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What Big Media Can Learn From the New York Public Library

By Alexis Madrigal

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Despite looming budget cuts, the library is flourishing and putting out some of the most innovative online projects in the country



NEW YORK -- Two massive lions flank the steps of the New York Public Library's flagship building on Fifth Avenue. Crafted out of pink Tennessee marble, Patience and Fortitude, as they became known in the 1930s, are the library's tangible link to the ancient history of libraries. Across the world, sculptures of lions had [stood watch over sacred spaces](#) for thousands of years. During the library's construction, people like Teddy Roosevelt suggested using a bison because the new-world animal had "the advantage of being our own." But he and everyone else was rebuffed. These lions, and this library, were part of the long tradition of knowledge, passed down from one elite to the next from Alexandria to Rome to London and finally to New York. Information was not just an idea, but the set of physical objects that contained it. And that stuff had to be [protected by the powerful](#), lest their precious atoms be lost and the wisdom into which they could be distilled lost also.

The lions guarded the doors when the main branch of the New York Public Library was dedicated in May of 1911 and they watch over it still, rather haughtily looking over the heads of visitors to one of the world's great libraries. Yet over the last 100 years, and particularly over the last 10, everything about the storage and dissemination of knowledge has changed. The lions still guard the building, but the information's gone out the back door, metastasizing in the new chemistry of the Internet.

With all this change -- not to mention [a possible \\$40 million budget cut](#) looming -- it would be no surprise if the library was floundering like the music industry, newspapers, or travel agents. (Hey, man, we all get disintermediated sooner or later.) But that's the wild thing. The library isn't floundering. Rather, it's flourishing, putting out some of the most innovative online projects in the country. On the [stuff you can measure](#) -- library visitors, website visitors, digital gallery images

viewed -- the numbers are up across the board compared with five years ago. On the stuff you can't, like conceptual leadership, the NYPL is killing it.

The library clearly has reevaluated its role within the Internet information ecosystem and found a set of new identities. Let's start from here: One, the New York Public Library is a social network with three million active users and two, the New York Public Library is a media outfit.

The library still lends books, but over the past year, the NYPL has established itself as a beacon in the carcass-strewn content landscape with smart e-publications, crowdsourcing projects, and an overall digital strategy that shows a far greater understanding of the power of the Internet than most traditional media companies show.

Biblion, a storytelling app whose iPad icon features the lion head, is the flashiest of these efforts. It presents a slice of the library's 1939 World Fair Collection in a format that, [while controversial](#), pushed the traditional boundaries of the e-publication. Moving around the app doesn't feel like flipping through the pages of a museum catalog or crawling around a website. To me, it felt like a native application for the tablet era, a new form for the more spatial experience afforded by the tablet's touchiness. Even for those who didn't like the interface, the question had to be asked: this thing came out of *a library*?



Then there is the library's slick crowdsourcing projects, which allow users to [digitize beautiful old menus](#) from New York's restaurants and [plot historical maps of the city](#) onto the GPS-enabled digital maps of today. Both projects are both useful and feature user interfaces that best most commercial crowdsourcing applications.

The library is even improving its basic infrastructure to keep pace with the big social networks, announcing this week that they are launching [a new log-in system through Bibliocommons](#) that will bring simplified and more powerful catalog and account services to the library's users.

Everywhere you look within the New York Public Library, it's clear that the institution has realized that its mission has changed. It's no longer only a place where people take out books and scholars dig through archives. The library has become a social network with physical and digital nodes.

How did this happen? An institution as old and august as the NYPL is not supposed to react nimbly to new developments, let alone lead the media companies producing the books and magazines it preserves.

The NYPL has 50 million items in its collections spread out over 90 research libraries and branches. It's almost unique in serving both as a world class research institution for scholars as well as a regular-old city library system kids use to check out Harry Potter books. The system's got \$1.2 billion in assets. In 2010, the library pulled in about \$245 million in operating revenue and spent about \$255 million. Outside operations, the NYPL brought in an extra \$80 million in donations, "capital appropriations" from various government entities, and investment income from the library's \$680 million worth of investments in hedge funds and the like. In a very real sense, that is to say, the library made money last year. However, while there is a lot of money floating around, it turns out that donors restrict various amounts of it, as do the government entities, so the whole situation is more complex than the average media company's. The main point to take from all this: The people working at the library are working with many of the restraints that would be familiar to anyone running a magazine or website.

And yet there they are, launching [an alternate reality game with Jane McGonigal](#) played in the stacks of the library. Or getting 100 of their curators and employees to [start blogs](#). Or posting a painstakingly reconstructed digital version of the pathbreaking proto-musicals, "[The Black Crook](#)."

I visited the library to see who was behind the excellent work at the library to see how they thought about what they were doing. And maybe I was hoping to pinch some lessons for my own work on how to teach old animals new tricks. The Atlantic was founded in 1857, after all, 54 years older than Patience and Fortitude.

I'm going to give you the conclusion to his article here to solve the [tl;dr problem](#). There are two things the library has done to create such cool projects. First, I'm convinced the NYPL is succeeding online because of desire. The library's employees give a shit about the digital aspects of their institution, and they are supported in that shit giving. I mean this in the most fundamental way possible and as a damning critique for media companies. Second, the library sees its users as collaborators in improving the collections the library already has. While serving them online costs the library some money, they are creating value, too, by opening up conduits into the library for superusers.

The logic of protecting offline revenue pushed most media companies away from aggressively reevaluating their role in the information ecosystem. Something you hear a lot in the magazine business, for example, is that you "can't trade print dollars for digital pennies." That's kept many of us (The Atlantic excepted, I would say) from innovating online. No such pressure exists at the NYPL. The whole point of the library is to be used by the various people who do so. And the logic of delivering what users want leads inexorably to trying to give them the best digital experiences in the world.



My first stop was the Communications department, which produced Biblion. It is not at the main library location but rather at 34th Street at the [Science, Industry, and Business Library](#). Entering via a side entrance, I signed in with the security guard and took the elevator to the fifth floor. I emerged into the familiar territory of fluorescent-lit cubicles and shared bathrooms that I trust you're familiar with too. These places are like the landscapes of the Western. The setting, though it technically changes each movie, looks and functions precisely the same in the areas of fundamental importance. There will be red rocks; there will be beige carpet. It's the office.

This is the domain of Deanna Lee, an energetic and playfully aggressive former television news producer (below). She's justifiably proud that her small team put together Biblion in just five months working with a CMS that consisted of a few pieces of paper taped to her wall. "I was sick of hearing people saying e-readers are killing libraries," Lee said, and she set about creating an app to put the lie to the idea.

She maybe wanted to prove something else, too. "PR and content are all tied together now," she maintained. Everyone is just telling stories on the Internet, so if you want to succeed in PR, you need to be a storyteller. Take a look at the [NYPL's Tumblr](#). Conversant with current memeology and drawing on common news hooks (Father's Day, Bloomsday, the library's budget woes), the Tumblr provides a flow of tiny stories from and about their collections. Press releases are no longer where the communications action is.

Lee proudly notes that the Tumblr's run by her head of PR, Angela Montefinise, who used to work for the New York Post. And who, I note with appreciation, has an office that looks just like a daily reporter's, her desk and shelves covered with every kind of paper, and topped with a mock Post page one showing her inside Oscar the Grouch's trash can. If you are familiar with most

public relations firms, this is not exactly how they are set up.



Lee, especially, seems to enjoy all the blurring of the lines. She left network news in a huff after having an enterprise report on China canned in favor of a story about the guy who [faked killing Jon Benet Ramsey](#). After a stint at the Asia Society, she landed at the library, where she's been pushing to create new things that are not press releases. "We can all do this," Lee said. "We are all storytellers."

Biblion is quite obviously her baby, perhaps because she had to push it past many skeptical people before it came out. "This was a nightmare for the curators, essentially," she said. They had to give up control of the collections to outsiders, outsiders who would put something out in months, not the years that they themselves might spend creating a similar project.

On the other hand, the curators had already left quite a trail to follow in the form of a nearly 700-page "finding aid," which described the 1,183 linear feet of documents scattered across 2,508 boxes. In other words, she did not exactly pull the first Biblion release out of thin air, but rather carved it from the archival materials already assembled. Next, she hired the design firm Potion, staffed by former MIT Media Lab types who wanted to make a splash, and they were off to the races.

Internally, Biblion has been a hit. What began as a curator's nightmare has become a hot date. Now, everyone wants their collection to be the next to get the Biblion treatment. Lee, for her part, isn't content to just cut-and-paste together another finding aid. She wants to explore her notion of building "living archives" in a couple of different ways.

First, she wants the next Biblion collection to be drawn from an unconventional source. Something like Paul Holdengraber's [Live from the NYPL](#) series will be transformed into a Biblion collection, Lee said. He's interviewed everyone from Jay-Z to Harold Bloom and the videos are all available online. "I want to show that anything can be a collection," she said.

Lee's team's also hard at work on another initiative to create a living archive of the avant garde musician John Cage's sheet music. His collection is particularly in need of innovative digital treatment because the notation that he used for his work doesn't fit into the standards we have for such things. How would one know that certain seeming doodles mean, "[play the cactus like this](#)"? Lee imagines making Cage's sheet music available on the Internet, but pairing it with video master's classes from people like Kronos Quartet* and Sonic Youth, extending the information available in the New York Public Library's collection with knowledge from its users.

I left Lee's office thinking about how the library uses its assets to drive, in the argot of my industry, user engagement. This was the specialty of my next stop, a meeting with the heads of [NYPL Labs](#) and the digital team.



Take [What's On the Menu?](#), a slick project to crowdsource the transcription of tens of thousands of menus that, by virtue of their fonts and designs, are resistant to OCR, the way computers turned scans into text. Both the front end transcription and the back end output of the system are impressive. The New York Public Library's director of strategy, Micah May, told me within a year, all 40,000 menus in their collection will probably be done. Such a task would not have been possible without the help of thousands of networked volunteers.

The project, like Lee's vision for the Cage archive, highlights the key change in the way the library thinks about itself.

"A library is not just a place that collects information and processes information," May said. "We create the tools and structure the information so that others can enhance the collections." Another NYPLer, Doug Reside, Digital Curator of Performing Arts, put it even more simply, "The public library can be used to organize people to organize information."

That is to say, the NYPL's collections can become more valuable to all of its users by tapping into the energy and expertise of some of its users. The role of the library is to create the right kinds of conduits for superusers to get involved. That job falls to Michael Lascarides, senior manager for web initiatives for the New York Public Library, and Ben Vershbow, manager of NYPL Labs, which Vershbow calls "more an idea than a real unit" but that is tasked with connecting curators and collections with digital experts.

If my reporter self felt right at home with Lee and her fist-banging love for narrative, my inner technologist swoons around Lascarides and Vershbow. Lascarides is an artist and Vershbow directs plays, but that's just the New York in them; both are tech nerds deep down. I can feel it, even if Vershbow is wearing a plunging v-neck and has an uncanny ability to present the same look to my camera, no matter how many photos I snap.



The first thing Lascarides says to me is, "Digital is becoming the horseless of our age." He's referring to the late nineteenth century time that produced publications like, "[Horseless Age](#)," the Wired of the early automobile era. His point is that the word "digital" is becoming unnecessary because "digital is woven into everything." You add the adjective when you need to differentiate it from the world's general expectations. After automobiles dominated the landscape, horselessness was assumed. Indeed, we all live in the horseless age, but very few of us feel the need to draw attention to that fact.

I dwell on this point not only because I like saying horseless age, but also because it's a key element of how the NYPL encourages its staff to think. As May puts it, "Our strategy starts and ends with users." They simply provide what the people want, and increasingly, that means combining brick-and-mortar offerings with digital collections and front-ends.

Vershow describes the library as a "massive collection of niches," not unlike the web itself. Getting collections online and weaving them into the extant communities is "a very natural place for us to be in the knowledge commons," he said. Take the menu project. When you click on a menu item, say, "[rum punch](#)," it brings up a fact sheet about that dish. On the page, there are links within the menu collection -- to other menus that have rum punch -- as well as off-the-site to Epicurious, Google Images, Hathi Trust, Flickr, Twitter, and others. The original menu has become another node on the living web. It leaves the realm of the archival and becomes something you can make, maybe even from this 2001 recipe in Bon Appetit for [Rum Punch Granita](#). Or another example: you can see "Tutti Frutti" on [a menu from 1900](#) and then make it with a recipe from [1906](#) or [1962](#).

	Hotel Thorndike	December 17, 1907	\$0.30
	Hotel Marie Antoinette	February 21, 1900	\$0.30
	Hotel Marie Antoinette	February 18, 1900	\$0.30
	John Wanamaker	December 29, 1906	\$0.20
	John Wanamaker	May 14, 1900	\$0.20

Look up "Tutti frutti" in...

Look in...	For...
NYPL Digital Gallery	Historical images from the NYPL's collection
NYPL Catalog	Book and other materials from the NYPL's collection
MenuPages	Look for restaurants still serving this dish today!
Epicurious	Search for recipes for this dish
Google Recipe Search	Another search for recipes
Hathi Trust	Full-text searches of books (great for vintage cookbooks!)
Google	General information elsewhere on the web
Google Images	Pictures of all kinds elsewhere on the web
Wikipedia	General, encyclopedia-style information
Flickr	Pictures taken by individuals
Twitter	What people are saying today about this item

I think that's brilliant, but not because it's digital. Digital is merely the *precondition*. The web and search algorithms and crowdsourcing and all that make it possible, but to focus on them would miss the point. The point is: this project changes our relationship with time. When we weave history into the web, we weave the past into the present. And that is awesome and important. The archive takes on a life in our own, just as Lee hopes the Cage archives will.

Every magazine, television network, or radio station with an archive is sitting on gold. Get that stuff out of the basement and put it online for free, where people can link to, remix, and use it. But don't just dump it there. Take advantage of what the web can do. Structure the work, as NYPL's strategy head says, so that people can improve on your collection.

People love the texture of old stories and the odd solidity of old photos. If you let them use those things for their own purposes, they love them even more. Take the New York Public Library's stereogram collection. Stereograms were actually publicized by a key member of The Atlantic's staff at the end of the 19th century, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. Two images were taken from nearly the same angle that, when inserted into the proper viewer, gave something of a three-dimensional aspect to the scene. Most people have never looked through a stereoscope and in many respects, they are mostly just another indication that fake 3-D sucks. However, Joshua Heineman of the blog [Cursive Buildings](#), struck on a brilliant idea a couple of years ago. He took the available stereograms, which are usually by archives and libraries side-by-side, and [transformed them into animated GIFs](#). These flickering images do, in fact, give you the 3-D feel but within the web's vernacular.

That might not be the kind of collection improvement that a curator would imagine, but that's exactly the point. When you put information in the hands of people, they come up with all kinds of stuff that people within an institution might not think about.



Now, the grand lions that once guarded the building, keeping knowledge in, and to a lesser extent, the rabble out, will serve a different role. The lion's head has become the New York Public Library's brand on the Internet. More people will see the library's logo than will ever see the sculptures themselves. The good news is that Patience and Fortitude do still mean something in the Internet age. But they are not the only values the library will need to cultivate to keep its title as the best social network that is also a library and a media company. Speed, openness, and adaptability may be as important as the more phlegmatic aspirations of the past.

Balancing between the library's old and new values will be the challenge for incoming library president Anthony Marx, who takes over for Paul LeClerc, the library's head for more than 17 years. Marx starts in a couple of weeks, moving to the library from Amherst, where he was [a champion of socioeconomic diversity](#), who had an "[out-sized impact](#) on the national conversation about diversity in higher education." He seems like the kind of guy who will bless the library's push to serve more people through innovation online.

Of course, the thick library buildings will remain rooted in the streets of New York. Many collections, mostly because of copyright issues, will remain locked in basements and available only to pro researchers. But that probably won't be the only use for these beautiful, expensive buildings. Rather, the library would like to see them become hubs of conversation and collection improvement. Some of the Internet-sparked thinking about community building and the value of users is rubbing off on the physical space of the library. The New York Public Library is getting webbier by the day. Institutions famous for wanting people to be quiet now want you to speak up.

"I think we can become places of conversation," the curator Reside said, "Places where information is not only pulled off the shelf, but conversations can also happen around the contents of the library."

Users, even in a library, can no longer be shushed.



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