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## Digital Libraries as Digital Third Place: Virtual Programming in the Age of Loneliness

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# **Digital Libraries as Digital Third Place: Virtual Programming in the Age of Loneliness**

## **Introduction**

Brick-and-mortar libraries are commonly cited as examples of “third places:” community building spaces outside of home and work which embody qualities of equity and access without placing demands upon those who use them. However, as libraries increasingly invest in digital services, can they continue to serve in that role through virtual programming? Amid what public health officials are currently referring to as a “loneliness epidemic,” with the highest self-reported rates of loneliness and social isolation measured since sociologists began tracking it in the 1970s, the community-building role of libraries is perhaps more essential than ever. While much has been written on libraries as third place, digital libraries and, to a lesser extent, digital third places, literature examining the possibility of digital libraries as digital third places is scant. By examining existing library efforts to address loneliness among their patrons, virtual library public health initiatives, and existing research on loneliness in the age of social media, this paper argues that digital third places can indeed serve the same community-building function as physical third places, given certain circumstances and intention of design. This paper also offers an identified list of features common to successful digital third places, as well as likely pitfalls which occur due to deficiencies in design and moderation and concludes with a list of suggestions for virtual library programming with third place in mind.

## **Libraries as Third Places**

The story that libraries tell about themselves is that they are places for everyone. Whether public or academic, the guiding values of libraries revolve around equity, access and, aside from a few standard rules for behavior, being institutions that place no demands upon the people who use them. No purchases are required and, once there, a patron is free to use the space for more-or-less any purpose which best suits their needs. Whether that purpose is conducting research, finding summer reads, accessing the internet, or simply enjoying some pressure-free moments, libraries pride themselves on being there to serve. For many, libraries are a cornerstone of democratic societies.

All of the qualities listed above are what enable libraries to function as third places. In *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999) discussed the value of third places to communities. These are spaces, neither work nor home, which serve an essential community-building role by facilitating socialization. Essential to the function of third places is that they offer equity of access and demand little to no obligation from those who enter them – they are places to simply “be.” Jeffries et. al, (2009), describe the value of a third place as offering “stress relief from the everyday demands of both home and work. It provides the feeling of inclusiveness and belonging associated with participating in a group’s social activities, without the rigidity of policy or exclusiveness of club or organization membership”. Commonly cited examples other than libraries include churches, community art spaces, coffee shops, public parks, and playgrounds (Harris, 2007; Montgomery & Miller, 2011; Slatter & Howard, 2013) as well as a local bar or neighborhood barbershop where regulars might gather to converse with one

another far more often than they do to get a haircut. These are places to socialize, forge social bonds, and exist without pressures or expectations (Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosenbaum et. al., 2007).

Research reveals other commonalities in that third places tend to be a neutral ground, with no political and few, if any, financial obligations for those who visit. They are also a leveled place, where community is emphasized over social status; conversation and community are central activities, though not necessarily the only activities and; finally, third places are easily accessible - requiring little in the way of travel and scheduling to utilize them (Sleeman, 2012). For libraries, in particular, these qualities make those spaces valuable resources for marginalized groups including, but not limited to, homeless individuals, the LGBTQ community, and immigrant communities (Kelleher, 2013; Philbin et. al., 2019; Scott, 2011).

The capacity of libraries as third places is strengthened by the fact that they are able, through offering a variety of programming, become an “intermediate and open space for adventures and surprises” (Elmborg, 2011, p. 346). This also depends on whether space and programming are designed with such intentions (Elmborg, 2011, p. 346). As provisioners of information and providers of space, libraries accommodate and serve multiple communities of interest by providing space and programming specifically designed for them. Libraries, both public and academic, as third place, are so ubiquitous in their myriad of services and roles that we’ve perhaps come to take them for granted. The growth of digital libraries, however, presents new challenges for libraries in their community-building and programming capacities.

### **The Rapid Growth of Digital Libraries**

The move into digital library services was significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the first year of which saw 430 million eBooks circulated through the digital reading platform Overdrive alone --- a 33% increase over 2019 (Albanese, 2023). That trend continued into 2021, albeit at a reduced pace, with eBook loans topping half a billion, a further 16% increase. Even after the era of lockdowns ended, Overdrive reported 555 million items e-circulated in 2022 (Albanese, 2023). Academic libraries, even as universities have returned to in-person classes, also continue to see an increased demand for virtual services from students. An industry study by Research and Markets predicts the online education market to more than double 2021 numbers by 2027 (Renub Research, 2022). COVID-19 certainly required a sudden, massive move to temporarily exclusively online services, however that increased engagement merely accelerated existing trends.

The response of libraries throughout has been one that is primarily concerned with increasing access to and delivery of services and materials. Ashiq, Jabeen and Mahmood (2022) surveyed 23 practice articles of both academic and public library pandemic responses and found that digital library initiatives could be divided into distinct areas of infrastructure development, leadership and policy, training, and information literacy. Missing from the articles that these researchers surveyed is evidence of strong consideration of interactive programming and the community-building function of libraries. It is likely this was simply a matter of urgency - the sudden dramatic change in need for library services required by the pandemic meant that digital circulation, training and policy were priorities, and the dangers of health-related misinformation motivated libraries to offer online fact-checking and information literacy programming

(Martzoukou, 2020). For academic libraries there was also the added responsibility of continuing to support the curriculum, which itself was undergoing a sudden, rapid transition into online learning (Meththa & Wang, 2020). However, once libraries have sorted out infrastructure, policy, workflows and training, they then have the opportunity to move on to other programming, including those that would allow them to function as digital third places. As Liu, Akram, and Abrar (2020) note, mobile digital library penetration is already above 90% for all libraries. Given the ease of mobile use, and considering recent eBook circulation trends, libraries should account for the fact that some of their patron base will, from now on, primarily or even exclusively utilize digital library services and adjust their deliverables accordingly.

Research on the subject of digital libraries as digital third places is currently limited. Lawson (2004) was an early call for intention of digital library third place design, writing that “virtual libraries should try not to lose the virtues they have established as traditional third places and should strive to be the model of a virtual third place” (p. 14). Houghton (2013) recognizes that a library is not simply the sum-total of the collections housed and services offered and that digital libraries can function as a community-building presence because of the established ability of librarians to design programming which facilitates interaction between people in community networks. Neither of these sources, however, go into much detail about what such intentional design would look like in a virtual space. Arguably, until recently perhaps there was not seen to be much need for it, but the past several years have proven the powerful need for open spaces in the digital realm where knowledge-seeking, social services and community-building can safely intersect, and libraries and digital libraries are uniquely positioned to answer that need.

### **The Loneliness Epidemic**

While social media and the internet have made each person more connected to more people than at any time in human history, the country is also in the midst of what public health officials are calling a “loneliness epidemic,” with the highest self-reported rates of loneliness since sociologists began tracking that data (Jeste, Lee & Cacioppo, 2020). It seems counterintuitive – people can, at a moment’s notice, reach out to the majority of individuals who have ever been considered friends, whether through Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or simply via text message. Individuals are more apprised of the day-to-day lives of their friends than any generation prior. Once, catching up on the lives of high school and college friends ten or twenty years later would be something for a reunion, a wedding, a funeral, even a chance meeting at an airport. Now, many people are kept apprised of the careers and families of people they have not seen in years by seeing their status updates. And yet, surveys such as one conducted in early 2022 by the New York City Department of Health found that 57% of respondents felt lonely at least some of the time, and 67% had felt socially isolated earlier weeks (Chokshi, 2022).

The reason why growing loneliness is such a concern for public health officials is not limited to personal happiness. Loneliness has real, observed, physical health ramifications. Holt-Lunstad et al (2019) found that the influence of social isolation on mortality was comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The reasons are myriad – people with friends are more likely to be active; lonely people are more likely to consume alcohol and lead sedentary lives. People who are lonely have a higher risk of depression, hypertension, dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. (LeRoy et. al, 2017). These effects are amplified for individuals over the age of 65 and a 2020 report from the National Academy of Sciences found that social isolation was associated with a 50% increased

risk of dementia, along with increased risks of stroke, heart disease, depression, anxiety, and suicide (NAS, 2020). Loneliness is literally killing people, and the problem only seems to be getting worse.

There is a role for libraries to play here, though, and one which lends the idea of developing digital third spaces more urgency. A systematic review of literature looking at the causes of this dramatic increase in loneliness identified “weakening of local institutions that strengthened social capital, and the ways the internet is used by young adults” as two of the major culprits (Crowe et. al, 2022). In other words, a loss of third places, coupled with a lack of engagement with digital third places. Even though libraries persist in the same community-building role as they always have, the move into online social lives means that many people are less likely to socialize in physical spaces. If libraries are interested in functioning as digital libraries, now is the time to do so. To do that, libraries need a coherent set of guiding principles.

### **Library Responses to Loneliness: Physical and Virtual**

Some public health officials and researchers are noting how libraries can function as a facilitator of social interaction and engagement and therefore as a partial antidote to loneliness. In large part, this is due to already being a space that is commonly used by the public in a way that does not demand financial compensation. Thus, existing outside the realms of commerce, work and home life, they’re primed as a site of third place value. Khan positions this capacity in the context of a UK government plan announced in 2018 to address the loneliness epidemic: approximately half the adult population in the United Kingdom (and 43% of those over 55) use public libraries to some degree, which makes a solution obvious. (Khan, 2018).

The capacity of libraries to function as a facilitator of public health outcomes is sufficient that, according to a team lead by social and behavioral scientist Morgan Philbin, public libraries should be considered a component of the health system itself (Philbin, 2019). While examining the role of libraries in a number of areas including, but not limited to, providing access to healthcare, addiction services, and employment services, they specifically note that libraries can help alleviate feelings of social exclusion among marginalized groups, including LGBTQIA+ youth who do not feel safe at home (Philbin, 2019). Other researchers have also noted that libraries can often serve as a refuge for LGBTQ individuals, a demographic found to be disproportionately at risk of social isolation (Hawkins, 2022; GLSEN, 2023; Barriage et. al, 2021; Gorcynski & Fasoli, 2021, Moagi et. al, 2021).

The emphasis on library use by the elderly is important. Franssen et. al (2020) found that self-reported loneliness was highest among those over the age of 50, and there is no disagreement that the same group is also at particularly high risk of negative health effects from loneliness (Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008; Luo, 2012; Gerst Emerson, 2015). In addressing this, Khan continues that programming targeted at specific age groups offer socialization opportunities (Khan, 2018). Similarly, libraries which offer story time sessions for young children can offer parents a place to socialize with peers, and teen programming, such as the YOUmedia center at Chicago Public Libraries, a space for collaboration and creation without the usual library noise restrictions, serve a similar peer-connection role for youth (Austin, et. al, 2011). What all these studies examining the role of libraries in combating loneliness have in common is a focus on the

social role of libraries, both public and academic, as physical third place. Facilitation of real-world social interaction and offering safe spaces are established roles for physical libraries. Addressing the loneliness epidemic in a virtual setting, however, is not.

Physical interaction in library spaces is well-documented as an effective response to combating loneliness – whether it be through makerspaces, displays, workshops, cultural or ESL programming, book groups or social gatherings (Johnson, 2016; Arts Council England, 2018; Princh, 2020). A study of Canadian libraries combating elder loneliness examined various tactics for encouraging group interactions and bridging age gaps with knitting sessions, digital literacy clubs, movie or quiz nights, and fitness classes, with one respondent stating that refreshments are often served in order to surreptitiously offer food to anyone who may be low-income with limited access to regular meals or snacks (Baluk, Griffin & Gillett, 2021). However, an easy connection to the topic of digital libraries as digital third places here is Parkinson, Schuster & Mulcahy (2022), which specifically noted the essential component of communities of common interest to functioning digital third places. As libraries already have extensive experience in facilitating such groups, extension into a digital realm would be a next logical step.

### **Recommendations: Designing Digital Library Programming with Third Place Intention**

Can virtual spaces function in the same community-building capacity as brick-and-mortar third places? If so, what sort of design do digital libraries need to incorporate into virtual services to ensure they function as third places? How can digital libraries continue to function as this essential community cornerstone? While the simple extension of circulation and reference into the digital realm may satisfy basic functionality for remote users, they do not offer the same capacity for community building as do physical spaces. If libraries are to continue to function at the same level as a third place amid the continued growth of digital services and use, then at least some of those services need to function as an analog for the possibilities of physical space. Otherwise, as a library's digital services continue to grow, that library's function as third place will necessarily diminish. Every hour of labor spent by libraries developing online services is an hour not spent developing in-person programming.

In terms of libraries, the takeaways detailed in this paper can be used to inform how digital library programming is designed to address the loneliness epidemic in our patrons. Such a goal is a natural extension of the role libraries already serve in society: that of third place and of being essential sites for community building. However, while the role of libraries as places that facilitate socialization is established, such is not the case for digital library offerings. And while often merely providing the physical space for socialization, such as a book club popular with senior citizens, allows for social interaction to occur on its own, online interaction is a much trickier animal. The simplest form of digital library services – allowing access to materials – is not one where a digital third place can occur. For it to occur, design with intention is essential. And while such an approach can have different outcomes depending on type of interactive platform, age of user, and method of use, in the context of libraries, certain universal guiding principles can apply:

- Design digital library services that move beyond simply providing access to electronic materials and allowing for virtual reference.

- Re-conceptualize the role of virtual libraries to include facilitation of meaningful social interaction, which is essential to community building and addressing issues of loneliness and social isolation.
- Create virtual spaces where communities of interest can gather online and engage in organic social interaction.
- Rather than being a way for libraries to broadcast informational programming, these spaces should function as third places, embodying the same features of equity, access, and obligation free social interaction between participants.
- Design library programming where contributions from patrons are not only encouraged but are integral to the design.
- Design library programming in which patrons engage in active creation and share those creations with their peers.
- Design library programming suitable for different levels of interaction - some patrons function well in large groups while others require more intimate, low-energy environments.

It is also essential that moderation policies be enacted to combat toxic behavior and ensure a positive experience for attendees. Stevens et. al (2017) and Parkinson, Schuster & Mulcahy (2022) stress that competent mediation and facilitation is essential to discourage toxic behaviors and promote organic socialization. Here, it is important to remember to focus on facilitation, and avoid moderation tactics that become dictatorial. Quoting the latter, “there is a balance between facilitating opportunities for interaction while allowing consumers the freedom to engage in naturalistic conversations, with service providers needing to find the optimal point for their service community” (p. 121). The goal is to ensure a positive space where organic, as opposed to forced, socialization can occur.

### **Conclusion**

Taking these suggestions into account will allow digital libraries to continue to function as third places in a manner analogous to their brick-and-mortar counterparts. In devoting labor and investment to the workflow responsibilities of digital libraries, to the infrastructure required, to funding and administration, libraries have established the necessary systems to allow for this type of programming. The initial focus on simple extension of circulation into the digital sphere was one required by the pressures of the pandemic, and the myriad library public health education initiatives that libraries undertook during the pandemic, have given libraries experience in moving programming into the digital realm, meaning existing workflows are in place to utilize in thinking about provisioning digital third places.

As Ashiq, Jabeen and Mahmood (2022) found in their literature survey, libraries that have moved into digital services have already devoted labor and time into developing infrastructure (digital circulation), leadership and policy, and training, along with initial forays into digital programming in the form of information literacy and public health education. Digital circulation and information literacy and public education programming are easily quantifiable. Circulation in simple terms of reference interviews and lent items, and outreach programming in terms of content created and attendance of virtual events. Virtual community building is perhaps less easily described in terms of simple statistics. What number can describe the cessation of

loneliness through the formation of an online friendship? Given the loss of many traditional third places, and the migration of so much of people's social lives into social media, the job of communicating the value of remaining third places has gained an added importance. Doing so will make future advocacy much easier and help ensure that these less-easily quantifiable benefits of libraries can be enjoyed by patrons in virtual spaces.



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