrounder about why we even have a public library system in the US.

pre-1700s: Private libraries

Morgan Library (NYC) Admission in 2020: $22

———

Private & Society Libraries

Libraries were originally mostly private collections of books held by rich white men, to be shared with other rich white men. Even now many of these private libraries exist, and cost money either to visit or to join.
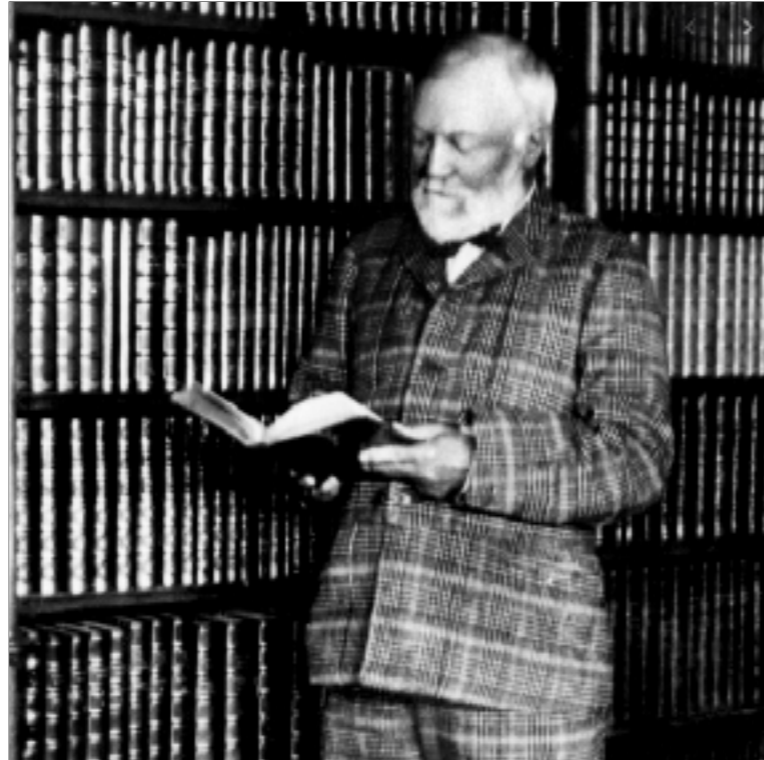
> **"**
>
> ***1700s: By pooling their resources in pragmatic Franklinian fashion, they could. The contribution of each created the book capital of all.***
>
> ———
>
> Mechanics Institutes/Membership Libraries

Ben Franklin started the push, at the same time or earlier, to have libraries open for working class men. This was sort of so working class men could understand the science and math behind the work they needed to do, but also to better themselves and learn about the world. There's a charming PDF about the history of the push for more public spaces for working (white) men to learn things. Some of these places still exist today, slightly more democratic than the private libraries.

> **1920: 3,500 public libraries in the United States. Carnegie's funding had built about half of these libraries.**

Carnegie Libraries (part of…)

Public libraries have been around in some places in the US since the 1830s, but they were often limited by the population's desire to have one and ability to afford them. Carnegie changed that, somewhat. By the 1920s there were 3500 public libraries (compared to over 9000 public library SYSTEMS now) and he had built half of them. However, again and still, they weren't totally egalitarian. See the notes for a great project that discusses segregated Carnegie libraries built in the Southern US.

> **"**
>
> *2017: 17,000 individual public libraries in the US employing 142,131 people. In 2017, there were 1.3 billion+ physical visits to public libraries.*
>
> ———
>
> Public Library Systems

Public library systems in the US "caught on" as a way to support a democratic republic. You couldn't be trusted to vote without having a way to independently educate yourself free from the influence of your workplace, church, or social groups. Access to information had to be egalitarian and it had to be free. There are a lot of "yeah but…"s to this general idea but this is the big picture view.

Mutual aid actions

So let's talk about how libraries maintain and support mutual aid principles in a way really only seen by maaaaaybe fire departments. And even then, that's only if your house is burning down.

The actual building

Cool in summer. Warm in winter. Mostly safe. Mostly clean bathrooms. Very few rules. You don't have to buy anything. You don't have to believe in anything specific. There is a person here who can help you, for free.

First thing, the library is a community space and the library staff are the stewards of that space which they maintain for the benefit of the large community (usually a geopolitical community). And THE PERSON (or people) is the thing that makes it a library, not the room full of books. Mutual Aid is, primarily, a very human thing.

Lending physical materials

In 2017, there were 1.6 billion collection materials that the public could access, with 2.2 billion checkouts. Allowed by: first sale doctrine, lending rights enshrined in copyright law.

Mostly what the library stewards is shared community cultural content. Physical materials are lent at a rate that is staggering. Books, audio books and music, DVDs, and even other materials like cake pans, puzzles, and ukuleles. And the law allows it. You buy a physical book, you can do what you want with it and a library is legally allowed to lend it. However, not for digital materials and this is a WHOLE THING.

Interlibrary loan & copy cataloging

If you want a book at almost any library in the US, you can get it from your home library. It is findable through linked data/records. Allowed by: ALA Interlibrary Loan Code

The biggest mutual aid action is interlibrary loan. The public library system in the US is an interconnected network of catalogs allowing you to not only FIND a book in another library system (thanks internet, another amazing interconnected network) but obtain it by having your library borrow it from another library. Many US states have state cards where you can just having borrowing rights at any library in your state (Vermont, alas, does not). Copy cataloging, basically making a catalog record for a book ONCE and then other libraries can use that record, smooths this process significantly.

Free computers/wifi

Free wifi is available in a lot of places. Free computers are at your public library. Hotspots and devices are lent. Wifi is enhanced to reach the parking lot.

And internet access now more than ever has become a linchpin of modern access needs. However, if you don't have a device to use that access, it's not helpful. While more people than ever have smartphones, a smartphone is not a computer. Libraries have computers, many lend computers, they have beefed up their internet so it's accessible outside and currently many libraries are maintaining outdoor computer labs so people can access the internet for free, safely.

Free To All

Citizens, non-citizens, housed, unhoused, rich, poor,
people needing accessibility accommodations, children,
ALL.

And this access is FOR EVERYONE. And this is what makes it a bigger deal and much more anarchistic than corporate feel good digital divide solutions or other fake-o capitalistic endeavors that try to mimic libraries. Our websites are accessible, our buildings are accessible, our services are accessible, and (with some exceptions, usually so exceptional that they make the news) we are for every single person.

Next steps?

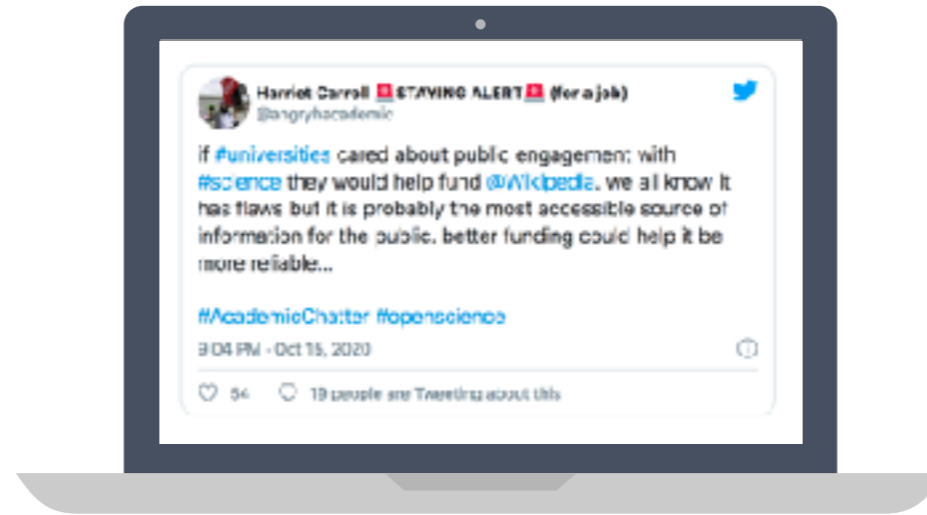The digital materials issue is *MESSY* and *FRAUGHT*

But…. what about all that digital content still wrapped up in copyright laws, especially in the COVID era? Libraries are looking at….

Controlled digital lending

Controlled digital lending would make scanned physical books available. It's messy and currently wrapped up in a legal battle, but feel free to check it out while it's around. Lending ebooks in libraries is currently a thing but is a mess of overpriced books and unreasonable lending decisions.

Removing barriers to access

We cautiously test the waters with Wikipedia (I'm a heavy duty editor) but that can be complicated because it's more like offering internet access (i.e. buyer beware) than access to reference books. Requires a mental shift in how you view the information you receive.

How many barriers do we need to remove?

There are other options that are pretty clearly outside of most libraries' moral compass, but as library access becomes more and more national and then international, how do we manage the fact that information access is incredibly inequitable? How do we find ways to share the resources we have. Vendors aren't offering realistic options. What's the smart play?

Library Genesis?

If libraries don't step up to offer genuine options to these problems, other entities will do it. We have an opportunity to find new ways to serve more people better, but we have to wrestle with capitalism to be able to do that effectively. The big question is: are we up to it?

@jessamyn
jessamyn@gmail.com

<librarian.net/talks/mutualaid>

Feel free to continue this conversation with me. Thank you for your attention.