

---

# The Myth and the Reality of the Evolving Patron

## *A Report and Reactions to the 2013 RUSA President's Program with Lee Rainie*

**Mary Mintz, Marie L. Radford, Emily Ford, and Joyce Valenza**

*Mary Mintz is Associate Director for Outreach, American University, Washington DC, Marie L. Radford is chair, Library and Information Science Department, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Emily Ford is urban and public affairs librarian, Portland (Oregon) State University, and Joyce Valenza is teacher-librarian, Springfield Township (Pennsylvania) High School*

*Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, was the speaker at the RUSA President's Program at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Library Association in Chicago. This article provides some highlights from his presentation and responses from three prominent library visionaries.*

Mary P. Popp, 2012–2013 RUSA President, provided the leadership and inspiration for this annual program which drew a large audience that filled all the seats and spilled over onto the floor of the McCormick Place convention center room for five hundred in Chicago on June 29 at the ALA annual Conference. Lee Rainie, the Director of the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project was the big draw, and he delivered. His dynamic and informative speech was laced with humor that was warmly received by the audience. Rainie was also generous with his time. He participated in a follow-up discussion forum on June 30 where he was joined in a panel discussion by Emily Ford, Urban and Public Affairs Librarian at Portland State University; Marie L. Radford, Chair, Library and Information Science Department, at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and Joyce Valenza, teacher-librarian at Springfield Township High School, PA, and part-time professor. Joseph Thompson, Associate Director of the Western Maryland Regional Library and chair of the program committee, moderated the program and discussion forum. Other program committee members were Dianna McKellar, Emily Kornak, Sherri Michaels, Mary Mintz (co-chair), Matthew Neer, and Mary Popp. A summary of Rainie's presentation follows along with reactions from Ford, Radford, and Valenza who not only participated in the discussion forum as panelists, but also generously agreed to describe their reactions to his presentation for this report.—*Editor*

Lee Rainie, Director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project ([www.pewInternet.org](http://www.pewInternet.org)), spoke at the 2013 RUSA President's Program at the Annual Meeting of the American Library Association, Chicago. To experience the full impact of Rainie's presentation, readers may view the program recording ([www.ala.org/rusa/rusa-presidents-program-video](http://www.ala.org/rusa/rusa-presidents-program-video)) and slides ([www.slideshare.net/PewInternet/2013-6-29-13-evolving-library-patron-rusa-at-ala-pdf](http://www.slideshare.net/PewInternet/2013-6-29-13-evolving-library-patron-rusa-at-ala-pdf)). Additionally, one can read the Pew reports on libraries ([www.pewInternet.org/Topics/Activities-and-Pursuits/Libraries.aspx?typeFilter=5](http://www.pewInternet.org/Topics/Activities-and-Pursuits/Libraries.aspx?typeFilter=5)), including "Library Services in the Digital Age" ([www.pewInternet.org/Topics/Activities-and-Pursuits/Libraries.aspx?typeFilter=5](http://www.pewInternet.org/Topics/Activities-and-Pursuits/Libraries.aspx?typeFilter=5)). This article highlights Rainie's key points from Pew survey data on America's library use. Following this summary, responses from leading library thinkers Emily Ford, Marie L. Radford, and Joyce Valenza, discuss their takeaways and thoughts from Rainie's presentation.

---

## SUMMARY OF LEE RAINIE'S PRESENTATION

Rainie began by noting that the technology revolution has changed patron expectations of public libraries and experiences with libraries in five different ways. These expectations and experiences have undergone an evolution driven by patrons' (1) engagement or need, (2) life stage, (3) life stressors, (4) demographics, and by (5) library innovations. Librarians find it challenging to meet user expectations to both retain traditional services while embracing new service innovations, which can create a "world full of pain," for librarians.

Pew data found that 53 percent of Americans aged 16 or older visited a public library in the previous year. Women account for 59 percent of library users with parents of minors accounting for 63 percent of overall use. Somewhat surprisingly, among seniors 65 or older, only 40 percent reported visits. Sixty-three percent of library visitors have some college education. Based on the data, Rainie suggested that libraries may want to "romance the moms" among their potential users.

What do library users do when they visit public libraries? The top three reported activities were borrowing books (73 percent), browsing books/media (73 percent), research (54 percent), and get help from a librarian (50 percent). Interesting demographic data characterized some of these activities. For instance, people under age 30 were more likely to do research. African Americans, especially seniors, were among those most likely to request assistance from librarians. Younger people were more likely to use a library for activities like reading, studying, and listening to music. Rainie also presented information on how patrons virtually interact with libraries, specifically through websites. This data closely matches the in-person data in that the website users tend to have higher incomes, more education, and many were parents of minor children.

Rainie sketched a landscape for libraries that has been shaped by three broad technical revolutions and suggested how libraries might respond to them. The first was increased use of broadband Internet from 4 percent of Internet users in 2001 to 68 percent currently. Among the consequences for libraries is that more than 70 percent of Internet users report being content creators. The Internet has enabled them to be publishers and broadcasters. More people exist in a more public sphere that constitutes a "fifth estate" beyond the traditionally impartial fourth estate of traditional journalism. One consequence is that "we argue about much more now." Libraries, Rainie said, have a potential role to play as they become the commons for many of these conversations which create a need for fact checking, synthesis, and critical thinking.

The second revolution was the advent of mobile devices. As of 2012, 91 percent of the adult population has a mobile device; 56 percent being smart phones. Rainie amusingly noted that smart phones are used for "snacking," while tablets are used for more leisurely activities. For librarians, use of mobile devices means that multitasking or "continuous partial attention" has become the norm among patrons who

also require real-time, just-in-time searching which libraries can support. Smart phones also connect the real world more closely with the data world.

The third revolution was social networking, an incredibly powerful community tool with 61 percent of adults now engaging in it. Seniors, for instance, can now stay in closer touch, not only with their current friends and family members, but also other individuals from different stages of their lives. They have "resurrected" old friendships or "restored latent ties." Groups that could not have existed in the past are formed by strangers with similar interests or circumstances, such as medical conditions. Preferences among Internet users using social media vary. Facebook use is at 68 percent; Twitter at 18 percent; and Pinterest at 15 percent according to Pew. Facebook is the largest social network and still growing. Users do, however, at times "take a leave of absence" from Facebook. Interestingly, Twitter users "have all the hallmarks of influencers." Twitter and other social networks have become more trusted than most institutions. The only local institutions retaining trust are firefighters and librarians (nationally, only the military retains trust). Librarians need to continue to interject themselves in the processes of determining validity and meaning while also providing traditional roles via new media.

Rainie concluded that while people can do things on their own that were previously impossible before these technical revolutions, they hate noise, interruptions, and junk. The relationship between abundance and scarcity has flipped. The new scarcity is not information, but time. Librarians have potential to give people something worthwhile—efficient but meaningful experiences—just as they have in the past. Even given the context of the digital age, librarians' goals have not changed fundamentally. Serving diverse people with different needs and expectations is "familiar territory" to librarians. The library may mean different things at different life stages for individuals and among demographic groups. But awareness of what the library offers remains a gap for potential library users. Only one-fifth of users report knowing what is available. Those who know, or who learn, what libraries offer may experience librarians as "teachers, coaches, and trail guides" in this emerging world.

---

## EMILY FORD'S RESPONSE: THE CONTEXT BEYOND THE DATA

*Emily Ford is the Urban and Public Affairs Librarian at Portland State University and blogs at the influential "In the Library with the Lead Pipe" ([www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org](http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org)).*

There's nothing like piles of data to overwhelm you. And there's nothing like looking at what those data say to make you feel like a statistic. This is what happened to me with respect to the Pew Internet Libraries reports. After reading the reports and hearing Rainie's presentation I felt uncomfortably cataloged and sorted. My descriptors? Thirty-something,

female, owner of multiple computer, mobile, and reading technologies, heavy library user, and information snacker. Women are reported to be more likely to use libraries and be heavy readers, and my combined demographic traits: being an educated, white, 30-something female makes me more likely than any other user-type to own an e-reader or tablet. Although this certainly reveals something about me, it does not fully capture my story. No bundle of descriptors could. Surely there is more to my story.

As good librarians, we know the limits of cataloging. We know that the pace of change for cataloging rules and creating new headings far exceeds the pace of our information world. We also know that the resources to which we provide access and for which we aim to facilitate creation are not born in vacuums. Rather they are influenced by surrounding circumstances and contexts; social, political, and economic factors being part of their greater story.

Rainie's presentation and the Pew Reports offered me no answers, but, instead prompted me to ask more questions. Why? Why do African Americans and Hispanics report using research help more than whites? Why are African Americans and Hispanics more likely to find libraries more important to their communities than do whites? Why are women more likely than men to visit the library? Any conceivable answer I have to these questions makes me uncomfortable. It does so because my answers are not based in my knowledge, but in my assumptions and in my socially acquired prejudices.

The data leads me to assume that African American and Hispanic cultures value community goods more than white cultures. Instead of small family units, I understand these cultures as valuing larger community groups such as extended families, church groups, and neighborhoods, more than Caucasians. Hispanics and African Americans may look to their larger communities as bearers of the public goods more often. Or maybe it's because a disproportionately large percentage of the United States' African American and Hispanic population is poorer than Caucasians. One could conclude that Pew survey findings reflect these cultural values and social inequities. I also assume that women use libraries more because it is women who sacrifice their careers to parent and who are more involved in their children's education. Yet I don't know that any of this is true. I only have assumptions as to why the Pew Report data show what they show.

While the Pew data points to some interesting thought exercises, I would approach with caution. Why? Precisely because it has no social context. Libraries do not exist and provide services within a series of data points, but within unique communities. No public opinion data set will ever 100 percent accurately portray each community's needs or wants. What patrons in Portland, Oregon want and need, may be completely different from the desires and needs of patrons in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Each community faces its own challenges and has its own identity. As librarians do we really want to base our innovations and service priorities on such broad sweeping statements? What other data needs to be gathered? What other information should we know, and

how do we get to understand and know the social contexts within our communities that can guide our work to innovate and transform libraries and services so that our patrons and our libraries can continue to evolve? Any answers to "why" questions should be based in social, political, and economic contexts. Because Pew Reports cannot provide local contextual framing, librarians should examine their unique community frames to try and answer the why questions elicited by the Pew Reports. Librarians will find interesting answers, and some answers may tell stories that we find unacceptable. When this is the case, the onus should be on us to do what we can to change those stories.

---

### MARIE L. RADFORD'S RESPONSE: CHALLENGES SUGGESTED BY LEE RAINIE'S PRESIDENT'S PROGRAM

*Marie L. Radford is an internationally known scholar and visionary and Chair of the Library and Information Science Department in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, New Jersey.*

#### Challenge One: Leveraging Good Will for Survival of Libraries

It is gratifying, although not surprising, that Rainie revealed that the recent Pew studies of library use, including the "Younger Americans' Library Habits and Expectations" survey, found that those surveyed hold positive views of libraries and enthusiastically reveal these positive opinions when asked. The reason these findings are not surprising is that past library surveys that asked this question yielded the same result, namely, "They love us." In the current economic climate of reduced human and budgetary resources, one challenge for the profession is simply to survive and thrive. This challenge involves figuring out how to leverage the good feelings (indeed often expressed as love) of libraries/librarians into strong and sustainable support. The irony is that monetary investment in library collections and staff are being deeply eroded just when users (especially those from the most vulnerable populations, as noted by Pew) need us the most. These populations include underrepresented, often less powerful or low-income groups, including immigrants, minorities, the elderly, and children. Rainie mentioned that the growing demographic of African American and Hispanic respondents reported higher demand for library services. Many members of these populations, especially urban youth, have less access to technology,<sup>1</sup> and it follows that it would be extremely important for Pew researchers to dig deeper, in their next study of library use, to explore how people envision libraries of the future, their expectations regarding library survival amid diminishing resources, and, perhaps most importantly, their willingness to commit their tax money. The idea that libraries can and will continue to "do more with less" is becoming

pervasive. Librarians continue to struggle with conflicting and increasing demands from their users, especially with regard to increasing social media presence and technology support. Furthermore, many people mistakenly believe that libraries are not needed, as everything is available in full-text and “free” on the web. They fail to realize that it is impossible to access these free resources if one does not own a laptop/tablet/smartphone or the money to pay for an Internet service provider. Public libraries provide access “free to all,” but cannot continue to do so with paltry resources.

## Challenge Two: Increase Awareness of Library Services

Another finding Rainie reported is that only about one-fifth of those surveyed were fully aware of the variety of services that libraries offer. As someone who studies library use, sadly, this finding is also not surprising to me. Multiyear Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded research projects I have been involved in have found that virtual reference services (VRS) are underutilized, mainly because people do not know they exist.<sup>2</sup> Pew results clearly reflect the widespread idea that people equate libraries with print books (“tree books” as opposed to “ebooks”). As Rainie noted, librarians have endeavored to rebrand libraries as technology hubs, being most successful with young adults, although Connaway and Dickey found that strong, traditional associations of libraries with books remains the prevalent view.<sup>3</sup> This is despite a raft of vibrant library services that are reaching out to connect with users, developing virtual relationships anytime/anywhere through chat, email, texting, social media, mobile apps, embedded professionals, etc. Librarians provide important value-added services combining strong service ethics with access to subject knowledge, curation, and searching expertise. How can we do a better job of getting the word out? I have recently adjusted my mindset to a more proactive stance, embracing the term “potential user” to replace my former terminology “non-user.” Focusing our creative energies with increased and sustained attention on attracting these “potential users” seems to me to be one approach to improved visibility and greater use of the myriad services and collections libraries offer. As another example, I wonder why every public and academic library has not yet hung out a huge sign that reads “Free Wi-Fi.” This is a no-brainer, and I believe that we would be surprised at how many people are unaware of this basic service, provided by nearly every public and academic library. Rainie noted that 39 percent of all adults visited library websites. What could be done to boost this percentage? One low cost idea is to have a tent card on every flat library surface with the library’s URL or a QR code that links to the website and to “ask-a-librarian” services. Once they are in the physical (or virtual) library door, we have the opportunity to entice them and educate them further about our services and collections. Knowledge is power. Knowledge of library services and collections empower our users.

## JOYCE VALENZA’S RESPONSE: MY LINGERING QUESTIONS

Joyce Valenza, librarian at Springfield Township High School, PA maintains a creative website (<http://springfieldlibrary.wikispaces.com>) and blogs at *Neverending Search* (<http://joycevalenza.edublogs.org>).

Much of Lee Rainie’s talk continues to resonate, but interpreting the data presents lingering questions, many having to do with young people and a qualitative story that we have yet to explore.

### On Library Monogamy

Pew’s findings address use and feelings about *public* libraries. Yet, people (especially young people) may not be *library monogamous*—they may have relationships with more than one library, likely their school or academic libraries. Individuals may experience a larger library ecology/ecosystem that is not seen when questions center on one type of library. Although Rainie said future Pew studies will focus on school libraries, and there already exists a body of research, I continue to wonder about what library means to young people we *share*.

### On Seams

Rainie’s survey found library websites to be used more heavily by women, the more wealthy, the more highly educated, and parents. Perhaps we should find a way to lose the seams. *Library is library. Library is a platform.* Our members or students enter through a variety of connected doors—website, app, Twitter handle, chat, email, LibGuide. *Library is ubiquitous, tool agnostic/device agnostic/24/7 just-in-time, just-for-me, embedded, responsive.* Library is *library* whether on or offline. Online spaces are merely scalable extensions of services, resources, relationships, and spirit. The goal is to become useful, engaging, embedded and necessary nodes on the networks of our community members—off or online. All library connections are library *visits*.

### What about the Other Research?

How might we associate Pew findings with new understandings from research of other fields about social spaces?<sup>4</sup> How might these connections present new metaphors and models about libraries as emerging ecosystems and evolving public spaces? While Pew asked specific questions about reasons folks use public libraries, there are subtler responses multiple choices may not have elicited.

Many see our spaces as the social, cultural and intellectual commons for schools, universities, or communities—what sociologist Oldenburg refers to as the *third place/space* in his *Great Good Place*,

determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with



people's more serious involvement in other spheres. . . . They are the heart of a community's social vitality, the grassroots of democracy, but sadly, they constitute a diminishing aspect of the American social landscape.<sup>5</sup>

People visit because it is *their* space, a space they love. In many libraries, people set up little *nests* or *offices*. You turn around and Pablo or Sally is predictably in his/her space.

Library is also what Jenkins would call a *participatory culture environment*, a space for tinkering, play, inquiry, learning, creating.<sup>6</sup> All Jenkins' characteristics of participatory cultures (including low barriers to artistic expression, informal mentorship, support for creating and sharing, social connection) exist in beloved library spaces.

Within libraries young people engage in the three genres of participation Ito and her team describe: *hanging out* (friendship-driven activities), *messing around* (tinkering, media-driven activities) and, most often, *geeking out* (the expertise-centered arena, where mentors, like librarians, are most welcomed).<sup>7</sup> So, it is time to connect research about public spaces with our own.

### What's a Patron? And What about the Librarian?

Lankes<sup>8</sup> says *there is not anything about library that is not about learning, that knowledge is created through conversation*. Our mission is *to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities*. Perhaps it's just semantic, but the terms *patron* or *evolving patron* make me uncomfortable as they do not describe the relationships I've built across my library career. *Patron* does not express the notion of library as community or the importance of social engagement, conversation, or participation. It's not only about the stuff and its containers— buildings, books, programs, databases, or technology. It's really about relationships, belonging, connections, membership, and affiliation. Library visitors are not just consumers, or just creators, they are part of our community. I prefer Lankes' term—*member*, to describe those we connect with.

Future research should include questions that move beyond the notion of *transactional* use to the more important stories of *transformational* use and research that teases out new relationships and examines hybrid or blended environments shared with *patrons*, virtually and physically.

### Final Thoughts

Rainie is so right. We must get better at telling our stories—to members and our nonmembers—at various points of perceived relevance throughout their life stages. But are we seeking the right data? Are we telling the right stories that may be about culture, participation, relationship and affiliation and a larger library ecosystem?

### References

1. D. E. Agosto and S. Hughes-Hassell, "Toward a Model of the Everyday Life Information Needs of Urban Teenagers, Part 1: Theoretical Model," *JASIST* 57 no. 10 (2006): 1394–1403.
2. L. S. Connaway and Marie L. Radford, *Seeking Synchronicity: Revelations and Recommendations for Virtual Reference* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2010), [www.oclc.org/reports/synchronicity/default.htm](http://www.oclc.org/reports/synchronicity/default.htm).
3. L. S. Connaway and T. J. Dickey, *The Digital Information Seeker: Report of the Findings from Selected OCLC, RIN, and JISC User Behaviour Projects* (Bristol, UK: Higher Education Funding Council of England, 2010), [www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents).
4. K. Zichuhr, L. Rainie, and K. Purcell, "Younger Americans' Library Habits and Expectations," 2013, <http://libraries.pewInternet.org/2013/06/25/younger-americans-library-services>.
5. R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 42.
6. H. Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
7. M. It, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
8. R. D. Lankes, *The Alas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).