Meeting a Composite of User Needs Amidst Change and Controversy

The Case of the New York Public Library

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The New York Public Library, a venerable institution with a strong commitment to serve the research and leisure needs of its users, has been a subject of much controversy in recent years. At the heart of the controversy is the Central Library Plan that proposes changes in both the facilities and the services that the library offers. The proposed changes are designed to modernize and improve services to users. The purpose of this study is to see how well New York Public Library meets user needs in the area of access and storage, as expressed by borrowing e-books, receiving library materials that are stored offsite. To answer these questions, we assigned a group of testers with two tasks and report their finding in both qualitative and quantitative terms. The results of our study provide a user perspective of how prepared New York Public Library is to meet their patrons' needs.

In an attempt to remain true to their mission of meeting user needs, libraries are constantly introducing changes to library buildings, facilities, collections, and services. While in many cases libraries are reducing the size of the physical collection, the physical space is not shrinking, but rather is appropriated differently. Librarians say that housing books is less of a priority, but as shelf and storage space is reduced, libraries are expanding their facilities and creating new services for "today's people."[1]

Nowhere have changes to every level of a library system been on a scale as large as that of the New York Public Library (NYPL), which is in the midst of the proposed $300 million Central Library Plan (CLP).[2] The changes at NYPL run across all areas of service, including facilities, sources, and service.

This research examined how well the services provided to library users by NYPL are meeting those users' expectations. Specifically, we focused on two aspects of public library services: borrowing digital items, and requesting books housed in off-site storage facilities. Since NYPL is one of the largest library systems in the United States, we hope to be able to extrapolate from our findings recommendations to public libraries in other systems. The research was designed so that testers will use and have an opportunity to experience and reflect upon these services.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The New York Public Library system is an ideal research setting for several reasons. First, it is the largest public library in the country in terms of the

population it serves, and the second largest in terms of volumes held.[3] In addition, NYPL is implementing large-scale changes to the system in many areas, including facilities, services, and collection development. These changes have been subject to heated debates over the past few years, and the Central Library Plan received extensive coverage in the *New York Times* and *The Nation* and was the focus of two lawsuits, with plaintiffs including writer Edmund Morris, historian David Nasaw, and Pulitzer prize-winning historian David Levering Lewis.[4]

NYPL, founded in 1895, is the nation's largest public library system. Serving three boroughs of New York City—the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island—with 87 branches, NYPL also encompasses four scholarly research centers: The Stephen A. Schwarzman building, for general research; the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and the Science, Industry, and Business Library (SIBL). With its holdings of more than 51 million items, including books, e-books, DVDs, and historical material, and another 800,000 images in its digital gallery, NYPL brings in more than 18 million patrons a year, and its website draws more than 32 million visits.[5]

NYPL's centerpiece is its Beaux-Arts Public Library building on 42nd Street, built between 1902 and 1910. With 75 miles of shelves and an enormous public reading room set over seven floors of stacks, it served as a circulating library until 1981, when circulation services were moved to the Mid-Manhattan Library across Fifth Avenue.[6] In 2008, Wall Street financier Stephen A. Schwarzman donated $100 million to NYPL, and the landmark building was given his name. Schwarzman's gift, however, was earmarked specifically for a series of proposed changes to the building that have proven controversial.

The Central Library Plan (CLP), originally presented in 2008, proposed restoring the Schwarzman building's status as a circulating library. The CPL met loud public protest,[7] and was finally abandoned in May 2014.[8] The CLP proposed opening up closed space within the building, moving 1.5 million books from their present location in open stacks to storage space to be built out underneath Bryant Park. An additional 1.5 million books were to be moved offsite to Recap, a shelving facility in Plainsboro, New Jersey, to be accessed through online request. Renovations to the Schwarzman building were to include an expanded children's room, increased computer space, and additional "destination" and general public space. Improved research services are also cited as a priority, with NYPL aspiring to "more librarian assistance, quiet study and collaborative spaces, additional computers, quick and easy access to our highest demand books and materials for users on the go."[9]

The public has not given the proposed changes unanimous—or even broad—approval. NYPL has been accused of a lack of transparency in its planning process; the original proposal was formulated without input from the public or City Council oversight.[10] There is a widespread concern that moving so many of the library's holdings offsite will result in access difficulties for researchers, long wait times for requested books, and a general decline of the egalitarianism NYPL is famous for.[11]

NYPL counters that the building's present configuration is underutilized and inefficient. Present storage conditions require modernization, and given modern operating costs, the new layout would be more economical.[12] Both Columbia and Princeton Universities currently use the offsite Recap facility with great success; most request turnaround times have reportedly remained within the quoted 24-hour time frame. Relocated books will be limited to less-used material, and the library plans to offer improved "digital browsing" for patrons to examine offsite holdings.[13]

At a time when library acquisition and personnel budgets are being cut regularly, improvements to a single building are seen by many as a vanity project, designed to improve tourism and raise its public profile while neglecting the everyday service needs of the library's local users.[14] The CLP's potential impact on the user community at large, however, is difficult to assess. Examining the current state of services at NYPL is one way to gauge areas in need of improvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While public library use was once an on-site experience, increasingly, user needs are faceted and take place on many platforms simultaneously, from a number of locations. Fairly recent changes such as the introduction of e-books and offsite storage locations have changed libraries, and the outcomes of these changes is highly variable. As user trends continue to evolve, responses to those changes—including assessment metrics—need to be re-evaluated on an ongoing basis.[15]

E-book Borrowing

As e-book borrowing becomes steadily more ubiquitous, technological factors are becoming less of a deterrent.[16] Their use is more widespread than ever; in 2011 nearly a third of e-book readers preferred to borrow rather than buy, as did almost two-thirds of audiobook listeners.[17] But the experience of library patrons looking to borrow electronic material is still not smooth,[18] and bears further examination.

Research surrounding library e-book and audiobook use has primarily been concerned with issues of discoverability,[19] and has only recently begun to seriously examine questions of usability. Additionally, a majority of studies have been concerned with the adaptation of e-books in academic settings,[20] as publisher issues have delayed their widespread use in public libraries.[21]

Especially as e-book use becomes more prevalent, and ownership of e-readers and listening devices more commonplace, users expect fewer barriers to borrowing the material they want.[22] In fact, surveys reveal that user problems have been endemic since e-books were first adopted, particularly in connection with the software required for access but also

with the library interfaces and the e-books themselves.[23] Thus, challenges to access e-books are often a result of the constraints imposed by publishers and vendors and the plethora of e-book platform.[24] Libraries need to keep up with advances in user and Web services along with e-content; their infrastructure needs to reflect user needs.[25]

There is a marked lack of user surveys accurately defining what these needs are, however, and such metrics are necessary to define a set of best practices.[26] Blummer calls for librarians to actively advocate for e-book use and standards, which include delivery services. And Duncan advises libraries to be responsive to user e-book needs for their own survival: "The time is ripe for all libraries to analyze and implement e-book and eAudiobook solutions tailored to their communities. Indeed, if library managers delay in this area, the explosion of e-readers, and related electronic resources will overtake the community's patience for libraries to deliver such services."[27] But surveys defining these needs within the public library sector, and which give accurate assessments of where strengths and problems lie, are still not prevalent in library literature.

Offsite Requests

The decision to establish offsite storage facilities for libraries facing shortages of space has always been a controversial—and often difficult—one.[28] Academic libraries, either in shared or individual arrangements, have most commonly adopted offsite solutions.

Much of the studies done on offsite library storage have documented the worries of patrons, particularly the academic community. Scholars have traditionally been apprehensive about losing access to needed material, and voiced concern over the definition of what items would be deemed "low-usage" and removed from central circulation.[29]

There is also noted concern over the loss of browsing as an aid to research. Offsite materials are accessed through library OPACS, and the inability to collocate related work is generally seen as a drawback. The potential waiting period between requesting material and its receipt is also cited as a problem: "That waiting period certainly can disrupt intellectual processes, what mathematicians call 'clear thought', and thus the reader loses momentum. Is the productivity of the institution's researchers lowered as a result?"[30]

If opinions among the academic community have been mixed,[31] the reaction to the New York Public Library's Central Library Plan has proved to be extremely divisive.[32] The plan proposes to relocate 1.5 million "lesser-used" books to an offsite storage facility in Plainsboro, New Jersey shared by Princeton and Columbia Universities.[33] Much of the problem lies in the lack of documentation about actual user experiences with borrowing from offsite storage; perceptions are largely negative, and there is very little research available to counter them.

PROBLEM STATEMENT/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to examine how well the New York Public Library system is adapting to changing user needs and preferences, we focused our research on access and storage, two areas that are at the heart of the CLP. Given the increasing role of e-books and library storage centers in enhancing access to materials in public libraries, we asked the following research questions:

RQ1: How well does the e-book borrowing procedure meet users' needs?

RQ2: How well does the offsite request procedure meet users' needs?

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY

Students taking a required general reference course at a master's program in New York City were assigned the two tasks that were tested in the study. Data for this study was collected over four semesters, from January 2012 to December 2013.

The first task asked students to borrow digital items (e-book or audio book) from NYPL. This was assigned early in the semester, when most students were still new to reference services and processes. The questions asked students to describe their experience in narrative form and reflect on the process and their affective response to it.

The second task asked students to request a book from NYPL's remote storage facility. This too was assigned early in the semester. Students were asked to use the library catalog to identify materials held in remote storage and request them, and describe their experience in narrative form.

The first two tasks focused specifically on the NYPL system with the intention of learning how well recent changes to the library's services are meeting users' needs and expectations. Tasks were assigned early in the semester when students' information behavior resembled that of a library user rather than a library and information science professional.

Narrative Form

We chose to collect data in narrative form. Narrative form is more suitable for students early in their studies, as it more closely emulates a library user's experience of the process, does not require or confine participants to specific criteria, and encourages self-reflection and critical observation. Narrative form has been used successfully to elicit data on the everyday experience of using new technology.[34] To further encourage self-reflection, students were provided only with general guidelines for the task, and were asked to record their own experiences soon after completing the assigned tasks. Natural language responses to questions about transactions were already noted as particularly helpful in prior research.[35]

Content Analysis

Once testers completed their tasks and submitted narrative reports, we conducted a systematic analysis of the narratives and extracted common themes. Content analysis is regarded as an appropriate method for narrative form and allowed us to answer the research questions using both qualitative and quantitative data.[36]

Limitations

Although every effort was made to design the tasks to emulate the experiences of library users, it is possible that testers, by virtue of their role as library and information science students, employed a more critical examination of the processes. In addition to being LIS students, the testers shared similar traits and habits: they all live in or near large urban areas and are familiar with library technologies and service models.

This method of data collection presents limitations due to the self-reporting component of the narrative form. Although the triangulation of data over four semesters helped to strengthen the findings, these limitations should be considered.

FINDINGS

E-books

Students were asked to download an electronic book in either digital print or audio format. They were instructed to download two books of different file formats and reflect on their experiences.

In total, students downloaded 42 e-books and 36 audiobooks. Tables 1 and 2 offer a breakdown of the file formats that were tested:

When asked about previous experience with downloading e-formats from the library, only 7.8% (6 of 78) of testers indicated that they had previously downloaded e-formats from any library.

Testers pointed to problems and made observations regarding many aspects of the downloading process. Areas that were mentioned most frequently addressed *choice of materials* available, the advantage of having *dedicated e-readers* for e-books, the *blurring of boundaries* between the library and the for-profit world, and the availability/quality of *online assistance* offered by the library for downloading e-books.

One frequent complaint was that the e-materials of choice were not available for immediate loan. In fact, 42% (33 of 78) of the items of first choice were not available to download, since they were in use by other patrons.[37]

It is a bit frustrating because it pulls up copies that are not available and you have to keep scrolling until you see something that is.[38] [S12.4]

Another student commented that the selection did not seem to capitalize on the unique contribution that e-formats can make to specific types of content:

Table 1. Number/Type of E-books Downloaded

E-book file format	No. of items
Kindle	16
PDF	3
EPUB	4
Adobe Digital Edition	15
Unspecified	4
Total	42

Table 2. Number/Type of Audiobooks Downloaded

Audiobook format	No. of items
MP3	17
WMA	9
ODM	2
Unspecified	8
Total	36

In the case of audiobooks I think that there should be a much broader range of poetry, mainly because it would seem that one of the primary advantages to accessing books audibly would be to have the opportunity to listen to works that are meant to be read aloud. [F12.18]

Many pointed to a lack of a dedicated device (e.g. Kindle) as a barrier to getting the most benefit from this service. Only 29% of students owned an e-book reader, although one student indicated that the library offers users an opportunity to experience e-books before committing to a device:

Ultimately, the borrowing of e-materials via NYPL is thus far only convenient for users who have an e-reader. Otherwise, several technically complicated steps are required. [S12.11]

I would recommend this resource for users who are interested in testing out whether they want to make the jump to using e-book materials. [F12.6b]

Others also felt that the library's e-books were most suited for people with dedicated e-readers. One student said:

If I could get it to work on my Kindle, this would be a great service, but for the moment, the inconvenience outweighs the potential. [F12.3b]

another iterated the same sentiment:

I am currently convinced that e-books are best for those who have long-since purchased the necessary devices to specifically operate and utilize the e-book. [F12.4]

Students were quite troubled by the strong presence of commercial vendors at every step in the borrowing process. Downloading a Kindle book requires users to exit the library website and enter Amazon's website. This caused some user confusion and they were concerned they would be charged for the book. In addition, once the loan term is over, Amazon asks the user if they would like to purchase the book.

One user said:

> The commodity/shopping lingo to download e/audio was interesting because for a moment I forgot I was borrowing the item for free and not purchasing anything. [S13.6]

Another student noted library reliance on commercial software for circulating books, and said:

> The system only goes up to Windows 7. I am sure they will eventually change this but until then I am unable to borrow and download e-books through NYPL. [S13.1]

Other students, aware of the large role that commercial vendors had in the library e-book reality, were sympathetic toward the library in its struggle to reconcile these conflicting needs:

> The nice thing about the Kindle format is that most of the time you can send the file wirelessly through Amazon. This particular book unfortunately cannot because it is published by Penguin Publishing. That particular company is currently at odds with Amazon and has chosen to no longer allow their e-books to be downloaded wirelessly. . . . I do not hold NYPL responsible for this inconvenience but it can sour the experience of downloaded e-books for a first time user. [S12.5]

Others found the third party presence very off-putting:

> The NYPL eSystem is very fragmented and dominated by proprietary software to manage licensing issues. I did nor feel in control when navigating and didn't enjoy the process at all. [S.13.16]

With regard to online assistance available when downloading e/audio books, students indicated that while they were able to complete the task, the service could be improved by adding video tutorials on the process.

> There are digital communities with forums I often frequent that usually have video tutorials I can use as reference tools if I ever need help troubleshooting a particular piece of software/hardware. NYPL should provide something like this as it's rather simple and rather inexpensive to create (they can even host it on YouTube). . . . NYPL's technology guidance ought not to read like stereo instructions. [F12.8]

I would have liked, in addition to the Compatible Devices and Software Downloads menu items on the eNYPL home page, an item along the lines of "First time e-book borrower?" that would have explained what I needed to do and walked me through the process to get set up before I begin to select items. [F12.6b]

On several occasions, testers who tried to ask librarians for assistance with the process found that librarians were unable to help:

> NYPL should offer more instructions to librarians so they are not so nervous about their own system, and have more instructions on the site itself. [S12.14]

Often, testers described the process as confusing on some level, although they did not point to a specific factor that was making it confusing:

> It's unclear which book you actually ended up downloading. [S13.1]

> Downloading e-books isn't terrible or anything, just not terribly convenient. [S12.12]

Offsite Storage/Recap

We asked our testers to use the library catalog to identify materials that are stored at NYPL's offsite facility (Recap), located approximately 55 miles from the library's main branch. The library's policy indicates that materials requested before 2:30 pm will be available on the next business day.[39]

A total of 27 requests for offsite materials were submitted; of these 25 were for books and 2 for articles. Testers reported a high level of task completion, as shown in table 3 below.

While the quantitative data above indicate that delivery of items from Recap is overall successful and timely, the content analysis of the narratives revealed several common themes that were addressed by testers with varying degrees of satisfaction.

The service did not meet expectation in several areas, primarily with regard to *circulation policy*, *electronic delivery*, *tracking the request*, and *timely delivery*. The most common complaint indicated by almost a quarter of testers (22%) was that once materials arrived users were unable to borrow them, since all books in Recap are non-circulating.

For example, one tester said:

> The policy is that no off-site items can never leave the premises…. This concept was new to me and I wondered about how it might become a real inconvenience. After all, how many books can be properly read in seven days for only limited periods of time? [F12.17]

and a second added:

While making an offsite request is a simple process, it seems to be beneficial only to patrons doing research projects who wish to view original and first edition works because offsite requests cannot actually be circulated. [S12.29]

One student, unaware that the book was checked out to her for on-site use only, attempted to walk out of the building with the book, and was stopped by the security guard.

He told me that the staff "never" explain the process for patrons and lots of people make the same mistake. I think it's really sad that the guard has to do the job of the staff in this situation. This could be resolved by requiring the staff to say something to the effect of, "Have you ever requested a book from offsite storage before?" [S13.21]

Another complaint was that when articles were requested, they were not delivered in PDF format, as indicated on the library website, but in print. When the option for electronic delivery was selected, the request was processed as if it were for a physical item. The screen options and language were confusing.

In the location slot is written Electronic Document Delivery, which is confusing because I did not actually receive an electronic delivery. If I were, I wouldn't be waiting on an arrival at a pick-up window. [F12.19]

While most testers found requesting materials from offsite to be relatively simple, once the request was submitted there was no way to track the process.

What surprised me however, was that when the request was complete, the window seemed to close abruptly, without providing any proper sense of closure to the transaction. [F12.20]

This leads to one additional "perfect world" note: It would be productive to have (in a similar vain to UPS packages) more real-time tracking info on your requested items, so you'll know exactly where they are at all times. [F12.22]

Several testers also noted that their books did not arrive by the "next business day" as promised. On several occasions the books arrived later than expected.

It would have been a [lot] more helpful if on the website itself it even given mention of a long wait time, the way NYPL has worded the process it reads as if you could receive the requested item/items within a few days. [S13.18]

It was equally inconvenient for users when books arrived

Table 3. Delivery Time for Items in Remote Storage

	Format requested	Received within timeframe
Book	92.6% [25]	77.7% [21/27] or 84% [21/25]
Article	7.4% [2]	3.7% [1/27] or 50% [1/2]
Total		81.5% [22/27]

early, or when materials requested at the same time arrived on separate days.

Two of the books were delivered a day early, and the others were not delivered until 4 pm on the day I had specified to pick them up.
Seeing as the library is only open until 6 pm, this could have been problematic had I actually been planning on doing research that day. [F12.13]

The procedure for requesting the materials was smooth overall, and most testers found the process relatively easy and NYPL's interface clear. All testers pointed to some weakness in the process, but for the most part it met their needs. Testers compared the process to options available from commercial websites, and suggested adding some features such as a UPS-like ability to track the request or an "add to cart" option that would prevent the need to repeat the process from beginning to end when requesting more than one item:

Were there a feature akin to "add item to cart" I would have had a more satisfactory experience ordering both books at once rather than separately. [S13.31]

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how well New York Public Library is meeting user needs in two areas that are the heart of the library's Central Library Plan: namely, access to materials stored offsite and to ebooks.

A group of testers was asked to complete two tasks: first, to download an e-book or audio book from a library website, and second, to use the library website to locate and request a book or article that was stored in an offsite facility. Data were collected through narrative reports and follow-up surveys. The narrative reports were previously identified as valuable in that they provided assessment that culls responses from the user's subjective input and yielded valuable data, particularly on weaker points of the services tested.[40]

From the analysis of responses we identified recurring themes that were raised by testers, including expectations for high quality service and seamless access to content. These themes were present throughout during all tests. We found that while libraries provided services in the areas of e-book

borrowing and offsite storage requests, our testers identified many needs in the areas of scope and selection of materials, timeliness and service quality, that need improvement.

First, we wanted to know how well libraries meet user needs in the area of e-book borrowing. Results indicate that while users were able to download e-books from the library, the process of borrowing them is not as technologically seamless as users would like, and the choice of titles is limited. Additionally, users indicated that they were uncomfortable with the presence of commercial vendors being present in the circulation. Libraries provide users with free public access to materials, free, not only from payment, but from commercial interests as well. To continue such access, librarians should work with vendors to implement models that safeguard readers from solicitation and protect their anonymity.

Second, we wanted to know if the library is able to meet user expectations for delivering books stored offsite. We found that while in many cases items were delivered within the promised timeframe, there were quite a few delays. Additionally, users were unhappy to learn that these materials do not circulate and can only be read in the library. Users saw this as a hindrance to their ability to use the books, and expressed their dismay at this policy.

We tested user needs with a particular focus on the New York Public Library system. Our results indicated that there was a gap between the library's vision, as laid out in the CLP, and the findings of our tests. We also found concerns that "moving so many of the library's holdings offsite will result in access difficulties for researchers, long wait times for requested books" were for the most part unwarranted, and that the library was able to uphold delivery times.[41]

Libraries may be limited in their ability to provide seamless access to e-books due to licensing constraints, but there are some simple measures libraries can take to make the user-experience more accommodating. One such measure would be to allow circulation of materials held in off-site storage. Libraries should also not restrict delivery of off-site storage to the main library, and deliver them to the user's branch of choice. Another measure would be to simplify the process of requesting digital copies for articles or book chapters stored off-site. Currently, users must provide complete bibliographic details, including page numbers, when requesting a scanned chapter or article, but since page numbers are often not available for older materials in the catalog record, users must see the physical copy before they can request a scanned copy. Finally, another simple step that library can take is to provide very short instructional videos directly from the catalog record, that demonstrating the process

Our study offers an evaluation centered on the user experience,[42] and the results clearly identify areas where library services can be improved, returning specific scenarios that have been lacking in prior research.[36]

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