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# Conceptual modelling of the public sphere in public libraries

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Conceptual  
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the public  
sphere

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to construct a conceptual model of the public sphere in public libraries. Various international authors over the past 20 years have associated the public sphere with public libraries, but these associations have yet to be clarified and synthesized in a comprehensive way.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study used qualitative content analysis to identify the dimensions of the public sphere in public libraries. The study's scope included annual reports from an urban US public library system from 1900 to 2010.

**Findings** – Six dimensions of the public sphere in public libraries are described with examples. The dimensions are: core criteria; internal public sphere; external public sphere; collect and organize discourse; perform legitimation processes; and facilitate discourse. Three of these dimensions are newly identified. The six total dimensions are synthesized into a comprehensive conceptual model with three discourse arenas: governance and management; legitimation; and commons.

**Originality/value** – This study is distinctive because it used a data-based, empirical approach to public libraries to an abstract sociological concept. Three dimensions of the model are new to library studies literature and therefore represent new potential areas of inquiry. The resulting conceptual model is useful for both practitioners and researchers in the public library sector. Further, the model contributes to existing social and political theory.

**Keywords** Public libraries, Politics, Public sphere, Library systems, Communication, Modelling

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Librarians and library researchers have associated public libraries with a Habermasian public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*). Recently, it has even been suggested that a transnational public sphere is emerging, one sustained by libraries (Morrison, 2010). To substantiate these claims, it is important that library researchers clearly explain what they mean by a public sphere and how public libraries relate to it. The public sphere has been mentioned in library literature for over two decades, suggesting that the concept has a latent importance to the field of library studies. As of yet, however, connections between public sphere theory and public libraries remain vague. Braman (2009), for example, points out that more work is needed to theorize library-state relations, and Webster (1995, 2014) and Buschman (2003) express ambivalence about the vitality of public sphere institutions in the face of state-sponsored marketization. Given the recent closings of public libraries in several nations (Evjen, 2015), the value of public library services is a live issue that could be better explicated by way of a public sphere framework.

This study is an attempt to clarify how public libraries relate to the public sphere. To do this, we first identify the dimensions of the public sphere in public libraries.



This is accomplished through an analysis of public sphere theory, a review of previous library literature, and qualitative content analysis of annual reports from an urban US public library system. We then use the dimensions we find to construct a model of the public sphere in public libraries. Our model has three arenas of public sphere discourse: governance and management; legitimation; and commons.

This study of the public sphere is significant for several reasons. First, it clarifies an undertheorized area that is of central importance to the library studies field. Examination of the public sphere as it relates to libraries uncovers the ideals that are fundamental for understanding the purpose and value of public libraries in society. This study thus touches on empirical as well as normative aspects of public libraries. Second, this study is distinctive because it introduces a data-based, empirical research methodology into this area of inquiry. Previous references to the public sphere and public libraries have been speculative and conjectural in nature, but our study explains an abstract sociological concept accurately and in depth and connects it to libraries using real-world examples. The model we present is valuable to both library practitioners and library researchers. Practitioners can use our model to orient library services and strategic planning, while library researchers can use the model to identify areas of inquiry. A public sphere perspective of public libraries is attractive because it focusses on how public libraries can be governed and legitimated in socially just ways. A public sphere framework may present an effective way to articulate the social and political value of public libraries.

## 2. Habermas and the public sphere

The public sphere concept is most commonly associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas (1989a) tracked the development and eventual collapse of critical public debate in France, Germany, and England from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. In its heyday, the public sphere was a form of sociality characterized by open, intellectual discourse by private actors. In addition to raising topics related to art and culture, the debate and deliberation that formed the public sphere served as a counterdiscourse to absolutist governmental power. These discourse contexts developed in tandem with the emergence of capitalist markets and nation-states in early modern Europe.

The public sphere was first presented by Habermas as a historical social category, one situated in a particular moment in time and place. Since then, however, the concept has been used beyond early modern and European contexts to understand discourse and politics on national and international scales. To what degree and in what forms the public sphere exists in modern societies, if ever it did, are central questions surrounding the public sphere concept, and they have prompted unyielding debates in fields such as history, communication, and political theory. The traditional narrative of the liberal public sphere has been criticized as simplistic and idealistic (Webster, 2014). Library and information studies literature has also focussed on these questions, and any model of the public sphere in public libraries must be careful not to succumb to similar criticisms of idealization.

What is the public sphere? Communicative interactions that count as public sphere discourse must meet three necessary and sufficient conditions related to publicness: openness; debate; and common concern (Habermas, 1989a, pp. 36-37). The condition of openness means that anyone in principle can engage in communication regardless of who they are, what they own, or what they believe. The condition of debate means that discussion is based on reason and justification – that the force of the better argument

prevails, not a member's relative social capital. One principle of debate is that any topic is thematizable. Finally, the condition of common concern means that private citizens raise issues of mutual interest that transcend their own particular positions. Moreover, they come to interpret for themselves what is in the common interest rather than allow these interests to be dictated to them by ecclesiastical or state authorities. The degree of publicness or *Öffentlichkeit* – to what extent public sphere discourse obtains or not – can be evaluated with respect to these three necessary and sufficient discourse criteria. Habermas (1984, 1989b) argues that even if these criteria do not obtain perfectly, they are guiding ideals that underlie everyday communication. In many communicative contexts, therefore, interlocutors cannot help but assume that the situation approximates the conditions of openness, debate, and common concern.

The public sphere in the abstract – both in early modern Europe and in modern forms today – is grounded in physical and material media. Early public sphere infrastructure included face-to-face meeting places such as coffee shops, salons, and book clubs, as well as world-of-letters forums such as the free press, art journals, and magazines. Today, public sphere discourse also occurs using electronic and digital platforms (Papacharissi, 2002). The public sphere is not necessarily tied to any single media infrastructure or institution, but organizations, technologies, and culture all affect the nature of public sphere discourse (Boeder, 2005). Each institution and media form contains its own affordances as well as its own potential distortions that affect public sphere quality.

The public sphere is a concept often used to describe communication across on a macro-level scale. Habermas (1996) uses the term to describe broad flows and circulation of power from societal peripheries to decision-making cores. In fact, the public sphere is not a monolithic whole, and any global public sphere is composed of collections of local conversations regarding social, cultural, and political topics (Habermas, 1987, pp. 359-360). Organizations and groups have intra-organizational public spheres “constituted by the public of the organization's members,” as well as “external,” inter-organizational public spheres located between “societal organizations and state institutions” (Habermas, 1989a, p. 248). Central to the public sphere concept is its bundled and rough-cut nature: it is composed of various layers, enclaves, and networks of communication that circulate in and between groups. The boundaries of smaller public spheres are porous, and “each public sphere is open to other public spheres” (Habermas, 1987, p. 360). The public spheres that comprise a whole are “articulated around specific themes and ordered contributions” (Habermas, 1987, p. 359).

Habermas affords an essential role to the public sphere in his theories of society and politics. Central to these theories is his distinction between system and lifeworld. The lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt*, forms the background cultural, social, and personality structures that support communication (Habermas, 1984, 1989b). Public sphere communication also replenishes the lifeworld through cultural reproduction, socialization, and social integration. In contrast to lifeworld communication, system communication relies on the non-linguistic media of power and money to reproduce society materially. The two primary sub-systems are the bureaucratic state and the market economy. The public sphere acts as an intermediary space that operates on the boundaries of the lifeworld and system in order to ensure that specialized, differentiated system processes reflect the values and interests of the lifeworld. The public sphere therefore serves as an interchange arena where private actors raise issues of public concern so that the values may be translated into and institutionalized within the system. Public sphere arenas must be perennially created and refurbished to

ensure that the lifeworld is not colonized or overrun by system imperatives (Habermas, 1989b, p. 355). The challenge for social actors is that a public sphere “has to be “made,” it is not “there” anymore” (Habermas, 1989a, p. 201).

### 3. The public sphere in library literature

It remains an open question how public libraries fit into public sphere theory. Habermas (1989a, p. 51) himself mentioned that public and subscription libraries supported literary and world-of-letters public spheres in eighteenth century Europe; however, he did not explain these roles in detail. Several authors in recent library literature have re-established connections between the public sphere and public libraries, both with respect to the services public libraries offer and the norms they reproduce (see Table I). We discuss these articles in this review section to understand the associations between public libraries and the public sphere that have already been made.

The works in our review were retrieved through a systematic search of library databases and by following the indexes and references of books about public libraries. The library-related databases we searched included Library Literature and Information Science, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, and Library and Information Science Abstracts. We also performed library and web searches to identify monographs, conference proceedings, and other gray literature of relevance. Search terms we used included “public sphere” and “Habermas.” We searched for works that referenced and discussed the public sphere explicitly. We realized that the works and thought of Habermas are widely discussed in multiple fields, and that Habermas’s works touch on much more than just the public sphere. For our review, however, we focussed on works that describe in a substantive way the connection between the public sphere and public libraries. The following works were excluded from our study: those that simply associate the public sphere with public libraries without explaining why, and those that discuss closely related concepts such as transparency, democracy, or politics without mentioning the public sphere. The works cited in this review are limited to English-language literature.

| Sl no. | Author                      | Year  | Work                 | Country      | Method     |
|--------|-----------------------------|-------|----------------------|--------------|------------|
| 1.     | Webster                     | 1995  | Book                 | UK           | Criticism  |
| 2.     | Williamson                  | 2000  | Article              | UK           | Criticism  |
| 3.     | Buschman                    | 2003  | Book                 | USA          | Criticism  |
| 4.     | McCook                      | 2003  | Article              | USA          | Criticism  |
| 5.     | McCook                      | 2004  | Chapter              | USA          | Conceptual |
| 6.     | Buschman                    | 2004  | Article              | USA          | Criticism  |
| 7.     | Kranich                     | 2004  | Chapter              | USA          | Conceptual |
| 8.     | Buschman                    | 2005a | Article <sup>a</sup> | USA          | Criticism  |
| 9.     | Buschman                    | 2005b | Article              | USA          | Criticism  |
| 10.    | Andersen and Skouvig        | 2006  | Article <sup>a</sup> | Non-specific | Criticism  |
| 11.    | Newman                      | 2007  | Article <sup>a</sup> | UK           | Interviews |
| 12.    | Rothsman and Leckie         | 2007  | Chapter              | USA/Canada   | Conceptual |
| 13.    | Rothbauer                   | 2007  | Chapter              | Canada       | Interviews |
| 14.    | Aabø, Audunson, and Vårheim | 2010  | Article <sup>a</sup> | Norway       | Survey     |
| 15.    | Buschman                    | 2013  | Article              | USA          | Criticism  |

**Table I.**  
The public sphere in library literature

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>Articles appeared in peer-reviewed journals

Webster (1995, pp. 111-112) recognized that public libraries function as instruments of the public sphere in the UK insofar as they provide resources and materials that inform public discussion. Public libraries, Webster (1995) stated, fulfill Habermas's conditions for a critical public sphere because the inclusion of multiple viewpoints in library collections fosters critical debate rather than manipulation; the viewpoints of the authors of the materials in the collection are not necessarily those of state authorities; and public library services are open to anyone. Webster (1995) therefore found that public libraries meet the public sphere conditions of debate and openness. According to Webster (1995), public libraries support the public sphere through citizens' interactions with staff and collections. Williamson (2000) concurred with Webster (1995).

Buschman (2003) argued that public libraries function as intermediaries that connect private citizens to debate about social and political issues. He maintained that libraries function as "disseminators of rational, reasoned, and organized discourse, as a source of verifying or disputing claims, and as a space for the inclusion of alternative views of society and reality" (Buschman, 2003, pp. 120-121). Buschman (2003, 2005a, b) therefore found that public libraries meet the conditions of openness and debate that are central to the public sphere.

McCook (2003) found that public libraries support the public sphere through their collections and in their role as meeting places. Using the notion of a public sphere "commons," McCook (2004) suggested that public libraries meet the condition of common concern. McCook (2004) furthered maintained that the public libraries support the public sphere through citizen-staff interactions and civic training (pp. 188-193). These observations imply that public libraries serve to sustain and reproduce the lifeworld.

Kranich (2004, 2013) found that public libraries support the public sphere by enabling access to collections and by serving as meeting places. Aabø *et al.* (2010) confirmed that public libraries, in their role as meeting places, support the public sphere and do not just function as third places and social gatherings (Leckie and Hopkins, 2002, p. 327). Aabø *et al.* (2010, p. 26) explicitly concluded that public libraries, as complex meeting places, "appear to be a part of the public sphere in the Habermasian sense."

Andersen and Skouvig (2006, pp. 307, 310) argued that the act of information organization performed by public libraries is an act of disciplining, enclosing, and separating information, ultimately influencing "what can and cannot be communicated" in the public sphere. The authors therefore identify knowledge organization as a public sphere role performed by public libraries. The authors observe that public libraries serve not only passive, but also active roles in affecting the nature of public sphere discourse.

Newman (2007) approaches the relationship of the public sphere and public libraries from a different perspective by asking how notions of publicness are constructed and contested by public authorities involved in public library policy. Using data gathered from interviews with public authorities in the UK, Newman (2007) uses perspectives from public libraries to investigate how the idea of a public has changed over time.

Leckie and Buschman (2007) and Rothbauer (2007), two chapters from an edited collection, discuss how public libraries serve as public spheres in their capacity as spaces and places. Leckie and Buschman (2007), a conceptual article on the relationship of the public sphere and public libraries, reiterates the association between public libraries and the liberal model of the public sphere depicted by Habermas (1989a). Using data drawn from interviews with LGBQ patrons of public libraries, Rothbauer (2007) expresses doubts that public libraries adequately serve LGBQ patrons in an authentic public sphere sense, and they instead act as closeted spaces.

In summary, previous studies found that public libraries support the public sphere in several ways: by enabling citizens to interact with collections and staff; by providing civic training opportunities; by acting as meeting places for citizen discourse; and by selecting, organizing, and promoting discourses. Public libraries, at least in some instances, meet all three conditions of the public sphere: common concern, debate, and openness. Aabø *et al.* (2010) and Newman (2007) base their analyses on empirical data, and four articles out of nine are peer-reviewed. As a result of this review, we concluded that there is not yet a clear and comprehensive model of the public sphere in public libraries that speaks to all of its dimensions and explains how they interrelate.

#### 4. Synthesis of public sphere theory and library literature

Drawing from public sphere theory and from previous library literature, we were able to identify three dimensions of the public sphere represented in public libraries: core criteria; internal public sphere; and external public sphere. Core criteria refers to the three necessary and sufficient conditions for public sphere communication: openness; debate; and common concern. These norms of publicness distinguish public discourse from other kinds of communication, such as instrumental, means-ends communication, strategic, manipulative communication, unidirectional communication, and private communication. Core criteria is the first dimension of the public sphere in public libraries because the criteria were outlined by Habermas (1989a, pp. 36-37) in his description of the public sphere and because they were identified by authors in library literature as characteristics of public libraries.

Definition of dimension 1 – core criteria:

- core criteria can be used to evaluate the degree of publicness of a discourse; and
- the three criteria are openness, debate, and common concern.

The internal public sphere dimension is the second dimension of the public sphere in public libraries. The notion of an internal public sphere was first put forth by Habermas as a necessary characteristic for ensuring public sphere discourse about organizations in modern society (Habermas, 1987, pp. 359-360, 1989a, p. 248). Similar to the notion of glasnost, the internal public sphere refers to transparency and discussion about what goes on intra-organizationally and inter-organizationally – for example, how money is used and gathered, how organizations pressure or cooperate with one another. We therefore include internal public sphere in our public sphere in public libraries model. To be considered public sphere institutions, public libraries must contain a transparent, internal public sphere dimension.

Definition of dimension 2 – internal public sphere:

- internal public sphere contains discourse about the functioning, maintenance, and operation of the library;
- discourse meets the three core criteria;
- this discourse occurs between the library system and its community environment;
- the internal public sphere has two sub-dimensions, intra-library communication and inter-library communication;
- intra-library communication is discourse about library functioning; and
- inter-library communication is discourse about the relationships the library has with and other organizations, including private sector groups and the state.

The third dimension is the external public sphere. This dimension suggests that the library supports discourse about wider society, not just discourse about its own operations. As a public sphere institution, the library acts as a platform to support discourse about politics, culture, science, health, as well as discourse about other organizations. In a sense, this type of public sphere discourse is internal to the library because it takes place using library infrastructure. At the same time, however, the topics and themes of discourse in this dimension do not concern the library organization itself, which is why we termed this dimension external public sphere. The topics of discourse are directed outward, external to the library. This dimension represents the public sphere role typically associated with public libraries. Habermas (1989b) and all previous library literature we reviewed make this connection between the public sphere and public libraries.

Definition of dimension 3 – external public sphere:

- in the external public sphere, the public library acts as a platform to support discourse about non-library-related topics;
- discourse meets the core criteria;
- the external public sphere supported by a particular library system is part of a broader, society-wide public sphere; and
- discourse in the external public sphere includes a number of topics and themes, including economics, science, art, culture, and literature.

Reflection on the three dimensions above led us to a number of preliminary conclusions. First, the public sphere in public libraries, while existing as a whole, is also composed of three discourse arenas: one in the intra-library public sphere dimension, one in the inter-library public sphere dimension, and one in the external public sphere dimension. Each of the three arenas is distinguished by distinctive topics, distinctive audiences, and by different interactions between the library system and its environment. Moreover, whether or not an instance of communication can be included as an example of any public sphere interaction in the library must be decided according to the three core criteria. There are many kinds of communication that libraries exhibit, but the core criteria can be used to distinguish public sphere from non-public sphere communication.

We identified and defined the three above dimensions from the outset based on existing literature, but we still did not understand the dimensions in detail, and we did not have a clear picture of how they related to public libraries. We also did not know how to relate the public sphere in public libraries back to Habermas's larger social and political theories, including his notions of system, lifeworld, and colonization. This is because there is not yet a comprehensive model of the public sphere in public libraries based on empirical data. We decided that there needs to be a model of the public sphere specific to public libraries that can be used and understood within the public libraries world. We suspected that the public sphere in public libraries is more complex than previously assumed. Moreover, it appeared that the public sphere in public libraries cannot be understood from a single perspective. With these considerations in mind, we established five main objectives for our study:

- (1) more fully understand the core criteria, internal public sphere, and external public sphere by referencing them to discourse in an actual library;
- (2) explore and identify the functions of the library system that are affected by each of the three discourse dimensions mentioned above;



- (3) identify the central theme and audience that characterizes each arena of discourse;
- (4) build a model of the public sphere in public libraries using the emerging concepts we find; and
- (5) explain the model using examples from a public library system.

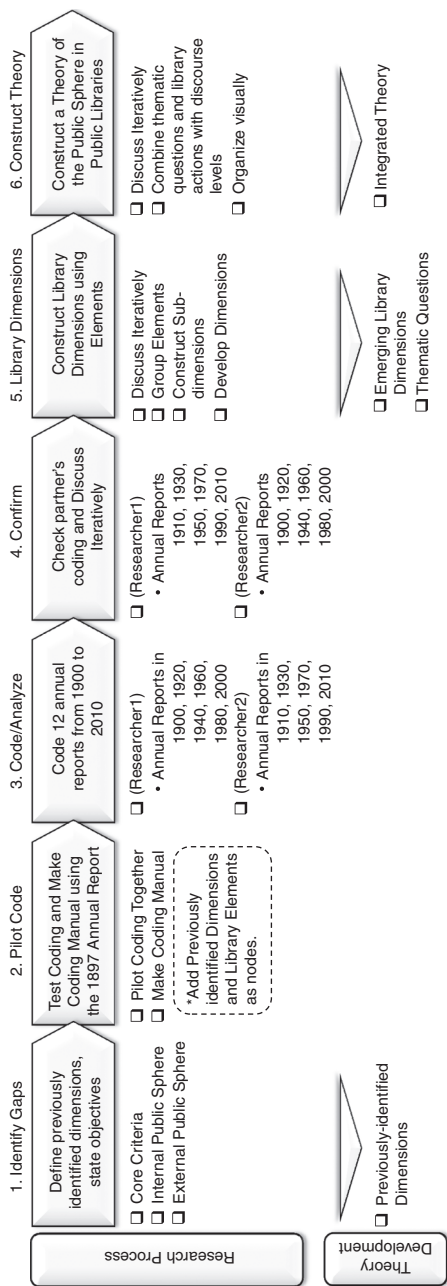
## 5. Methodology

In order to accomplish these objectives, we adopted a case study approach and used qualitative content analysis to investigate the contents of 12 annual reports – 1,173 paragraphs – from the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP), a public library in a mid-sized US city. Our research process appears in Figure 1.

We chose CLP because it is a typical case (Yin, 2014). CLP is one of the oldest public libraries in the USA and its size is neither extremely large nor extremely small. Because CLP is a typical case with characteristics similar to other public libraries, we believed a study of CLP would yield concepts that could apply elsewhere (Yin, 2014). We examined the annual reports in ten-year increments from 1900 to 2010 (see Table II). We chose to analyze annual reports in ten-year increments because we believed this distribution of data about the library produced a representative picture of the library over time. This data collection approach led to data saturation without redundancy. We chose annual reports as data sources because they had been published consistently since the library's inception and they included all reports written by each division and group in the library. We believed that the documents would lead to a full understanding that was representative of a US library over time in the USA. We chose to analyze 12 annual reports over a period of 110 years, rather than the latest reports from the most recent 12 years, because we wanted to construct a model that was historically generalizable, not just applicable to the current moment. The documents were freely available in the library. While it might be said that the annual reports represent limited, library-centric perspectives, no other data sources were as comprehensive or detailed. They were highly valuable information sources to analyze entire functions and elements of public libraries.

We scanned the documents and analyzed them using NVivo research software. NVivo is a data management and analysis software tool. The unit of analysis we used for coding was the paragraph level. We decided that the paragraph was the appropriate level to code in order to adequately capture concepts. Sentence-level is too small because it is redundant, and page-level is too large because pages often cut off in the middle of concepts. We assigned multiple codes to single paragraphs, as seen in Figure 2.

The library's first annual report, 1897, was coded by both researchers as a pilot in order to practice coding and in order to develop a coding manual. This first stage – the pilot coding – therefore followed an iterative process until we felt the coding frame adequately accounted for the data (Schreier, 2013). Due to the large number of paragraphs, and in order to make the coding process efficient, the remaining documents were divided into two sets. One researcher coded the first set individually following the coding manual, the other researcher coded the second set individually following the coding manual, and then the researchers exchanged sets for review. The researchers reviewed each other's coding and, in the spirit of communicative action, resolved discrepancies through extensive discussion. Researchers assigned a total of 5,929 coding references to the 12 annual reports. Our research methodology emphasized theory development and open-ended discussion.



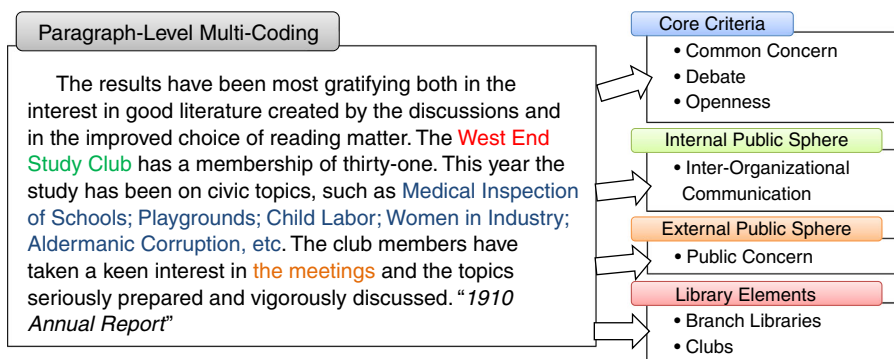
**Figure 1.** Research and theory development process

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**Table II.**  
Scope of the analysis

| Sl. no. | Year | Pages | Paragraph | Pictures | Tables | Charts | Lists |
|---------|------|-------|-----------|----------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1.      | 1900 | 72    | 82        | 1        | 24     | 0      | 19    |
| 2.      | 1910 | 80    | 131       | 5        | 46     | 0      | 15    |
| 3.      | 1920 | 98    | 239       | 4        | 3      | 0      | 13    |
| 4.      | 1930 | 37    | 86        | 5        | 18     | 0      | 4     |
| 5.      | 1940 | 17    | 43        | 2        | 12     | 1      | 0     |
| 6.      | 1950 | 24    | 80        | 0        | 14     | 0      | 2     |
| 7.      | 1960 | 28    | 87        | 0        | 10     | 0      | 2     |
| 8.      | 1970 | 40    | 133       | 0        | 14     | 0      | 4     |
| 9.      | 1980 | 18    | 107       | 18       | 0      | 1      | 5     |
| 10.     | 1990 | 27    | 108       | 25       | 10     | 0      | 3     |
| 11.     | 2000 | 16    | 18        | 4        | 1      | 2      | 2     |
| 12.     | 2010 | 31    | 59        | 31       | 4      | 2      | 13    |
|         |      | 488   | 1,173     | 95       | 156    | 6      | 82    |

**Figure 2.**  
Example of  
assigning multiple  
codes to a single  
paragraph

The development of the coding frame during the pilot coding used both concept-driven and data-driven techniques (Schreier, 2013). Three dimensions were established from the beginning based on the previous work we outlined in the preceding section. These dimensions were therefore concept-driven. References from the text were coded to these nodes when appropriate. We constructed the remaining three dimensions using a bottom-up, data-driven process by grouping individual nodes into elements, elements into sub-dimensions, and sub-dimensions into dimensions.

## 6. Results

We found three new library dimensions in addition to the three previously identified dimensions. The six total dimensions and their sub-dimensions appear in Table III.

### 6.1 Dimension 1: core criteria

The core criteria dimension contains three sub-dimensions: openness; debate; and common concern. As noted earlier, core criteria refers to the norms that ensure public discourse. These criteria can be used to evaluate the degree of publicness of public sphere discourse in the library.

Openness refers to instances of ongoing effort of CLP to widen the scope of participants in discussions. Openness was expressed in many ways by CLP throughout

**Table III.**  
Dimensions and  
sub-dimensions of  
the public sphere in  
public libraries

| Dimensions                              | Sub-dimensions  | Examples of elements   |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Previously identified dimensions</i> |   |  |
| Core criteria                           | Common concern<br>Debate<br>Openness  | Literacy programs, concerts<br>New collections, programming<br>Expansion, materials in different languages   |
| Internal public sphere                  | Intra-library<br>communication<br>Inter-library<br>communication                            | Problems inside the library, distribution of<br>funds<br>Advisory board, district library  |
| External public sphere                  | Support<br>People and groups<br>Public concerns   | Donations, investments, taxes<br>City council, schools<br>Population, business and industry  |
| <i>Newly emerged dimensions</i>         |   |  |
| Collect and organize<br>discourse       | Collection development<br>Facilities<br>Knowledge organization<br>Human resources           | Collection categories, collection size<br>Continuity, virtual expansion<br>Cataloging and classification<br>Library management and governance, staff |
| Perform legitimation<br>processes       | Evaluation<br>Promotion<br>Outreach   | Surveys, community meetings, focus groups<br>Friends of the library, interactive workshops<br>Bookmobiles, home libraries                            |
| Facilitate discourse                    | Citizen discourse<br>Integrate citizens<br>Interact with collections<br>Interact with staff | Reading clubs, meeting room<br>Programs, lectures and classes<br>Circulation increase, books for the blind<br>Reader's advisory, virtual reference   |

its history, including its ongoing expansion of branch libraries, the development of materials for blind and handicapped patrons, and mobile services such as the bookmobile and home visits.

Debate means the exchange of reasons for and against validity claims. We coded for debate anytime an understanding of a topic obtained through exchanging reasons. Examples of debate at CLP that were raised in 1990, for instance, were what services to provide and for whom, and which aspects of services and collections would be better supported through private rather than public funding.

Common concern pertains to any kind of discourse about cultural, social, economic, or political issues that are thematized by citizens, either about the public library itself or about aspects of society external to it. Common concerns raised in the annual reports that were directly related to the library were, for example, in 1900, how to meet the technical and scientific interests of the growing industrial economy, or how to develop services in response to children who no longer labored in Pittsburgh's factories. In our study, common concerns were raised by citizens and incorporated into the annual reports and the internal discussion in the library. A common concern raised in 1970 that was indirectly related to library service was drugs in the community. As a result of citizens raising this concern, two branch library locations held town meetings to discuss the issue.

When coding for the core criteria, we focussed on processes of communication rather than results or outcomes. From the annual reports, there was no way for us to determine whether certain outcomes did, in fact, meet the common concerns of all participants, or whether all participants did, in fact, have their say. We could, however, identify processes and procedures in library discourses that promoted the public

sphere conditions of openness, debate, and common concern. General meetings, solicitation of community feedback, and an orientation toward community interests are examples of core criteria characteristics.

### *6.2 Dimension 2: internal public sphere*

The second dimension, internal public sphere, contains two sub-dimensions: intra-library communication and inter-library communication. Intra-library communication is discourse about library functioning. We coded for intra-library communication in any instance where library departments, staff, or management communicated with community groups regarding library services or problems. Inter-library communication, by contrast, is discourse about the relationships the library system has with other organizations in its community environment. We coded for inter-library communication anytime there was discussion about the library not related to inner management and that was directed to non-library organizations.

### *6.3 Dimension 3: external public sphere*

The third dimension, external public sphere, includes three sub-dimensions: support; people and groups; and public concerns. The external public sphere implies that the public library resides in a network with a number of private citizens, organizations, and state agencies. The external public sphere includes discourse about non-library issues. These issues are diverse and range from commercial and industrial topics to war, women's suffrage, and child labor.

### *6.4 Dimension 4: collect and organize discourse*

The fourth dimension of the public sphere in public libraries is collect and organize discourse. This is a newly identified dimension and it contains four sub-dimensions. The topic or theme of discussion within the collect and organize discourse dimension includes library functions such as storage, access, preservation, and materials acquisitions. Within this public sphere dimension, library functions are affected by the input from outside people and organizations. Collection development includes basic library duties related to acquisition. A perennial issue in CLP was whether the collection categories satisfied the diverse community demands. Facilities relates to the storage and maintenance of the collection as well as the physical access to it. Knowledge organization includes intellectual access to materials. Human resources refers to the staff, volunteers, staff training, and management within the library.

### *6.5 Dimension 5: perform legitimation processes*

The fifth dimension, perform legitimation processes, is a newly identified dimension that contains three sub-dimensions: evaluation; promotion; and outreach. Discourse within the perform legitimation processes dimension relates to library system maintenance and is carried out between the library, citizens, and state. Evaluation refers to efforts by the library to assess the needs of its community in order to adapt to emerging needs. Evaluation strategies at CLP included community surveys and focus groups. Support means the development of new ways of promoting services and resources to the public. Outreach means utilizing new platforms of communication with community members and organizations, including home visits, regular newsletters, and virtual communication such as Twitter.

### 6.6 Dimension 6: facilitate discourse

The sixth dimension, facilitate discourse, is a newly identified dimension that includes four sub-dimensions: citizen discourse; integrate citizens; interact with collection; and interact with staff. Within the facilitate discourse dimension, citizens utilize library infrastructure to communicate with one another about cultural and political topics and to transmit values and interests to other, non-library organizations including state agencies. Citizen discourse refers to contexts where citizens come together with one another to debate political issues of mutual concern and coordinate actions. Examples in CLP reports included meeting room use, study clubs, reading clubs, and women’s clubs. Integrate citizens means that the library prepares, guides, and educates citizens for participation in the public sphere. Examples include exhibits, lectures, classes, programming, and publishing. Interact with collections means that citizens engage with library resources, whether in virtual or analog form. This sub-dimension is represented in the annual reports by discussions about circulation, ILL, and reading in non-traditional places like station libraries. Interact with staff refers to instances where citizens consult with or depend on library staff when initiating political discourse. Examples include virtual reference, phone reference, readers’ advisory, and indexing services.

## 7. Model of the public sphere in public libraries

### 7.1 Criteria for a conceptual model

A conceptual model of the public sphere in public libraries should identify and describe several things. First, the model should include the concept’s primary dimensions, in other words, the six dimensions of the public sphere we identified in our results. Next, the model should describe how the dimensions connect the library system to relevant entities in the library’s environment. This means that the model should describe how the library system communicates with its environment through the public sphere. The model must identify what the relevant environmental entities are and what kinds of communicative exchanges the library shares with them in each arena. The model should also describe how the arenas relate to one another. Finally, a conceptual model of the public sphere in public libraries should connect back to Habermas’s theories of communication and society, especially regarding system, lifeworld, and colonization.

### 7.2 Arenas of the public sphere in public libraries

From our results, we determined that the public library maintains three public sphere arenas. We found that the three discourse dimensions (intra, inter, external) correspond to the three dimensions pertaining to library functions (see Table IV). In the intra-library dimension, the library collects and organizes discourse; in the inter-library dimension, the library legitimates itself before its public; and in the external public sphere dimension, the library facilitates discourse within the larger public sphere.

| Arena | Functional dimension           | Discursive dimension        | Arena name                |
|-------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1     | Collect and organize discourse | Intra-library public sphere | Governance and management |
| 2     | Perform legitimation processes | Inter-library public sphere | Legitimation              |
| 3     | Facilitate discourse           | External public sphere      | Commons                   |

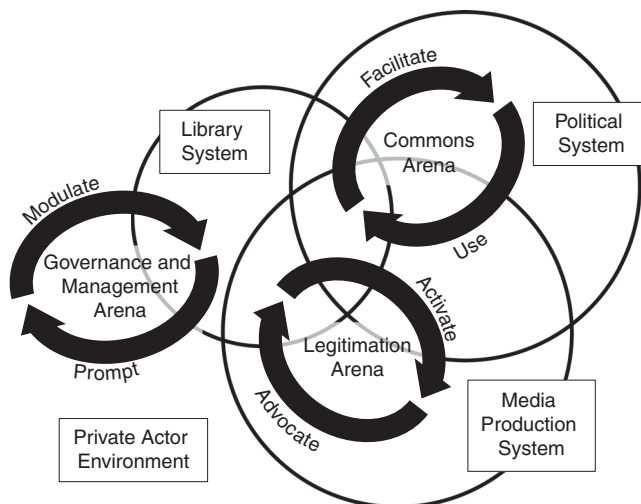
**Table IV.**  
Dimensions and  
arenas

Each of these three functional/discursive pairs forms an arena of public sphere discourse that connects the library to its community. Using the arenas as channels, library acts as an open system. The three arenas are the central features of our model.

These three public sphere arenas of the public library straddle the boundary between the library system and its environment. The relevant groups, actors, and non-library systems located within the library environment include private citizens, community groups, and the state bureaucracy. Each arena of the public sphere has distinct communicative interchanges with these environmental entities. We term the three arenas of public sphere discourse governance and management, legitimation, and commons.

A visual depiction of the three public sphere arenas is shown in Figure 3. In this image, the library system is located within its environment. The environment is composed of private actors, the political system, and the media production system. These systems overlap and intersect with each other and with the library to some degree. Each of the three arenas of the public sphere in public libraries – governance and management, legitimation, and commons – intersects with these environmental entities in a different way.

Each arena has distinctive exchanges between the library system and its environment. The governance and management arena acts as a communication channel between private actors and the library system. In the governance and management arena, the library system prompts its environment for feedback. In response, the environment modulates or changes the internal functioning of the system. In the legitimation arena, the library system communicates with private actors and the political system. The library system activates, mobilizes, and stimulates private actors to provide financial and material support. In response, private actors advocate on behalf of the library system to other public and private sector organizations. The commons arena intersects with all entities in the figure: the library system, private actors, the political system, and the media production system. In the commons arena, the library system facilitates the use of its infrastructure. Each of these three arenas is explained in more detail below.



**Figure 3.**  
The public sphere  
arenas in public  
libraries

### 7.3 Governance and management arena

The first arena is governance and management. In this arena, the library, citizens, community groups, and private sector actors engage in discourse to determine what types of issues to promote in library collections and services, how these discourses should be organized, and how they should be made accessible. The library system prompts actors in the environment to provide feedback regarding library functioning and services. In response, environmental actors modulate the library system with feedback.

As an example of governance and management arena discourse, CLP related in 1980 how it incorporated the needs for the blind and physically handicapped by expanding its services accordingly:

The Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (LBPH) expanded its personalized services by 5.5% in 1980. An increasing number of users are college students needing assistance in locating textbooks in formats usable to them.

In this example, the annual reports show that the library took into consideration the interests of an underserved population and expanded its services to better meet their needs. It held open forums to debate this common concern. What collections and services to provide to underserved populations therefore became a matter of debate connecting the library to its environment.

In another example, in 1990, CLP planned to survey citizens to determine how to collect and organize discourse:

We will ask citizens throughout our service area to help us answer some very crucial questions. What services should the library be offering? Who benefits from these services?

The above excerpt shows that the library engaged in a give-and-take of reasons to justify the implementation of certain services. Public feedback circulated into the library system where it was taken up and adopted by the system. The system adapted to its community. The discourses prompted by the library in the governance and management arena took place using procedures that would reflect the common concerns raised by citizens.

In an example from 1920, CLP reacted to perceived needs of local business and industry by expanding business collections and adding a new business branch. These changes were initiated as a result of governance and management discourses that raised the common concern of adapting to expanding local markets:

A downtown branch equipped with a good reference collection of limited scope and serving also as a station for circulating books brought upon call from the Central Library would enormously increase our value to a considerable portion of the population. The establishment of a downtown branch is unquestionably the most imperative need of the Library.

By responding to a variety of local interests, these examples show how the library system prompted and received environmental feedback regarding governance of the library, particularly with regard to what discourses the library collected and organized. These examples show how the library system modifies collections and services through its governance and management arena.

### 7.4 Legitimation arena

The second arena is legitimation. Within this arena, the library activates, stimulates, and mobilizes the support of its environment. The library communicates its value to its publics in order to sustain itself as an institution. Transmissions from the library are



directed to both private citizen bodies and the state. In response to these signals, environmental actors may choose to appeal to public and private bodies for political and financial backing for the library.

In an example of legitimation arena discourse, in 1990 CLP held local rallies to rouse public backing in a time of limited funding:

The release of The Report of the President's Advisory Committee on the Library began the process of informing the citizens of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County about the library's financial difficulties that have developed over the past 15 years. Neighborhood meetings held about the Report continued that educational process. There is an enormous reservoir of goodwill toward the library in the community from elected officials and citizens who want to help. The growth of the Friends of the Library, from 100 to 750 members, certainly has been one of the highlights of the year.

The library continued to mobilize support through a release of a comprehensive review of the library system in 2000 and a series of interactive community workshops in 2010. These examples illustrate how the legitimation arena enables the library to communicate to its community audience, and also enables library supporters to appeal to other public and private sector bodies.

### *7.5 Commons arena*

The third arena of the public sphere in public libraries is the commons arena. In this arena, citizens use library resources to share culture, communicate about interests and values, participate in civil society, and debate cultural and political topics. Public libraries undergird the commons arena by acting as an infrastructure or platform. In this arena, the library facilitates discourse about topics external to the library, and private actors utilize library resources such as space, collections, and personnel.

Many examples show how private actors used CLP as political and literary public spheres. Instances of political public sphere uses were civic clubs and women's groups, and instances of literary public sphere uses were study clubs, lectures, and children's programs. In 1900, books from CLP were loaned to professors at local universities "to aid in university debates on current questions." In 1950, CLP reported that "The Library and the Foreign Policy Association joined in establishing discussion groups at the Brookline and Homewood branches." These examples show that the commons arena connected community actors with library infrastructure in the formation of political and literary public spheres.

There is evidence that political public spheres facilitated by the library system supported political action on the part of private actors. Through the formation of political public spheres, citizen groups translated their interests into state-secured rights. For example, in 1920, following the passage of the 19th amendment, the Allegheny County League of Women voters held regular meetings at the Hazelwood Branch to discuss learning how to vote. The commons arena thus seemed to influence citizens' political power and perhaps affected new legislation.

### *7.6 Arena relationships*

According to our model, the quality and existence of the commons arena is a function of the quality and existence of the legitimation and governance and management arenas. The legitimation arena ensures that the commons arena is there and exists over time. The governance and management arena ensures that the commons dimension does not become distorted, colonized, or biased – that the library remains an open system.

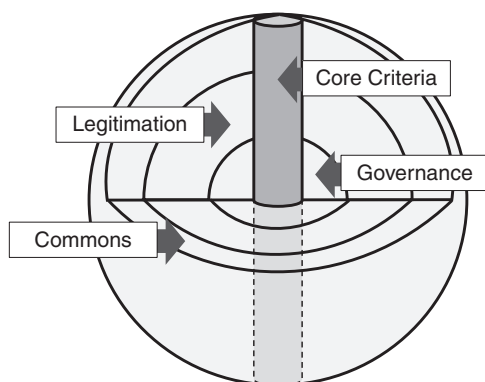
The three arenas taken together may therefore be imagined three-dimensionally as concentric spheres (see Figure 4). The governance and management and legitimation arenas form the inner spheres around which the outer sphere, the commons, emerges. The core criteria of openness, debate, and common concern form the axis of the shape and touch all three arenas.

### 7.7 *The public sphere in public libraries: between lifeworld and system*

The public sphere in public libraries is a complex, multi-dimensional discourse network. In our study, we analyzed this network using examples from a single type of organization: a public library system. At a more abstract and macro scale, single public library systems form groups and federations of multiple library systems. The public spheres formed by public libraries overlap, intersect, and combine with public spheres supported by other infrastructures, technologies, and groups, such as news outlets, political parties, and social media. Taken together, all of public sphere contexts supported by multiple institutions and technologies form a global public sphere.

At various levels of scale, the public sphere in public libraries can be viewed from both system and lifeworld perspectives. From the lifeworld perspective, the public sphere supports cultural reproduction, identity formation, and group solidarity. The examples from our analysis illustrate communicative action occurring in the various arenas of discourse that enable these processes to occur. The three discourse arenas serve as sites for the reproduction of the lifeworld.

The arenas of the public sphere in public libraries can also be viewed from a system perspective. As organizations, public libraries operate according to the non-linguistic media of money and power. Because the public sphere arenas intersect with both system and lifeworld, it might be said that public libraries function as boundary systems that operate on the edges of the lifeworld and system. The governance and management and legitimation arenas raise lifeworld concerns about the library and address them either to the library system, the state, or other organizations. The governance and legitimation arenas ensure that the commons is created, reproduced, and inoculated from system colonization. In the commons arena, the library acts as a shared, open platform to relay political and economic concerns from the lifeworld to state and economic sub-systems.



**Figure 4.**  
Visualization of  
Arena relationships

## 8. Conclusion

We successfully created a conceptual model that describes the public sphere in public libraries. The six dimensions we identified in our results combine to form three discourse arenas: governance and management; legitimation; and commons. The quality of public sphere discourse depends on how well the core criteria of openness, debate, and common concern are met in the procedures and processes of the discussion. The three arenas act as communication channels between the library system and its environment. In terms of lifeworld and system, the arenas of the public sphere in public libraries secure cultural reproduction, identity formation, and solidarity within the lifeworld and serve as a relay between lifeworld and system.

The method we used to identify the six dimensions and construct a model was also successful. This method was effective because it allowed us to ground public sphere theory in concrete examples from a public library. Our model of the public sphere in public libraries is more detailed and better justified than those of previous studies.

This study of the public sphere clarifies an undertheorized area of library studies literature and connects public libraries to Habermas's broader societal frameworks. The public sphere concept is essential for understanding socially just functioning of public library organizations. We believe it therefore serves as a normative as well as empirical model. Moreover, lifeworld and system perspectives of the public sphere in public libraries bring out the society-wide purpose of public libraries. The model we presented is valuable for practitioners because it can help orient library services and strategic planning. The arenas of the public sphere we identified also open up new areas of inquiry for public library researchers.

Our study raises a number of questions and suggests several possible avenues for future research. First, we found elements of the public sphere in public libraries that deserve further study, such as virtual communication. How the virtual public sphere in public libraries is changing, expanding, or transitioning remains an open question. Another significant issue not addressed in this study but suggested by it is the relationship, overlap, and potential conflict between the public sphere and the private sphere. Further, our analysis has not yet explained in sufficient detail the threats, vulnerabilities, distortions, and blockages associated with the public sphere in public libraries. Future research in this area could provide more detailed diagnoses of the public/private tensions articulated by Webster (1995) and Buschman (2003).

We plan to build on this study in a variety of ways. A comparative analysis of the public spheres of different libraries is needed to better understand how and why public spheres vary. Ethnographic studies of public libraries of various sizes or locations, such as international public libraries, may yield insights in this regard. We also hope to use the data from this study to explore how the public sphere changes over time. The final destination for our research is a clear and logical theory of the public sphere as it relates to public libraries.

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