



LIBRARIES, CREATORS AND AUDIENCES

Independent library futurist Philip Minchin specialises in innovation, play, and learning. Lately, he's been thinking about the role libraries can play in the new world of creative economies.

Copyright is based around an old, industrial model of culture: an original work is a template for a 'widget' which is manufactured, distributed, and sold. Controlling copying is therefore central to generating income for creators. However, as culture becomes electronic and communications become effortless, the creation and distribution of copies, as such, becomes trivial. This significantly complicates the business model of those whose focus is on trading copies for cash.

Their response has been to insist on escalating degrees of control and surveillance of communications channels, impinging on the work of libraries, on the natural flow of work into the intellectual and cultural commons, and on

fundamental freedoms including the rights to privacy and to freedom of expression.

The shift away from this problematic industrial model has already begun.

Even within the widget-selling framework, there are new twists. There are creators, notably webcomic authors, who give their main work away for free online, and sell related paraphernalia and compilations of that same free content.

Beyond these evolutions of traditional 'culture via retail', we are seeing a proliferation of ways that creators can solicit support for their work, whether as an expression of appreciation for creations already published, as support for specific proposed projects, as general patronage, or more. Think of the astonishing rise of platforms like Kickstarter, Pozible, Flattr and Patreon, and check out Cory Doctorow's *Information Doesn't Want To Be Free* too.

Libraries have largely sat out this remarkable transformation. This is odd; we are a highly trusted institution whose existence revolves around helping audiences find the creators they seek, and to a lesser but growing extent, assisting our patrons to themselves become creators. (For more on this, see v.gd/2waylib.)

It's even odder when you consider that increasingly there are cultural works which may never be made available through the traditional models on which we still largely depend.

In fact, numerous opportunities exist in these new creative economies for libraries to explore, and it is my hope to assist libraries to get on the front foot and make the most of them.

My full paper (v.gd/libsaud) explores these and other ideas in more detail, but here in brief are a few ways that libraries can participate more fully in this extraordinary change.

Increasingly, we see that what is fundamental to creative success is not the established hierarchies of production, distribution and promotion that we have relied on in the past, but a successful and trusted relationship between audience and creator.

As I've already mentioned, ignoring channels that are becoming increasingly important (Kickstarter alone has funnelled USD \$1.7b into over 84,000 projects in just a few short years) will see us missing out on important works. Further, many of crowdsourcing's major successes have been projects that traditional publishing wisdom said would never sell – but clearly did! It's clear that these platforms offer new insights into actual public demand and that we need to expand the pool of publishing and distribution channels from which we are buying.

These new creative economies are producing more and more resources for free. Aside from obviously 'library' content like that on Project Gutenberg, libraries are largely ignoring it. This is partly because we haven't yet worked out how to handle the quality control that traditional publishers nominally offer, and partly because of the knotty questions around how to reward the people who made it. We have an obligation both to better include these resources in our collections, and to work out how to do so fairly.

We already demonstrably boost retail sales of the creative media we lend. We should be looking to promote people supporting creators through these newer channels too, and helping people become creators is a great way to raise awareness of the value of creative work, so libraries have an important role in cultivating our audience's own creative aspirations.

Just as libraries are the places people come to encounter creative works, we could become channels from the public back to the creators they appreciate. Further, we already collect information about what's popular. Suitably anonymised,

this could be very useful to creators (and their various representatives). And how about this: when someone looks up a book in the catalogue, what if there was an optional newsfeed from its creator?

As 'the new village square' there is a lot more libraries could be doing to support self-organised gatherings where people share their interests directly with each other. Our libraries can be the focal points around which our communities build themselves. Our local communities are also often facets of wider communities of interest. Imagine if libraries were the place they all came to connect!

I'm only too aware of how much of the landscape around libraries is shifting right now. This particular shift is less obvious, but we ignore it to our peril. Enabling the public to engage with the world of culture is our home turf; but as the terrain shifts and new actors vie for space, we need to be actively taking our place within the new landscape, or we risk being crowded out.

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This is a condensed summary of a longer paper at v.gd/libsaud.



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