

Giving What You Don't Have

Cornelia Sollfrank in conversation

Marcell Mars
Public Library

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[00:13]

Public Library is the concept, the idea, to encourage people to become a librarian, where a librarian is a person which can allow access to books – and also which has a catalogue or index, so that it's searchable. [00:32] And the person, the human being, can communicate, can talk with others who are interested in that catalogue of books. [00:43] And then when you have a librarian, and you have a lot of librarians, you have a Public Library, because we have access to books, we have a catalogue, and we have a librarian. That's the basic set up. [00:55] And in order to really work, in practice, we need to introduce a set of tools which are easy to use, like Calibre, for example, for book management. [01:07] And then also some part of that set up should be also developed because at the moment, because of the configuration of the routers, IP addresses and other things, it's not that easy to share your local library which you have on your laptop with the world. [01:30] So we also provide... When I say 'we,' it's a small team, at the moment, of developers who try to address that problem.

[01:38] We don't need to reinvent the public library. It's invented, and it should be just maintained. [01:47] The old-school public libraries – they are in decline because of many reasons. And when it comes to the digital networks, the digital books, it's almost like the worst position. [01:59] For example, public libraries in the US, they are not allowed to buy digital books, for example from Penguin. So even when they want to buy, it's not that they are getting them, it's that they can't buy the books. [02:16] By the current legal regulation, it's considered as illegal – a million of books, or even more, are unavailable, and I think that these books should be really available. [02:29] And it doesn't really matter how it got on Internet – did it come from a graphic designer who is preparing that for print, or if it was uploaded somewhere from the author of the book (that is also very common, especially in humanities), or if it was digitised anywhere. [02:50] So these are the books which we have, and we can't be blinded, they are here. The practice at the moment is almost like trying to find a prostitute or something, so when you want to get a book online you need to get onto the websites with advertisements for casinos, for porn and things like that. [03:14] I don't think that the library should be like that.

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Book Management

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What we are trying to provide is just suggesting what kind of book management software they can use, and also what kind of new software tools they can install in order to easily get the messy directory into the directory of metadata which Calibre can recognise – and then you can just use Calibre. The next step is if you can share your local library with the world. [03:52] You need something like a management software where it's easy to see who are the authors, what the titles, publishers and all of the metadata – and it's accessible from the outside.

[4:08]
Calibre

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Calibre is a book management software. It's developed by Kovid Goyal, a software developer. [04:22] It's a free software, open source, and it started like many other free software projects. It started as a small tool to solve very particular small problems. [04:31] But then, because it was useful, it got more and more users, and then Kovid started to develop it more into a proper, big book management software. At the moment it has more than 10 million registered users who are running that.

[04:52] It does so many things for book management. It's really 'the' software tool... If you have an e-reader, for example, it recognises your e-reader, it registers it inside of Calibre and then you can easily just transfer the books. [05:08] Also for years there was a big problem of file formats. So for example, Amazon, in order to keep their monopoly in that area, they wouldn't support EPUB or PDF. And then if you got your book somewhere – if you bought it or just downloaded from the Internet, you wouldn't be able to read it on your reader. [05:31] Then Calibre was just developing the converter tools. And it was all in one package, so that Calibre just became the tool for book management.

[05:43] It has a web server as a part of it. So in a local area network – if you just start that web server and you are running a local area network, it can have a read-only searchable access to your local library, to your books, and it can search by any of these metadata.

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Tools Around Calibre

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I developed a software which I call Let's Share Books, which is super small compared to Calibre. It just allows you, with one click, to get your library shared on the Internet.

[06:24] So that means that you get a public URL, which says something like www.some-number.dot.memoryoftheworld.dot.net, and that is the temporary public URL. You can send it to anyone in the world. [06:37] And while you are running your local web server and share books, it would just serve these books to the Internet. [06:45] I also set up a web chat – kind of a room where people can talk to each other, chat to each other.

[06:54] So it's just, trying to develop tools around Calibre, which is mostly for one person, for one librarian – to try to make some kind of ecosystem for a lot of librarians where they can meet with their readers or among themselves, and talk about the books which they love to read and share.

[07:23] It's mostly like a social networking around the books, where we use the idea and tradition of the public library. [07:37] In order to get there I needed to set up a server which only does routing. So with my software I don't know which books are transferred, anything. It's just like a router. [07:56] You can do that also if you have control of your router, or what we usually call modem, so the device which you use to get to the Internet. But that is quite hard to hack, just hackers know how to do that. [08:13] So I just made a server on the Internet which you can use with one click, and it just routes the traffic between you, if you're a librarian, and your users, readers. So that's that easy.

[08:33]
Librarians

[08:38] It's super easy to become a librarian, and that is what we should celebrate. It's not that the only librarians which we have were the librarians who were the only ones wanting to become a librarian. [08:54] So lots of people want to be a librarian, and lots of people are librarians whenever they have a chance. [09:00] So you would probably recommend me some books which you like. I'll recommend you some books which I like. So I think we should celebrate that now it's super easy that anyone can be a librarian. [09:11] And of course, we will still need professional librarians in order to push forward the whole field. But that goes, again, in collaboration with software engineers, information architects, whatever... [09:26] It's so easy to have that, and the benefits of that are so great, that there is no reason why not to do that, I would say.

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Functioning

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If you want to share your collection then you need to install at the moment Calibre, and Let's Share Books software, which I wrote. But also you can – for example, there is a Calibre plugin for Aaaaarg, so if you use Calibre... from Calibre you can search Aaaaarg, you can download books from Aaaaarg, you can also change the metadata and upload the metadata up to Aaaaarg.

[10:13]
Repositories

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At the moment the biggest repository for the books, in order to download and make your catalogue, is Library Genesis. It's around 900,000 books. It's libgen.info, libgen.org. And it's a great project. [10:33] It's done by some Russian hackers, who also allow anyone to download all of that. It's 9 Terabytes of books, quite some chunk of hard disks which you need for that. [10:47] And you can also download PHP, the back end of the website and the MySQL database (a thumb of the MySQL database), so you can run your own Library Genesis. That's one of the ways how you can do that. [11:00] You can also go and join Aaaaarg.org, where it is also not just about downloading books and uploading books, it's also about communication and interpretation of making, different issues and catalogues. [11:14] It's a community of book lovers who like to share knowledge, and who add quite a lot of value around the books by doing that. [11:26] And then there is... you can use Calibre and Let's Share Books. It's just one of these complimentary tools. So it's not really that Calibre and Let's Share Books is the only way how you can today share books.

[11:45]
Goal

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What we do also has a non-hidden agenda for fighting for the public library. I would say that most of the people we know, even the authors, they all participate in the huge, Giving What You Don't Have. Cornelia Sollfrank in Conversation. Kenneth Goldsmith.
[<http://artwarez.org/projects/GWYDH/>]

massive Public Library – which we don't call Public Library, but usually just trying to hide that we are using that because we are afraid of the restrictive regime. [12:20] So I don't see a reason why we should shut down such a great idea and great implementation – a great resource which we have all around the world. [12:30] So it's just an attempt to map all of these projects and to try to improve them. Because, in order to get it into the right shape, we need to improve the metadata. [12:47] Open Library, a project which started also with Aaron Swartz, has 20 millions items, and we use it. There is a basedata.org which connects the hash files, the MD5 hashes, with the Open Library ID. And we try to contribute to Open Library as much as possible. [13:10] So with very few people, around 5 people, we can improve it so much that it will be for a billion of users a great Public Library, and at the same time we can have millions of librarians, which we never had before. So that's the idea.

[13:35] The goal is just to keep the Public Library. If we didn't screw up the whole situation with the Public Library, probably we'd just try to add a little bit of new software, and new ways that we can read the books. [13:53] But at the moment [it's] super important actually to keep this infrastructure running, because this super important infrastructure for the access to knowledge is now under huge threat.

[14:09]
Copyright

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I just think that it's completely inappropriate – that copyright law is completely inappropriate for the Public Library. I don't know about other cases, but in terms of Public Library it's absolutely inappropriate. [14:29] We should find the new ways of how to reward the ones who are adding value to sharing knowledge. First authors, then anyone who is involved in public libraries, like librarians, software engineers – so everyone who is involved in that ecosystem should be rewarded, because it's a great thing, it's a benefit for the society. [15:03] If this kind of things happens, so if the law which regulates this blocks and doesn't let that field blossom, it's something wrong with that law. [15:16] It's getting worse and worse, so I don't know for how long we should wait, because while we're waiting it's getting worse.

[15:24] I don't care. And I think that I can say that because I'm an artist. Because all of these laws are made saying that they are representing art, they are representing the interest of artists. I'm an artist. They don't really represent my interests. [15:46] I think that it should be taken over by the artists. And if there are some artists who disagree – great, let's have a discussion.

[15:58]
Civil Disobedience

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In the possibilities of civil disobedience – which are done also by institutions, not just by individuals – and I think that in such clear cases like the Public Library it's easy. [15:17] So I think that what I did in this particular case is nothing really super smart – it's just reducing this huge issue to something which is comprehensible, which is understandable for most of the people. [16:31] There is no one really who doesn't understand what public library is. And if you say to anyone in the world, saying, like hey, no more public libraries, hey, no books anymore, no books for the poor people. We are just giving up on Giving What You Don't Have. Cornelia Sollfrank in Conversation. Kenneth Goldsmith.
[<http://artwarez.org/projects/GWYDH/>]

something which we almost consensually accepted through the whole world. [16:55] And I think that in such clear cases, I'm really interested [in] what institutions could do, like Transmediale. I'm now in [Akademie] Schloss Solitude, I also proposed to make a server with a Public Library. If you invest enough it's a million of books, it's a great library.

[17:16] And of course they are scared. And I think that the system will never really move if people are not brave.

[17:26] I'm not really trying to encourage people to do something where no one could really understand, you know, and you need expertise or whatever. [17:37] In my opinion this is the big case. And if Transmediale or any other art institution is playing with that, and showing that – let's see how far away we can support this kind of things. [17:56] The other issue which I am really interested in is what is the infrastructure, who is running the infrastructures, and what kind of infrastructures are happen in between these supposedly avant-garde institutions, or something. [08:12] So I'm really interested in raising these issues.

[18:17]
Art Project

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Public Library is also an art project where... I would say that just in the same way that corporations, by their legal status, can really kind of mess around with different... they can't be that much accountable and responsible – I think that this is the counterpart. [18:44] So civil disobedience can use art just the same way that corporations can use their legal status.

[18:51] When I was invited as a curator and artist to curate the HAIP Festival in Ljubljana, I was already quite into the topic of sharing access to knowledge. And then I came up with this idea and everybody liked it and everybody was enthusiastic. It's one of these ideas where you can see that it's great, there is no one really who would oppose to that. [19:28] At the same time there was an exhibition, Dear Art, curated by WHW, quite established curators. And then it immediately became an art piece for that exhibition. Then I was invited here to Transmediale, and have a couple of other invitations. [19:45] I think that it also shows that art institutions are accepting that, they play with that idea. And I think that this kind of projects – by having that acceptance it becomes the issue, it becomes the problem of the whole arts establishment. [20:10] So I think that if I do this in this way, and if there is a curator who invites this kind of projects – so who invites Public Library into their exhibition – it's also showing their kind of readiness to fight for that issue. [20:27] And if there are a number of art festivals, a number of art exhibitions, who are supporting this kind of, lets say, civil disobedience, that also shows something. [20:38] And I think that that kind of context should be pushed into the confrontation, so it's not anymore just playing "oh, is it ok, it is not? We should deal with all the complexity..." [20:57] There is no real complexity here. That complexity is somewhere else, and in some other step we should take care of that. But this is an art piece, it's a well established art piece.

[21:11] If you make a Public Library, I'm fine, I'm sacrificing for taking the responsibility. But you shouldn't melt down that art piece, I think. [21:26] And I feel super stupid that such a simple concept should be, in 2013, articulated to whom? In many ways it's like playing dummy, I play dummy. It's like, why should I? [21:50] When we started to play in Ljubljana like software developers we came up with so many great ideas of how to use those resources. So it was immediately... just after couple of hours we had tools – visualisations of that, a reader of Wikipedia which can embed any page which is

referred, as a reference, a quote. [22:17] It was immediately obvious for anyone there and for anyone from the outside what a huge resource is having a Public Library like that – and what's the huge harm that we don't have it. [22:32] But still we need to play dummy, I need to play the artist's role, you know.