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Squirreling Away: Managing Information Resources & Libraries — Boy, If Life Were Only Like This

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Sisyphus has nothing on modern librarians.

As we know, **Sisyphus** was the subject of an often-told story in Greek mythology. To punish him for eternity, **Hades** subjected him to an eternity of hard labor, but with a sadistic twist. While this labor seemed to have no end, the sad truth was that it had no purpose. Poor **Sisyphus** would roll a boulder to the top of a hill, only to have it roll to the bottom, forcing him to once again attempt the task. Sure, it must have really been awful to roll a boulder up a hill, only to see it roll to the bottom over, and over and over and over again. Kinda of a lousy way to spend eternity. Actually, it is a lousy way to spend any day. It might be a bleak way to start a column on modern librarianship, but please stay with me.

Our role today as librarian is many things. We are trying to live with one foot in the past as the keeper of the archives of recorded knowledge. Meanwhile, we are also trying to make sense of a tsunami of information that comes at us, and our patrons, at a rate that no one can ingest. Our job is complicated because we are aspiring to solve both impossible tasks. And just when we think that we have something accomplished, we realize that we are right back where we started from.

Maybe this is defending public and collection space, or protecting our collection budget or keeping our staff — the work of a librarian is not only never done, it never feels settled. Maybe it is trying to convince the new administrators that it's only all online because we pay for it. Anyway, this is our boulder as we try to keep our operations moving and our sanity in check.

Being a librarian in his mid-fifties, I went to library school at the very beginning of the Internet age. While we were exposed to a few sessions on Dialog, our training came on the index volumes that were a key aspect of every library's reference collection. Needless to say, the world of library education 30 years ago is a far cry from what the new students are learning. And that is a good thing. The information that people can get access to from wherever they are is something only a few evangelicals could see as being in our future.

However, with that ability to get virtually anything from our phones, we are seeing a line of thinking that is undercutting the value and role of the library in our modern information ecosystem.

To that end, I want to look at the article that grabbed our collective attention this summer. And you know what I am talking about...On June 21st, 2018, a *Forbes* contributor posted an article on their site that saw librarians lose their minds. Contributor **Panos Mourdoukoutas** wrote a column called “Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money.”¹ **Mourdoukoutas** is the Chair of the Department of Economics at **Long Island University Post** and has written several books — that I hope are better thought through than this brief article on the *Forbes* site.

The premise behind **Mourdoukoutas**' assertion is simply one of privatization. In this context, privatization is the move of public services or public oversight to private or corporate control. We have actually had many instances of privatization in our workforce over the years, but they have not been front and center. Back in 1991, **John B. Goodman** and **Gary W. Loveman** wrote an article in *Harvard Business Review* asking “Does Privatization Serve the Public Interest?”² This is a way that they introduced the topic:

“According to privatization's supporters, this shift from public to private management is so profound that it will produce a panoply of significant improvements: boosting the efficiency and quality of remaining government activities, reducing taxes, and shrinking the size of government. In the functions that are privatized, they argue, the profit-seeking behavior of new, private sector managers will undoubtedly lead to cost cutting and greater attention to customer satisfaction.”

There might be many perceived benefits here for the privatization of public services. But the one that seems to drive this movement is the reduction of cost to provide the service. On the surface, if we think about janitorial services, how could an organization or a school system save money by hiring a firm to run those operations? The key appears to be in the reduced cost of labor and the less generous benefits packages that many public employees receive. I am sure there are academic libraries that outsource the maintenance services based on financial reasons alone.

We have seen privatization in action across many fields. In Michigan, I had an opportunity to tour the **Sault Tribe Youth Facility** that also provides a way for the state to outsource or privatize services (though this to another government). From their site:

“The **Sault Tribe Youth Facility** is a state-of-the-art, 25-bed secure juvenile detention facility. The facility houses male and female juvenile offenders from 11 to 17 years of age. The facility is licensed by the state of Michigan and federally certified through the **Bureau of Indian Affairs**. The facility provides structured care and supervision of youth accompanied by support activities, health-related services, substance and mental health services, cultural services and focuses on furthering the educational, cultural and social development of each youth.”³

As they told us on our tour, they can provide a service that is less expensive for the state than if they ran the service themselves. This becomes a huge concern for the state — or any organization — that is charged with trying to maintain all the services needed with a budget that might not be as big as one might like.

And that brings us to **Panos Mourdoukoutas**' piece. A very nice summary of the response from the library community may be found on the *Guardian* website.⁴ It would not be too long for a reader of *Against the Grain* to see what the concerns that librarians and those that support them might be. It did not take too long for *Forbes* to pull the article off their website, but thanks to the Wayback Machine from the Internet Archive, we have access to this work. But at its core, the author is making the wrong assumption and likely misappropriating the motivation of a company to serve in this role. Let's dig in a bit into these two thoughts.

The Wrong Assumptions

Panos Mourdoukoutas might be writing from his own perceptions and uses of the library. This is a real problem with many people in the business community, who draw from their own personal experience and instincts, rather than to look at the market information or anything resembling data. We often hear of business men and women who rely on their guts rather than what the market information tells them (who are we kidding — it's mostly businessmen here who do that). That might explain where he is coming from in writing this column. Right off the bat, he laments:

“Amazon should open their own bookstores in local communities. They can replace local libraries and save taxpayers lots of money, while enhancing the value of their stock.”⁵

He adds —

“Libraries slowly began to service the local community more. Libraries introduced video rentals and free internet access. The modern local library still provides these services, but they aren't for free. Homeowners have to be financed by taxpayers in the form of a ‘library tax.’ It is usually added to school taxes, which in some communities are already high.”

So, through his outstanding investigative reporting, he learned that public libraries are paid for by...wait for it...tax dollars. In fact, as the

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argument with others spilled over to **Twitter**, he stated “Let me clarify something. Local libraries aren’t free. Home owners must pay a local library tax. My bill is \$495/year.”⁶

But the same is also true about all sorts of community endeavors that you may or may not take advantage of. You should be thrilled if you have not had any interaction with the fire department in any year. While I have not needed the **Saline Fire Department** at my house for many a year (if ever), but I think that money as part of my taxes is exceptionally well spent. The same could be said for the police department. The same might be said for other services that I may or may not use. Every town likely has a wealthy individual who might not have kids, or never goes to the library, and grumbles for every dollar they spend to make that community a place you might want to live. But hopefully, the community can decide as a whole what its core values are and how to fund them.

The Wrong Motivations

In looking through this article, it also appears that he is completely lost when it comes to the motivations that might be at play when privatization takes place. For this to take place, ideally, there is a community that is seeking to shed an obligation while at the same time, there is a company that sees this as an opportunity to make money. We have often talked about running governments as a business, but I believe this is just plain wrong. For example, if a store cannot make money in a location, it is in the best interest of the company to close. But can government services do the same? Can they just close up a fire department and EMT because there are not enough people around? Close the town up? That cannot be easily done.

One of the key aspects of any privatization argument is the motivation on the part of the company looking to get involved. In this case, the author is suggesting that **Amazon** could take over the role of a local library. But for a company to take on this role, it needs to make sense economically. For the companies, these will be a new revenue source. They need to be able make money for this to work for the company. And there needs to be a way for the community to save money for this to work for the municipality.

This is really where **Mourdoukoutas’** idea falls apart. Libraries provide many services that any commercial entity would not be interested in matching. While he states that people will just as likely read at a **Starbucks**, it is a bad idea for a space that is open to everyone (including visitors and people from adjacent cities). **Starbucks** itself ran into problems this April after two African-American men were arrested at a Philadelphia location for sitting there without being paying customers.⁷ I am sure that a library would not do that.

But that is the million dollar question. If libraries were commercially viable enterprises, there would be for-profit entities trying to take over this work. In fact, they would have already done it years ago. Privatization does not succeed when there is not sufficient revenue to be earned by companies nor savings by communities.

So while the author might use **Amazon** a great deal, it is not likely that he or she understands how they, or libraries operate. That did not seem to prevent him from sharing these ideas broadly, even if for a short time.

And that brings us to **Sisyphus**. While librarians have taken great joy in pointing out the fallacies of his argument, this task is tiresome. Think of the work that we could focus on if we were not constantly needing to defend our role on campus and in communities from people who do not seem to have a great understanding of the issues involved. All academic librarians are told that everything is available electronically, and that is not true. All academic librarians are told that everything is free on the Internet, and that is not true. But every time we answer these questions, it is rolling a boulder up the hill. Over and over again.

In thinking through this conundrum, I am reminded of one of my favorite movie scenes of all time. **Woody Allen’s** 1978 Oscar winning movie *Annie Hall* won four awards, including Best Screenplay for **Allen** and **Marshall Brickman**. There is a scene that takes place in a theater lobby as **Allen’s** Alvy Singer and **Diane Keaton’s** Annie Hall are waiting in line. When another man in line is trying to impress his date (we

assume) with his knowledge about media, he draws the attention and ire of Alvy, who steps towards the camera and address the audience:⁸

ALVY: What do you do when you get stuck in a movie line with a guy like this behind you? I mean, it’s just maddening!

MAN IN LINE: Wait a minute, why can’t I give my opinion? It’s a free country!

ALVY: I mean, d — He can give you — Do you hafta give it so loud? I mean, aren’t you ashamed to pontificate like that? And-and the funny part of it is, M-Marshall McLuhan, you don’t know anything about Marshall McLuhan’s...work!

MAN IN LINE: Wait a minute! Really? Really? I happen to teach a class at Columbia called “TV Media and Culture”! So I think that my insights into Mr. McLuhan — well, have a great deal of validity.

ALVY: Oh, do yuh?

MAN IN LINE: Yes.

ALVY: Well, that’s funny, because I happen to have Mr. McLuhan right here. So ... so, here, just let me—I mean, all right. Come over here ... a second. (Alvy gestures to the camera which follows him and the man in line to the back of the crowded lobby. He moves over to a large stand-up movie poster and pulls **Marshall McLuhan** from behind the poster.)

MAN IN LINE: Oh.

ALVY: (To **McLuhan**) Tell him.

McLUHAN: I hear-I heard what you were saying. You-you know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing.

ALVY: (To the camera) Boy, if life were only like this!

Having an expert around at a moment’s notice is nice, but it will not prevent people from thinking through the idea of privatizing or outsourcing the library to **Amazon** or another company. Given that we do not have Librarian of Congress **Dr. Carla Hayden** available behind every poster when we are presented with a simplistic approach to complicated library problems, we are forced to act calmly and patiently as we roll the argument back up the hill. It would be nice if it could stay up there. Boy, if life were only like this. 🌿

Corey Seeman is the Director, Kresge Library Services at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is also the new editor for this column that intends to provide an eclectic exploration of business and management topics relative to the intersection of publishing, librarianship and the information industry. No business degree required! He may be reached at <cseeman@umich.edu> or via twitter at @cseeman.

Endnotes

1. **Mourdoukoutas, Panos.** “Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money.” *Forbes* (online). Posted June 21, 2018 9am.
2. **Goodman, John B., and Gary W. Loveman.** 1991. “Does Privatization Serve the Public Interest?” *Harvard Business Review* 69 (6): 26–38.
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4. **Lyons, Kate.** “Twaddle”: librarians respond to suggestion Amazon should replace libraries.” *The Guardian* (Online, US Edition). URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/23/twaddle-librarians-respond-to-suggestion-amazon-should-replace-libraries> (accessed September 23, 2018).
5. **Mourdoukoutas, Panos.** “Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money.” *Forbes* (online). Posted June 21, 2018 9am. Viewed from the Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web/>.
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8. **Allen, Woody and Marshall Brickman.** *Annie Hall* (original screenplay). URL: http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/annie_hall.html (Access September 23, 2018).