Critical Theory and Digital Libraries

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This paper will examine the purpose of a digital library and the factors that constrain it. By addressing the alteration of the public library we can analyze comparative concerns to the digital library's functionality and proliferation of information to the masses. The public library has presented many concerns such as the corporatization of the space and move to private market business. Does a library without the physical presence of a librarian compromise a citizen’s ability to act democratically? Can a digital library perpetuate the same demands as a public library in the public sphere or does it act outside of those conditions? To answer these questions we will need to look at the public library's history as a post-institutional space and how it has been co-opted by interests in the private sector. The purpose of the public library, being a space for social democracy and discourse, has been compromised. The digital library's origin, however, is found in the link between the proliferation of science and technological discourse—not blossoming from the library as a public space. Can we imagine a digital library as a space for social democracy if open access is a condition of purchasing power? What the digital library can offer is a central focus of this topic.

I will be addressing three stages of addressing a digital library. First I begin with an analysis of the public library and how its values are acted towards commercial enterprises. I then provide a concern for the influx of information
and challenge whether the digital library can sufficiently regulate its intake without collapsing. Third, I provide a theoretical case for looking at a digital library as a metaphorical means for achieving multiple accesses to multiple meanings and knowledge. Christine Borgman writes how a "new conversation is necessary among librarians, library users, and officials responsible for funding libraries to insure that the library of the future serves the intellectual needs of diverse users and fields. Library literacy is as indispensable as computer literacy if the active scholar and the curious inquirer are to be empowered to seek and assess knowledge in any form or source" (33). This new conversation also needs to address the ramifications of commodification in the library and how the digital library treads in this murky, capitalistic water. We need to be quick on our heels and not consider the digital library in a similar motif as home shopping.

David Levy writes, how "libraries have come to symbolize, and to exemplify the values we impute to, the entire circuit" (Digital Libraries and the Problem of Purpose). He emphasizes the consumptive behaviour in an information space, whether it is the physical library or digital library–regardless of the form the institution has to measure up, so to speak, to the means in which we currently gather information. There are some fundamental problems with his articulations: the digital library provides a circuit for information materials to enter quickly, but such an influx is contestable when addressing the irregularity of the body. If we continue to believe that being inundated by information brings us closer to wisdom and knowledge, we will succumb to the reduction of our own power and freedom. Our picture of the world has become so spliced and compartmentalized that no comprehensive image is accessible, which is further problematized when the image is regulated by global capital and the culture industry.

The body in a public library faces a comparative experience of alienation.
The public library is defined as a post-institutional space, yet its distinction as a public good fluctuates with commercial influence (Rooney-Browne 5). Ed D'Angelo articulates how a librarian’s working schedule has been “reengineered to allow less time for reading” and follow trends of revenue and “low culture” (119). In this way, the role of the librarian has been simplified by corporate and retail appropriations to management and customer service.

Jurgen Habermas defines the public sphere as:

...a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens...They [citizens] then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of the constitutional order subject to the constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest (49).

Within the public sphere there are a series of public spaces, which assist in the proliferation of democratic thought and freedom (Rooney-Browne 3). The library constitutes a public space by being "a place of books and reading, of research, of librarians, of free thought, and of balance – balance between education and recreation, between print and electronic, between quiet and noise, and between parental concern and civil liberties [...] an open space where community may thrive across all socio-economic and demographic groups" (Scrogham 12). The space itself is where citizens can come together and promptly challenge political views and promote democracy; however, in order to challenge one needs access to interiorized materials (Habermas 52). In this regard, the patron is not pandered
to by their consumer desires nor can the company circumvent critique and high
standards.

The public library was a space where the working class could participate
in critical engagements with literature, the arts and culture. This was to "divert
the working class from moral wrong doing such as visiting public houses;"
however, the Public Libraries Act of 1850 was intended to connote a space
reducing class stratification (Ditzion 2). Sidney Ditzion articulates how the
library as a post-institutional space encompasses "the educational process where
the schools left off, and by conducting a people's university, a wholesome capable
citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life;" therefore,
depleting from the business and commercialization of academic institutions
and tendencies (74). In order for librarians not to be removed from libraries and
patrons not to continue their role as consumers the public library must be
emancipated to sustain the values of a democratic society and to treat all
citizens as equals (D'Angelo 1).

The public library has shifted drastically from an intellectual commons to
a space infringed upon by postmodern consumer capitalism. Lizabeth Cohen
writes that the "commercializing, privatizing, and segmenting of physical
gathering places that has resulted from allowing the unfettered pursuit of profits
to dictate a new metropolitan landscape has made more precarious the shared
public sphere upon which democracy depends" (289). Developments in mass
marketing and and production in America has greatly impacted our global lives–
where the allure of consumerism has become a desirable feature of
westernization. During the 1960s while the West was facing an ideological
decline, the rest of the world became "Westernizing" at an astonishing pace
(Deleuze). This ideological shift, or the Westernization apart from the West, is
globalization. The acceleration of commerce and capitalism affects the modes in
which we desire information—information becomes a thing, a commodity. The
space that information circumlocutes is not transcendental, or outside the
dominant paradigm—it either complicates dominance or perpetuates it.

Where the public library has become stunted due to these commercial
pressures, the digital library might be able to overcome. The dimensions of the
spaces should be considered—what was once achievable in a public library, before
the ever-present hacking of funds, could be physically achieved in a digital
library. It is suggested "documents in a conventional library are fixed and
immutable, while documents in a digital library are fluid and changeable"
(Blumson). This is not to suggest the demise of the public library in its entirety,
but to enter new platforms into the hopeful fulfillment of social democracy—a free
space for liberal thinking and transformations. Of course, fluidity presents
challenges of criteria. Blumson writes,

If a document is subject to change, what belongs in the
archive? The 'original' (assuming it can be identified)? The 'final'
(perhaps in the sense of most recent)? Or perhaps every version.
This would not be pleasing news to the archivist who was hoping
that digital storage would reduce the resources required for
archiving. (What's the Problem)

The digital library counters the stock, commercial entity that has become of the
public library, but also must actively dissemble the crippling effects of an
information influx. Neil Postmann's lecture "Informing Ourselves to Death"
discusses how

[T]he tie between information and action has been severed.
Information is now a commodity that can be bought and sold, or
used as a form of entertainment, or worn like a garment to enhance
one's status. It comes indiscriminately, directed at no one in
particular, disconnected from usefulness; we are glutted with information, drowning in information, have no control over it, don't know what to do with it. (Informing Ourselves to Death)

Differentiating between what information is relevant, and what information is irrelevant becomes a fundamental conceptual quandary for the digital library.

The digital library as a depository for cultural texts and meanings negotiates over what information is relevant, authoritative and personally pertinent. The ease in which one can create a digital library is in contrast to the commercialization of the public sphere—although archival memory only "reflects the interests and values of ruling paradigms" there are endless possibilities for unfolding cultural differences and memories in a digital library environment (Lithgow). Sandy Stone writes, "We no longer live in a world in which information conserves itself primarily in textual objects called books...but inescapably, at the threshold of a new and unsettling age [in which we must] reimagine the scholarly enterprise" (177-78). What the digital library can do that the public library can no longer is "reimagine the scholarly enterprise" by mitigating information through different referential points. These points Diffuse the influx and allowing an option for the user to negotiate how it wishes to enter the space and extrapolate the digital library's knowledge base.

Multiplicity is an aspect of the digital library's purpose because it has the capacity to collapse totalizing discourses and narratives (presenting alternative historical materials over dominant ones), but it also has the potential to aid context control. The latter is an Orwellian notion and is one to be considered if we want the subject to flourish in a digital library. Jean-Francois Lyotard writes,

it is precisely this kind of context control that a generalized computerization of society may bring about. The performitivity of
an utterance, be it denotative or prescriptive, increases proportionally to the amount of information about its referent one has at one's disposal. Thus the growth of power, and its self-legitimation, is now taking the route of data storage and accessibility, and the operativity of information. (47)

His worry is that the digitization of information will eliminate contingencies and maximize social utility of the subject. In this regard, we see the subject alone at her desk, accessing information with a few strokes on her keyboard, suffering from a lack of face-to-face communication. This is why the digital library cannot fully lose its affiliation with the physical space of the library—if only to give the semblance of human contact.

A digital library is defined as a space where "information collections are catalogued, organized and presented in ways that not only match the characteristics of the information, but also those of the intended users" (Jones 1). Jacque Derrida's notion of différance is something to address in digital library theory. Derrida means that words on their own have no meaning until they are compared and differed from other words. Meaning is endless and broached by an endless sea of signifiers rather than a reductive form of binary oppositions and hierarchies (Différance). The same understanding can be appropriated in digital library theory: they can stay dormant as mere prototypes, is this not why we press on the interoperability of digital library, so that they can unfold their purpose for multiple intelligences and cultures? The user's différance gestures at a number of heterogeneous factors that produce the user's definition of meaning and models.

The digital library cannot be assumed to be a new public space, as articulated by Habermas, but needs a new international for techno-democracy to actually take place. Derrida writes how:
[Western democracy] is exercised with more and more difficulty in a public space profoundly upset by techno-tele-media apparatuses and by new rhythms of information and communication, by the devices and the speed of forces represented by the latter, but also and consequently by the new modes of appropriation they put to work, by the new structure of the event and of its spectrality that they produce. (79)

This weariness is derived from control apparatuses, such as surveillance, regulating the user, and the singularity of information. The digital library, however, can counter this onslaught by the nature in which programs are emphasizing "multiple modes of knowledge acquisition" (Smith 236). Multiplicity can be achieved in the design of digital library, by offering multiple medias, aesthetics and access points. It becomes more a position of electronic storage—multiplicity is only as good as the choice of storage medium. Following Blumson, "fluid documents require a storage medium that can easily be modified [...] Storage devices that are easily modified are prone to catastrophic failures and have extremely short, by library standards, lifetimes" (What's the Problem).

In a digital library collections are changeable and mobile. I can potentially access one library from across the globe with great ease (only until I am confronted with an access fee). Space offers absolutely no hindrance on where a digital library can be or be used by. A digital library can be anywhere at anytime, as long as the correct technical conditions apply, such as interoperability. Insofar as the digital library can be accessed beyond space and time, it extends a certain degree of authority to the medium. Alternative digital libraries can be recognized more ubiquitously than when situated in the social confines of real society. It does not mean those ruling dominant paradigms do not exist in a virtual space, but that the negotiations are far more succinct (as long as the subject has access in every possible sense of the word). All is fine and
well, until we address the instability of the space—it only exists as long as someone is accessing it. Mark Poster writes, “Pages of digital texts have the stability of liquid. They may be combined with other texts, reformatted in size and font, have sounds and images added to them or subtracted from them. And all of this may be done with almost no effort [...] bits may be moved, erased, or changed as easily as they are read” (92). In this regard, traditional preservation has to be reconsidered, because not all materials can be considered permanent. Blumson articulates that "electronic storage can capture materials" and offer "at least the appearance of permanence" (What's the Problem). Digital library theory is a constant folding and unfolding of the disappearance and reappearance of information.

Interoperability is a condition of a digital library in order to augment infrastructure with new services. We must consider the biases associated with content selection, what it includes or excludes and the ways in which it objectifies culture. Culture has changed because of globalization so it is also important to acknowledge the difference between a leaning towards western desire and community building. As Carol Smith writes, the hope is to "facilitate practical digital library design solutions that recognize the complexity of human beings, and the complexity of their relationship with their surroundings. It will afford consideration of both individuals and cultures as fluid, ever-evolving entities" (231). A theoretically conscious collaboration in the development of a digital library is a step to combating the homogenization of knowledge.

This paper was intended to look at alternative purposes of a digital library from a theoretical perspective. By looking at the terms "public space" and "public good" it is more equivalent with the unimaginable physical space of the public library. Although the digital library did not derive from an Act aiming to deliver a space for social democracy, the Internet as an imaginable non-hierarchical sphere is a notable component to its purpose. The Internet has the capacity to be
a liberatory space, but we cannot lose sight of its dependency on corporate ideologies selling themselves as diversifying superstructures. The digital library, in the alternative sense, can argue against the development of subjective faculties that demand a lack of freedom. It all depends on innovative software and theoretical consciousnesses.
Works Cited


