How is the Public Imagined by Public Librarians? A Case Study of One US American Public Library During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper explores how librarians from one US American library imagined their publics during the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. By revisiting Habermas' positioning of the public sphere, this paper inquires librarians' own understanding of publics. Through the imagination of their publics after the buildings of the library closed in response to the pandemic, the librarians deepen our understanding of how publics are imagined, and thereby, how publics are made and how publicness is performed.

Introduction

Emergency responses to the pandemic provide an extreme case that reveal new insights into how public libraries imagine their public(s). By the end of March 2020, most local governments in the USA had decided to close their library buildings to ensure the safety of library staff and patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many public libraries developed new online programs and resources to entertain, educate, and inform families from a distance. One of the most popular programs was "virtual story time." Many library systems also saw dramatic increases in the usage of their e-lending platforms such as Overdrive. By the end of March 2020, ebook and audiobook loans were up by 30% from a year ago. These rapid shifts to digital platforms highlighted the library's processes of imagining publics.

Public library spaces were also being re-purposed in response to COVID-19. Many libraries kept their public WiFi turned on for people to use from their cars in the parking lots, or for people to use while standing outside the library. Other libraries were lending their physical buildings for urgent uses. The Central Library of Arlington in Virginia temporarily converted to a warehouse to receive donations of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for first responders. The Rochester Public Library in Minnesota turned one of their buildings into a day shelter for the homeless. Some library systems used their makerspaces and 3D printers to manufacture demanded supplies, like face shields.

At the library highlighted in this study, all buildings were shut down mid-March 2020. When libraries re-opened, they did so on a limited basis, meaning that all in-person group programs such as children's storytelling sessions were paused. Library users were not permitted to browse books inside the library, sit in the lounge areas, copy or scan materials, or use the meeting rooms. Library branches were utilized as distribution hubs for COVID-19 tests and vaccines. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the library re-organized services amidst new restrictions on in-person gatherings, prompting a re-conceptualization of the library's intended audiences.

To understand these changes, and how they might affect public libraries, this paper explores how librarians from one US American library imagined their publics during the COVID-19 pandemic. It inquires librarians' own understanding and imaginations of publics, using Habermas' theory of the public sphere as a means of analyzing and reflecting potential shifts and changes. The librarians deepen knowledge regarding how publics are imagined, and thereby, how publics are made and how publicness is performed.

Public Libraries and the Public Sphere

Revisiting Habermas' conception of the public sphere, this paper asks: How did the Librarians imagine, understand, and perform the public library's publicness during the COVID-19 pandemic? Who are considered the public libraries' publics (and counterpublics)? What insights may we glean about how such publics are enacted? As Habermas posits in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the public needs to be produced and performed. Through the production, performance, and contestation of publicness during the COVID-19 pandemic, the librarians deepen our understanding of how publics are imagined, and thereby, how publics are made.

In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas traces the history of how the bourgeois public sphere "challenged the principle of traditional feudal rule" and "brought into being a new basis for authority: the consensus emerging from the public's open-ended, critical argumentation and debate" (Benson, 176). It then traces the developments that lead to the disintegration of this bourgeois public sphere, namely economic developments, and a concentration of mass media. As Hohendahl and Silberman summarize, "As soon as the development of capitalism causes economic contradictions to be reflected as social problems, difficulties arise for the classical model of the public sphere. The bourgeoisie... now shows an inclination to adapt the public sphere to the changed circumstances, so that the contradiction between its own particular interests and the interests of the general society are disguised. Structural disintegration of the classical public sphere and private domain (production and consumption) starts to break down. As soon as social conflicts of a developed class society are reflected as demands in the public realm, discourse loses its character of a discussion free of domination" (Hohendahl and Silberman, 93).

This paper does not seek to salvage the existence of a unified public sphere in Habermas' original sense à la Negt and Klue (1993). Instead of seeking a universalized public, this paper focuses on how one small team of public librarians imagined their publics, and what insights their efforts, aspirations, and disappointments provide to understanding the dynamics behind the development and performance of a public sphere, however ephemeral or fragmented.

Building from the feminist and queer critiques of Habermas' exclusion of women, this paper responds to the call to action for the creation of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). Rather than discussing the possibility or impossibility of any practical formation of a universal public sphere, this paper engages with the public

sphere in which the interviewed librarians define and thereby enact. The focus, thus, is on what Warner calls the "emancipatory potential" (Warner, 2005) of Habermas' ideal public sphere.

As Warner writes, "The important point for him [Habermas] is that the emancipatory potential of the public sphere was abandoned rather than radicalized and that changing conditions have now made its realization more difficult than ever" (Warner, 2005, p. 49). By exploring the extent to which librarians continue to seek the emancipatory potential of the public sphere, this paper assumes a positioning of the public sphere as an ideal or horizon, without debating the specific details of whom is included or under what conditions it may exist.

Such understanding of the public sphere and how publics are performed has gained increasing traction in library studies. By exploring how librarians in an US American city imagine and perform publicness, this paper builds upon Newman's engagement of changing political/cultural formations of publicness regarding public libraries in Britain (Newman, 2007), Stone's engagement with library patron motivations and the symbolic representation of the library (Wood, 2021), and Quinn and Ryan's exploration of the publicness of library spaces (Quinn & Ryan, 2022). However, instead of focusing on political forces, institutional histories, communication theory, or physical place, this paper focuses on librarians' imagination of publics.

Buschman man argued that "libraries in their collective existence in democracies embody and enact much of Habermas's classical definition of the public sphere," (Buschman, 2005, p. 2). These arguments emphasize the purpose and impact of the library, for example to "further rational discourse" and "to make access to information and education more widely and universally available." This paper builds upon those arguments to explore how public libraries enact publicness through the lens of how public librarians imagine their publics.

Buschman posits the commercialization of libraries as an example of the capitalist dismantling of the public sphere (Buschman, 2005). This study offers a different understanding of publics as something that is produced through what libraries do, that is enacted and brought forward. It proposes publicness to not only be a question of funding structure and legal form, but also a question of how libraries practice their craft. Rather than taking the dynamics of the public sphere or its dismantling as given, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how the public sphere can be reimagined through the making of publics during a state of exception.

Moving from Topographical to Procedural Approaches to Defining the Publicness of the Public Library

Instead of anchoring publicness on the building of the public library itself (Eberling, 1966; Koontz, 1997); how the building is used (Japzon & Gong, 2005); or what the space's potential uses, implications, and transformative powers are (Klinenberg, 2019), this paper focuses its exploration of publicness beyond the walls of the physical space.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the public library featured in this paper (the "Library") ramped up how it engaged people outside of the walls of the public library building. While the physical spaces of the public library were closed, the librarians at the Library (the "Librarians") were prompted to re-conceptualize what and where the library can be.

To make sense of how the Librarians imagined their publics, this paper focuses on procedural approaches over topographical approaches to publicness. As Iveson observes, "'public space' is most commonly defined in a topographical sense, to refer to particular places… that are (or should be) open to members of 'the public'" (Iveson, 2007, p. 4). According to Iveson, the problem with the topographical approach is that it falsely conflates publicness as a context for action, publicness as a kind of action, and publicness as a collective actor (Iveson, 2007, p. 8). Michael Warner has argued that "public and private are not always simple enough that one could code them on a map with different colors – pink for private and blue for public" (Warner, 2005, p. 27).

A procedural approach understands public space as "any space which, through political action and public address at a particular time, becomes 'the site of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion" (Benhabib, 1997, p. 78). This allows for publicness to exist across locations, and in this case, to make sense of the publicness of public libraries at a time when the physical buildings of the public library were closed.

Following procedural approaches, publics build public spaces in diverse topographical contexts: "not Athens, but Athenians, was the polis" (Arendt 1958: 195). In a similar way, this study follows the librarians (the people), not the library (the place). While the Librarians interviewed did discuss spaces like their closed library buildings, digital spaces like Reddit, and other contexts for imaginations of their publicness, this paper explores a broader variety of ways in which they imagined publicness.

This paper takes this approach, acknowledging its limitations. Neither topographical nor procedural approaches to publicness "trace fully the complex interactions between the distinct dimensions of publicness" (Iveson, 2007, p. 17). While topographical approaches can fail acknowledge the diversity of actions that may take place in a designated public space, procedural approaches often fail to acknowledge the significance of location that continue to shape how actions are performed *de facto*.

Methods

To methodologically reflect the state of exception in which public libraries and public librarians found themselves, an explorative approach was adopted. The focus on one case permitted a deeper exploration into how the library was disrupted and sought to claim their publics.

Unstructured narrative interviews were conducted with public library staff (the "Librarians") at the public library (the "Library") in a major city of the United States of America (USA) from April 2020 to November 2021. These interviews collected free-flowing narratives that provided insight into the processes through which librarians imagined their publics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the restrictions around the COVID-19 pandemic, unstructured interviews with staff of a single library allowed for an explorative approach to understand the changing context.

Interviews were conducted with the following library staff: Executive Director, Associate Director of Collections, Director of Youth and Family Services, Director of Outreach, 2 Outreach Librarians, and 1 Branch Librarian. Each librarian was randomly assigned a number one through seven to maintain anonymity. Interviews took place over video conferencing and lasted between 1 and 2 hours each. During the interviews, librarians were asked to describe whom their work at the library served and how those audiences changed during the pandemic. The interviews also asked the librarians the extent which to the population currently being served was whom they thought the library should be serving, and if not, whom else the library should serve.

Results and Analysis

The following key themes emerged through 2 rounds of coding:
- Theme 1: the roles of digitization in the imagination of publics;
- Theme 2: the selection of imagined publics;
- Theme 3: the discovery of the interests and needs of imagined publics;
- Theme 4: the engagement of imagined publics;
- Theme 5: the limitless of the library's imagined public

The table below shows which of the coded themes emerged in the interviews for each librarian:

	Librarian One	Librarian Two	Librarian Three	Librarian Four	Librarian Five	Librarian Six	Librarian Seven
Theme 1	x	x	x	x			x
Theme 2	x	x	x	x			x
Theme 3	x	x	x	x		x	x
Theme 4			x	x	x		x
Theme 5	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Theme 1: the roles of digitization in the imagination of publics
Imaginations of the public were contextualized within processes of digitization. The mass adoption of the Internet changed how librarians imagined their publics' needs as

well as how the librarians imagined opportunities to locate and find new publics. For Librarian Two, digitization increased the need for librarians to combat misinformation and "direct information purposefully." Librarian Four discussed the importance of the library in providing access to WiFi, eBooks, and audiobooks. By responding to digitization with new programs and new resources for their imagined publics, these librarians demonstrate how they were dynamically adapting what they designed for their publics upon the platforms through which they were imagined utilizing.

Digitization not only prompted librarians to reimagine their publics' needs, but also how they served these needs and the avenues upon which to serve them. Librarian Three discussed the ways in which digitization prompted reimagination of tactical strategies to engage publics, for example, by highlighting challenges of two-way engagement in virtual activities. Librarian Three also discussed how digitization provided the library with new channels to engage their publics, for example, by utilizing Discord chats to invite teens to library programs.

Librarian Five emphasized how digitization would present opportunities for some libraries and challenges for others. Embedded in this analysis is an assumption that libraries are different from one another. Librarian One, for example, "wasn't familiar with that type of programming – I think I feared that a bit." The Librarians take different responses to digitization, and thereby imagine and engage their audiences differently. In discussing digitization, librarians reveal the extent to which the imagination, selection, and engagement of publics is a constant and dynamic process.

As Librarian Two described, "The pandemic might be serving as an accelerant of the slow transition to electronic." This decreased reliance on the Library's physical spaces during the pandemic prompted new imaginations of the Library's publics. For Librarian Four, it shifted imaginations around the public's wants, inducing a shift to prioritize the provision of WiFi and Internet access over other services. For Librarian Three, it shifted imaginations around how the public engages with the Library, inducing a question around how to "let people know we're moving virtual." In attempts to find new ways to "reach people" digitally rather than within the physical spaces of the Library, the Librarians reconfigured their imaginations of their publics wants and needs. For Librarian Two, it shifted imaginations of the public's needs: "there wasn't the same relentless pace and opportunity to experience information and most disturbingly for libraryland – misinformation."

For Habermas, the making of publics has historically relied on technological media (printing press, radio, and television). For the Librarians, publics are similarly imagined to be technologically mediated through contemporary channels (namely, social media and the Internet).

Theme 2: the selection of imagined publics
Five of the seven librarians interviewed discussed processes for selecting publics. For the other two librarians interviewed, this theme did not emerge as a dynamic process, but rather as a static given. For example, Librarian Five discussed how "my job is to...

serve kids in this neighborhood." Librarian Six imagined publics mainly based on geography: "I think people who go to work at the library have the feeling that they want to serve the immediate community… they want to serve their neighborhood… when you go to work for the library, you try to know as much as you can about the neighborhood you serve. There is a focus on local – local needs."

Librarian Four expanded beyond geography of service and age ("from womb to tomb") of participants to discuss socio-economic class, transportation access, housing status, and sense of safety as other criteria through which the library selects publics. Librarian Two broadened the definition of the library's audience to include the government administrators and politicians who oversaw the Library ("we're required by nature of libraries being a part of a civic organization, to have governance by people who do not have full understanding of what the libraries could do"), while Librarian Three broadened the definition of the Library's publics to include partnering community-based organizations, distinguishing these publics from the users of the Library's resources and programs. Librarian One and Librarian Seven selected publics with more nuanced processes, adding variables of awareness, intention, trust, scheduling availability, and structural racism to how they selected publics: "these people cannot access the 4 walls of the library within the limitation of our hours or locations, so we will go to you and we will provide the same resources as you could get in the library." As Warner has written, publics are heterogenous. The Librarians' imagined publics were dynamically heterogenous: geographically dispersed and imagined in various categorizations of demographics.

Theme 3: the discovery of the needs and wants of imagined publics
All seven interviewed librarians wrestled with the challenges of imagining not just who the library's publics are, but also what they need, what they want, and how to uncover what these publics need and want. In calling out how other librarians miss important variables in how they design programs for their publics, Librarian Three re-emphasizes how this process differs from librarian to librarian, highlighting the imagination of a public's interests and needs as a dynamic and ongoing process.

Librarian Two referred to personal experience and societal needs in imagining the Library's publics: " We all value time over money. In challenged communities, it's an even greater commodity because less is scheduled." Projections of personal experience ("we"), along with generalizations based on socio-economic class ("challenged communities") shaped a dynamic imagination of this public's needs.

Librarian One noted the important distinction between what someone needs and wants. Librarian Seven echoed this point by expressing frustration with designing programs based upon assumed or described needs that the imagined public did not attend: "you do all this work and you trekked it out there, and nobody showed up. It's just so disappointing." Community partners, for example, would tell Librarian Seven that their community would benefit from a program like resume writing, but with experience Librarian Seven learned that the actual participants of the program "might not see that this is something that they need." Librarian Six's approach was to ask the community

directly, but Librarian Seven named that asking people alone is not enough. According to Librarian Seven, people say they want different things than they actually do, and their behaviors are the best indication upon which to understand whether the library has accurately imagined a public's interested and needs.

Librarian Five approached this differently. Whereas the other librarians discussed starting with naming the need and want of the community, then imagining what resources or services the Library could provide them to resolve that need or want, Librarian Five started by asking what resources and services the Library offered and then imagined who/how the imagined public could benefit from being connected to those services. These varying methods led to different results. Whereas Librarian Five focused on extending e-books during the pandemic, Librarian Seven focused on providing services to navigate pandemic-related social services. The Librarians' imagined publics were not only heterogenous in who they are and where they are located, but also in what they want and need. If the public sphere is made up of publics, these publics have different interest and desired, and thereby must be engaged differently.

Theme 4: the engagement of imagined publics
Four of the seven librarians interviewed discussed the tactical approaches in which they engaged the imagined publics. Once the public has been selected, Librarian Four named how challenging it is for the library to actually meet an imagined and selected public. According to Librarian Seven, "we only really preach to the choir. If there's a program happening in a library, unless you know about our website, or unless you're coming into our building, you don't know about it. One of the weaknesses that this showed, is that we are really not apparent to non-library users."

The Librarians used different strategies to engage their imagined publics. Librarian Three described the task of making "cold calls" to try to get in front of this audience. Librarian Four set up pop-ups on streetcorners. Meeting the public was not enough for Librarian Four, who described the often required process of "encouraging" this public to engage with the library: "They'll say I don't know how to use a computer so what would I do if I go in there, or I'm not the best reader or I don't like to read… then I try to encourage them by saying ok there are computer classes, we have audio books."

Librarian Seven adjusted practices as imaginations of the public changed, positioning the burden of engaging the imagined public on the shoulders of librarians: "I need to have something that's catchy and more engaging than just me, some books, and a library card." As the pandemic precluded activities from being conducted together, Librarian Seven began to gift arts and crafts kits for families to take home. There is an assumption that the library should, and thereby could, serve the public better if they improved what resources/services are provided and how they are delivered.

Exhibit A provides a copy of internal notes from a strategy meeting led by Librarian Seven. The goal of the meeting was to discuss how to engage more people to access library services, regardless of their capabilities (including physical and psychosocial)

and identities (including race, gender, and class). In these notes, Librarian Seven reveals an awareness of how different publics are heterogenous, and how different publics face different access barriers to engaging with the Library.

Exhibit A: Notes from an Internal Strategy Meeting in February 2021 to Map Barriers to Accessing Library Services and Library Resources

Barriers to accessing library services
- Physical barriers
    - Location
    - Hours
    - Fines
    - Health limitations
    - Tech
- Emotional barriers
    - Lack of representation among staff and collection
    - Lack of trust in government agencies
    - Feeling threatened by other patrons or presence of library police
    - Feeling unwelcome due to gender, sexual orientation, culture, socio-economic status, age
    - Assumption about what we offer not being relevant to their lives
- Skill barriers
    - Illiteracy
    - Computer illiteracy
    - Language barrier
- What are the barriers to library resources?
    - Transportation/physical
    - Fines
    - Language access
    - Not a safe space, because of
        - Gender identity/sexual orientation
        - Lack of representation among staff or in materials
        - Cultural/Racial barriers (not feeling safe approaching staff members of a different background)
        - Lack of trust in government agencies
        - Feeling threatened by other patrons or library police
    - Lack of computer literacy
    - Illiteracy
    - Health emergency
    - Time/schedule
    - Barrier to information: Lack of awareness/assumptions about our services
    - Assumption of understanding our communities/internal bias of staff/lack of focus on listening, including no formal structure to collect information
    - We work with gatekeepers, which limits direct input from community
- What are the broader barriers to access?

- ○ WiFi/Internet
- ○ Language/literacy
- ○ Socio-economic status
- ○ Race/cultural backgrounds
- ○ Health/ability
- ○ Age
- ○ Information/trust
- ○ Resources (i.e.: not having materials for a Maker program)

In reimagining publics differently, the Librarians are necessarily reimagining practices differently as well. According to Librarian Four, "when we started we were just tabling, going to events, here's some library cards, here's a wave and a smile. Then we changed our thought process, and we went into "embedded outreach" [hand quotes]… more connection with the community, so our ultimate goal was to go into communities and create programs, building lifelong connections."

Theme 5: the limitless of the library's imagined public
All seven librarians interviewed discussed the limitless of the library's imagined public by using words like "anyone" and "everybody." As Librarian Two described, "we have to serve all." For Librarian Three, the library is "the only 3rd space left that everyone can access." The library "offer[s] services that are available to anyone," summarizes Librarian Four. For Librarian Seven, the library "is not the four walls, it's basically helping any person at any time with any needs that they have." For Librarian Seven, the goal of the library was to "expand access to library resources beyond library walls... in order to reach all residents."

Librarian One caveats the claim that the library's public is "everyone" by recommending that librarians' specify "who we're trying to serve and why." Embedded in this recommendation is the assumption that focusing on one audience necessarily pulls time and attention away from another audience. Librarian Five echoed this concern in the quality of service when the library "tried to be all things for all people," calling the process of focusing in on specific programs for specific audiences as an "opportunity."

For Librarian Two, the library can be anything for anyone as long as it continues to "pivot." Everything that helps anybody can fit under the library's mandate: "it's not common for public libraries to be like, yeah... we aren't going to help you." The limiting variable is the library's capacity (staff, time, books, etc.).

Librarian Three and Librarian Six named the limits of their capacity in their own training and skillsets, but caveated this with the claim that they could still help anyone, including those seeking expertise beyond the individual librarians' skillsets. As Librarian Three shared, "people [...] ask[ing] me for bus routes… I'm not a city planner, but I can easily find that information for you." Librarian Seven named other limitations to this goal to serve all publics, including times in which the library building is open, comfort of the library furniture, cultural understanding of how to use the American library, language barriers, and lack of digital skills.

Discussion

The Public Sphere of Public Libraries: A Horizon
As the Librarians' narratives around Theme 5 reveal, they all imagined a public sphere in a Habermasian way. Fraser's feminist critique and Warner's queer critique of Habermas' bourgeois notion of the public sphere stress that it was too universal, too male, and too heteronormative (Warner, 2005; Fraser, 1992). Yet, in these critiques, the idealized public sphere remains present on the horizon. Critiques of Habermas continue to be made in relation to a normative and idealized public sphere, "very different indeed from the bourgeois public sphere, though deeply indebted to it as a background set of conditions" (Warner, 2005, p. 57). The librarians interviewed believe in this horizon when they name the possibility of public libraries to serve everyone (i.e. all conceptualized publics). All Librarians interviewed imagined their publics as some form of "anyone," "everybody", or "all."

The Librarians' imaginations of their public were made in relation to this horizon. When they described their day-to-day focus to engage more teens (Librarian 1), more homeless (Librarian 2), more seniors (Librarian 3), more of the unemployed (Librarian 4), or more immigrants (Librarian 7), this work was framed within the contours of the Habermasian public sphere. In this imagined public sphere, all were welcome to engage, particularly those that have traditionally not engaged.

Publics are "social imaginaries" (Warner, 2005, p. 12) because they are unattainable. For Habermas, even the purest instances of public spaces were not pure, i.e., not fully democratic. The need for an unattainable horizon of a normative public sphere — democratic, inclusive, non-hierarchical — is normative. While the Librarians fail to achieve Habermas' pristine and normative definition of publicness in practice, they continue to imagine the possibility of the idealized public sphere, raising questions around the analytical categories with which we may classify varying degrees of successes and failures for publicness.

Imagining Publics and Counterpublics

As Warner has written, publics are dispersed and diverse. As narratives of theme 1 reveal, the Librarians imagined their publics and counterpublics differently. Themes 2, 3, and 4 reveal how differently they imagined their publics' localities, demographics, wants, needs, and engagement strategies.

In this context, Warner's exploration of publics and counterpublics provides a helpful framework to understand the Librarians' imagined publics, and thereby to describe their performances of a contemporary public sphere. Building from queer theory, Warner posits that "some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public," thereby "counterpublics" who "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (Warner, 2005, p. 56).

Librarian Four explained how resources and services that are interesting and helpful for one population (e.g. teens) may not be interesting or helpful for another population (e.g. seniors). The selection of program participants, thus, is a pre-requisite for the design of a program, and inevitably must leave out different populations from that program in its selection of whom to include. In this way, the macro-level conception of the Library's public can remain "everybody" while individual programs must serve individual, different, and many publics. Notably, it must also exclude certain publics in order to serve others.

In the normative ideal of the public library being accessible to everyone, non-users of the library are not participating and thereby counterpublic. According to Librarian Four, the mandate of the Library during COVID-19 was to find people who were disconnected and disengaged from the library's resources and services and to identify ways to (re)engage them in the library. In other words, they were tasked with selecting counterpublics – the communities most disconnected and disengaged from the library's resources and services – and identify ways to engage them as Library publics. "We're focusing on the harder to reach communities or those that wouldn't ever make it into the Library to receive those resources..." In this way, Librarian Four views people who do not use the public library as counterpublics, which are "by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment" (Warner, 2005, p. 63).

Particularly in narratives involving themes 3 and 4, the Librarians showed a keen awareness of the "partitions of the perceptible" (Rancière 1999) that deny some people access to certain performances of publicness. They work to admit traditionally excluded people (e.g. racial minorities and the poor) into the public spheres of the public library, revealing challenges with assumptions that the public sphere is open to all.

According to Librarian 1, limited resources required the Librarians to select which counterpublics to engage first. As Librarian 1 asked, "We're a small team, so do we just focus on children, do we do adults, do we do book events?" Librarian 1 continued by focusing on the process in which Library activities change, rather than by focusing on what activities specifically are provided for whom: "I think there's a way to add every element that we offer and present ourselves as vibrant, living, and learning. This is where you come to help yourself have a better life, and to learn great things, whatever facet that is." In this framing, the Library's publics (and thereby counterpublics) are constantly evolving, revealing Librarian 1's imagination of publicness as a "vibrant, living, and learning" process.

Different Librarians imagination of publics in theme 1 shaped different narratives in how they worked to engage imagined publics into the public sphere in theme 4. Librarian 1, for example, selected to prioritize serving older adults and providing them with digital literacy programming. When describing the seniors, Librarian 1 used the word "bracket" to describe the category of people that required additional assistance to engage. "There are just some things we don't know because we're not in that bracket." Here, Librarian 1 is referring to the older age bracket, but the use of the word "bracket" to describe a specific social group echoes Fraser's requirements for the "bracketing" of social

inequities in order to conceive of the bourgeois public sphere. Librarian 1 worked deliberately to make it easier for an otherwise "bracketed" social group to engage with the Library.

Conclusion

Immense efforts to curate customized services for diverse publics is a hallmark of the public library profession. This paper has explored how librarians from one library in a major US American city imagined their publics during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has inquired librarians' own imagination of publics by revisiting Habermas' positioning of the public sphere. Interviews with librarians were transcribed and coded according to the following key themes that emerged: the roles of digitization in the imagination of publics; the selection of imagined publics; the discovery of the interests and needs of imagined publics; the engagement of imagined publics; and the limitless of the library's imagined public. All librarians interviewed imagined the possibility of the library serving "anyone," "everyone," or "all." They imagined this idealized public sphere even as they acknowledged the library's failure to fully perform this publicness in practice. In describing how they imagined their publics, the librarians added knowledge to the dynamics behind the publicness as a dynamic and evolving process. In imagining their publics, librarians explored much more than who their publics were as demographics such as age and gender. They also explored what their publics needed, what they wanted, what barriers they faced to access library resources, why they would want to access library resources, and what capacities and skills they had or lacked.

This study highlights one single case and therefore cannot be easily generalized. Yet already through the imaginations of the librarians interviewed, insights were revealed on the heterogeneity of and dynamics behind how publics are imagined and engaged, as well as how the imagination of a public shapes the practice and enactment of publicness. The depth of empathy and effort to imagine the details of the library's public sheds light on the specific actions required to imagine and therefore enact publicness. Future research is needed to see how this works in practice in a different context.

Further insight would be drawn from future studies exploring how public librarians' conceptions of their publics differ normatively and empirically, as well as further empirical work on how publics come about, how they are performed, how they disappear, when they "work," and when they "fail." Further insight may also be drawn from explorations regarding library studies' engagement with procedural notions of publicness and the practical moves to extend the library's publicness beyond the physical walls of the public library. Deeper explorations of library counter-publics may also shed light on how librarians can select and engage their publics.

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