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Participatory Culture and Collaborative Democracy: The Awesome Libraries Chapter

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ABSTRACT

A brief overview of the Awesome Libraries Chapter of the Awesome Foundation and the process of crowdsourcing and funding transformative ideas in public libraries.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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In a 2018 *New York Times* op-ed, Eric Klinenberg, author of *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* wrote, “If we have any chance of rebuilding a better society, social infrastructure like the library is precisely what we need” (Klinenberg 2018b). Throughout the editorial, Klinenberg highlights public libraries’ democratic principles of openness and inclusiveness, as well as its continued role in exemplifying a shared-resource system where individuals take responsibility in caring for publicly owned items. These values manifest in the populations that public libraries serve, cutting across socio-economic, racial, and generational divides. What is hinted at in the op-ed, and further explicated in Klinenberg’s book, is that public libraries provide a compelling blueprint of how we can reengage with our community and civic life.

Much like public libraries, crowdsourcing has been touted as a potential model for public engagement in an increasingly networked information society. Though you probably think of Zack Danger Brown’s “I’m making potato salad” project on Kickstarter when you hear the term (a project that ultimately raised \$55,492 from 6,911 backers), crowdsourcing has spread well beyond the, ahem...creative arts (Brown 2014). Civic crowdsourcing platforms such as Neighbor.ly and Ioby were created to allow local governments and civic organizations to fund projects that mattered to their respective communities. These platforms often give a voice to members of the community who feel disenfranchised by the political process that decides where parks are constructed or bus stops are placed. However, it’s important to note that that these civic-focused platforms, by their very nature, tend to be

populated by digitally-literate, well-resourced individuals with the economic means to engage in community-based philanthropy (Davies 2015).

However, the demographics of online civic-crowdsourcing projects weren't necessarily always skewed by the digital divide. In 1989, the City of Santa Monica, California created the first online civic-network for use by the public, the Public Electronic Network (PEN). Though mainly a clearinghouse of public notices and hearings, the discussion board became an active forum for public engagement. More importantly, in his study of the first online networks operated by a city government, Joseph Schmitz, emeritus professor of communication at Western Illinois University, noted that approximately 25 percent of PEN users came from computers in public libraries, which enabled "the voices of the otherwise disenfranchised – including the homeless – to be heard by the community" (Schmitz et al. 1995). PEN was an early example of building a digital platform to generate ideas through an open, diverse, and inclusive network of exchange. Tucked inside the history of PEN is an inextricable relationship between crowdsourcing, community-engagement, and libraries. This collaborative union forms the core of the Awesome Libraries Chapter of the Awesome Foundation.

The story of Awesome Libraries itself is embedded inside the history of *Library Pipeline*, a grassroots, library-centered initiative designed to create better educated communities with stronger social ties. Founded in 2015 by a group of librarians from the public, academic, and private sector, *Library Pipeline* was an idea incubator for librarians founded on a vision of openness, inclusivity, and creative risk-taking (Finnell and Konkiel 2017). Crowdsourced individuals came together and formed working groups dedicated to improving access to library and information science publications, developing nonprofit organizations and grants, and creating diverse and equitable professional development opportunities. The idea for a crowdsourced micro-funding platform focused specifically on libraries grew out of the innovation working group.

For clarification, it's important to make a distinction between crowdfunding and crowdsourcing. Whereas crowdfunding is traditionally a process by which an organization or individual seeks financial support to bring a product or initiative to market, crowdsourcing harnesses the creativity and energy of an online community and uses a managed process to create new ideas or initiatives (Brabham and Radin 2015a). Our working group shared a belief that strong libraries create better educated citizens and communities with stronger social ties. We wanted to create a platform that would allow individuals with those shared beliefs to come together and support projects that embodied the principles of diversity, inclusivity, creativity, and risk-taking. Moreover, we were intentional in choosing a mechanism that would allow us the opportunity to amplify participatory culture while also ensuring that both trustees and grantees reflected the diversity of the library community. We intentionally chose the Awesome Foundation for this reason.

The Awesome Foundation is an international network of autonomous chapters of philanthropists that provide \$1,000 grants for projects to “people devoted to forwarding the interest of awesomeness in the universe.” Each fully autonomous chapter supports projects through monthly micro-grants, funded and chosen by the chapter’s trustees. The Awesome Libraries Chapter was developed under this model and launched in January 2017 (“The Innovation in Libraries Awesome Foundation Chapter” 2017). The initial cohort of trustees who funded and selected grants were carefully recruited by members of *Library Pipeline* from around the world, and across the spectrum of librarianship, with an aim to create trustees that would support innovation in all its diversity. To prevent financial constraints creating a barrier to participation, recruited trustees were given the option of directly funding their participation or requesting financial sponsorship for their monthly contribution. Many anonymous librarians generously donated funds during the first year. Each year our trustees are carefully selected by the Chapter’s founders, maintaining a commitment to diversity, inclusivity, and geographic and institutional distribution.

Daren C. Brabham, assistant professor of public relations and new media at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communications, astutely notes in his 2015 book, *Crowdsourcing in the Public Sector*: “It is important to emphasize that crowdsourcing is a process rather than a tool” (Brabham and Radin 2015b). Deliberate, democratic discourse is often the most challenging and easily overlooked step in community development. Though Awesome Foundation provides a ready-built infrastructure, each chapter owns the process by which they fund a project. Because our Chapter is global, voting takes place through a combination online voting and videoconferencing. Balancing schedules across a global time zone can be challenging, and choosing just one project out of 100 to fund can be an arduous and difficult decision. However, what has emerged from this bottom-up process is an unspoken, collective agreement to fund projects with a focus on social justice.

Since January 2017, the Awesome Libraries Chapter has funded over a dozen projects, from around the globe, primarily focused on building community through reading projects, diversifying book collections, and increasing access to libraries. In April 2017, our Chapter funded Jasmine Passa’s project to expand the refugee and migrant library holdings in Belgrade, Serbia to include literature in Farsi, Pashto and Arabic. The project’s aim was to positively influence thousands of people enduring the treacherous journey from conflict stricken and opportunity deprived regions (The Awesome Foundation: Serbia: Refugee and Migrant Library 2017). In March 2018, the Chapter funded Shanel Adam’s proposal for *Progressionista*, a non-profit organization that introduces girls, ages 8–12, from underserved neighborhoods in Detroit to leisure reading through monthly book club meetings featuring women professionals. The speakers, or progressionistas, engage participants by sharing intimate stories about their careers and relating it to the group’s current book (The Awesome Foundation: Progressionista 2018). The

Traveling Bookmobile at the University of Houston-Victoria won the September 2018 Awesome Libraries grant. This project, developed by professors Amy Barnhill and Janelle Bouknight, delivers books to children in suburbs of Katy, Texas who lack transportation to the public library or who do not have books in their home (The Awesome Foundation : UHV Traveling Bookmobile 2018).

Each of these projects represents a specific, community-based project that would normally fall outside the scope of a grant-funding agency. Often, simple ideas are the best ideas. However, in much the same way that PEN opened up a space for those who felt they couldn't penetrate the complex bureaucracy of Santa Monica's city government, our collective hope is that Awesome Libraries provides a space for truly impactful ideas at the intersection of libraries and civic-engagement to emerge. Speaking of the public library as a symbol, Eric Klinenberg writes,

“The library really is a palace. It bestows nobility on people who otherwise couldn't afford a shred of it. People need to have nobility and dignity in their lives. And you know, they need other people to recognize it in them too” (Klinenberg 2018a).

In the smallest way possible, the collective intention of the Awesome Libraries Chapter is to recognize the transformative power of libraries, librarians, and the communities that they impact.

Notes on contributor

Joshua Finnell is an Associate Professor and Head of Research & Instruction in the University Libraries at Colgate University. In 2017, he co-founded the Awesome Libraries chapter in collaboration with Bonnie Tijerina and Robin Champieux. His work has appeared in *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *New Library World*, and *International Information & Library Review*. He currently serves on the advisory board of *Library Pipeline*.

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