

Maine Policy Review

Volume 24
Issue 1 *Humanities and Policy*

2015

Public Libraries: Essential Infrastructure for the Public Humanities

Stephen Podgajny

Portland Public Library, Podgajny@portlandpubliclibrary.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Podgajny, Stephen. "Public Libraries: Essential Infrastructure for the Public Humanities." *Maine Policy Review* 24.1 (2015) : 49 -55, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol24/iss1/17>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine.

Public Libraries:

Essential Infrastructure for the Public Humanities

by Stephen Podgajny

Public libraries are the key component in the delivery of local humanities programs in Maine. The value of Maine's 265 public libraries cannot be discussed without a deep understanding of their relationship to the humanities. The humanities and the basic literacy skills needed to fully appreciate and experience them, in turn, describe the essence of public libraries. Public libraries provide the major infrastructure and audience potential (6,886,104 visits in Maine in 2013) for the public humanities precisely because they are public and are humanities-centered institutions.¹

The public library is not dictated by statute, not limited to transactions or any specific functional activity, and is a unique expression of investment by an individual community in the common good. It is an invention that among other things seeks to better us, to help us to understand the world and ourselves, and to create a sense a place. What could make more sense, be more inspiring or potentially transformative than building a collective resource and sharing it among an entire community? And what could be a better vehicle to present and show the relevance of the humanities to a community?

Public libraries sprang from a nineteenth-century belief that common citizens, with a supportive civic structure, could reach their individual potential. Individual progress would by extension greatly benefit the whole community or, more cynically, reinforce American ideals through assimilation. Historians have argued over the purity of the basic motivations of the founding forces (for example control of the immigrant populations) for public libraries, but today's public libraries have fully and enthusiastically embraced a multiplicity of roles and platforms for delivery of services and experiences. This evolution of the public library into an active community and cultural center takes full advantage of its ability to create any mission that it sees as appropriate for its community.

The last two decades have seen the introduction of computers for public use and the redesign of many public library spaces that transcend the notion that the number of books on the shelves is the single most

important feature of an effective public library. The public has participated in debates about the role of technology, e-reading, and the concept of spaces that must serve a multitude of citizen needs, including programs and community conversations. Until recently, these conversations have been anchored and constrained within the historical association that equated the mission of the library with two factors: the act of lending and its major asset: the book. Complicating the public conversation further is the pairing of the assumed demise of the printed book with the predicted final chapter of America's public libraries. In recent years, however, libraries have begun to transcend that framework by creating and taking on new roles and eliciting a new service narrative even while reading and borrowing of the printed book remains significant.

In the last decade, the public imagination has grown to accommodate the notion of the public library as a cultural center delivering an array of programs and resources to every socioeconomic group. Those programs and the resources that the library makes available are overwhelmingly humanities based. In trying to define the humanities, one often resorts to a simple list of academic disciplines which is just that—a list. The list would centrally include history, literature, languages, and philosophy. National humanities commissions have added the study of the arts, comparative religion, and law, while the National Endowment for the Humanities legislation includes linguistics, archaeology, and ethics. Beyond mere listings, it is another thing to capture the experience, value, and effect of the humanities. The humanities need to be experienced, and the public library, through its variety of programs and setting, provides a wide variety of opportunities to do so.

Public libraries have many functions and roles that naturally mirror methods and intent of the humanities. Public libraries remain text-based institutions in whatever format that text is presented. Core library activities such as programming and lending support humanities processes of engagement. "The humanities presume

particular methods of expression and inquiry—language, dialogue, reflection, imagination and metaphor,” and from the public library perspective the aims of the humanities “insight, perspective, critical understanding, discrimination and creativity” are bedrock public library objectives and might be supplemented only by “informed” (Commission on the Humanities 1980: 2) These methods and outcomes expressed 35 years ago by “The Humanities in American Life: a Report of the Commission on the Humanities” still resonate strongly for public libraries, and indeed, for our world.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF MAINE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

To understand how public libraries support the humanities, it is helpful to understand the resources brought to bear in that effort. Public library infrastructure in Maine is fundamentally local. Maine lacks county library systems, which are common nationally. Some Maine public libraries are town departments while others are independent nonprofits (501c3) with close ties to municipal government. Regardless of governance and the amount of private support from endowments, fees, and donations, the preponderance of funding for public libraries flows directly from municipalities. Unlike in most states, there is no direct state aid for public libraries. Recognition that public libraries are at the mercy of municipal budgets and general economic trends has created in all libraries in Maine a collaborative ethic that leverages existing resources and focuses statewide library planning. Somewhat counterintuitively, the lack of an organizational hierarchy, such as a county library system, may provide the flexibility to encourage more local creativity, dialogue, and partnership in presenting relevant humanities experiences.

The infrastructure available focuses on the efficient delivery of information throughout the state: hundreds of thousands of physical items lent by public libraries to public libraries course throughout the state annually. The discovery of these items is made possible by the existence of MaineCat, a union catalog of holdings shared by many types of libraries in Maine. Those materials are lent willingly by participating libraries and are delivered statewide through a van service to 126 member libraries from Madawaska in the far north to University of Maine campuses, Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin colleges, and to York Public Library in the south.

In the digital environment, citizens are served by MARVEL!, a collection of information sources and databases. Close inspection of MARVEL! leads one to the conclusion that despite the financial strains for public libraries, they have never been more capable of serving their public in highly sophisticated ways. Considering only arts and culture, history and literature as broad categories, hundreds of thousands of journals in full text and abstract form, interviews, speeches, essays, editorials, criticism, original text documents, and biographies are available at any time via the Internet. Those sources also include items that focus on Maine humanities such as the Maine Memory Network, Maine News Index, and Windows on Maine. The richness of MARVEL! is well beyond that which can be conveyed in the space allotted for this article.

Finally, the network infrastructure that delivers the humanities through major statewide information resources such as MaineCat and MARVEL! has been developed and enhanced over the past 20 years through innovative collaborations involving state government, regulatory agencies, private businesses, federal government, and the University of Maine (see Sanborn and Nutty 2013). Statewide library collaboration has made Maine a national model.

MAINE'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES: LEAD PARTNER FOR THE PUBLIC HUMANITIES

Maine's public library infrastructure provides an incredible opportunity for humanities organizations and every individual citizen to embrace the public library as a powerful partner in the humanities experience. The role that each public library plays is dictated by the its mission and vision, community needs, staff expertise, and economic resources. This engagement is shaped by interlocking and complementary library responsibilities that include the requirement to collect; convene and present; combine and collaborate; and create, conserve, and preserve.

Public Libraries as Collectors

Although public libraries as a whole benefit from the aggregation of resources as described earlier, each public library accepts the moral obligation to build individual collections to the best of its ability. The sum total of those individual collections is shared in a reciprocal manner. Humanities-related materials constitute the overwhelming majority of public library collections. An examination of

collections in public libraries participating in the URSUS and Minerva multitype library consortiums² along with Portland Public Library (PPL) yields a conservative estimate of 1,500,000 items that could be classified as humanities based. It is a fiscal challenge to maintain the depth and quality of library collections regardless of the format. The depth and timeliness of Maine humanities collections are greatly enhanced by the constant updating of MARVEL! databases and the ongoing purchasing of humanities-based materials by public libraries.

In 2011, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded the Maine Shared Collections Strategy (MSCS), a collaboration of the libraries at Colby, Bates, Bowdoin, University of Maine, University of Southern Maine, and the Bangor and Portland public libraries. MSCS has created a strategy for a “statewide, multi-type library program for managing, storing, and preserving print collections among public and private institutions to achieve greater efficiencies and extend the power of every dollar invested in collections and library facilities” (Revett 2013: 65). With major libraries taking responsibility for collecting and sharing of specific subject areas and individual titles, it is now possible for public libraries to practice a more focused collection strategy. New collection storage centers at Bangor Public Library (BPL), PPL, and Colby College have provided long-term physical structures for the expansion of humanities collections. The participation of public and private colleges and universities provides enormous additional capacity to the humanities collections that can be shared with Maine citizens. The MSCS initiative has also provided the framework for addressing the expansion of access and integration of digital collections with print resources. As digital collections, such as the Digital Public Library of America, Digital Commons, and HathiTrust Digital Library,³ become more easily accessible and searched through integration into MaineCat and Google, the expansion of humanities materials will be enormous.

In the context of the digital age and the infrastructure for the public humanities, what of the librarian? Public librarians are for the most part liberal-arts educated and trained as librarians. They navigate a world of information efficiently and make idea connections. Librarians have asserted since the popularization of the Internet and the explosion of knowledge that navigation and use of knowledge demands more than just receiving a list of search results. Leon Wieseltier could be describing the world of the public librarian in

the digital age in his essay “Among the Disrupted” (*New York Times*, January 7, 2015):

The humanistic methods that were practiced before digitalization will be even more urgent after digitalization, because we will need help in navigating the unprecedented welter. Searches for keywords will not provide contexts for keywords. Patterns that are revealed by searches will not identify their own causes and reasons. The new order will not relieve us of the old burdens, and the old pleasures, of erudition and interpretation.”

Librarians facilitate this navigation, making the library an increasingly essential resource for the public humanities in the twenty-first century.

Thousands of programs occur annually at Maine’s public libraries.

Public Libraries as Conveners and Presenters

Thousands of programs occur annually at Maine’s public libraries. Many are hosted, some are convened, and others are generated and presented by the library directly. As well as basic library programs directed toward youth and adults, libraries have an important role in other kinds of offerings in the public humanities.

Discussion and sharing of viewpoints and content is a critical component of the humanities experience, especially as it is through the process of exchange that individuals grow and communities are strengthened. Public libraries convene and host community gatherings and conversations centered on an array of humanities programs. From their inception public libraries have been great democratizers, levelers, and lifelong educators. In the effort to create civil spaces, the library’s physical presence and safe environment may matter more and more as time goes on. Living in both the physical and digital worlds, along with founding principles of service to all, neutrality on issues, confidentiality, and a public service ethic, public libraries have developed great reach and have earned a reputation for trustworthiness.

A convener of any type must possess standing. The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life

Project has extensively studied libraries and their place in the digital world. The presence of a public library in a community is seen as overwhelmingly positive: 91 percent say libraries are important to their community; 76 percent view libraries as important to them and their families; and 93 percent says that having a public library improves the quality of life in a community (Pew Research Center 2013). A key finding shows 96 percent believe public libraries are important because they promote literacy and a love of reading, both of which are core components in a lifelong appreciation of the humanities. That good will and standing provides libraries with the opportunity to convene people to have conversations about just about anything from books to what makes a civil society. In response to recent tragic events and civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, the public library there remained open and became a place of refuge and normalcy by providing a safe environment for adults and children.

Maine's communities are changing before our eyes. The causes are varied: lack of economic development for young and old, graying of our state, influx of retirees, refugees, and immigrants, and development pressures. These forces of change require the creation of discussion forums to guide the future of our communities, and Lewiston Public Library (LPL) and PPL have been leaders in creating sites for community dialog.

In 2014, LPL with various partners played a central role in the *The Changing Face of Home* project. In response to absorbing over 6,000 immigrants from Somalia and other parts of Africa, Lewiston had a vested interest in promoting civility, understanding, and listening to the stories and viewpoints of others. Instead of the traditional text model, the project relied on the storytelling of four participants who expressed their ideas of home. Within LPL's safe environment, the project introduced the idea and practice of civil discourse and exposed participants to the role of the humanities in creating such discourse and building community. In summing up the project, LPL Director Rick Speer said, "The discussion allowed everyone to better understand the struggles that their neighbors had gone through in their lives and the importance that they all placed in finding a safe place to raise their family and to call home."

In 2013 PPL announced its Choose Civility initiative, modeled on the work of the Howard County Library System in Maryland. With generous funding from the Lerner Foundation, the library aims to position

itself as a community center where citizens can gather to civilly discuss issues important to the community. In partnership with Lift360 and the Maine Humanities Council (MHC), the initiative has hosted numerous programs since its inception, covering a variety of topics that affect Portland and the state as a whole, including incivility in politics, economic inequality and how we can become better citizens and neighbors. In partnership with the MHC, PPL hosted *Creating the Communities We Wish to Live In* sessions in various locations throughout the city where attendees read a short poem that generated facilitated discussion to explore what kind of communities we aspire to be. Feedback has confirmed that people are looking for a trusted space in which to have these important conversations about our democracy. Further events are planned for the upcoming year. (See Bartel [2015] for further discussion of the Portland and Lewiston programs.)

Maine's public libraries offer thousands of free humanities programs annually to the public: lectures, book clubs, reading, discussion, and more. In their openness to all, partnerships with community organizations, and consistency in presenting programs, public libraries overcome a major perceptual roadblock to public appreciation of the humanities: that the humanities are a narrow academic exercise with no relationship to real life. A statewide public library program that illustrates this richness of humanities offerings is the MHC's *Let's Talk About It* series, which is described in depth by MHC Executive Director Hayden Anderson elsewhere in this issue (Anderson 2015).

Public Library as Combiner and Collaborator

Due to a robust infrastructure, multidisciplinary interest and assets, physical presence, service to the entire population, and flexibility in mission creation, Maine's public libraries are great synthesizers, collaborators, and combiners. They are also the perfect partner for public humanities initiatives and programs that seek to be interdisciplinary and address topics not traditionally considered to belong to the core humanities, as the examples below illustrate.

The mission of Cornerstones of Science (COS), a Maine nonprofit, is to work "with libraries to create experiences of science that spark curiosity and foster a deeper connection to the world around us" (COS 2012: 2). COS was born in 1999 in a public library (Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick) with the initial focus on use of the best works in science and

technology that would improve science literacy, but also to give people an understanding of the meaning and process of science, the impact of science and technology on daily life, and to impart an ability to participate in the public policy debates that are centering more and more on science and technology. Since few Americans have strong backgrounds in these fields and many lack an even basic knowledge of them, many citizens cannot fully engage in the important current issues. The acquisition of science literacy is the means for the ultimate goal of nurturing informed citizens, who, to strongly echo the humanities, understand the world around them and how to use that understanding to advance community.

The ability to synthesize programs and disciplines and to collaborate with outside organizations is a core value for Maine's public libraries. A review of the programming at the Blue Hill Public Library (BHPL) illustrates the point. In addition to its home grown programs, the library has hosted multisession programs on such topics as Examining Public Discourse in the Age of Technology; Science Religion and Faith: Quest for Understanding and Meaning; and Darwin's Theory of Evolution: Is it Really So Controversial?, all in collaboration with Colloquy Downeast (Senior College). BHPL also facilitates the intersection of the arts and humanities through its Friday opera previews, which are conducted at the library the day before simulcast of the Metropolitan Opera performances at the Grand Auditorium in Ellsworth. The offerings at BHPL reflect local interest as well as the philosophy of the library, as Library Director Rich Boulet says: "I think more than anything public libraries are about access to information and experiences. Part of our role is making that information fun and engaging, adding value to the experience."

Portland Public Library likewise has had enormous success in leveraging its art gallery to serve humanities experiences. Each fall for the past three years the library has hosted shows by major American illustrators such as Maurice Sendak and Edward Gorey and on topics such as the Pulp that perfectly connected art to text and provided a rich window into the humanities.

Public Library as Creator and Conservator

Public libraries provide the infrastructure for the public humanities where it matters most—at the local level. They collect, organize, preserve, publish, and facilitate discovery. They provide the tools to acquire

local, state, regional, national, and global information and to place it into a meaningful context. Thus public libraries create a scenario either individually or with partners that makes hitherto unknown material available and discoverable.

To fulfill its statewide mission to preserve the history and heritage of Maine, the Maine Historical Society has drawn public libraries into numerous partnerships as libraries in every county in the state participate in the Maine Memory Network, a statewide digital archive that provides access to thousands of historical items from museums, archives, historical societies, and libraries. According to Steve Bromage, director of the Maine Historical Society, "Public libraries are the center and crossroads of information in most communities, and can play a key role in local history projects, convening people, organizations, and resources. They bring professional staff, consistent hours, and a strong orientation to the general public. Participation helps libraries expand their capacity to provide information about local history; improves technology skills of staff; and extends their relationship with schools and historical organizations" (2015: 139).

The process and end products embedded in the library as creator and publisher of digital collections of all types has afforded the opportunity to move the goal of building community from a sometimes difficult-to-measure programmatic basis to something concrete and demonstrable. The newly published materials become part of the public collections and able to be shared. The size, variety, relatively low overhead to produce, and online accessibility can help digital collections to quickly become a major force in building community.

The creation of digital collections often has at its heart relationships with a partner who either donated the material or has some abiding interest in its future. A community partner approaches due to an anniversary or opening, or simply with a strong interest in a public policy debate. These moments provide libraries with a path to expose a specific community segment or event to the wider community while the infrastructure—the library and its platforms—creates a lasting collection to inform future search and community engagement. The collections remain, are discoverable by the world, and continue to build communities.

Three of Maine's public libraries (BPL, Maine State Library, and PPL) became the first public libraries nationally to use the Digital Commons platform to

publish local digital collections. Each library has begun its publishing based on its mission and also the opportunities afforded through existing collections. BPL and PPL have aggressively digitized local history collections of all types. Included are photographs, journals, city government documents, and reports.

Examples of the library as creator and bringing local content to the world include PPL's effort to make the best use of a key newspaper and a major photographic collection. Portland Public Library has digitized the *Casco Bay Weekly*, a free and independent news-weekly, that ran from 1988 to 2004 and which functioned as a cultural record for southern Maine. This publishing leveraged previous indexing of the entire paper by library staff. The *Portland Press Herald* Still-Film Negative Collection consists of 70 years (ca. 1936 to 2005) of primary photographic images, including approximately 600,000 images made up entirely of negatives. The collection was accessioned by PPL, as a gift from the *Portland Press Herald*, in December 2009, and is currently being arranged, described, indexed, and conserved. The collections also are now the basis of a major exhibit at PPL. The depth and substance within this collection provides an extraordinary spectrum of real-time documentation of the life of the city of Portland through the twentieth century.

Public libraries continue to evolve, but...their foundation and natural affinity for the humanities will endure.

Publishing collections in digital formats is a form of preservation but not necessarily conservation. Many past microfilming projects have preserved hundreds of volumes of Maine's historic newspapers. In the case of the *Casco Bay Weekly*, the print issues have been microfilmed for preservation purposes, and the originals will be stored in archival boxes. Many collection care decisions are not as clear as to conservation or preservation and are often budget driven. Ultimately, through the Maine Shared Collections Strategy, discussed earlier, a great humanities preservation effort by major libraries in Maine is already underway as thousands of individual items have been identified for retention.

FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC HUMANITIES AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries reflect and respond to the society in which they exist. The infrastructure described earlier must be supported with reinvestment in order to have public collections, spaces, and technology resources with which to present and experience the humanities. Until now, the infrastructure has been built through collaboration and a commitment to the common good. Policymakers have responded to a certain degree, but more needs to be done. Considering the stunning statistical profile of public libraries widespread public impact (visitation, resources offered and used) the lack of significant direct state support to public libraries is inexplicable. Public libraries need more nonlocal support to extend hours and services and to attend to their larger infrastructure needs. It is also critical that those organizations and individuals who care about the future of the humanities be clear eyed about the societal trends that ignore or diminish the value of the humanities. If public libraries are the major force in presenting the public humanities, then coalitions extending beyond current partners must be built. Even with all of the good will and value delivered by public libraries related to the humanities, it is worrying that 31 percent of Americans say they “know not much or nothing at all of what their libraries offer” (Rainie 2014: 15). Humanities-based organizations—especially libraries—need a strategy to promote and illustrate the values of the humanities.

Public libraries continue to evolve, but as they change, their foundation in and natural affinity for the humanities will endure. In a digitally dominated world, while text becomes less frequently lent in paper format (books), the public library will provide infrastructure to make humanities content both affordable and accessible in digital formats while still offering print options. The public library as a physical presence will remain the natural place for welcoming and convening people and creating community through the sharing of views and ideas. Public libraries will still collect, convene, collaborate, create, and conserve in proportions that reflect community needs and opportunities.

By combining persistent value and flexibility public libraries stand as a bulwark against the tide of short-sighted thinking embedded in policy planning that views the goals of public education solely through the prism of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and workforce preparation. The marginalization

of the humanities in public schools is an annual budget theme. Essayist Leon Wieseltier captured the threat to the humanities in the academic world in response to the broad societal trends of “technologism” and “scientism”:

The notion that the nonmaterial dimensions of life must be explained in terms of the material dimensions and that nonscientific understandings must be translated into scientific understandings if they are to qualify as knowledge, is increasingly popular inside and outside the university, where the humanities are disparaged as soft and impractical and not sufficiently new. (*New York Times*, January 7, 2015)

The societal trends that Wieseltier decries are important to the future of public libraries. Public libraries at the center of their communities and committed to fulfilling individual and social potential will continue to provide a critical lifelong option for learning, growing, and developing that will happen primarily through engagement with the humanities. As we come to recognize and value this relationship as an extraordinary asset of our everyday landscape, we will strengthen community and best position ourselves to make effective policy decisions for our future common good. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. In 2013 Maine public libraries reported 754,367 cardholders and offered 36,494 programs with an attendance of 558,423. Of those programs 21,888 were directed toward children with a total attendance of 354,577 (Maine State Library 2013). The vast majority of the adult and youth offerings could be classified as humanities programs, given the use of literature of all types to assist in illuminating a variety of topics.
2. The URSUS consortium includes the libraries of the seven University of Maine System universities, the Maine State Library, Bangor Public Library, and the Maine Law and Legislative Library. The URSUS libraries not only share a common catalogue and lending privileges between libraries, but also jointly subscribe to databases at considerable savings over individual subscriptions. The Minerva consortium also has a shared catalogue, with lending privileges among member libraries; it has 56 member libraries, including public, academic, hospital, and school institutions.
3. The HathiTrust Digital Library is a digital preservation repository providing long-term preservation and access services for public domain and in copyright content from a variety of sources, including research libraries, Google, the Internet Archive, Microsoft, and in-house

partner institution initiatives. Partner libraries include Colby College and University of Maine.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Hayden. 2015. “Power and Pleasure of Ideas: The Maine Humanities Council and the Public Humanities in Maine.” *Maine Policy Review* 24(1): 43–48.
- Bartel, Anna. 2015. “Why the Humanities Are Necessary to Public Policy, and How.” *Maine Policy Review* 24(1): 117–123.
- Bromage, Stephen. 2015. “The Maine Memory Network: Re-Imagining the Dynamics and Potential of Local History.” *Maine Policy Review* 24(1): 138–140.
- Commission on the Humanities. 1980. *The Humanities in American Life*. The Regents of the University of California, Berkeley.
- Cornerstones of Science (COS). 2012. *Awakening Curiosity, Enriching Lives*. COS, Brunswick, ME. <http://www.cornerstonesofscience.org/Cornerstones%20of%20Science%20Brochure.pdf>
- Maine State Library. 2013. *Maine Public Library Statistics*. Maine State Library, Augusta. <http://www.maine.gov/msl/libr/statistics/Summary.pdf>
- Pew Research Center. 2013. *How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities*. Pew Research Center, Washington, DC. http://libraries.pewinternet.org/files/legacy-pdf/PIP_Libraries%20in%20communities.pdf
- Rainie, Lee. 2014. “The Next Library and the People Who Will Use It.” Pew Research Center Presentation, November 13, Az/LA Mountain Plains Libraries.
- Revett, Matthew. 2013. “A Shared Approach to Managing Legacy Print Collections in Maine.” *Maine Policy Review* 22(1): 65–66.
- Sanborn, James M. Jackson, and David Nutty. 2013. “Maine Libraries: A History of Sharing and Collaboration.” *Maine Policy Review* 22(1): 52–61.



Stephen Podgajny has served as a public librarian for nearly four decades. He formerly directed the York Institute (now Saco) Museum, and since 2006 has been executive director of the Portland Public Library, Maine’s most heavily visited cultural organization. He is former chair of the Maine State Cultural Affairs Council and Maine Library Commission and has served on many boards.