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**Negotiating Digital Public Spaces: Context, Purpose,  
Audiences**

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## Title: Negotiating Digital Public Spaces: Context, Purpose, Audiences

### Structured Abstract

#### Design/Method/Approach

The article investigates tensions arising from the conjuncture of public spaces and digital culture through the lens of the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). This research uses qualitative content analysis of a range of data sources including semi-structured interviews, primary texts, and secondary texts.

#### Purpose

The purpose is to investigate the logic of digital public spaces and their relationship to both ideas of nationhood, and to physical public institutions and their audiences.

#### Findings

The construction of the public library space as a digital entity does not attract anticipated audiences. Additionally, the national framing of the DPLA is not compatible with how audiences engage with digital public spaces.

#### Originality/Value

Drawing on original, qualitative data, this article engages with the prevalent but undertheorized concept of digital public spaces. The article addresses unreflexive uses of the digital public and the assumptions connected to the imagined audiences for platforms like the DPLA.

### Introduction

In July 2018, *Forbes* published an editorial by Long Island University economist Panos Mourdoukoutas, titled 'Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money'. The core message was that 'Amazon has provided something better than a local library without the tax fees', with its new initiative *Amazon Go* combining 'a library with a Starbucks' (Mourdoukoutas, 2018). Within hours, the piece received over 200,000 views, and was met with backlash on the news site and on Twitter, prompting a retraction from *Forbes*. The responses on Twitter are telling. Many people referred to their usage of public libraries and

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2  
3 their experiences as personal beneficiaries of these spaces. A number of respondents also  
4 stressed the value of libraries, in terms of the community and cultural life they engender, as a  
5 worthwhile tax expenditure. Finally, social media comments emphasized free access and the  
6 democratic principles of libraries, as opposed to monopolistic for-profit corporations like  
7 Amazon (see Nadler and Cicillinie, 2020).  
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18 The outpouring of support following the publication of the editorial is revealing of the values  
19 and agendas inscribed in public library discourse, particularly in the context of the US. As  
20 Shannon Mattern comments, 'One key misperception of those who proclaim the library's  
21 obsolescence is that its function as a knowledge institution can be reduced to its technical  
22 services and information offerings' (2014). In contrast, Twitter comments foregrounded  
23 benefits which are harder to quantify, notably libraries' contributions to community,  
24 democracy, and the equitable distribution of knowledge and resources (e.g. music and ebooks).  
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35 The fact that they provide free Internet usage, enabling online participation in services relating  
36 to health care access, housing, voting, and job searching, also highlight the significant role of  
37 libraries as a public good.  
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45 The *Forbes* controversy raises larger questions about the role of non-governmental public  
46 entities in digital spaces and how these are constructed and used by digital and analog publics.  
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49  
50 Part of this conversation centers on digital cultural content and access to digital holdings, which  
51 are increasingly important and inform the 'public' framing of non-commercial online initiatives  
52 during the last ten years, including the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), the Internet  
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3 Archive (IA), and the Wikimedia Foundation. However, the privatized infrastructure of the  
4  
5 Internet mediates engagement with these holdings and signals the simultaneous restructuring  
6  
7 of audience relationships with public culture (Usher, 2021; Noble, 2020; Yeo, 2020). Making  
8  
9 sense of what a digital public space might look like has renewed and urgent significance in the  
10  
11 wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many public institutions, including libraries, have been  
12  
13 pushed to expand their online access and provisions, while facing funding cuts. This article  
14  
15 investigates tensions arising from the conjuncture of public spaces and digital culture through  
16  
17 the lens of the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). We undertake qualitative content  
18  
19 analysis of a range of data sources including semi-structured interviews, primary texts, and  
20  
21 secondary texts. Attention is given to the ambivalence surrounding the DPLA's uptake of the  
22  
23 'public library' mantle, and the shifting conception of its role and the resources a digital public  
24  
25 space might be expected to provide for audiences. To explore the issues arising from the  
26  
27 attempt to demarcate a national digital public space, we ask:  
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37 **R1** What is the relationship between (digital) public spaces and (digital) public libraries?

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40 **R2** What type of audience and community find ready expression in digital interpretations of  
41  
42 traditionally physical public spaces?  
43

44  
45 **R3** Who are the digital public?  
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49 The DPLA serves as a vehicle to interrogate these larger theoretical and conceptual concerns.  
50  
51 The DPLA's focus on a 'national', 'public' audience sits uneasily alongside its practical  
52  
53 implementation online. We argue that unclear assumptions about audiences and online  
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3 engagement have hindered the DPLA's service model and its desire to provide a platform for a  
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5 digital public.  
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### 10 **Libraries, the Public Sphere and (Digital) Public Spaces**

11  
12 Understandings of public spaces like the library have historically been framed through the  
13  
14 concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), in which libraries materially embody a forum  
15  
16 for free and equal speech or access (Buschman and Leckie, 2007; D'Angelo, 2006; Webster,  
17  
18 2010). In the US library tradition, the public sphere discourse has found expression in the idea  
19  
20 of the 'informed citizen', whose access to information enables their participation in the rational  
21  
22 and democratic discussion of public matters (Seale, 2016). This ethos was embedded in the first  
23  
24 public libraries, founded in the 1850s, and consolidated in the creation of the American Library  
25  
26 Association (ALA) in 1876 (Harris, 1999). Such foundational beliefs persist in contemporary  
27  
28 assumptions about the value of libraries, in conjunction with the more recent view that publicly  
29  
30 funded and maintained institutions represent a defense against the widespread privatization  
31  
32 and marketization of core services. These debates have also invoked the notion of libraries as a  
33  
34 public good, as sites of free knowledge provision and a bulwark against the commodification of  
35  
36 information (ALA, 2004; Kerslake and Kinnell, 1998; Pawley and Robbins, 2013). Here, the wider  
37  
38 social purpose of the library starts to become visible, as a place that stands for a system of  
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40 values beyond the fiscal (Smith, 2012).  
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52 The original public sphere concept is based on fundamental inequalities and exclusions, largely  
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54 on the grounds of race, gender, class and sexuality, which translate into uneven access to public  
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3 fora (Fraser, 1990; Bourdieu, 1996). For some commentators, the aspirations of the public  
4  
5 sphere are useful, but limited, demanding a more nuanced understanding of how universal or  
6  
7 democratic claims work in practice (Fung, 2003; Tsing, 2005; Widdersheim and Koizumi, 2015).  
8  
9

10 The spatial metaphors through which publicness has been circumscribed - including the  
11  
12 imaginary of the public library - expose the exclusions of such liberal democratic ideals (Barnett,  
13  
14 2008; Newman, 2007; Warner, 2002). Many US-based practitioners and researchers are  
15  
16 increasingly confronting these issues and recognizing them as foundational to library practice  
17  
18 (Honma, 2005; Bourg, 2014; Hathcock, 2015; Drake and Bielefield, 2017; Gibson et al, 2017a;  
19  
20 Gibson et al, 2017b; Crooks, 2019; Polebaum-Freeman, 2019; Gibson et al, 2020). Libraries are  
21  
22 bound tightly with shifting notions of who and what are implicated in publicness and how  
23  
24 democratic engagement can be enacted.  
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32 In the digital realm, the idea of the public sphere has come under pressure regarding its  
33  
34 applicability to online environments. Manuel Castells notes the ways in which some large tech  
35  
36 organizations shunt the interests of the public to the margins of the networked society (2008).  
37  
38 We see this playing out in the increasing dominance of private actors on the web: for example,  
39  
40 the Wikimedia foundation stands out as the lone non-profit in the top traffic web properties  
41  
42 against competitors like Google, Meta, Microsoft and Amazon. Zizi Papacharissi (2003) suggests  
43  
44 that *digital public spaces* should not be conflated with *digital public spheres* and that political  
45  
46 debate online must be distinguished from past experiences of public discourse. Jodie Dean  
47  
48 (2009) goes further, arguing that the Internet is made up of contestatory neodemocratic  
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50 networks and cannot be understood within a political architecture of the public sphere. These  
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3 writers show how digital technologies shape and are shaped by existing social formations, and  
4  
5 stress that the emergence of publics and constituencies of interest must be rooted in analysis of  
6  
7 socio-technical relations. They foreground the contingency of public formation and the role of  
8  
9 technology as part of a network of relations that can be reconfigured to create radically  
10  
11 different publics (Cody, 2011). This body of work productively unsettles the link to older notions  
12  
13 of the public sphere as a forum that assumes a particular public or audience in advance. Such  
14  
15 approaches also contend with the ways the privatized infrastructure of the Internet reorganizes  
16  
17 dimensions of public culture (Andrejevic, 2007; Chun, 2016; Crooks, 2019; Noble, 2020; Yeo,  
18  
19 2020). Building on these insights, we use the term *digital public space* in this article to refer to a  
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21 platform that provides a space of engagement for digital public audiences.  
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30 Ongoing research into digital public spaces in the cultural sector has attempted to navigate the  
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32 diverse spatial configurations of public institutions and hybrid physical-digital spaces (Audunson  
33  
34 et al, 2017; Hemment et al, 2013). Efforts which focus on libraries at the intersection of physical  
35  
36 and digital space have emphasized the socially and technically mediated aspects of publicness  
37  
38 (Borgman, 2000; 2003; Niegaard, 2011; Mattern, 2014). In the UK, Hartley (2015) has examined  
39  
40 place-based publics and looked at strategies for making digital collections more public-centered  
41  
42 online. Hartley's work foregrounds the connection between the platforms and their audiences:  
43  
44 providing digital collections alone is not sufficient to create a space of engagement. Rather, an  
45  
46 attendance to shared interests and values is necessary to draw audiences to use platforms  
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48 (Hartley, 2015; Castells, 2008). The DPLA has highlighted comparable priorities, in negotiating  
49  
50 between its value proposition as a provider of digital services and its public purpose.  
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## Methodology

The article addresses unreflexive uses of the digital public and the assumptions connected to the imagined audiences for digital public spaces. The DPLA is the site of focus for this investigation. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of a range of data sources, including interviews; the DPLA's public-facing website; DPLA strategy and policy documentation; DPLA event documentation; and secondary literature documenting the history of the DPLA.

As part of a larger study on digital heritage platforms, we interviewed 7 current and former employees of the DPLA in 2018 and 2019. Interview subjects were intentionally chosen to represent the DPLA's history and myriad projects, ranging from a former director to a participant who worked in a state hub. We followed recommendations from interviewees regarding future interviews in relation to particular topics such as the infrastructural design process and the development of ethical technology practices. Our interview protocol was semi-structured and we incorporated additional questions at the suggestion of interviewees.

The research corpus also includes materials generated by the organization. We examined news updates, policy documents, and strategic planning statements released by the DPLA via email and its website. We also included secondary literature, which was predominantly written by former and current staff of the DPLA. Using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, we viewed the DPLA's public web presence at annual intervals from 2011 to the time of writing, with additional crawled content around the official launch period. Finally, we included

1  
2  
3 recordings of plenary events from the DPLA's annual conference, DPLAFest, along with  
4  
5  
6 webinars presenting new projects and partnerships in 2019 and 2020.  
7

### 8 **Table 1**

9  
10 **[see additional file submission]**

11  
12 Both researchers engaged in qualitative coding of the materials, attending to emerging themes  
13  
14 suggested by interview participants. Recurrent codes include:  
15

- 16 ● the name/naming process of DPLA;
- 17
- 18 ● appeals to "nation"/being "of America";
- 19
- 20 ● the relationship between libraries and books;
- 21
- 22 ● the rationale for metadata aggregation.
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30 Using this data, we identified the challenges that stem from the DPLA's self-identification with  
31  
32 the public library tradition versus its current status as an online-only resource.  
33  
34

### 35 36 37 **The Digital Public Library of America: What's in a Name?**

38  
39 The DPLA is a digital, non-profit initiative, which has received funding from a mixture of US  
40  
41 government grant agencies and private research foundations throughout its lifespan. Its stated  
42  
43 goal is to provide free access to collections from cultural institutions across the US, via an online  
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45 platform (<https://dp.la/>). It aggregates metadata about these collections, making it searchable  
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48 in a centralized location. It also has an online exhibitions feature which draws together content  
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51 from different contributing institutions. Beyond these functions, the DPLA has been  
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3 characterized by a grander purpose, that of providing a digital public space for users, in much  
4  
5 the same way that physical libraries have been imagined as a form of public space.  
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7

### 8 **Image 1**

9  
10 *Screenshot of dp.la landing page taken 2022-04-08 [see additional file submission]*  
11  
12

13  
14  
15 The DPLA was originally conceived as a public, non-commercial alternative to Google Books,  
16  
17 explicitly invoking the egalitarian principles of the US public library movement in the nineteenth  
18  
19 century: ‘The DPLA, we resolved, would be “an open, distributed network of comprehensive  
20  
21 online resources that would draw on the nation’s living heritage from libraries, universities,  
22  
23 archives, and museums in order to educate, inform, and empower everyone in the current and  
24  
25 future generations”’ (Darnton, 2013). The DPLA’s system was built on a distributed database  
26  
27 model, aggregating metadata and pointing to the institutional sites where digitized collections  
28  
29 were held. In November 2011, the DPLA debuted at a national gathering of library professionals  
30  
31 in Los Angeles aimed at mapping out a blueprint for library engagements in the digital era. It  
32  
33 was presented as a potential collaborative partner for libraries wanting to expand their digital  
34  
35 holdings, alongside the HathiTrust and the Internet Archive. Specifically, the project was  
36  
37 described as ‘an umbrella organization for those wanting to be involved in creating a national  
38  
39 digital library’ (De Rosa et al, 2012). This coincided with the construction of the DPLA’s beta  
40  
41 web platform, before the official launch in April 2013. When the website went live, the DPLA  
42  
43 had aggregated a substantial amount of digital content metadata, primarily from larger  
44  
45 partners such as Harvard University, the New York Public Library, and the Smithsonian. The  
46  
47 platform continues to expand, via its partners, smaller organizations, and by establishing state-  
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3 based 'Service Hubs' for the ingestion of metadata. At time of writing, the DPLA's website  
4  
5 provides access to over 41 million images, texts, videos, and audio files. However, in the years  
6  
7 since the project launch, there has been a strategic shift in priorities from amassing metadata  
8  
9 toward improving access to items such as ebooks, a move that will be examined in more detail  
10  
11 below.  
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18 The DPLA's association with public libraries is foundational to its ethos, but it has also been a  
19  
20 cause for concern from the project's early stages. The naming and the original framing of the  
21  
22 DPLA implies an historical through-line that situates it within a trajectory of unifying cultural  
23  
24 banners and political divestment in public resources. For example, the report from a working  
25  
26 group meeting in 2011 recorded that participants 'expressed concerns that a DPLA may  
27  
28 inadvertently take public funding away from existing public libraries, while others pointed out  
29  
30 that a DPLA could help drive attention to public libraries. Many participants emphasized that a  
31  
32 DPLA will support, not replace, existing public libraries' (DPLA, 2011: p. 4). As the extract  
33  
34 suggests, the DPLA and public libraries meet at the intersection of knowledge organization and  
35  
36 dissemination. However, the doubts raised about the DPLA are revealing of its entanglement in  
37  
38 debates about diminishing government funding for institutions like public libraries and state  
39  
40 museums. During its first years, the DPLA defined itself as 'a portal, platform, and public option  
41  
42 for access' (DPLA, 2013), and the project focused on supplementing public library services, with  
43  
44 activities including digitization, metadata creation and enhancement, hosting, and community  
45  
46 outreach programs. By 2015, the 'public' had been recast as 'a critical, open intellectual  
47  
48 landscape [...] in the face of increasingly restrictive digital options' (DPLA, 2015). Here, the DPLA  
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3 explicitly acknowledged the growing privatization of digital cultural content, the ongoing  
4  
5 challenges around the management of licensed ebooks, and the pervasiveness of paywalled  
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7 provisions. In this statement, it is possible to read both an attempt to position the DPLA in  
8  
9 opposition to such corporate entities and to define a public mission distinct from that of public  
10  
11 libraries to allay fears about possible competition for resources. The 2019-2022 Strategic Plan  
12  
13 continues to foreground the DPLA's supplementary role, insofar as it seeks to amplify 'the value  
14  
15 of libraries and cultural organizations as Americans' most trusted sources of shared knowledge'  
16  
17 (DPLA, 2019). Its ebooks initiative, which works to improve libraries' e-content experience, is  
18  
19 now given equal weighting to cultural heritage collections with regard to the DPLA's goal of  
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21 making digital content freely accessible to all.  
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30 In interviews we conducted with current and former members of the DPLA's core service team,  
31  
32 the question of the project's relationship with libraries, and specifically public libraries, came up  
33  
34 several times. Interviewees held divergent views about the significance of the name and its  
35  
36 impact on perceptions of the DPLA. To some extent though, they all reflected on the potential  
37  
38 mismatch between audience expectations of a public library and the DPLA's services. Staff  
39  
40 positioned differently within the project conceded this mismatch to varying degrees. Dan  
41  
42 Cohen (former DPLA Director) stressed that it was the openness implied by 'public library' that  
43  
44 was important, stating:  
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52 Every single word in DPLA can be contested but that's a silly reason to attack it [...] I

53  
54 think particularly the middle two words of 'public library' were really essential to the  
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3 project in that, while it did include research materials it was there for the public, it was  
4  
5 there for people who do not have the privilege of being at the research institution, that  
6  
7 might not have access to large-scale license collections and so the public library part was  
8  
9 important.  
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15 On the other hand, with the benefit of hindsight, Emily Gore (former DPLA Director for  
16  
17 Content), wished that the project 'didn't call out one specific type of institution because people  
18  
19 saw that very literally. [...] it was not meant to be very literal. It was meant to be like a public  
20  
21 library, like all are welcome, right?'. Or, as Michael Della Bitta (DPLA Director of Technology)  
22  
23 commented, 'I do run into complaints about some of the words, or how can you say you're a  
24  
25 library if you don't have any holdings?' These contrasting perspectives are expressive of the  
26  
27 conceptual versus the literal notion of the public library and its status in the DPLA.  
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35 The public library also informed perceptions of the DPLA's core work. Interviewees confirmed  
36  
37 the initial focus on building partnerships, establishing hubs, and setting up the technical  
38  
39 infrastructure for data aggregation, but suggested that this was not the end game of the DPLA.  
40  
41

42 Gretchen Gueguen (former DPLA Data Services Coordinator) remarked that 'the metadata  
43  
44 aggregation came about as a "we think it's a doable thing, like other people are doing this" [...] I  
45  
46 don't think it was always thought that that would be all it was'. Thoughts about the viability of  
47  
48 data aggregation were balanced by other priorities, particularly the aim to provide a library  
49  
50 platform for open and licensed ebooks. Kelcy Shepherd (former DPLA Network Manager) said, 'I  
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52 think that's where some of DPLA's ebooks work comes in, with this idea of it trying to carry that  
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3 role of the public library forward'. These interviews show how the imaginary of the public  
4  
5 library was delimiting both staff and user expectations, and ultimately played a significant role  
6  
7 in the DPLA's major strategic objectives.  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 The ambivalence surrounding the naming of the DPLA from the outset, as reflected above, has  
13  
14 been grounded in tensions arising from comparisons with physical public libraries. These  
15  
16 comparisons have plagued theorizations and practical implementations of digital libraries since  
17  
18 their emergence, as noted by a number of scholars (Borgman, 1999; Gooding and Terras, 2017).  
19  
20 In the case of the DPLA, there is a recognition that public library users and DPLA users comprise  
21  
22 different kinds of audiences, but its designation as a public entity is directed toward universal  
23  
24 openness, complicating its superficially national boundaries. In order to draw out the  
25  
26 relationship between abstract and more local expressions of publicness, it is necessary to  
27  
28 examine how the DPLA constructs and engages with its audiences.  
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### 37 **Who Are the Digital Public?**

38  
39 The discussion has so far focused on the political and conceptual purchase of the 'public  
40  
41 library', as a public good equally accessible to all, and the extent to which this can be  
42  
43 meaningfully translated into a digital public space. The matter of audiences, and who the DPLA  
44  
45 is for, is also crucial to consider in order to make sense of how engagement can happen in this  
46  
47 kind of non-governmental, non-commercial project. Here, we analyze how the DPLA is framed  
48  
49 and constrained by its projected audiences, which sit uneasily within national, local and state,  
50  
51 or institutional structures, and involve financial interests from both public and private sources.  
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3 We use the term 'audience', with its discursive baggage, intentionally. The DPLA offers a means  
4  
5 to explore the definition of audience in the digital age: rather than employ terms like user,  
6  
7 stakeholder, con-/prosumer, or receiver, we instead opt for audience to invoke both its  
8  
9 imaginary and its material potential (Bratich, 2005).  
10  
11

12  
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14  
15 First, it is important to note the multiplicity of the DPLA's audiences (Matusiak, 2017) and to  
16  
17 recognize that these have not always been clearly distinguished in planning and strategy  
18  
19 documents. An emphasis on 'access' and empowering 'the public', which has been reiterated in  
20  
21 the DPLA's strategic plans, contributes to this vagueness. As Cohen suggests, 'Open access has  
22  
23 often operated under the assumption that digitizing and putting materials online will be action  
24  
25 enough. It does not conceive of much interactivity or permeability between the digital library  
26  
27 and the public' (2020: p. 27). There are also barriers to defining users of digital content on  
28  
29 cultural heritage platforms, where general terms like 'visitor' cannot be easily translated into  
30  
31 online activities, which are more targeted (Hamma, 2004). Darren Peacock and Jonny Brownbill  
32  
33 make the stronger claim that, 'There is no "audience" for Web sites, simply people who use the  
34  
35 Web for their own purposes. The audience framework obscures this fact and sidesteps the  
36  
37 question of what those purposes are' (2007). The solution they propose is to develop metrics  
38  
39 geared toward finding out user motivations, a more difficult task when access is often assumed  
40  
41 as the *sine qua non* of web-based resources. Furthermore, website usage metrics are of limited  
42  
43 value for capturing user motivations. As Della Bitta (Director of Technology) voiced, '[Success]  
44  
45 can be hard to measure, because it's just based on clicks, and that one metric doesn't  
46  
47 necessarily tell you anything'.  
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6 An important factor influencing the DPLA's engagement with audiences is its network of hubs  
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8 and its partnerships with libraries and museums. These constitute a fundamental, if non-  
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10 conventional, audience, which has been increasingly recognized in the DPLA's policy statements  
11  
12 as it works toward a sustainable, non-grant based, funding structure. One interviewee  
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14 reinforced this view, saying: '...DPLA does have this responsibility to its contributing institutions.  
15  
16 You know, in some ways I would say they're the primary stakeholder'. However, as well as  
17  
18 providing the partners with a service, the DPLA is also reliant on their collections content to  
19  
20 feed its database and website. This complex relationship throws into doubt the scenarios of use  
21  
22 envisaged for other kinds of audiences and implies a service defined more around the  
23  
24 infrastructure of the DPLA than around the needs of different groups. In essence, the DPLA's  
25  
26 projected audiences become a functional mirror of the project itself (Bettavia and Stainforth,  
27  
28 2017). A former member of the DPLA's team identified a similar issue, suggesting that, 'A lot of  
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30 times the multiple audiences were at odds with one another. In part, because we thought we  
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32 could serve everybody, or we thought we could serve everybody equally and it's clear that you  
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34 have to make hard choices'.  
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45 The challenge the DPLA faces in defining its audiences is bound together with that of  
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47 establishing a sustainable funding model. The DPLA has historically been funded by grants. Early  
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49 large-scale grants for building infrastructure came from public monies from federal agencies  
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51 like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the National Endowment for the  
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53 Humanities (NEH). In recent years, funding has been more project based, coming from private  
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3 agencies including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Whiting Foundation, and  
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5 anonymous donors. The DPLA lists its current funders as Knight, Mellon, Pivotal Ventures, and  
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7 Sloan, all private money organizations (DPLA, 2020a). Concurrent with the shift from public to  
8  
9 private funds, the DPLA has been creating a fee structure for its hub members. This  
10  
11 development further complicates the stakeholder/audience nexus, and potentially makes the  
12  
13 DPLA more reliant on the hubs as it formalizes the service provider relationship through fees.  
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15 These hubs are now bread and butter to the DPLA, both in the content that feeds its aggregator  
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17 and in the funding which feeds its operations.  
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25 The history of the DPLA's funding in part accounts for the national framing of its services. For  
26  
27 example, in 2014, the DPLA received an IMLS National Digital Platform initiative grant in order  
28  
29 to expand its service hub network (Gore et al, 2017). However, Lucy Bernholz suggests that,  
30  
31 while the DPLA was originally conceived as a public resource, it was not necessarily intended to  
32  
33 be rooted in government; rather, it was 'influenced by the possibilities engendered by digital  
34  
35 assets, the culture of open-source software, and the norms of libraries. The hope was to build a  
36  
37 governance structure that shared some of the characteristics of the technology it was designed  
38  
39 to manage' (2016: p. 195). Similar sentiments toward openness and inclusion were reflected in  
40  
41 the DPLA's Technology Team Core Values statement, a document which was finalized in 2016  
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43 (DPLA, 2016). One interviewee described the process of creating the statement as part of 'a  
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45 conscious effort to get on the same page about how we wanted to work together,' while  
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47 another noted that the tech values became foundational to the ethos of the whole  
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6 The characterization of the DPLA as a national project *not* grounded in government raises  
7  
8 questions about who and what purpose 'nation' serves in the project. The idea of the 'well-  
9  
10 informed citizen' emerging from the US public library tradition was heavily implicated in a  
11  
12 government project of nation-building. Yet the DPLA's emphasis on being 'open, global and  
13  
14 distributed' (Darnton, 2020) does not assume a self-identifying national audience in the same  
15  
16 way. This further obscures the matter of who the digital public are, and how far the national is  
17  
18 compatible with local structures, social arrangements and technologies (Bowker et al, 2010).  
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22 The DPLA makes an appeal to the concept of nation in its designation of being 'of America'.  
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24 Simultaneously, work with regional organizations and some of its grant projects focus on access  
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26 to hidden collections built on relationships with smaller, localized communities (Cohen, 2020).  
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29 While there is not a simple dichotomy between nation and community (Bettavia and Stainforth,  
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31 2019), commonplace uses of these terms prompt consideration of how far the nation is  
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33 compatible with communities in digital public spaces. Community is often embraced as a more  
34  
35 authentic site for creating and valuing cultural heritage materials, but it can also have the effect  
36  
37 of othering people, placing them in opposition to homogenized imaginaries of national identity  
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39 (Hall, 1996; Anderson, 2006; Manguel, 2020). Furthermore, some communities have voiced  
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41 concerns about affiliation with national collecting institutions and the potential loss of  
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43 autonomy and control over important cultural materials (Caswell et al, 2017).  
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52 The community values of sites such as libraries are also embodied in their physical space. As  
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54 Mattern puts it, 'The library has always been a place where informational and social  
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3 infrastructures intersect within a physical infrastructure that (ideally) supports that program'  
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5 (2014). US public libraries provide a venue for the creation and sustenance of a variety of self-  
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7 selected community affiliations, from participation in maker spaces, to health and movement  
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9 initiatives for the elderly, to toddler story hours. They anchor communities, providing social  
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11 gathering places, shelter, and access to public and government services, often by providing  
12  
13 access to high-speed Internet. These functions have been thrown into relief by closures  
14  
15 associated with the COVID-19 pandemic: in the US, libraries have faced pressure to reopen  
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17 while librarians and library staff have not typically been prioritized for vaccination schemes.  
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19 Many libraries have expanded access to ebook titles, digital license numbers, or undertaken  
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21 partnerships in endeavors such as the Internet Archive's pandemic project to lend digital  
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23 versions of textbooks to at-home students (Freeland, 2020; Jæger and Blaabæk, 2020; Vieira,  
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25 2020; Wang and Lund, 2020). The clamor for libraries to reopen in-person services highlights  
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27 the importance of their physical presence.  
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37 In the creation of digital publics, libraries leverage their physical infrastructure for digital  
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39 engagement. Libraries are recognized as inherently hybrid. The DPLA cannot rely on physical  
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41 infrastructure for audience and community-building, which is one of several obstacles that  
42  
43 work against its ability to have local reach. As Shepherd (former DPLA Network Manager)  
44  
45 commented, 'I think [the DPLA] could certainly do more close work with user communities, but  
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47 I think part of the challenge there is being national, you don't have that like "we are part of the  
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49 community", you know, we're not. In that way, I think it is hard to be a national public library  
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3 [...] [E]ven state libraries maybe don't have as much of a challenge finding and tapping into their  
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5 community in terms of users'.  
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10 Alongside absent communities, the DPLA exemplifies the issues thrown up around technical  
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12 infrastructures, which are framed as national, or universal, expressions of publicness. The DPLA  
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14 has regional hubs and presents curated, geographically-specific collections. At the same time,  
15  
16 the scale implied by the DPLA's website is big, national, and aimed at universality, which is also  
17  
18 reflected in their metadata aggregation model. In practice though, designing for a universal  
19  
20 audience generates exclusive categories: the universal tech subject defaults to being a  
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22 representation of the designers, often cis-male, hetero, white, college-educated, and socio-  
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24 economically privileged (see Akrich, 1995; Oudshoorn et al., 2004). Likewise, while universal or  
25  
26 global reach is assumed to be technologically embedded in the Internet, via narratives of  
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28 access, connectedness and borderless communications, the impact of structural inequalities,  
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30 regional differences, web personalization and capital accumulation make the reality of the  
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32 Internet a far more fragmented experience (Rogers, 2013; Schiller, 1999; Srinivasan, 2017;  
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34 Sunstein, 2009). This digital marketplace has a distorting influence on the universal message of  
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36 the DPLA, which is not compatible, in many ways, with how digital infrastructure works or how  
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38 audiences operate online.  
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### 50 **Reconstituting Digital Public Space?**

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52 If physical public libraries are one embodiment of a Habermasian public sphere, scholars like  
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54 Papacharissi, Dean, Castells, and others make it clear that a digital library is not necessarily a  
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3 digital public sphere. In this article, we have used the concept of a digital public space, which  
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5 we have defined as a platform that provides a forum for the digital public. The question, then, is  
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7 whether the DPLA and other non-commercial, non-governmental projects like it provide a  
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9 digital public space in ways that mirror the physical spaces provided by institutions like libraries.  
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11 The history of the DPLA demonstrates that such questions cannot be answered without  
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13 reference to a platform's audience: to talk about digital public spaces is to talk about the digital  
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15 public. Castells quotes Melville Dewey's comment that the public "is what is common to a given  
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17 social organization that transcends the private... the public is the domain of shared interests  
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19 and values" (Castells, 2008, p 91). Physical public libraries create hybrid digital/physical publics,  
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21 audiences with shared interests and values that transcend the private. The DPLA has many  
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23 audiences: which of them, if any, are the digital public?  
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32 To some extent, the DPLA bears out the myth of the digital sublime (Mosco, 2005), wherein  
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34 faith that technology will solve social issues proves both unfounded and illustrative of liberatory  
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36 and limiting possibilities. The DPLA's evocation of the imagined community of the nation  
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38 (Anderson, 2006) has been shown to be at odds with strategies for inclusion and the work of  
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40 decentering so-called universal knowledge. The politics of statehood, nation, empire and  
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42 assimilation, framed rhetorically as 'public', are in tension with a dawning recognition of new  
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44 types of audiences and public responsibility. The DPLA's 2019-2022 Strategic Plan concludes:  
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52 American democracy is in turmoil. We know that we, and the libraries, archives, and  
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54 museums with whom we work, are vital assets for this moment in time. DPLA envisions  
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3 a future in which digital technology serves to spread knowledge and unleash creativity  
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5 so that all of our stories are told. (DPLA, 2019)  
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10 This language marks a shift from the DPLA's first strategy and a move from encompassing the  
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12 'full range of human expression' (DPLA, 2015, p. 10) to 'spreading knowledge, unleashing  
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14 creativity'. Yet the underlying ethos for the DPLA is still concerned with comprehensive reach.  
15  
16 Its historical shifts have represented moves to qualify that reach, but the focus remains on the  
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18 universal, despite the fact that events like the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the limits  
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20 of the universal in exclusively digital spaces.  
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27 This insight connects to another finding of the article: that the construction of the public library  
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29 space as a digital entity does not attract anticipated audiences. At the outset, we noted the  
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31 relationship between public spaces and public libraries, and sought to analyze what happens  
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33 when they transition from being physical entities to digital ones. We found that the imagined  
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35 audiences for such spaces, who correspond with traditional library communities, do not exist in  
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37 the absence of physical infrastructure. Many public library patrons rely on libraries for Internet  
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39 access, so cannot participate in digital spaces without access to a physical building. There  
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41 remains a dominant techno-determinist discourse that posits that web technologies will bring  
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43 everyone together. We have explored why that does not happen in practice when publics are  
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45 declared rather than built, clearly defined, or materially identified.  
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3 If the universal digital platform does not have the reach envisaged by the generalized imaginary  
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5 of the digital public, what type of audience and community finds ready expression in digital  
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7 spaces? The findings of this work serve as part of ongoing and future research into the  
8  
9 possibilities of non-commercial digital platforms (Noble, 2020; Pickard, 2022). Private  
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11 companies like Reddit and Facebook (Meta), among others, foster spaces for geographically-  
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13 dispersed communities with shared interests. A difference between the physical community of  
14  
15 a public library and these digital communities is not simply geography, but also common  
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17 interests and the assumed anonymity of digital space. We find that when people form  
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19 communities of shared values at scale, in essence a form of digital public, they often do so  
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21 around an affinity. Physical co-location has long served as one of the strongest affinities in  
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23 traditional analog environments; in digital space, affinities can also be built around shared  
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25 needs and interests (Fiesler and Dym, 2020). Digital public spaces that do not have the physical  
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27 infrastructure of a traditional library or the promise of anonymous togetherness struggle to  
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29 make a productive impact on the realm of digital community-making.  
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40 The DPLA defined itself in its earliest iterations as 'a portal, platform, and public option for  
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42 access' (DPLA, 2013). But the project begs the question: who are the digital public for such a  
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44 platform? Interview participants suggested that the library moniker was used operationally, as  
45  
46 a means to express that 'all are welcome'. We ask: just because *all* are welcome, will *all* come?  
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49 If the digital public manifests as a form of engagement on a digital platform, which is expressive  
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51 of shared values that operate beyond the realms of government and the private sector,  
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53 questions still remain about whether shared interests and values are embodied in the DPLA's  
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3 offerings in any material way. Building the infrastructure before finding this digital public  
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5 audience has led to a mismatch between the project's goals and audience expectations.  
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7 Multiple interviewees expressed the difficulty of quantifying the success of the DPLA; part of  
8  
9 the challenge arises from the related problem of defining success for a platform providing  
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11 ebooks, exhibits, and cultural heritage metadata. Cohen's (2020) acknowledgement that the  
12  
13 principles of open access have not always accorded with audience uptake is relevant here: the  
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15 digital public space might get built, and no one might come. Does it matter if they don't? One  
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17 interview participant stated that the DPLA's work is important, whether or not anyone uses its  
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19 materials: in effect, the DPLA is a form of public good and the resources must be there to  
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21 provide benefit, even if the direct beneficiaries are elusive. Whether or not the digital public  
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23 comes, the DPLA is there for them.  
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32 The final finding is that, in the case of the DPLA, the term 'public library' is a decoy; it is the  
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34 wrong starting point for understanding public engagement in non-commercial digital spaces.  
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36 The public library designation alerts us to the distortions of the digital public, but it is not  
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38 ultimately a frame of reference that can do substantial work in helping us understand what the  
39  
40 DPLA can accomplish or who its audiences are. The multistakeholder system of the  
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42 commercialized Internet (Grosse, 2020) leaves public institutions at the mercy of private  
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44 funding, while philanthropy is often connected to private sector and marketplace deliverables.  
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46 This is typified in calls to replace libraries with an Amazon/Starbucks hybrid to save the  
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48 taxpayer money. The DPLA wants to collaborate and supplement public libraries without its  
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50 own public funding, an inescapable contradiction, given its large-scale employment changes  
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3 and evolving financial model. What remains to be considered in greater depth is the role of the  
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5 nation and the public in digital spaces, particularly within a US context where public resources  
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7 are frequently not rooted in government. Safiya Noble, in her investigation of algorithmic bias  
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9 and redlining, calls for regulation, restoration and reparation from Big Tech: 'We need new  
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11 paradigms, not more new tech. We need fair and equitable implementations of public policy  
12  
13 that bolster our collective good. We need to center the most vulnerable among us - the working  
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15 poor and the disabled, those who live under racial and religious tyranny, the discriminated  
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17 against and the oppressed' (2020). Future research should foreground these priorities. The  
18  
19 work of scholars like Victor Pickard and Dan Schiller offers one potential avenue for exploration:  
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21 proposing the regulation of digital public spaces as public utilities, taking inspiration from  
22  
23 government organizations such as the US Post Office and Government Printing Office (Schiller,  
24  
25 2020; Pickard, 2022). This article highlights the parallel concern to define a purpose for digital,  
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27 national, non-governmental structures as part of a move towards new technology paradigms  
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29 that can redeem public goods in the digital realm.  
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<i>Data Source</i>
Semi-structured Interviews
Website (Live and Historical Crawls)
Policy and Strategy Documentation
Secondary Sources
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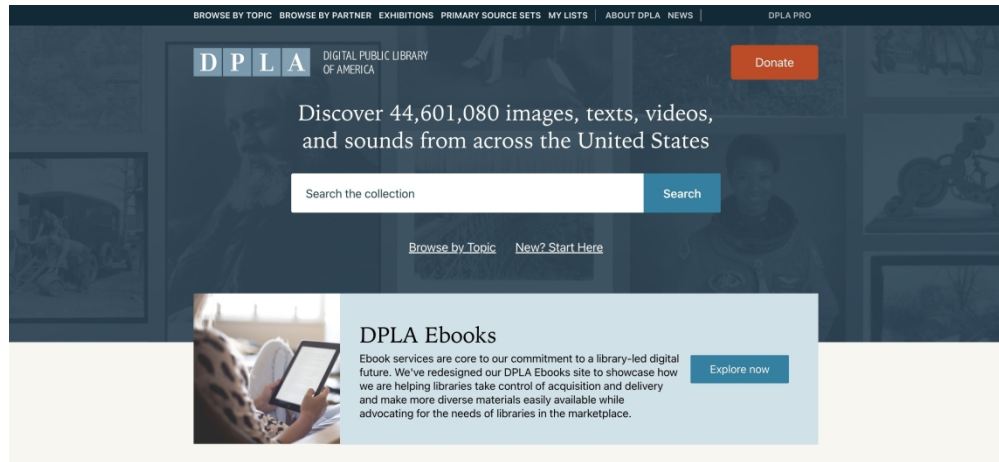
Journal of Documentation

<i>Quantity of Sources</i>
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13 samples ranging from 2011-2020
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Journal of Documentation

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