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## Public Libraries as Social Innovators

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on the usefulness of public libraries. Through a literature review, we document the shift in their core mission as they transition from codex curators to community builders. This reflects a change in service logic, moving away from the mobilization of technical capabilities in a low interactivity context and toward the mobilization of human capabilities in a high interactivity context. Public libraries now stand as social innovators in that their activities modify interaction patterns among individuals. As a consequence, they stand as key players in the knowledge economy.

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## Introduction

Public libraries are ubiquitous organizations<sup>1</sup>: there are 65,000 within the European Union alone (Quick et al. 2013, 13). Yet this apparent success masks the many challenges they face, which include, as identified by Smith (2019): a general distrust of government agencies; a decline in the human “attention span” (244) as a result of the pervasive use of smartphones; a “decline in reading” (244) and severe budget cuts. Further, the available data regarding the use of libraries reveals dramatic figures. For instance, Weaver and Appleton (2020) report that “between 2010 and 2016, the number of UK public libraries decreased by 14%, the number of library visits by 15% and the number of active borrowers by 23.5%” (xxi).

In this context, many question the usefulness of public libraries. Palfrey (2015) illustrates this point by recalling typical conversations in which his interlocutors declare that “we don’t really need libraries so much now that we have Google” (22). But when we say the word “library,” what are we actually talking about? To some authors, libraries are no more than codex curators (see, for instance, Gaines 1985b) while to others, they are builders of conversational networks within the society (Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson 2007). This duality is touched on in a recent report commissioned by the

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French government to assess the resources, needs and achievements of public libraries throughout the country (Orsenna and Corbin, 2018). On the one hand, the authors adopt a lyrical stance, describing libraries as “porous places in which multiple networks of actors and projects are interwoven, healing tears are shed, and strength to face the future is found, livening and re-livening our territories” (9–10). Later on, however, they adopt a technical approach, more in line with the curatorial perspective, stating that a library “owns a collection and [...] sets an annual acquisition budget,” that it has a “qualified personnel” and occupies at least 25 m<sup>2</sup> (35). Both types of libraries certainly coexist, and it is possible that those in difficulty are primarily of the curatorial type.

As a contribution to the debate on the usefulness of public libraries, the line of argument emerging from our literature review is that libraries are needed more than ever, as some are indeed prime social innovators. We revisit the definition of a social innovation as one that creates or modifies interaction patterns within the society, and put forward the idea that these new patterns can both produce serendipitous discoveries and foster social cohesion, in an era in which some authors identify a tendency toward social disintegration (Oldenburg and Brisset 1982; Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. [Section 2](#) details the shift in the core missions of libraries. [Section 3](#) conceptualizes the implications in terms of innovation trajectories. In [section 4](#), we discuss the definition of social innovation, drawing a parallel with the innovation trajectory of libraries. [Sections 5](#) and [6](#) discuss two dimensions of social innovation: the involvement of social networks in their making, and the production of such networks. [Section 7](#) concludes the paper.

## **Public libraries: from books curators to community builders**

The traditional view of a library’s activities tends to stress its curatorial mission. An example of this is provided by the Cambridge Dictionary, which states that a library is “a building, room, or organisation that has a collection of books, documents, music or sometimes things such as tools or artworks, for people to borrow, usually without payment.”<sup>2</sup> In another entry, it defines a public library as “a building where people can read or borrow books without having to pay.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the ISO 2789:2022 definition of a library indicates that it is an “organisation, or part of an organisation, whose main aim is to facilitate the use of such information resources, services and facilities as are required to meet the informational, research, educational, cultural or recreational needs of its users.”<sup>4</sup>

These definitions focus on the collections: a library’s role is to take care of these and to ensure their free circulation within the society. Note that the fact that every citizen can access books without payment does not mean that the library’s role is to serve everyone. For instance, Gaines (1985a), who was at the

time Director of the Cleveland Public Library, holds an elitist view. To him, “the guts of the library are in the integrity of its collections, the care with which it assembles and buys materials over a long period of time, materials that often the average member of the public is unaware of or indifferent to. The point of all our work is that when essential information is needed, it is there, and that is in the care of a curatorial staff” (53). As such, from the curatorial perspective, a public library might serve an elite minority, though not the whole community in which the library is located. A more universal view is also possible, however. For instance, Richter and Haley (1984) stress the term “public reading.” This expression, widely adopted in the period between the two World Wars in the French-speaking world, evokes an educational mission for libraries: to promote the activity of reading within the general public. From this perspective, library acquisitions should respond to the tastes and needs of the commoners, so as to stimulate their interest.

The universalist curatorial perspective is in keeping with the 1949 and 1972 versions of the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, which underlines libraries’ roles in conservation and dissemination and as a “living force for popular education” (UNESCO 1949; UNESCO 1972). The 1994 version of this same manifesto adopted a more inclusive stance, highlighting the need to provide accessible resources and specific services to “linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison” (UNESCO 1994). Interestingly, the provision of service to prisons and hospitals requires the library to be active in bringing its collections to the population, rather than remaining a static point of access to bookshelves. In this respect, the core missions of the library now go beyond the remit of a curator – which is why there is a need for a renewed definition. The 2022 version of the manifesto even declares that “libraries are creators of community, proactively reaching out to new audiences and using effective listening to support the design of services that meet local needs and contribute to improving quality of life” (UNESCO 2022). In this last definition, the presence of collections is only implied, whereas the library is seen primarily as a central social service for its community.

The shift toward community-building emerged in the early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Muddiman et al. (2000) question whether the UK still has equality of access to public libraries, particularly as a result of recurrent shifts in public library policy orientations happening against the backdrop of a tension between serving vocal “traditional” library users and trying to establish services for “new” communities” (15). The authors also highlight the fact that some marginalized groups (especially those without a stable address) had no access to library services. Among their recommendations to librarians, they insist on the necessity of engaging in “real and continuing consultation with socially excluded communities, groups and individuals” (61). In other words, the authors recommend the adoption, in the design phase of new library services, of co-creation methods with marginalized groups. These would

involve collaboration, listening and discussions with end-users (Vargo et al. 2008). de Moor and van den Assen (2013) summarize this new logic as follows: “libraries should move from ‘service design for patrons’ to ‘service design by communities’” (1).

In the case of the Chicago Public Library and its branches, ULC (2005) provided many examples of co-creation. For instance, Rose Powers, a Branch Director, is said to routinely seek to identify and contact local community leaders in order to gain a better understanding of their needs. This search strategy brings her participate in community projects, some of which are even not directly related to librarianship, such as helping to renovate a Chamber of Commerce – but which ultimately drag community attention to the library. This helps to expand both the number and the variety of stakeholders, resulting in new library initiatives such as new outreach programs or the sharing of teaching staff. By engaging in such actions, the library can (re)create social cohesion.

Community-building is therefore related to co-creation, which supposes an exchange of information. Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson (2007) develop this idea further by stating that the main role of libraries is to “facilitate conversation” (18). Indeed, it can be considered that books (or any other types of artifacts) provided by libraries are the results of conversations and that, “while one cannot converse with a book, that book certainly can be a starting point for many conversations within the reader and within a larger community” (18). Further, noting that “knowledge is created through conversation” (17), it is possible to summarize the core mission of libraries by saying that they “improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities” (Lankes 2011, 31). These authors, then, are grounding librarianship in conversation and knowledge creation theories.

The end-objective of community-building is knowledge creation. Going back to the initiatives reported by ULC (2005) in Chicago, it is clear that these involved a sustained dialogue with the community. The individuals involved certainly gained access to new knowledge arising out of discussions with librarians and/or other stakeholders. Many authors of academic literature have adopted this conception of a knowledge-creating library, making it influential in the academic literature. For instance, Heseltine (2020) declares that “libraries [...] are in the business of knowledge, learning, creativity, and imagination” (5). In the same vein, Bieraugel and Neill (2017), state that “libraries should look beyond the role of storing and serving up existing knowledge and examine the academic library as a place of discovery and development” (36).

The relationship between conversation and knowledge creation has been theorized by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, 2019) in the form of a four-phase spiral: socialization, externalization, combination and internalization. In the socialization phase, a person acquires tacit knowledge or know-how from

work, observation and/or through discussion with someone else. During the externalization phase, this tacit knowledge is made more explicit through discussion with a small team of close coworkers. In the combination phase, this explicit knowledge is combined with other bits of explicit knowledge, typically stemming from other working groups. It is in this third phase that knowledge produces new working prototypes – and thus potential innovations. The fourth and last phase is one of internalization, in which the individual transforms what has been learned in the three previous phases into new know-how. This new, tacit knowledge is then available to fuel a fresh cycle of knowledge creation and innovation.

The spiral of knowledge highlights an important point regarding libraries: it is in the nature of books to record explicit or codified knowledge, while the process of knowledge creation is initiated by a transfer of tacit knowledge, which often occurs through discussion. In this view, the curatorial library can do no more than play the role of supportive agent in the knowledge creation process, while the community-building library becomes an essential participant, because it facilitates (even permits) the initial transfer of tacit knowledge. Interestingly, it appears that books and other artifacts traditionally provided by libraries are now subordinated to the connecting activities, which have gained in importance.

In a sense, the library promoted by Gaines (1985a) was a provider of codified knowledge for the few users who were engaged into the combining phase of the knowledge creation process, whereas the one promoted by Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson (2007) and by Lankes (2011) is a facilitator in the socialization phase of that process. The community-building library also democratizes knowledge creation by permitting everyone to participate in the (potentially society-wide) discussion.

### **Innovation trajectories in public libraries**

The profound organizational changes that libraries are experiencing are reflected in the changing definition.

The very first public libraries, in the second half of the 19th century, were mostly book-centered and were never intended to be user-friendly. In the United States, for instance, Pungitore (1995) indicates that in the 1850s, “the stacks of shelving containing the books were closed to the public; users had to know exactly what they wanted so that they could ask the library employees to retrieve specific items” (5), and the collections excluded fiction and novels. In the same vein, the first public libraries in France forbade “the lending of books” (Richter and Haley 1984, 51). It was only later, during the Great Depression, that American public libraries became “a People’s University” (Pungitore 1995, 50), as they enlarged their collections to popular novels, and

**Table 1.** The stages of evolution of public libraries, adapted from Pateman (2020).

|             | Traditional library<br>(1850–1970)                                                                                                   | Community-led library<br>(1970–2000)                                                                                                         | Needs-based library<br>(2000–present)                                                                                   |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Objective   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Control of the working class.</li> <li>– Serving the elite and the middle class.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reaching new audiences (i.e. outreach programmes)</li> <li>– Supporting the marginalised</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Building a community</li> <li>– Community-led partnerships</li> </ul>          |
| Floor space | Dedicated to collections.                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 2/3 collections</li> <li>– 1/3 services</li> </ul>                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1/3 collections</li> <li>– 1/3 services</li> <li>– 1/3 partnerships</li> </ul> |
| Performance | Breadth and depth of collections, regardless of the community needs.                                                                 | Breadth and depth of services.                                                                                                               | Breadth and depth of community development activities.                                                                  |

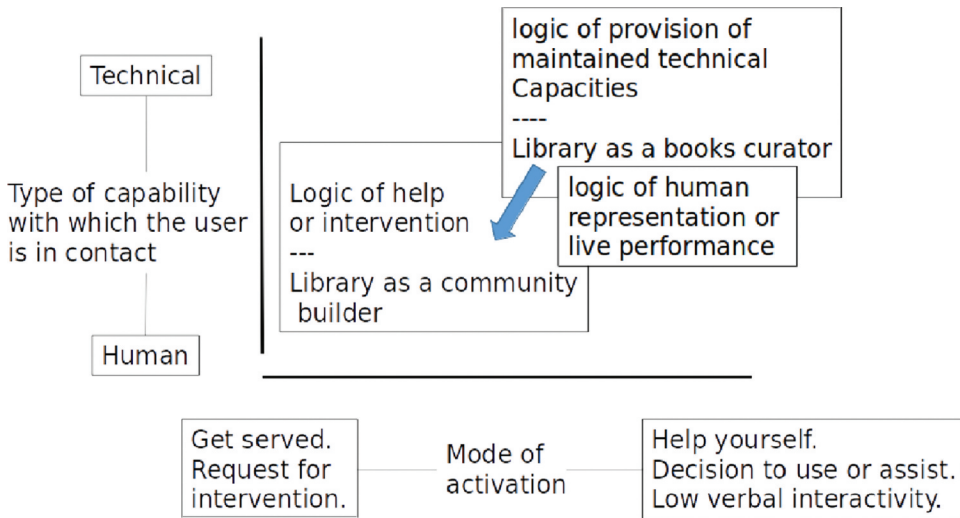
were massively used by unemployed people for educational and leisure purposes.

Pateman (2020) proposes a history of the evolution of public libraries in the United Kingdom in three stages that differ in terms of library objectives, use of floor space, and performance indicators (Table 1). The three stages are : the “traditional library” (1850–1970), the “community-led library” (1970–2000) and the “needs-based library” (from 2000 to nowadays). Pateman sees the process as necessarily sequential: a library must start as a traditional one, and must become community-led before it can become needs-based. The sequential view is debatable, but in any case, different types of libraries can coexist within a single country.

The evolution process described in Table 1 is consistent with the above-mentioned gradual servitization of libraries’ activities: less and less floor space is being dedicated to collections. Another major trend is the use of a co-creation logic: in the “community-led” model, the library generates initiatives to reach out new (usually impoverished) users, while in the needs-based model, the users are project initiators and stand as equal partners with the library. This dual change toward servitization and co-creation, and its implications in terms of innovation activities, can be conceptualized via recourse to the definition of a service.

For Gadrey (1992), “a service activity is an operation, aiming to transform a medium C, owned or used by a consumer (client, or user) B, performed by a provider A mandated by B, and often in relation with him, but without resulting into the production of a good susceptible to circulate independently from the medium C” (17). Such an operation mobilizes a set of capabilities coming from the provider (Gallouj and Weinstein 1997) and often also from the client him/her self (Djellal and Gallouj 2008). In this respect, Gadrey (1999) distinguishes between “technical” and “human” (i.e. relational) capabilities (15) and two modes of activation of the service: clients may want to be served, or to serve themselves. By cross-referencing capability types with request types, Gadrey is able to identify three service logics (Figure 1). First,





**Figure 1.** The different service logic and the libraries, adapted from Gadrey (1999, 15).

the “logic of provision” in which the client rents the use of a material artifact maintained by the provider. This applies to the activities of the curatorial library well. In this case, interactivity is low and the provider uses mainly technical capabilities. In “human representation” logic, the provider uses a set of human and technical capabilities in a low interactivity context. One example of this would be a live performance for the benefit of the user. Third, Gadrey (1999) identifies a logic of “intervention,” where the provider mainly mobilizes a set of human capabilities in a high interactivity context. This case is a good fit for the community-builder library, which interacts with its readers as well as with the community in which it is located more generally, in order to generate discussions and knowledge.

Following the narrative proposed by Pateman (2020), we identify a direction of organizational change among libraries from a logic of provision, adopted by traditional/curatorial libraries, to a logic of intervention, adopted in community-building libraries (Figure 1). However, unlike Pateman (2020), we do not adhere to a deterministic view. Thus, a community-building library does not necessarily emanate from a curatorial one, and the destiny of this last is not necessarily to become a co-creator of community services. In addition, Figure 1 should not be understood as binary, since both types of libraries mobilize a mix of technical and human capabilities – though with more pronounced development in human capabilities and interaction in the case of the community builder and more of a focus on the technical handling of collections in that of the traditional library.

Each of these two service logics suggests a particular direction (or trajectory) of innovation (Nelson and Winter 1982): one improving a library’s technological capabilities to preserve and circulate its collections, and the



**Table 2.** The two innovation trajectories in public libraries.

|                               | Book curator                  | Community-builder              |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Capabilities of the librarian | Technical                     | Relational                     |
| Operations                    | – Conservation<br>– Provision | – Conversation<br>– Connection |
| Nature of the service medium  | Books (material)              | – Individuals<br>– Knowledge   |
| Innovation trajectory         | Science and technology based  | Methodological and relational  |

other, more relational and methodological, increasing the scale and depth of the discussion and knowledge exchange within society. Table 2 summarizes these two innovation trajectories in terms of capabilities, types of operations and nature of the service medium in Gadrey’s sense (see above). These will be presented in more detail in the following sub-sections.

### *The science and technology trajectory*

In a technical sense this innovation trajectory improves libraries’ ability to fulfill their missions of conservation and circulation of collections. The traditional view about service organizations is that technological innovations are “supplier-dominated” (Pavitt 1984), meaning that the technology is not developed in-house, but provided by a supplier, with a strong orientation toward process innovation and the lowering of operation costs.

The literature is full of examples relating to library service digitization, often from a supplier-dominated perspective. For instance, Cervone (2008) uses a questionnaire to test the influence of professional advice networks on librarians’ receptivity to innovation. The topic itself suggests that innovation is emanating from other organizations before being adopted by libraries – which are therefore supplier-dominated. In this study, the surveyed population is selected from the members of the Consortium of Academic Librarians in Illinois, with receptivity to innovation measured by a set of nine attitudinal variables, ranging from individual risk-taking to views relating to organizational flexibility. These indicators are not related to technology adoption per se, though the authors do specifically invoke the digitization of resources as a motivation for their investigations. In this respect, they state, “Traditionally, the university library has held the role of caretaker of scholarly information on behalf of the academic community. However, as electronic modes of information delivery have begun to overtake traditional print-based formats, the scholarly information environment has been changing rapidly” (72). A curatorial perspective is transparent here. Another supplier-dominated view can be found in Khan et al. (2022), who build and administrate a questionnaire among academic libraries in Nanjing, China, so as to “assess the library personnel’s willingness to adopt internet of things services” (1977).

The supplier-dominated attitude could be explained by the fact that most libraries are now focusing on a relational trajectory – and thus, delegating technological improvements to suppliers. In an earlier period, curatorial libraries were able to produce in-house technological innovations – and in so doing, behaved as “science-based” organizations (Pavitt 1984). In this respect, Malinconico (1997) reports many cases of libraries developing technological solutions in the fields of computing and telecommunications. The author reminds that the New Jersey Public Library developed its own machine “to mechanise the processing of circulation cards” back in the 1930s, (48) and that a former director of the National Library of Medicine in the U.S. had been instrumental in the introduction of a punched card machine. In the field of telecommunications, he tells us that the National Librarian of Canada, Guy Sylvestre “appointed a task group on computer communications protocols for bibliographic data interchange” (52). These examples can certainly be considered as works of technological R&D performed by libraries.

### ***The methodological and relational trajectory***

This is the dominant innovation trajectory among community-building libraries. It aims to find new ways of deepening and to broadening the scope of discussion within society. (Please note that here, discussion refers to the generation and sharing of ideas.) More specifically, Nicholson (2019) identifies five types of innovation in libraries that satisfy this general objective: “participation innovations,” “making and creating innovations,” “learning innovations,” “outreach innovations,” and “partnership innovations.”

- (i) Participation innovations are initiatives that help libraries get involved in current cultural trends regarding media use and production, such as the promotion of open data or the gamification of the user experience. For example, Nicholson (2019, 334) reports the launch of the “Minecraft Gaming Day” in the North Melbourne Library, at which users were tasked with building a virtual library in the Minecraft video game.
- (ii) Learning innovations (Nicholson 2019) are library initiatives aimed at the promotion of lifelong learning. In this context, Nicholson (2015) mentions “a large reading and writing club programme” run by the Copenhagen Main Library (27), as well as a “guided reading club” project, potentially run in partnership with the psychiatric department of a local hospital.
- (iii) Outreach innovations aim to expand the user base. Examples include the opening of “pop-up libraries” (Nicholson 2019, 341) and the delivery of library services by bicycle. Some of these initiatives require

partnerships; for instance, the Grand Rapid Public Library is proactively searching for partners to organize any type of events capable (even indirectly) of promoting “the cause of literacy, books, information or the library as a community institution” (Warner 2013).

- (iv) “Partnership innovations” (Nicholson 2019) are intended to expand the range of services provided by the library through partnerships with other (often governmental) organizations. From this perspective, the library becomes a “community center” (ULC 2005, 3). One example is the setting up of a public event, bringing together a wide range of social services for the homeless in the Salt Lake City Public Library (Torres 2015).
- (v) “Making and creating” innovations aim to change the role of public library, “from being a content provider that encourages consumption, to a content producer that fosters creation” (Nicholson 2019, 336). This type of innovation is more often documented in the literature than others. Innovations belonging to this category range from dedicated floor space to fablabs, to a complete overhaul of the design of library spaces. In this respect, Bieraugel and Neill (2017) set out to test how the different spaces of a university library correlate with specific learning behaviors among users. They proceed by distributing questionnaires in the library, asking a series of questions to which users respond using a Likert scale. The questions are then grouped into seven learning behaviors: *exploration*, *exploitation*, *observation*, *questioning*, *experimentation*, *networking*, and *reflection* (42), and their results show that Makerspace is the most effective location for learning behaviors other than *exploitation* – in which Computer Lab scores highest – and *reflection*, where the Atrium scores best.

Bieraugel and Neill (2017) explore just one university library in the United States. Replication studies are thus needed, both in this country and abroad, and across a variety of library types. We might also ask about the direction of causality: is it that the spaces are promoting behaviors, or are they attracting those already in possession of these attitudes? And does the Makerspace score so highly because of the type of space it tends to be, or because of some specific feature(s) of the space being studied?

Despite its limitations, this study does raise the question of how the design of physical spaces affects user behaviors. Marino and Lapintie (2015) also tackle this issue, drawing up a typology of users of three public libraries, all located in Helsinki city center. The main differences between them lie in how the floor space is organized. “Library 10” (121) is mainly made up of “large group tables but not confined spaces, except for one meeting room of around 12 persons” (121). “Meeting Point” is a set of modular meeting rooms (with movable walls) that are equipped with workstations. The “university library”

has some facilities reserved for students and researchers. The authors conducted observations and interviews, ultimately producing a list of 5 user profiles, distributed in a non-uniform manner across the three libraries. This suggests that certain space and furniture layouts appeal to certain types of users. User categories are as follows:

- “Scholar,” typically a researcher seeking a “peaceful environment and easy access to information resources.”
- “Artist,” a young and educated person “employed in the fields of art and culture,” often a freelancer in search of a free workspace.
- “Walker,” a worker who stops by the library in the middle of a commuting journey to sit and do some work (consulting e-mails etc.).
- “Starter,” a young teleworker, often an entrepreneur. According to the authors, “the library can act as an incubator for them.”
- “Fugitive,” someone who escapes the office “to get work done.”

Marino and Lapintie’s work (2015) highlights the many creative uses of public libraries, especially as incubators for start-ups. Interestingly, the interviews reveal that the way the floor spaces are being used is very different from what their designers had in mind. For instance, some spaces in the university library were designed to appeal to researchers but in fact mostly attract teleworkers. Researchers seem to work in more or less random locations within the library.

In our view, the boundaries between these five types of innovations are porous. For instance, ULC (2005) reports a case in which a branch of the Chicago Public Library partners with local hospitals “to use the library to educate people and provide health screening” (25). Such an initiative is, at once, a *partnership*, a *learning* and an *outreach* innovation. This is why we prefer to use the all-encompassing label of “methodological and relational innovation.” Most of these initiatives can be labeled as social innovations, which are thus the main innovation trajectory of community-building libraries.

### **Social innovation: definition and parallel with library activities**

Many definitions of social innovation exist (Dacin, Dacin, and Matear 2010). Cloutier (2003) divides them into three categories, the first of which covers definitions “centered on the individual” (3). Through this lens, social innovations aim to create “new social structures” (3) by means of cooperation and co-creation. Novelty occurs when there is a “discontinuity” (8) with past practices used in a specific setting to address a certain problem.

Cloutier’s (2003) second category covers “social innovations oriented towards a milieu” (13) in which innovations modify “social relations” (13). Here, the author evokes Gershuny (1982). Adopting the point of

view of consumer theory, Gershuny states that a social innovation consists of “changes in the modes of provision for households needs” (496). Gershuny’s starting point is an assumption that households have various needs which are met through their demand and use of goods and services. In this view, new goods or services that respond to needs previously met by other means are social innovations. They relate to the “milieu” category because they necessarily alter interaction patterns within the society. For example, using a car rather than a taxi, or asking a librarian instead of a town hall for some public services represent changes in how people interact, and thence, changes to the social structure. As such, these new goods and services can be labeled as social innovations.

Cloutier’s (2003) identifies contributions highlighting the fact that new ways of organizing work are “social innovations within companies” (21). Note that these new working methods are not necessarily intended to improve workers’ lives.

Our takeaway from this typology is that social innovations are those that modify interaction patterns between individuals, whether within a company, a neighborhood or a larger area (such as a country, in the case of a culture change). Interaction can be result of, and the method by which the innovation is achieved – such as, for instance, through the use of a co-creation logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004; Vargo et al. 2008). We note that this analysis makes no mention of the goals of pursuing inclusivity, or aiming to improve well-being.

Interestingly, more recent definitions focus on the existence of an inclusive or “good” objective as a decisive criterion for social innovation.<sup>6</sup> In this, they are moving away from the interactive perspective – at risk of ending up with a circular argument that defines “social innovations” as innovations which are “social.” An illustration of the circularity issue can be found in Mulgan (2012), who defines social innovations as “innovations that are social in both their ends and their means” (35). For Moulaert and Ailenei (2005), such innovations involve the “(re)introduction of social justice into production and allocation systems” (2037), though they provide no discussion of the meaning of “social” in this specific context.

Hayek (1993) deplores the many uses of the word *social*. To him, any misuse of a word leaves it devoid of meaning and, when employed as an adjective, it confuses speakers as to the meaning of the noun being qualified. This is true in particular of the word *social*. Hayek recommends sticking to the etymology of the word: it comes from the Latin “societas, derived from socius, the personally known companion” (155). If we accept this, then the interactive dimension identified by Cloutier (2003) seems fairest: a social innovation should create or modify interaction patterns, permitting unknown individuals to get to know each other. Interactions can happen in the making of the innovation, or as a result of it. An inclusive dimension remains possible, but should not be decisive in classifying an innovation as social.

Since its stated objective is to foster conversation (and in particular to involve those with a weak acquaintance network), the community-building library can be considered a social innovation in its own right. The library does of course have conversational mission, but it is when it introduces a discontinuity – i.e. a drastic change – in the interaction pattern within a given milieu that it becomes *socially innovative*. Using this reasoning, most innovations belonging to the methodological and relational trajectory can be qualified as social.

The following two sections are devoted to interactions as a mean to innovate and to interactions as a result to innovations.

### **Social innovations and libraries: network as a process**

As noted, social innovation research has departed from the study of interactive solutions. In parallel, it has also developed a tendency to focus on the figure of the social entrepreneur – characterized by Mulgan et al. (2007) as “heroic, energetic and impatient” (13). Against this individualistic perspective, Desmarchelier, Djellal, and Gallouj (2020b) point out that social innovations can also be the product of large networks of actors. In particular, they highlight the connecting role played by a new type of actor, namely the “knowledge intensive social services” (KISS). These are “equivalent to knowledge intensive business services in nonprofit activities,” though with some notable differences – such as the fact that they “pursue an explicit social mission” and “act as connectors,” linking their clients to other actors in the social economy (Desmarchelier 2023, 52).

These large innovation networks that emerge from KISS activities have been labeled “public service innovation networks for social innovations” (PSINSIs) by Desmarchelier, Djellal, and Gallouj (2020a) and even national social innovation systems (NSIS) in Desmarchelier, Djellal, and Gallouj (2022). It is the centrality of public and private services that makes this kind of network so different from more traditional and technological innovation networks. Yet a paradox emerges here: the community-building libraries should be among the key actors in these networks, yet are absent from the data provided by Desmarchelier, Djellal, and Gallouj (2020b, 2022). This could be due to a number of factors. First, the authors do not depart in any significant way from Mulgan’s circular definition of a social innovation (2012). As a result, the projects covered in the authors’ data-sets do not necessarily aim to change the social structure. The networks reported by Desmarchelier et al. do in record interactions between organizations – but not those between individuals. Second, community-building libraries are certainly more present at the local level, while NSIS are of national scope.

In this context, can we identify public libraries, and projects initiated by them, in these PSINSIs? Are community-building libraries acting as KISS

actors? In other words, do they help social entrepreneurs by connecting them to other actors?

### **Social innovations and libraries: network as a result**

The community-building library aims to generate “conversation networks” and to take an active role, through those networks, in the knowledge creation process (Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson 2007). Such a connection between knowledge and social interactions is investigated by Carley (1986). In particular, she declares that “the development of the social world involves tacit consensus among the individuals in the society over perceived regularities; in this way, social knowledge as shared cognitive structure is also a by-product of human interaction. Social knowledge affects future interaction/communication [...]. As individuals’ knowledge bases co-evolve, their propensity to interact changes, social knowledge evolves, and social structures change” (382). What is being suggested here is a virtuous circle: social interactions nurture social knowledge, which in return create improved conditions for future social interactions, and so on.

This view echoes Nonaka and Takeuchi’s spiral of knowledge (1995), in particular in that the spiral highlights a co-evolution between an epistemological dimension (i.e. the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge) and an ontological dimension, since the various stages of the knowledge spiral involve an increasing number of individuals (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2019). We note that, in Nonaka and Takeuchi’s theory, knowledge creation is initiated by a meeting of individuals (network as a process). If the end-product of this process is a social innovation (network as a product), then further novelties in terms of interactions are possible, and this could trigger the spiral of knowledge once again. This remark highlights the intimate relationship between social innovations and knowledge creation, as well as the intertwining of networks *involved in* the innovation process, and those *resulting from* this process.

The idea that interaction is a prerequisite for knowledge creation is shared by authors from other disciplines. Pariser (2011) argues from a political science perspective that shared/social knowledge is a necessary condition to nurturing the debate of ideas in a well-functioning democracy – especially because such debate requires “citizens to see things from one another’s point of view.” On the basis of this assumption, both Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2017) take a pessimistic view of recent developments on the internet, in particular the ubiquity of recommendation systems, insofar as these lock internet users into “information bubbles,” thereby diminishing the shared knowledge base within society. Indeed, recommendation systems offer individuals tailor-made experiences (labeled “the daily me” by Sunstein) in lieu of the public (or shared) opinion (Tarde 1901) – which can thus disappear. In



a sense, recommendation systems are the opposite of social innovation, since they reduce opportunities for interaction.

In this context, an essential role of the community-building libraries could be to counterbalance the disintegrating force of online recommendation systems. Their ability to create acquaintances and shared knowledge, even with those who are less well-connected (for instance, newly arrived migrants) is evident in Wessendorf (2022). The author conceptualizes public libraries as “physical arrival infrastructures” (182), because – in addition to providing a variety of public services, resources and information – they are places where “serendipitous encounters can happen” (180). To illustrate her point, she recalls a public library in East London in which, “Pre COVID-19, twice a week a group of about 15 women used to gather their weekly crochet group on a large table by the front window, most of them with a migrant background. During the many times I attended the group, women regularly came into the library to ask members of the group about crochet, which sometimes led to conversations about how to find resources. One of those resources is English classes that take place several times a week at the back of the library” (182).

The risk of social disintegration had already been foreseen by Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) – but in the context of the development of the suburbs, which reduced people’s lives to a diptych home-office in which social interactions were governed by specific/well-defined roles and statuses. To these authors, individuals have greater need of alternative places (labeled “third places”) where they can exercise “pure sociability” (270), in other words, where they can participate in informal discussions with other people from a variety of backgrounds, without the boundaries conferred by social status. There are numerous benefits to getting involved in a third place: doing so exposes individuals to “diversity and novelty” (273), and the author suggests that exposing one’s own ideas to the judgment of others is both beneficial to mental health, and provides access to “collective wisdom” (281).

In summary, third places create informal and temporary discussion networks. Despite their instantaneousness, such networks can provide individuals with significant benefits. Public libraries can be described as third places (see for instance, Orsenna and Corbin 2018) and if we are interested in the networks they produce, we should certainly be paying attention to the passing experiences that they permit, rather than searching for institutionalized/stable networks. This suggests that networks as a process are certainly more permanent than networks as a product. To put it another way, the networks produced by social innovations are most often invisible, precisely because of their spontaneous nature. The crochet group described in Wessendorf (2022) illustrates this point: it is a permanent (process) network of around 15 women and produces many temporary (product) networks through serendipitous encounters with passersby.

Elmborg (2011) objects to the analogy between public libraries and third places because he considers that it positions libraries as direct competitors to for-profit alternatives such as coffee shops, and would downgrade them to being mere places of casual sociability. Instead, taking the idea that “place is security, space is freedom” (346), he suggests that libraries should be viewed as third spaces, between the many regulated and single-use spaces built by human beings (from churches to shopping malls), and the unregulated “representational spaces” (Lefebvre 1991) in which individuals can express complete artistic freedom. Seen as third spaces, public libraries would constitute “shared social space where real people engage in real struggle for meaning and purpose” Elmborg (2011), 349). Here, the network produced by the public library is certainly both longer-lasting and capable of producing more radical social changes than in the “third place” view.

To us, the main difference between the concepts of “third *place*” and “third *space*” has to do with the depth of the conversation they can nurture: casual sociability in third places, against purposeful questioning in third spaces. In both cases, then, public libraries are potential social innovators insofar as they permit the creation of novel discussion networks. Arguably, casual conversations most often change the interaction patterns within the society only marginally and can therefore be termed incremental social innovations – while purposeful discussions hold the potential for radical change.

## Conclusions

While it is true that social innovations may involve a network of actors in their process, it seems that what is most distinctive about them is this: their outcome is a flow of new social interactions. By achieving this, social innovations fuel social cohesion. From this perspective, the “third place” is a typical social innovation, since it routinely produces a renewed sociability. Thus, the shift in the core missions of libraries, from the curation of material artifacts to the building of communities, turns these organizations into prime social innovators. We might even say that social innovations now represent the natural innovation trajectory for libraries.

To some authors, factors such as suburban development (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982) and the pervasiveness of online recommendation systems (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017) mean that social ties in western societies are becoming increasingly stretched. Hence, third places – including public libraries – are of considerable importance to ensuring societal resilience. This paper also suggests that social cohesion could nurture the knowledge creation process. If this is so, then social disintegration might even hamper the performance of national innovation systems. Public libraries are, then, proving their worth – which is why we argue that their usefulness goes well beyond the need to nurture a literate society.

This new role calls for a change in the metrics used to assess library performance. Rather than focusing on the numbers of books borrowed, we should be considering how, and to what extent, public libraries contribute to social cohesion and innovativeness within their catchment area. One interesting case here is that of the Public Library Association in the U.S., which hosts a series of projects in a variety of domains – including the promotion of literacy, the provision of health-related information, and support for children’s education.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, the coexistence of several types of library should prompt the establishment of typologies of libraries; this would allow us to monitor their demographics and performances more closely, and should constitute an interesting avenue of exploration for a multi-disciplinary research agenda.

## Notes

1. This paper draws on investigations carried out within the LibrarIN project, funded by the European Commission under the Horizon Europe framework.
2. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/library> (last access: Oct. 7th 2023).
3. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/public-library> (last access: Oct. 7th 2023).
4. <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/en/#iso:std:iso:2789:ed-6:v1:en> (last access: Feb. 28th 2024).
5. The “shift” we are referring to is a change of priority. As such, community building libraries still continue to maintain, expand and circulate their collections, in addition to their offering of community services.
6. As an illustration of this state of affairs, we refer to Dacin, Dacin, and Matear (2010), who list no fewer than 37 definitions of social entrepreneurship. The vast majority of those both refer to *social innovation*, and define it in a circular manner.
7. <https://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives> (last access: Feb. 28th 2024).

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