Public libraries play a central role in providing access to data and ensuring the freedom of digital knowledge.

Data connectivity is intrinsic to most of our daily lives. The place which exists in almost every community large or small, rural or urban, is the public library. **Ben Lee** *argues that not only do libraries provide free access to data, but they do so in an environment which is trustworthy and neutral, geared to learning. Access to digital technology increasingly overlaps with access to opportunity and it is important to recognise the role public libraries already play (and have always played) in keeping the gate to knowledge open.*

In a recent Financial Times article about e-books and Amazon Prof John Kay casually dismissed public libraries as being doomed alongside printed books. He observed that readers might miss the "comfortable ambience" of libraries and likened library users to nostalgic steam train enthusiasts, but essentially his view was no harm would come if libraries disappeared. This blog post is based on my original response to that article.

It is not just library sceptics like Prof Kay who portray public libraries as more about printed knowledge than digital knowledge. Those campaigning to save libraries from spending cuts often point to the sacrilege of removing book shelves more than the inequality of the information divide and its conjoined twin, the digital divide. Free access to written knowledge as a route to a better life is what galvanised support for the first publicly-maintained libraries; not reading for the sake of reading. In 1852 Manchester opened the UK's first free lending library and in his address at the grand opening, with Charles Dickens as guest of honour, Sir John Potter, Mayor of Manchester and main benefactor said:

> *We have been animated solely by the desire to benefit our poorer fellow-creatures. It is the duty of those who are more favoured by fortune than they, to do everything in their power to afford additional means of education and advancement to those classes.*
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> **W.R. Credland's The Manchester Public Free Libraries (1899) a copy of which has been digitized by the Internet Archive project**

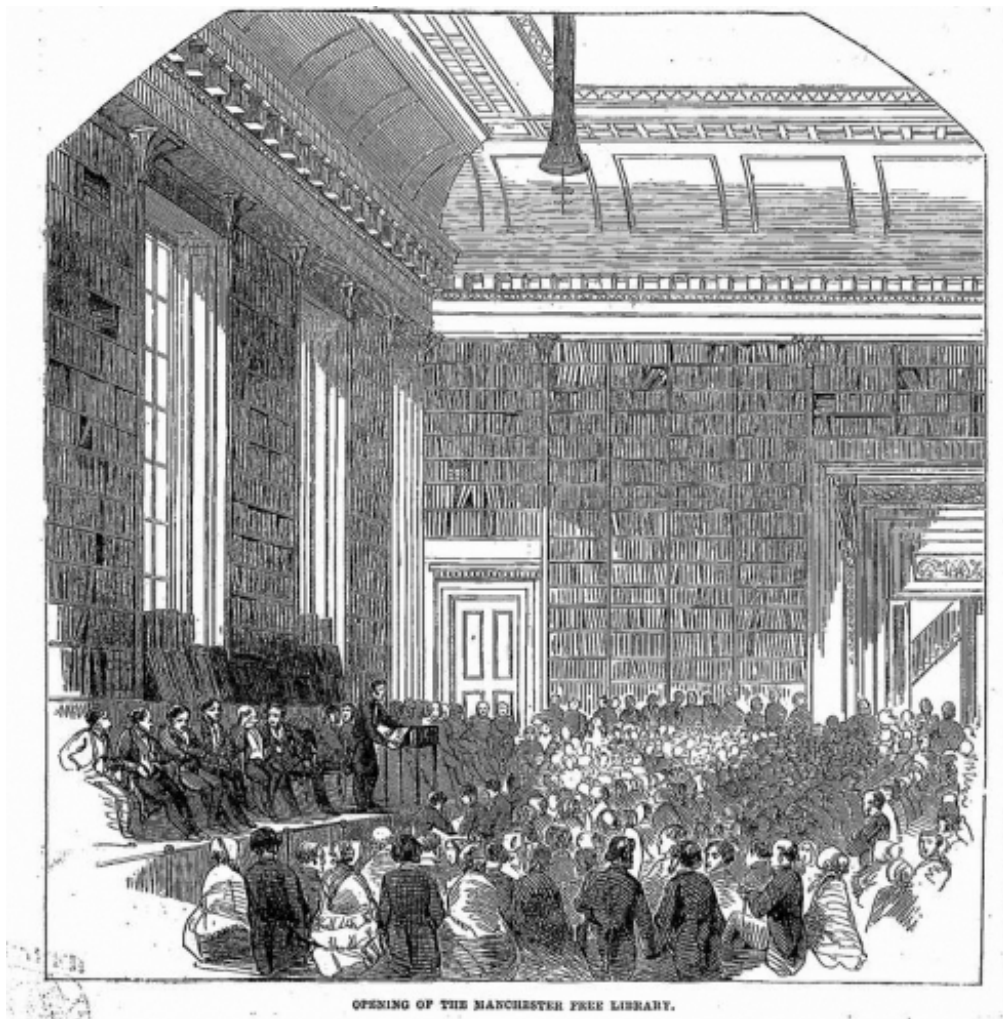In other words the purpose of the library was to enable the poor to build better lives.

OPENING OF THE MANCHESTER FREE LIBRARY.

Image credit: Working Class Movement Library

The knowledge divide

My interest in trends surrounding access to knowledge comes via research I have been involved with into public libraries; how people use them, their future over the coming decades, and how library leaders engage with digital technology.

Two trends around access to knowledge stand out. The first is that access to digital technology increasingly overlaps with access to opportunity. For example research from UK Online centres claims 72% of employers would not interview even entry level candidates who lack basic IT skills. Added to this, National Literacy Trust research has found parents now see digital skills as vital to enable their children to get on at school.

The second trend is that multiple disadvantage and digital exclusion are becoming even more closely aligned. The Tinder Foundation recently took ONS and other national data on internet access and used it to identify how many Britons are currently not online, or online but lacking the basic skills of how to email, search, and complete online forms. The answer is 11 million, one fifth of all UK adults – dominated by social grades C2, D and E.

When the Tinder researchers modelled the expected position in 2020 they forecast that eleven million will have become six million. However, they also forecast these would be people with the greatest social and economic barriers to online knowledge; having the fewest qualifications, being unemployed, or prevented from working by illness or disability.

Perhaps most interesting of all is new research from the National Literacy Trust which seems to show that when

children from low-income families are able to access digital technology, they derive more benefit than their better off peers (even though their chances of accessing technology are lower). Those same lower socioeconomic status children are also more likely to have poorer communication skills and fewer books in their homes.

£31 a month for knowledge

Whereas in 1852 knowledge was accessed by opening a printed book, today it is accessed by sending and receiving data using a phone, tablet or computer. Just as books were unaffordable for many families in 1852, today it is data which is too expensive for those on the lowest incomes. According to OFCOM average household spend on fixed broadband is now £16 a month and another £15 on mobile phones.

Data connectivity is intrinsic to most of our daily lives. But data also comes at a significant price except in the few places where it can be accessed for free, and the place which exists in almost every community large or small, rural or urban, is the public library. Not only do libraries provide free access to data, but they do so in an environment which is trustworthy and neutral, geared to learning, and staffed by information literate professionals – as opposed to say, free wifi in coffee shops, fast-food chains, and shopping centre atriums.

Increasing access to knowledge is not a one-way trip

There is a normative view that access to knowledge and information can only improve as wealth increases and democracies mature. This one-way journey is often traced back to the day in 1436 when Johannes Gutenberg's printing press brought a revolution in the spread of knowledge. Written text was no longer scarce, nor expensive to replicate.

Now, 570 years later we are in the midst of another revolution of similar magnitude in the way knowledge is controlled and consumed and there are clear signs that democratisation of knowledge is not a one-way trip.

Back to the future for libraries

Today it is common for people of all ages on pay as you go contracts to scope-out and connect to free wifi wherever they can grab it, because they cannot afford a data-rich plan. Some public libraries in the US are lending out wifi hotspot devices in neighbourhoods with low internet use. We have seen in our own fieldwork in those UK libraries with the best digital services, teenagers from all economic backgrounds (their faces lit by dozens of apps) studying or gossiping together on devices they own or have borrowed from the library. Just a few weeks ago Exeter Library opened a FabLab in collaboration with Exeter University to provide free access for the whole community to the kinds of technologies which underpin the knowledge economy, plus the skills (via the University) to use these.

So for these reasons I urge sceptics who dismiss public libraries to consider the evidence of the need for free neutral access to digital knowledge and the role public libraries already play (and have always played) in keeping the gate to knowledge open. And to those who value libraries but instinctively seek to protect the bookshelves more than the broadband I urge them to remember what the first public libraries were for, and for whom.

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About the Author

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