The Library and Democracy: A Typology of the Study of Democracy and the Public Library

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The New School Media Studies: Transforming Data

"*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*"
(Habermas 1989)[i]

"*The expression public opinion refers to the tasks of criticism and
control which a public body, of citizens informally – and, in
periodic elections, formally as well—practices vis-à-vis the ruling
structure organized in the form of a state*"
(Habermas 1989)

Attacks on public services within the last 3 years raise significant questions for the future of public access to information. Libraries, which rest at the frontlines of these budget cuts, have served not only as locations for free access to knowledge, but also as spaces for public forums, assembly, and jobs. As of May 2010, the city of Seattle faced a potential $120 million budget shortfall through 2012, which meant that Seattle Public Libraries were asked to drastically lower their own budget.[ii] This rang particularly true in August of 2011, when Seattle libraries closed their doors to the public for an entire week in order to save $650,000.[iii] While this instance was among the most radical actions taken by Seattle Public Library, libraries also looked towards cutting hours of operation and the potential to institute new charges to library patrons in order to operate under lowered budgets.[iv] Limiting the public access to libraries has also meant cutting worker's hours, closing the doors to those seeking shelter and jobs, and cutting back on the distribution of information.

This project seeks to recognize the role of libraries in providing the *framework* for democracy and public access to information throughout election cycles and to offer suggestions for developing a *multilayered* understanding of the library as a *political-media* environment. Here, democracy is coined as a location that acts to *frame* the acts of contestation, choice, the freedom of assembly, along with the act of voting (or choosing not to vote). Libraries function, in this sense, not primarily as locations in which voting occurs—but as locations in which the public may establish opinions that help them to make informed decisions or to make decisions that help them to dissent from repressive political structures. In exploring the library as a *frame* for democratic process it is important to recognize democracy not only as an *event of choice*, but as a *process* that includes access, assembly, interpretation, and availability. The following analysis takes a wide variety of public data from the Seattle Public Library in order to develop a typology of meta-library research, that helps to imagine an extensive view of the library as an essential location for democracy.

***Framework Studies, Democracy, and the Library*:**

In offering a simple definition of Democracy in 1960, Elmer Eric Schattschneider wrote that "democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process."[v] This definition emphasizes and privileges the role of the elite in developing the structure of democratic process. Here, one might see how this definition could lead to the reductionary believe that democracy rests within the domain of handing authority or trust over to an authority. Rather, the democratic process understood as a *framework* helps to imagine a series of categories that factor into movement and change within political society.

In an essay entitled "News Framing: Theory and Typology" communication researcher Claes H. de Vreese describes framework as a process which looks at the production, content, and use of media in understanding the total environment of 'media analysis.'[vi]It is in a similar, but more extensive sense, that one must look at the library not merely as a location for media interpretation, but as a location of media participation, interaction, and development. The library exists in order to diffuse and organize data in such a way as to promote the constant flow of changing information. As a public space, the library arranges information as to offer difference, the possibility for the construction of choice, and the capacity to develop shared or cooperative decisions with others. On a similar level, the notion of democracy can be imagined as a total environment in which people are free to formulate public opinions- while keeping in mind the public nature of their choice in a shared environment. In this sense, one cannot participate within a democracy without having access to dissenting opinions. This means for the library—that it becomes a public arena for contesting and exploring relations and differences.

Though, it can still be maintained that "a democracy minimally requires that citizens have an opportunity to choose among rival elites and platforms in regular elections (e.g., Dahl 1971, Riker 1982). The argument here is not that a public-library space is a purely theoretical space in which opinions do not lead into real action, but rather that the library (as a public space) frames the arena for having the equal chance to participate in the public display, exchange, and accumulation of information.
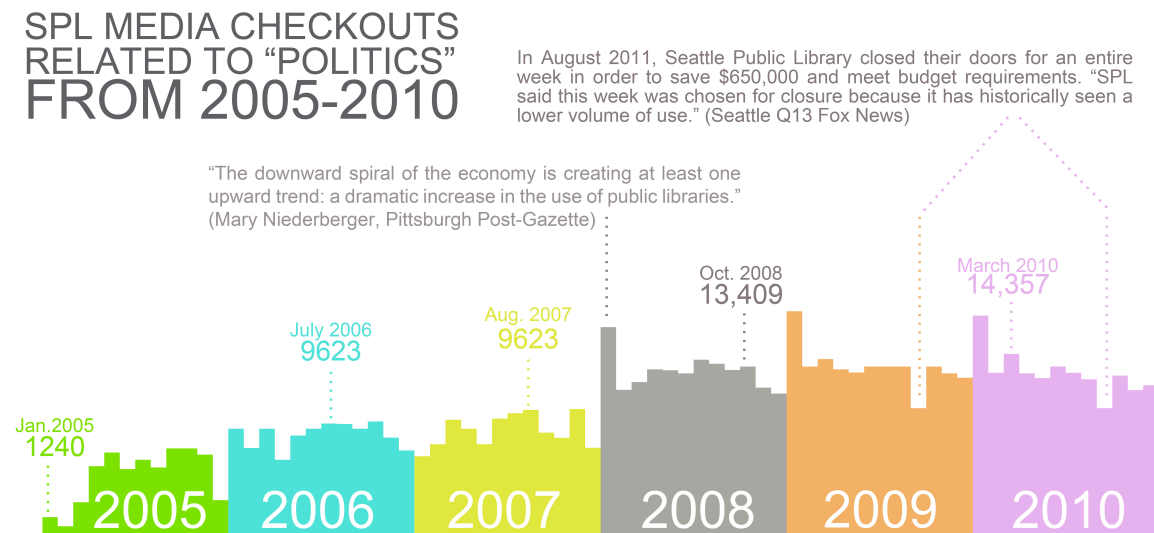
Library Data as the Framework for a Typology of Libraries and Democracy:

The following typology offers a variety of data that can be used to extend the re-definition and reframing of the democratic space of the public library. General conclusions can be drawn that the public body has utilized the library for processes that are directly related to political decision making, and certain contradictions are displayed on the basis of need/funding.

The library as a location of access:

In assessing the idea of democracy as a process, an analysis of access to information must be analyzed. If certain populations have an increased capacity to access information, political or otherwise, they will be far more confident in decision making, and far more capable of finding information relevant for a desired outcome.

The following info-graphic displays the number of checkouts of texts relating to "politics" from 2005 through 2010.

SPL MEDIA CHECKOUTS
RELATED TO "POLITICS"
FROM 2005-2010

In August 2011, Seattle Public Library closed their doors for an entire week in order to save $650,000 and meet budget requirements. "SPL said this week was chosen for closure because it has historically seen a lower volume of use." (Seattle Q13 Fox News)

"The downward spiral of the economy is creating at least one upward trend: a dramatic increase in the use of public libraries." (Mary Niederberger, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Oct. 2008
13,409

March 2010
14,357

July 2006
9623

Aug. 2007
9623

Jan.2005
1240

2005   2006   2007   2008   2009   2010

This graph displays the number of checkouts related to "politic" between 2005 and 2010 at Seattle Public Library. The most evident shift occurs in 2008, where the number of checkouts related to the general term "politic" goes from 7,194 in October of 2005 to 13,409 in October of 2009. Upon a general conclusion, one might argue that during the election year more people are checking out politically relevant media. Though, with the continuity of the high level of "politically-related" texts in 2009 and 2010, this conclusion should not be drawn. The number of checkouts in the Seattle Public Library in 2005 was 3,685,471 and in 2008 the checkouts skyrocketed to 8,751,672. This means that similar trends can be understood in the increasing number of "general checkouts" and those relating directly to "politic."
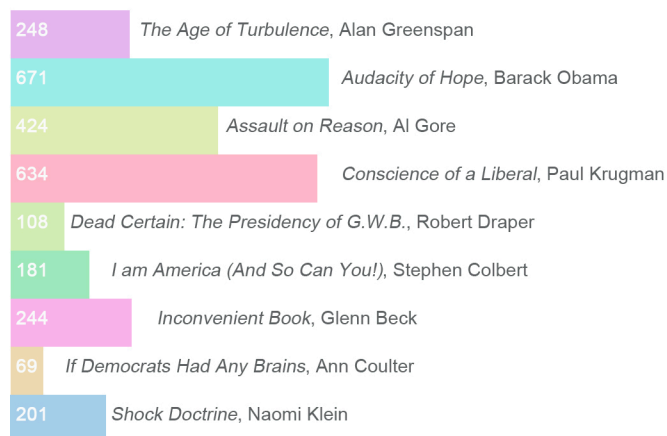
Upon more thorough investigation, most major public libraries experienced a similar jump in checkouts during 2008. In an article in the Pittsburg Gazette in 2009, the Director of a Pennsylvanian library states, "The increase in library usage is really dramatic and it's not just here, it's a national trend."[vii] These trends directly correlate to the rising number of patrons that begin to seek free or affordable resources during difficult economic times (the economic collapse became most evident in December of 2007). Similar trends can be displayed that correlate the downward spiral of the economy to the use of library computers and the assistance of library workers for job searches for patrons. In a Seattle Public Library Impact survey, published in 2010, 22% of library patrons surveyed admitted to using library computers to apply for a job or to send out a resume. Thus, signaling the need for public resources for access to information for decisions, as well as for survival.

Despite the growing need for library resources during difficult economic times libraries are asked to scale back their budgets. While the number of checkouts of library media from 2005-2010 doubled, in 2010 Seattle Public Libraries were forced to cut back their budget by $1.17 million. National austerity measures raise major questions for the capacity of low income people to have equal access to the information that directly affects their everyday lives.

The library as an environment for contestation:

While major questions must be raised in difficult economic times as to the interruption of equal access to information (due to austerity measures), and thus less than equal capacity to make informed decisions, the public library resources help to develop a multi layered political analysis. As Franklin D. Roosevelt references libraries,

SPL MEDIA CHECKOUTS OF POPULAR POLITICAL-FRAMING TEXTS IN 2008*

248	*The Age of Turbulence*, Alan Greenspan
671	*Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama
424	*Assault on Reason*, Al Gore
634	*Conscience of a Liberal*, Paul Krugman
108	*Dead Certain: The Presidency of G.W.B.*, Robert Draper
181	*I am America (And So Can You!)*, Stephen Colbert
244	*Inconvenient Book*, Glenn Beck
69	*If Democrats Had Any Brains*, Ann Coulter
201	*Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein

"libraries are directly and immediately involved in the conflict which divides our world, and for two reasons; first, because they are essential to the functioning of a democratic society; second, because the contemporary conflict touches the integrity of scholarship, the freedom of the mind, and even the survival of culture, and libraries are the great tools of scholarship, the great repositories of culture, and the great symbols of the freedom of the mind (Roosevelt 1941)" [viii]

* all texts released in 2007

Libraries serve not only for general access to information, but to help individuals to become exposed to spectrum of opinions. A simple analysis of key popular political framing texts, above, shows the diversity of ideologies that is made available to the public from Seattle Public Library just before the national election in November (conclusions should not be drawn about the popularity of particular ideology by the number of checkouts, but rather that political texts were highly popular during the election year and may have played a key role in decision making).

Similarly, throughout the 2008 election cycle, rooms throughout the library were used for public debates, non-profit meetings, and voter information panels, [ix] thus allowing for increased exposure to a plethora of opinions using a variety of media types. According to Seattle Public Library data, budget cuts have directly impacted their capacity to accumulate new resources.[x] Once again, this shows that austerity measures impact the capacity of libraries to contribute to public exposure to diverse and comprehensive opinions.
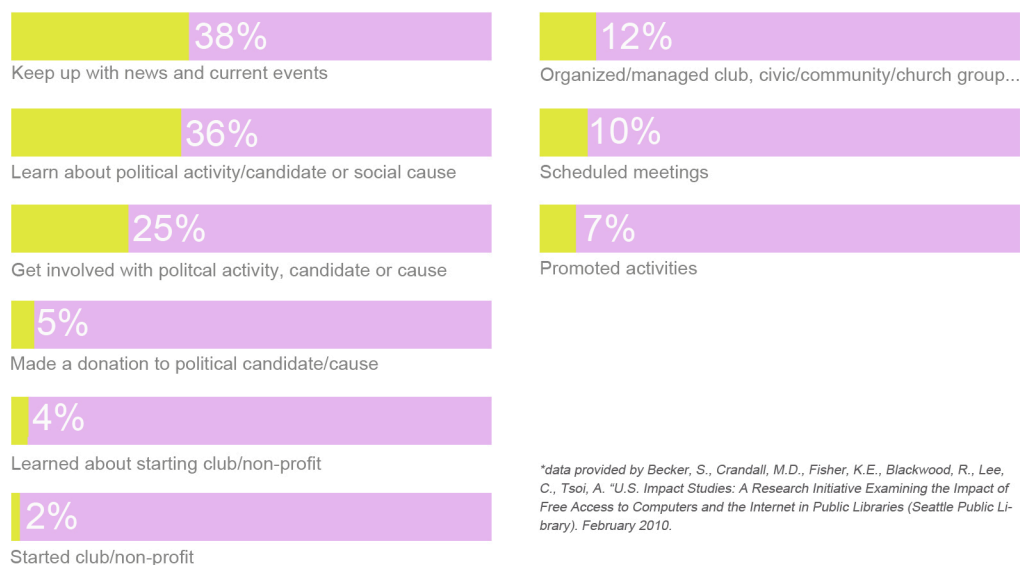
The library as a location of participation in public life:

While having access to information as well as being exposed to contesting points of view offer two ways that libraries function to support democracy, an additional category that sees the public as playing an active role in shaping everyday life is important in building an extensive and forward thinking perspective within a democracy. With the increase of speed and variety from new media, come new modes of political participation.

The following info graph displays the percentage of library patrons that used SPL computers to participate in civic engagement:

THE USE OF SPL COMPUTERS
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT*

Percent of SPL Qualified Users Who Indicated that they had used the library's computers or wireless networks to access from 2009-2010

38% Keep up with news and current events	12% Organized/managed club, civic/community/church group...
36% Learn about political activity/candidate or social cause	10% Scheduled meetings
25% Get involved with politcal activity, candidate or cause	7% Promoted activities
5% Made a donation to political candidate/cause	
4% Learned about starting club/non-profit	
2% Started club/non-profit	

data provided by Becker, S., Crandall, M.D., Fisher, K.E., Blackwood, R., Lee, C., Tsoi, A. "U.S. Impact Studies: A Research Initiative Examining the Impact of Free Access to Computers and the Internet in Public Libraries (Seattle Public Library). February 2010.

This visual displays the use of library computers for a variety of activities that directly influence public decision making. An important thing to note is that civic participation and engagement can range from seeking interacting with information to endorsing political candidates, and even further, to organizing groups and organizations that directly affect political issues.

It is in this sense that in the new media age, it becomes easier to see the role of the library patron not simply as those seeking information for decision making- but as those who are actively establishing new political formations. Most striking here is that 25% of library patrons admitted to using public computers to get involved in political activities. This means that new media plays an essential role in the future of utilizing libraries not only for political research, but also for political action. It is becoming more apparent that computers play an essential role in the reframing of democracy, especially with increased levels of participation via the web. This means that library resources must account for the growing need of low income populations to utilize new technology for *equal access to participate within their democracy.*

Conclusions:

Growing austerity measures nationally, especially those that cut back on essential public services that serve to protect the rights of less privileged populations strongly put into question the possibility of a democracy in a society that deprives these populations of the right to information and the right to participate in the creation of information. The role of the informed participant in the new media age is to develop media that will offer extensive and affordable solutions that will defend the public sphere, and will offer opposition to a highly corporate dominated digital community.

Here, I have offered a framework study to embed the public sphere into the conceptualization of democracy. One might imagine the library not only as a space of research, but as a space of access, of contestation, as well as civic participation. In framing the movement of democracy into a more participatory form, we must understand that increased participation within political structures during times of unrest must be met with increased levels of access for those who lack an economic means to participate without a public body to support.

Other creative solutions in the reframing of the public sphere in a democracy must also address the visual appeal of the public sphere, user friendliness and peer based learning models, cultural differences, and the development of a global perspective on the diffusion of information. While this project has only looked to address in slight, the visual appeal of the public sphere, stratification, and interaction- it is the hope of this project to inspire new forms of creative redirecting that will help establish a less ephemeral role for public services in growing times of need.

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[i] Habermas, Jurgen. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964) *New German Critique* , No. 3 (Autumn, 1974),

[ii] Langue, Larry. "Facing Big Cuts, Seattle Libraries Look for Creative Solutions" Thursday May 13, 2010. Seattlepi.com

[iii] "Budget cuts force week-long closure of Seattle Public Libraries"August 29, 2011. http://www.q13fox.com/news/kcpq-budget-cuts-force-weeklong-closure-of-seattle-public-libraries-20110829,0,814572.story

[iv] Ibid ii

[v] Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. *The Semisovereign People*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. 138.

[vi] de Vreese, C.H.(2005) "News Framing: Theory and Typology. Information Design Journal + Document Design. 13(1). 51.

[vii] Niederberger, Mary. "Patrons flock to libraries as economy struggles" Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Thursday, March 26, 2009. http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09085/958220-54.stm

[viii] President Roosevelt spoke at the American Library Association Annual Conference on June 1941

[ix] The League of Women Voters. "Seattle Voter," Vol. 50 (3), October 2008.

[x] http://www.spl.org/about-the-library/budget/2010-budget