Methodological Frameworks for Developing a Model of the Public Sphere in Public Libraries

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Good morning. My name is Michael Widdersheim, from the University of Pittsburgh, United States. My colleague is Masanori Koizumi, from the University of Tsukuba, Japan. The title of our presentation is "Methodological Frameworks for Developing a Model of the Public Sphere in Public Libraries."

First, an introduction.

The public sphere defined

- Debate about matters of general concern
- Three conditions:
    - Inclusivity of topics and participants
    - Exchange of reasons for and against validity claims
    - Orientation toward consensus
- Central questions raised by the public sphere topic:
    - Do they actually obtain?
   - What are they about?
    - How are they distorted?

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The term "public sphere" is used in several ways. Just to be clear, when we use the phrase "public sphere," we have a particular meaning in mind. To us, the public sphere refers to discussion and debate about matters of general concern. There are three conditions that characterize public sphere communication in our sense: inclusivity of topics and participants; the exchange of reasons for and against validity claims; and an orientation toward consensus. Some perennial questions associated with the public sphere are: do public spheres exist in an authentic sense? What issues do they concern? And how might they be distorted by power, money, or the media?

Background and context

- Our research collaboration began in 2014
- Dr. Koizumi was a visiting scholar at the University of Pittsburgh
- Michael is a PhD candidate there (but almost finished!)
- We discovered a shared interest in political and social theory, particularly the idea of the public sphere
- We've published several conference papers and journal articles together
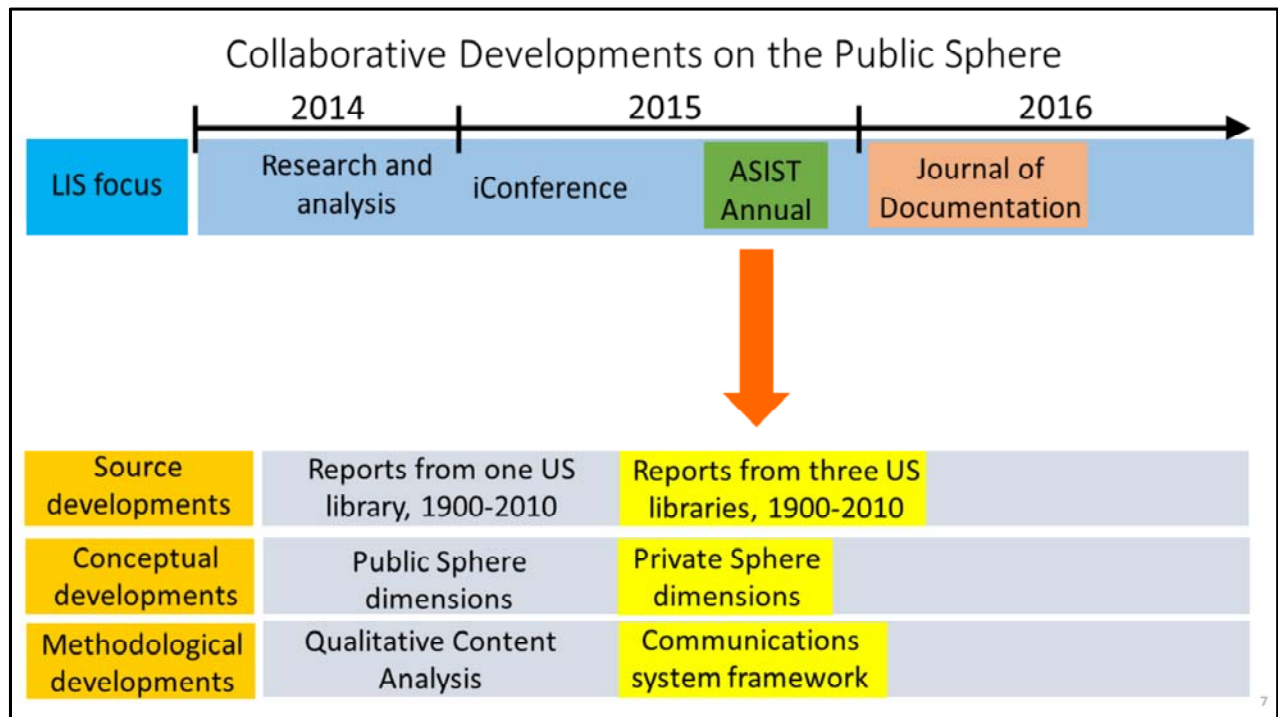
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Our research collaboration on the public sphere began in 2014. At that time, Masa worked as a visiting scholar and researcher at the University of Pittsburgh and I was a PhD student there. We found we had a shared interest in the social and political perspectives of public libraries, and we were both interested in the idea of the public sphere. We decided to pursue this interest further.

Collaborative Developments on the Public Sphere
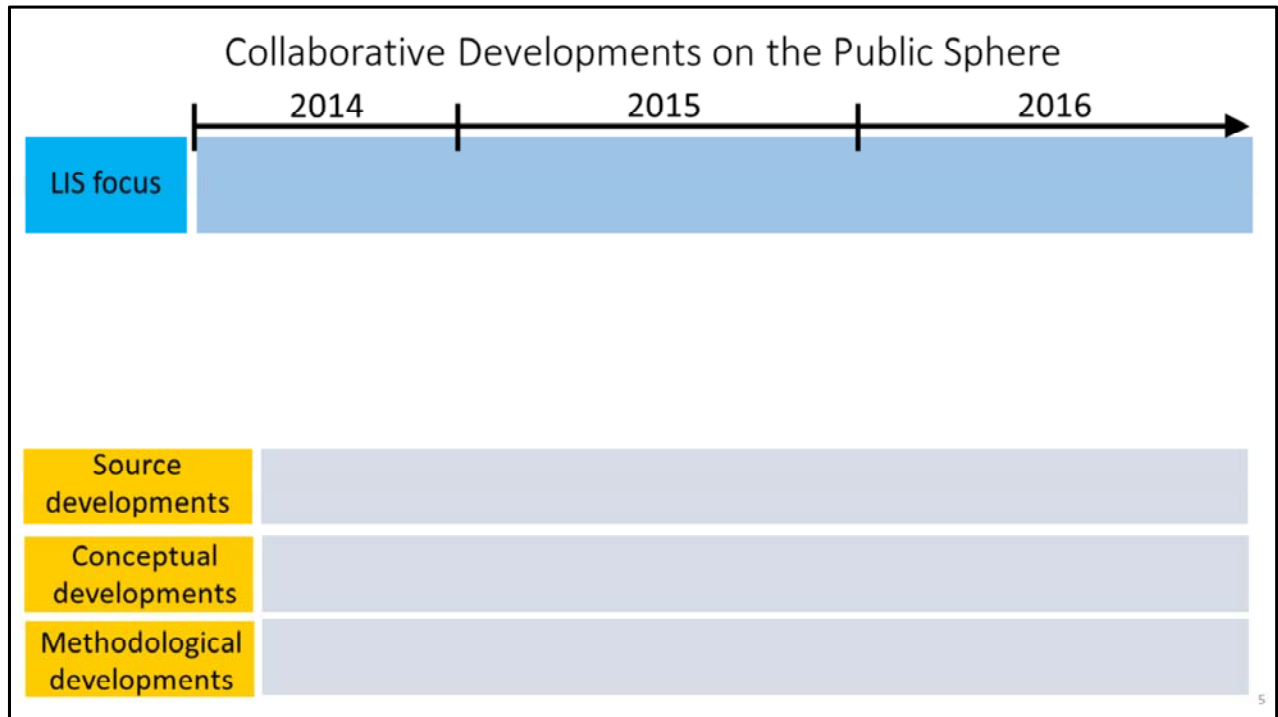
In our work, we began by focusing on the library and information sciences field as our audience. This focus led to a number of developments related to source materials, concepts, and analysis methods.

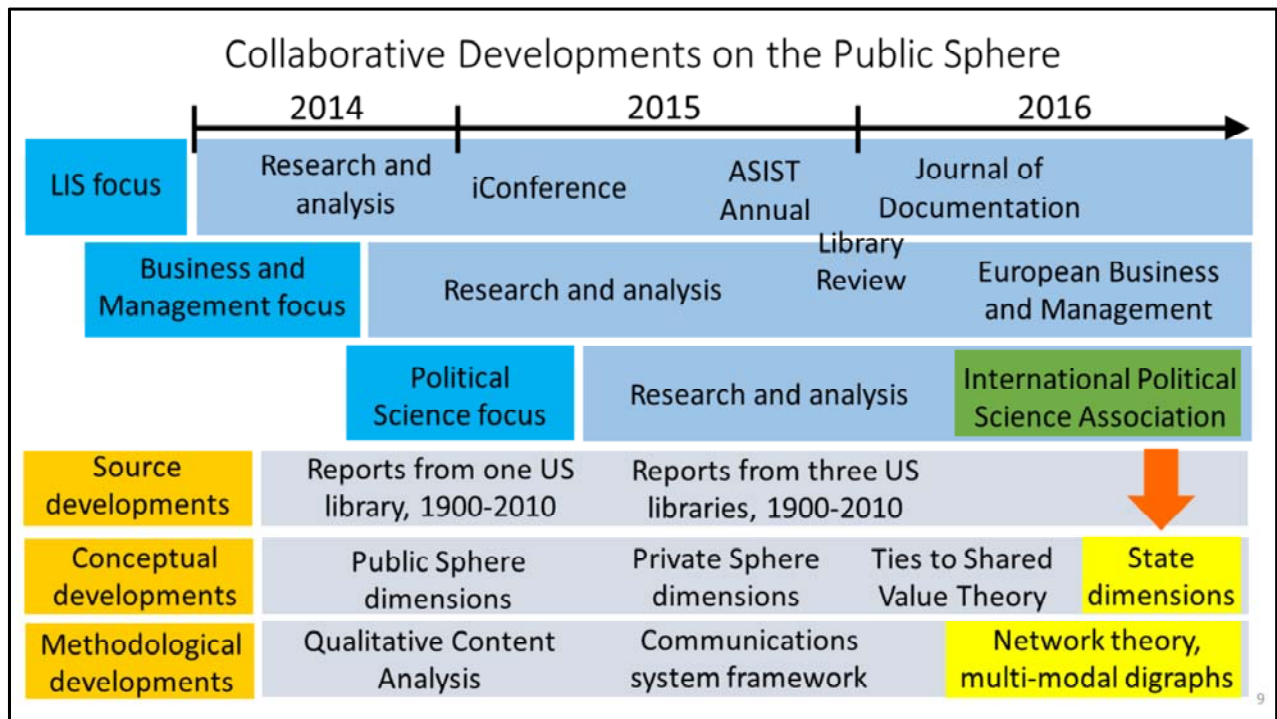Collaborative Developments on the Public Sphere
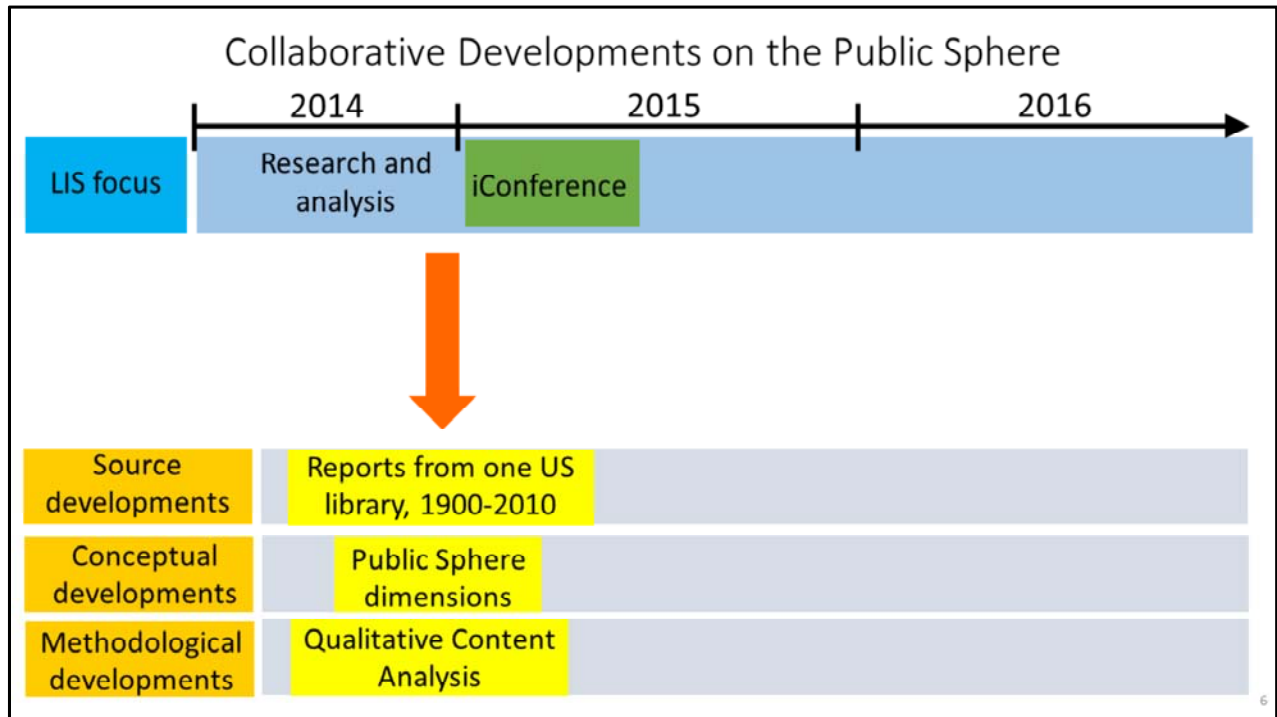
Our first public presentation was at the iConference in 2015.   At the iConference, we first offered several developments related to source materials, concepts, and methods. We began with Qualitiative Content Analysis of reports from a single US library system in order to more fully understand the dimensions of the public sphere.

Collaborative Developments on the Public Sphere

	2014		2015	2016
LIS focus	Research and analysis	iConference	ASIST Annual	Journal of Documentation

Source developments	Reports from one US library, 1900-2010	Reports from three US libraries, 1900-2010
Conceptual developments	Public Sphere dimensions	Private Sphere dimensions
Methodological developments	Qualitative Content Analysis	Communications system framework

We then continued the LIS focus in a presentation at ASIST in 2015. There, we expanded our sources to three US libraries, found several new dimensions related to the private sphere, and adapted a new orienting framework. Our preliminary work in this strand of research is now available in the Journal of Documentation.

Collaborative Developments on the Public Sphere
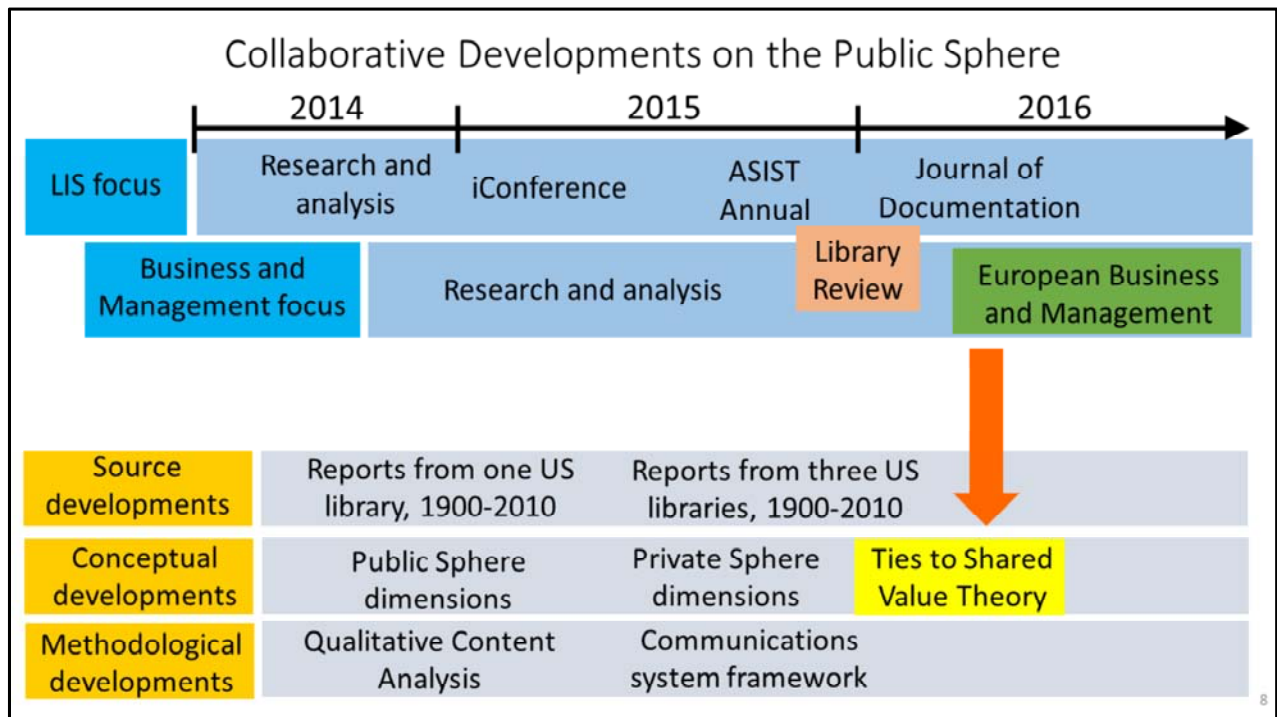
In the course of research, we found that we could offer contributions to fields other than LIS. Business and management is one example. Some of our research activities therefore straddle LIS and business. In this crossover work, we found new associations between the public sphere and what is called in the business field "the creation of shared value." These findings will be published later this year.

Collaborative Developments on the Public Sphere

	2014	2015	2016
LIS focus	Research and analysis — iConference	ASIST Annual	Journal of Documentation
Business and Management focus	Research and analysis	Library Review	European Business and Management
Political Science focus	Political Science focus	Research and analysis	International Political Science Association
Source developments	Reports from one US library, 1900-2010	Reports from three US libraries, 1900-2010	
Conceptual developments	Public Sphere dimensions	Private Sphere dimensions — Ties to Shared Value Theory	State dimensions
Methodological developments	Qualitative Content Analysis	Communications system framework	Network theory, multi-modal digraphs

In addition to LIS and business, we joined a larger conversation in the field of Political Science about the public sphere. To do so, we identified new dimensions of the public sphere related to the state, and, drawing from network theory, we utilized multi-modal directional graphs for analysis and visualization. These findings will be presented next month.

Guiding research questions

- What is the public sphere?
- How can the public sphere help us to understand public libraries?
- How can *public libraries* help us to understand the *public sphere*?
- How does our knowledge of the public sphere relate to other fields?

Given this overview, our research has been guided by several general research questions: What is the public sphere? How can the public sphere help us to understand public libraries and other cultural institutions? Conversely, how might the study of public libraries contribute to a better understanding of the public sphere in late modern society? And also, how does our research in LIS relate to other fields, such as business and management and political science?
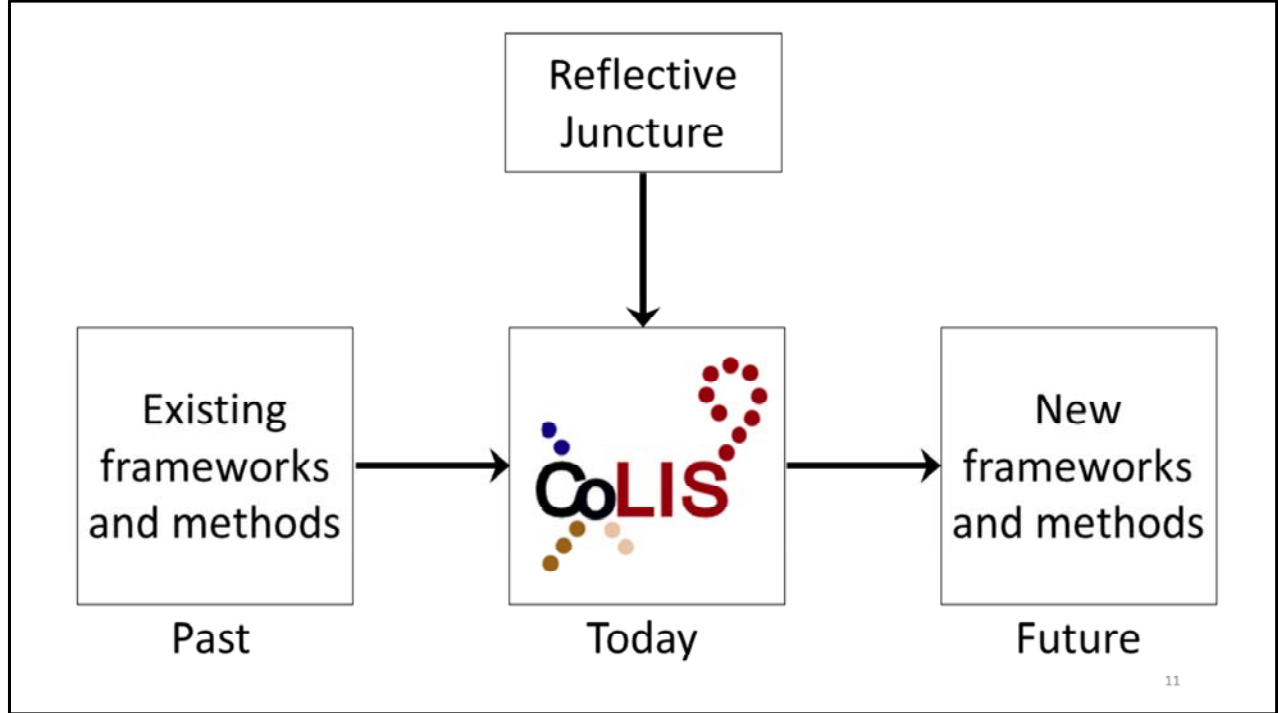
I tell you all this about our work so that you might better understand our purpose for today. In this presentation, we hope to offer new methodological and conceptual approaches for feedback and consideration. CoLIS for us represents a **reflective juncture** in our work, a chance to discuss with other experts new potential research directions in the LIS field that are related to the public sphere and library systems.

Literature Review

Next is our review of related literature.

Literature without a clear focus

- Some studies of the public sphere in the LIS field fail to offer conceptual or methodological insights into public sphere research

Type of study	Examples
Cassandra (pessimistic)	Webster (1995) Alstad & Curry (2003) Buschman (2003)
Pollyanna (optimistic)	Kranich (2004) Leckie (2004) Jaeger and Burnett (2010)

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You might ask why today we are interested in new methodological and conceptual approaches. This need arises from the existing literature. It may seem uncharitable to say so, but while existing literature in the LIS field offers important insights about the public sphere, it also faces several problems related to ontology and epistemology. The first problem is that some studies associate the public sphere with public libraries only superficially. These studies may be insightful in their own right, but they offer little to no clarification about what the public sphere is or why the association with libraries is made. These studies have no discernible research method and they fail to offer new conceptual insights. We've divided these "superficial" analyses into two groups: Cassandra studies and Pollyanna studies. Cassandra studies are overly pessimistic, and often criticize commercialization or privatization of the public sphere. Pollyanna studies are overly optimistic—they naively proclaim or pronounce, without critical reflection, that public libraries offer genuine, undistorted communication. By identifying new frameworks and methods, we hope to avoid these two types of studies.

Literature with a clear focus on public sphere

- Some studies have a clear methodology and framework

Example	Conceptual framework	Data Collection and Analysis Method
Vårheim, Steinmo, and Ide (2008)	Social capital	Regression analysis using survey data, interviews
Aabø, Audunson, and Vårheim (2010)	Custom-built, library as meeting place	Multivariate regression analysis using survey data
Evjen (2015)	Custom-built, legitimazation	Interviews of politicians

Other studies in the literature are similar in topic to our research. They associate the public sphere and public libraries, and they have a clear methodology and a clear conceptual focus. It is to this corpus of research that we would like to contribute, not to replace other approaches with our own but to offer complements.

Results

Proposed Framework 1: Circulation of Power

Next, our proposed frameworks.

Circulation of power

- Described in Habermas (1996), *Between Facts and Norms*
- Based on ideas from Hannah Arendt, Niklas Luhmann, Amitai Etzioni, Nancy Fraser, and Bernard Peters

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Our first proposed framework is what is called a circulation of power model proposed by Habermas (1996) in Between Facts and Norms. The circulation of power model draws from a variety of social and political thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Niklas Luhmann, Amitai Etzioni, Nancy Fraser, and Habermas's late student, Bernhard Peters. Unlike previous models of the public sphere, which were historical in nature, or oriented toward universal structures of communication, this model focuses on the political systems of late modern societies.
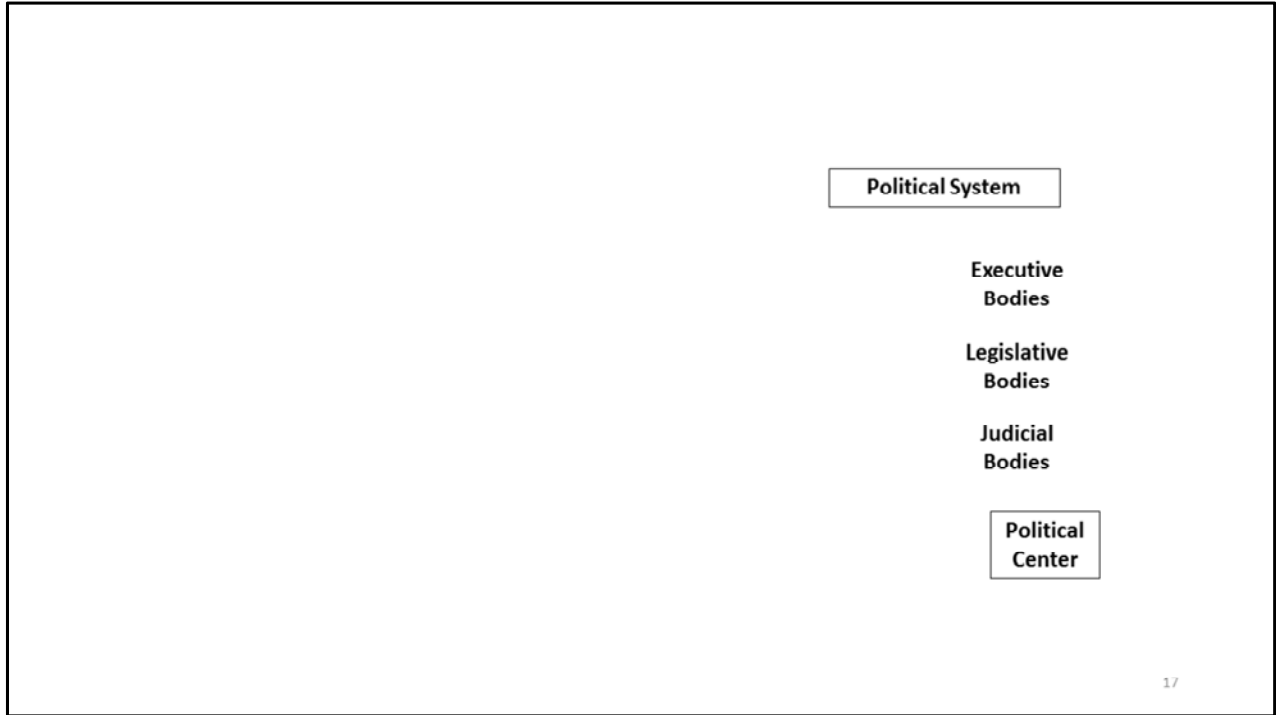
There are several ideas that constitute this model's ontology. The first is that the political system is organized concentrically. There is a core, or center, composed of decision-making bodies. These are the three main branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. Within and among these bodies are "formal" public spheres, such as parliaments and court rooms and voting.
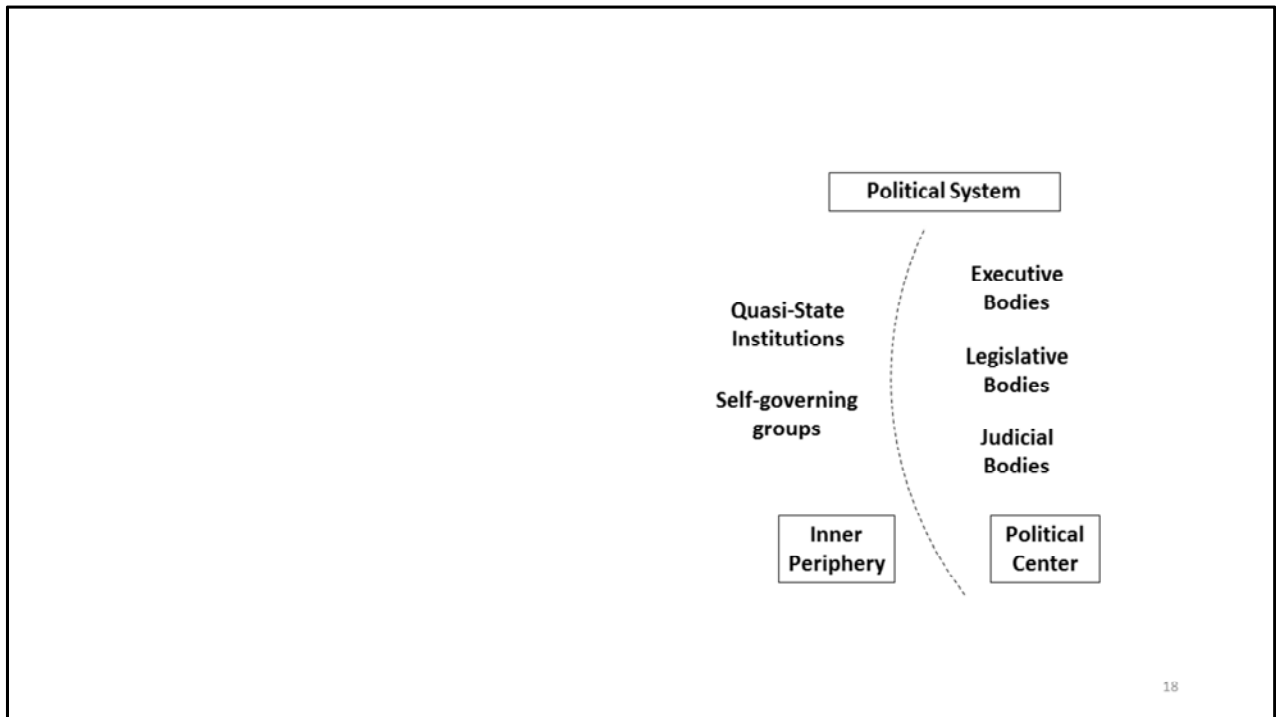
The next largest concentric ring, the inner periphery, is composed of quasi-autonomous agencies—the ministries, departments, councils, and bureaus that are granted autonomy over their respective specializations.
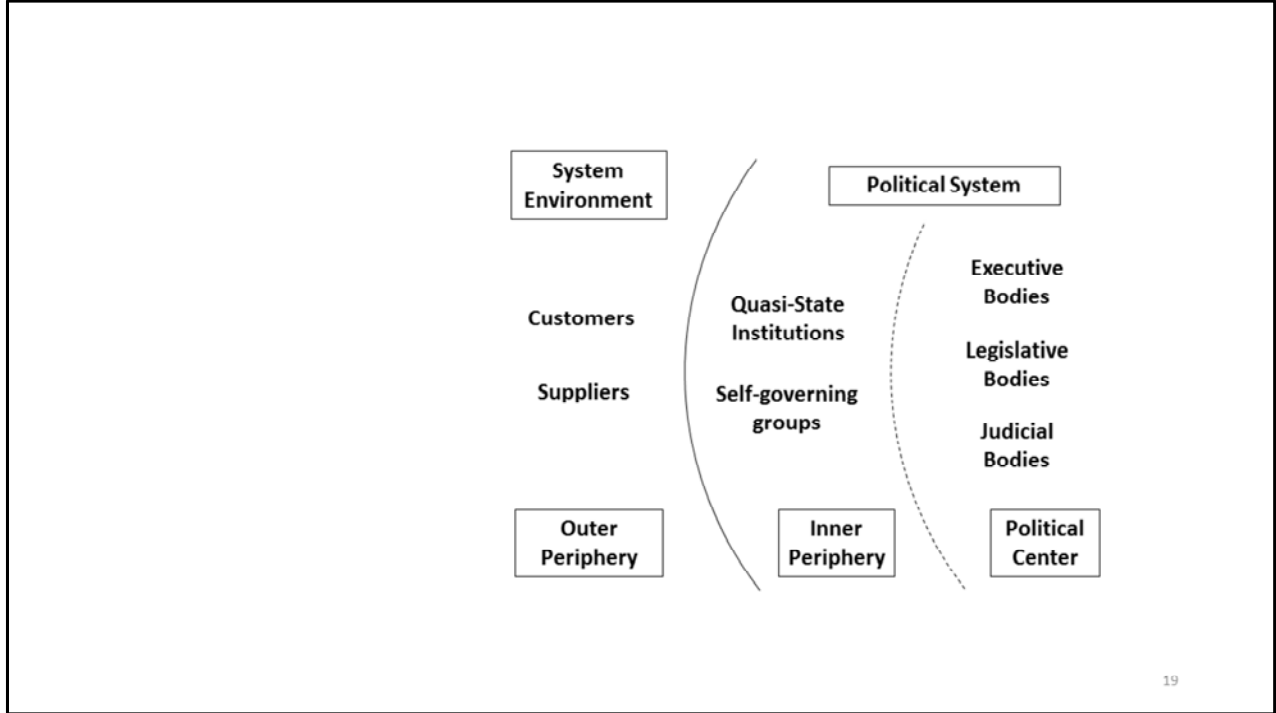
Next is the outer periphery and what are called "customers" and "suppliers." Customers are, for example, unions and lobbying groups. They petition the inner periphery and core for special provisions for their constituents. Suppliers are, for example, whistleblowers and watchdogs that "supply" the political system with feedback concerning policy decisions.
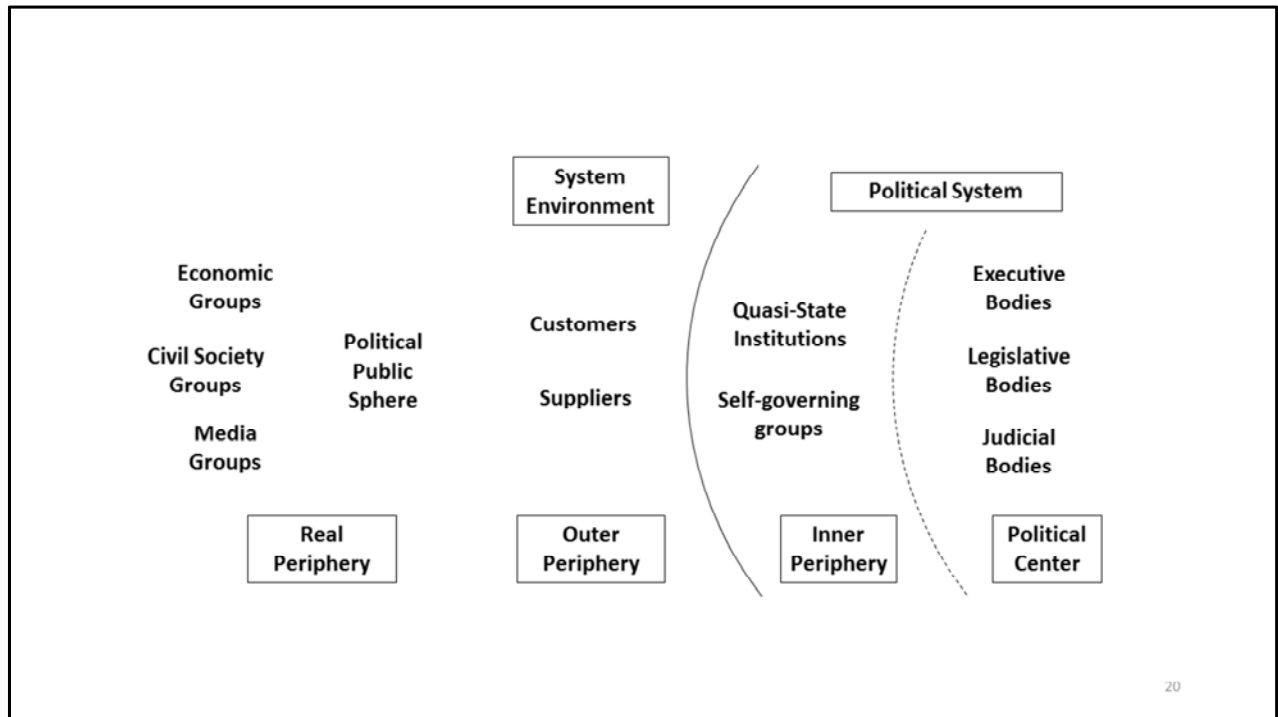
On the real periphery of the political system, the far left of the image, are the economic, civil society, and media groups that influence the political public sphere. This is where an "informal" public sphere happens.
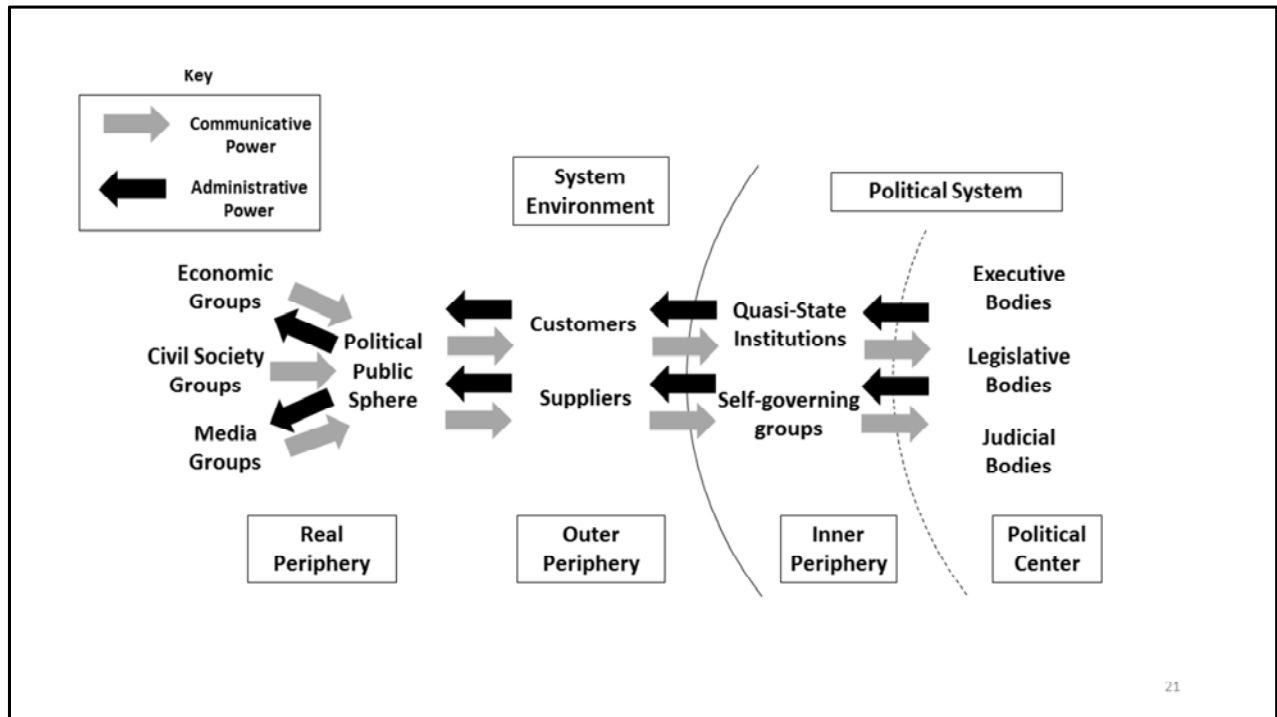
"Flowing" through all of these areas of the political system are two types of power: communicative and administrative. These forms of power are pictured here as the black and gray arrows. The idea of the circulation of power model is that these types of power "circulate" through the various areas—communicative power flows inward from informal publics to influence formal decisions at the core, and administrative power flows outward from formal publics at the center to influence peripheral bodies.

Circulation of power methodologies

- Historical – primary and archival sources
- Interviews about decision-making processes
- Observations of formal and informal publics

The ideas in the circulation of power model have not yet been applied within the library and information sciences field, despite how it seems well-equipped to elucidate how information systems function in fields of power. There are several data collection and analysis methods that seem to pair well with this framework. The first is historical. This type of approach might use primary and archival sources to explore how public libraries are situated in the center and periphery over time, or what kinds of power they display. Interviews and participant observation also seem like attractive data gathering techniques.

Proposed Framework 2: The public sphere "accelerometer"

Next is our second framework, what we call the public sphere accelerometer.

Categories and distinctions

- Civil society / system distinction
- Public / private distinction
- State, Economy, Public Sphere, Private Sphere

This framework is custom-built. It draws together several categories and distinctions that are related to the public sphere and are important in the political and social sciences. The central distinctions of this model are civil society/system, and public/private. The distinctions, when combined, form four sub-categories: state, economy, private sphere, and public sphere.
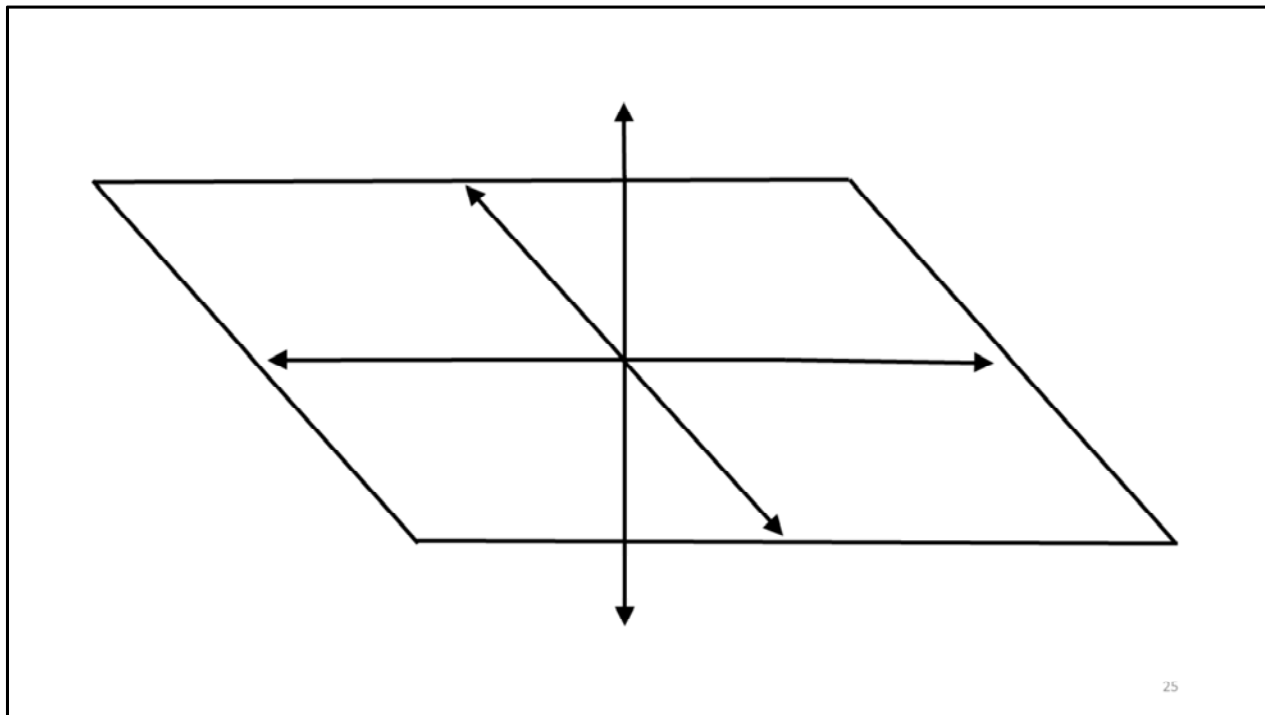
We'd like to describe our thinking and our model using a visualization. We call this visualization the "public sphere accelerometer." An accelerometer like that found in an iPhone is a device that measures acceleration, sometimes on three planes. Just as a physical accelerometer measures physical movements, our model can be used to sense intellectual movements on multiple axes.
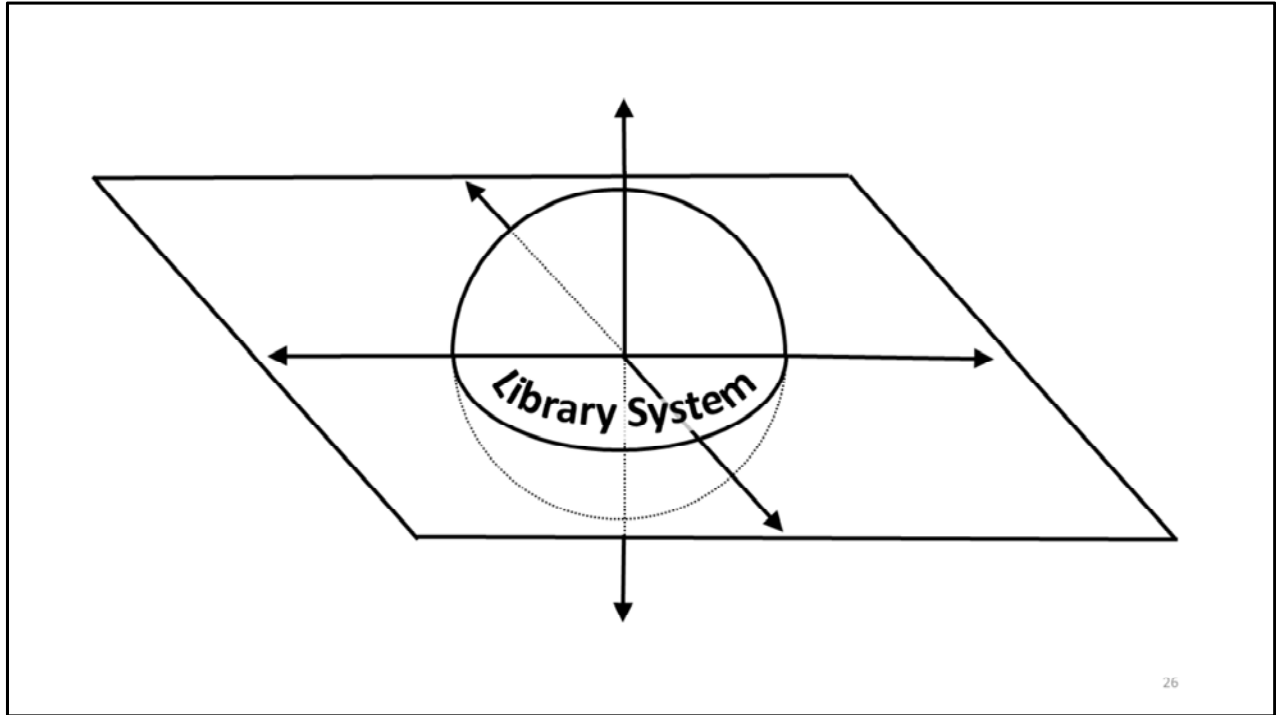
At the center of this model is our object of study, which is in our case is library systems.
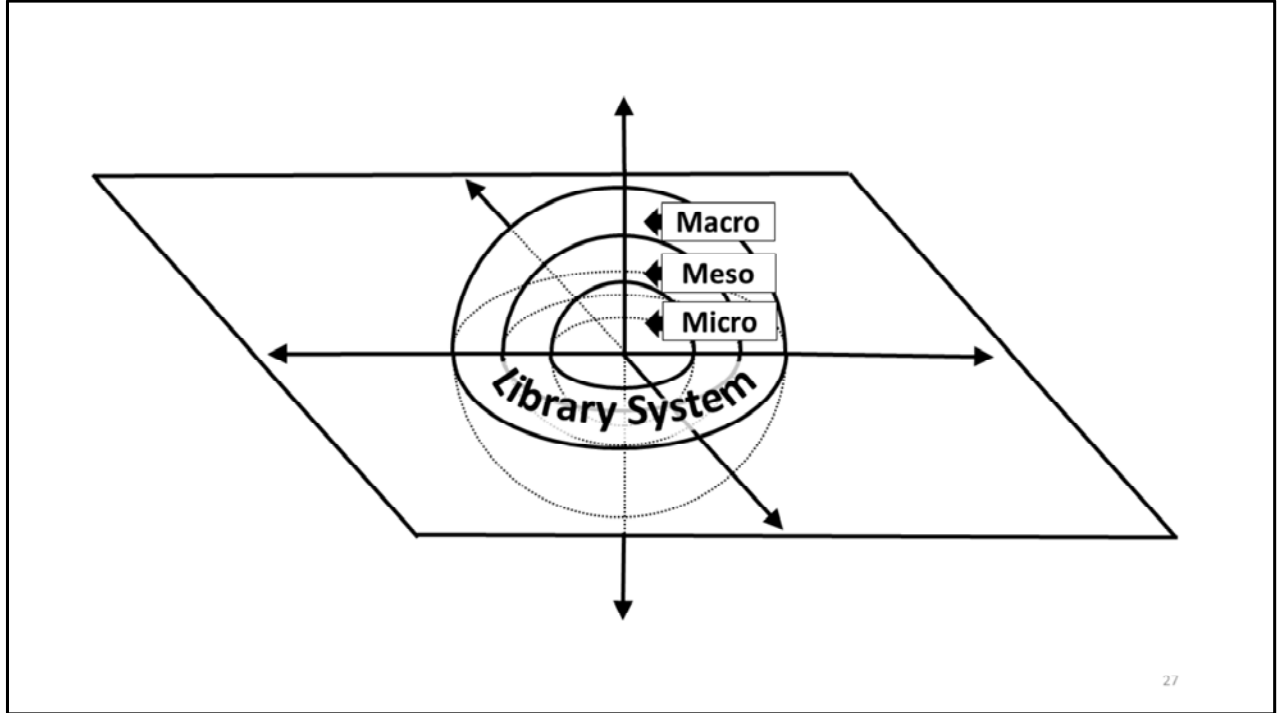
This system can be viewed at several qualitative scales: from micro-level interactions in small groups where meaning-making and understanding occur; to meso-level patterns in organizations; to macro-level or functionalist perspectives that ask what roles libraries play in society more broadly.
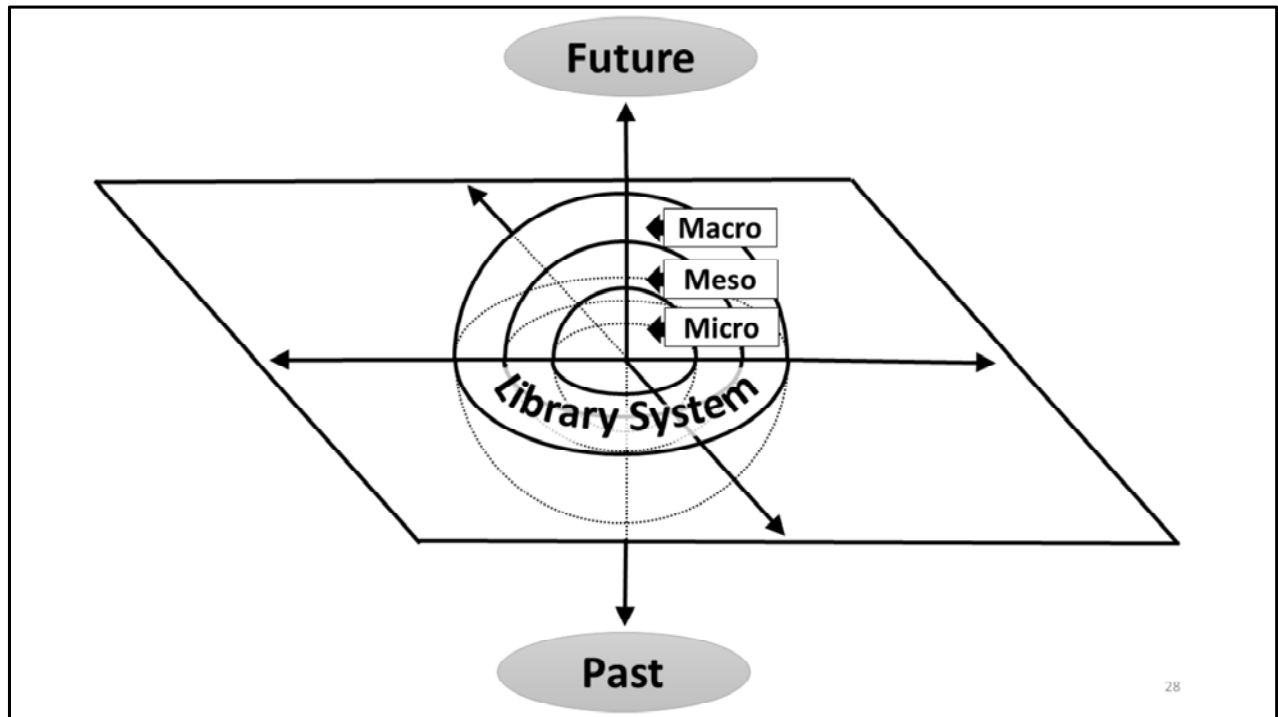
Any object of study of course exists over time. The z-axis of our visualization therefore represents time in order to foreground temporality.
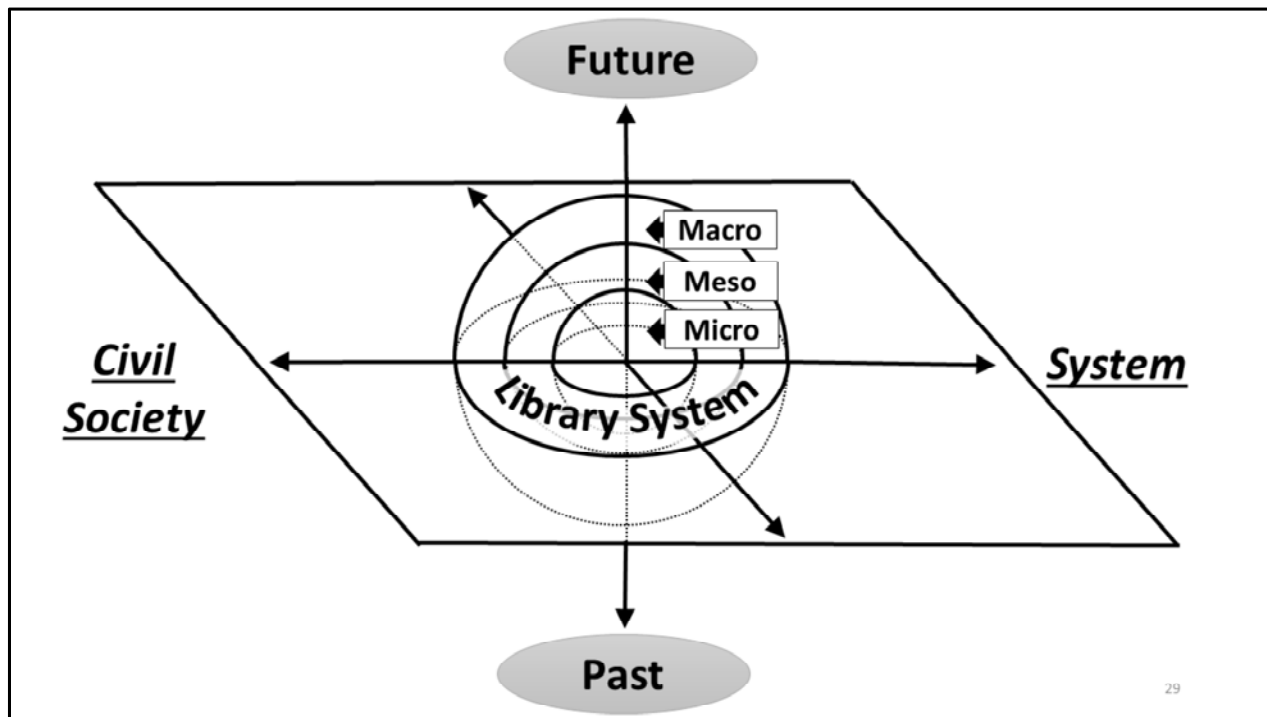
The x-axis of our framework represents the distinction between civil society and the "system," or what are studies that focus on meaning-making, on the one hand, and functionalist studies that ask what role or job public libraries play in society, on the other.
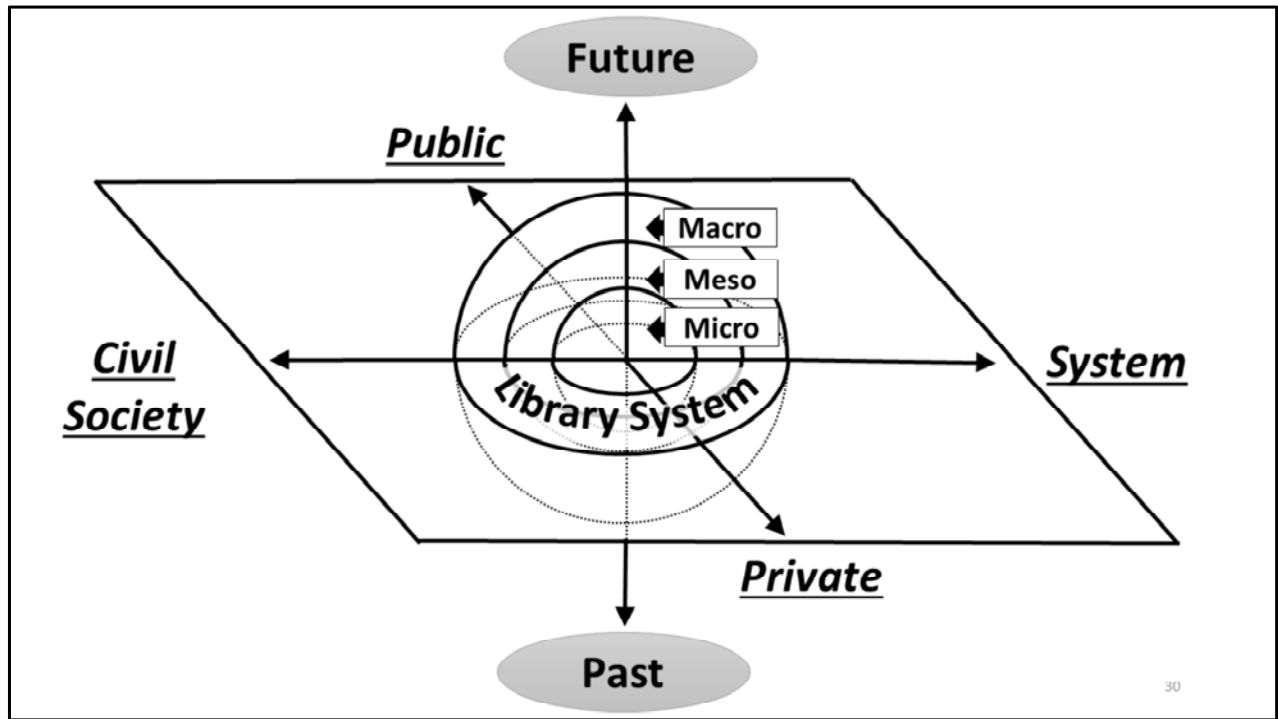
Then there is the public/private distinction represented by the y-axis.
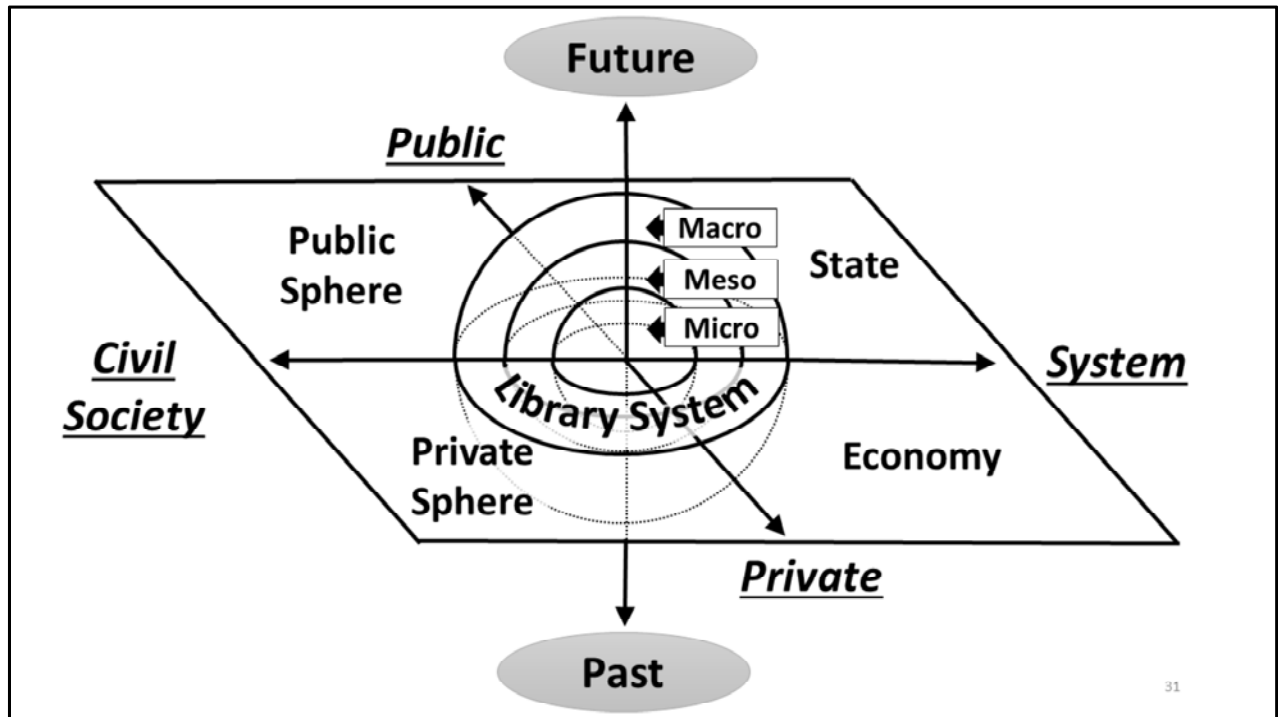
The combination of the x and y axes forms quadrants. They are the public sphere, state, private sphere, and economy. The advantage of this model is that it forces researchers to consider how public sphere aspects relate to other aspects.

Proposed data collection and analysis methods

- Content analysis of reports and other documents
- Interviews
- Participant observation, ethnography

Like the circulation of power framework, our custom-built model dovetails well with qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Content analysis of reports and other documents, interviews, and ethnographic approaches seem like an appropriate fit.

Conclusion

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Now, to conclude our presentation.

Conclusion

- We proposed two new frameworks and data collection methods to the study of the public sphere
  - Circulation of power
  - Public sphere "accelerometer"
- Future work will develop more concrete ways to apply these approaches in actual studies
- From our experience, using longitudinal data is an effective way to develop theory

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In this brief research note, we described our work on the public sphere and public libraries. We reviewed literature in our area of study, and we identified and described two new frameworks. For qualitative researchers, frameworks are tools designed to highlight certain features of reality and experience in order to answer certain research questions. Like astrolabes, thermometers, telescopes, or other physical tools, intellectual frameworks are tools that are only useful when applied. The next step in our project is therefore to apply these frameworks in concrete ways. We believe that using longitudinal and historical data is an appropriate way to do this.

Thank you.

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Questions and Discussion

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