

TECHONOMY NYC

Libraries: Changing the Way Humankind Uses its Time

Speaker:

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(Transcription by [RA Fisher Ink](#))

Marx: Hey everybody. Can you hear me? Good. So I'm Tony Marx, I'm the president of the library. I know, you're thinking has David lost his mind inviting someone who runs a library, never mind the largest library in America, possibly the world, to a conference of techies. So just to give you a little bona fides, you think of the library as this, but that is only one of 215 public library buildings in the city of New York. All told, we get about 40 million physical visits a year. That's more than all the museums and all the sporting teams combined. In the years since I've been at the library, so six plus, we've created education programs that now get a million and a half annual visitors. In the last five months, circulation of children's' books is up 27 percent.

So if you're worried that libraries are going out of business, or maybe you're hoping that libraries are going out of business, let me tell you that that is not the case. The building is so recognizable, because it symbolizes what libraries have symbolized for millennia, which is to be the holders, the protectors, and the providers of all the accumulated knowledge of humanity, permanently.

But we know that not everyone can or does come to this building. I grew up in New York City, Washington Heights. I never walked in this building. I thought it was definitely for people fancier than me. And most libraries don't look like this, with 55 million items in them. Most of them look a little more like this.

Now, I know that is a purposefully stark imagery for you, but the truth is most books by the vast majority are not available to most people in any form at this point in the 21st century. Certainly, if you rely on the physical collections of your local library, which may not be 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, you will find that the quality information you seek is not there. You will be often misinformed for the lack of that information. And most importantly, as an educator, and I hope we are all educators, we are losing the potential of applying the combined intelligence of humanity onto the world of quality information and setting it loose.

So we need a solution. And we think technology can be that solution. Now, that requires connectivity. You heard from Rangu and my other friends that we have a real problem. The New York Public Library—you know, we live in a city, the capital of the information age, two to three million New Yorkers don't have broadband at home. We started a program with the public schools; we're at about 35,000 households where we're lending people Wi-Fi to take home for a

year. But it's just the tip of the iceberg. So we need to solve a connectivity problem, but then we need to make sure that that connection get you access to all the world's quality information. So we've launched an app—who would've known, library launches an app—

[APPLAUSE]

You can download it right now, it's called SimplyE. There are several versions of it. If you have a New York Public Library card, or if you apply for a New York Public Library card online, you have access to the hundreds of thousands of books that are already on the site. If you're not a New Yorker, we'll get you the public domain books that we can give to you for free without having to pay the license. What was 25 clicks through the commercial services to get library patrons to the books that the library wanted to offer for free, SimplyE now makes it possible in two clicks.

We're not doing this alone. We're doing this with the Library of Congress, with Internet Archive, with the Digital Public Library of America. We won't be able to solve this alone. We have, in particular, a serious problem. Part of the problem is copyright. We are not opposed to copyright. Even if we were opposed to copyright, the Constitution of the United States makes it clear that's not going away, nor do we believe it should. Because producers of information need to be able to earn a living. But it's also the lack of availability.

Even if you did not need to rely on the library because you couldn't afford books and you went to Amazon and you went looking for books, this is what you will find. The stuff in the public domain, the classics, no problem, right? Very cheap. The stuff closest to today, the bestsellers that everybody is reading, on the political situation or fiction, or if you can tell the difference at this point—

[LAUGHTER]

Oops, I think I wasn't supposed to say that. [LAUGHS] Amazon will not get you the vast majority of the books that have ever been produced, which were the books produced in the 20th century, because they're in copyright and out of print. There isn't demand and there can't be demand because you can't find the book to decide you want to read it and tell your friends to read it. But you know what? You see that hole in that graph? We've got all those books.

[LAUGHTER]

We really do. The great libraries of the world have them. We need to ensure access to the public and we need to ensure that there is fair compensation for those that have been the creators of this work.

Another way to look at it, Chris's great long tail, so you see the fat end over here? You can get that in the bookstores, if you can find a bookstore. You can certainly get it in most libraries. All that other stuff, including, like the books I've ever written, which are down here somewhere, you can't get those. They're not available. We need to make those available. That is what the

library is in the business of doing. So we've taken our app and we've started to offer it. It's public domain; we offered it to every library in the country so far. We're closing in on the first thousand libraries by the end of this year.

Here's what we believe. We believe that libraries are a key to solving this problem. Because libraries are everywhere in America. In every neighborhood. So here's the aspiration, folks. Why in the age of great technology should we let geography, finance, or time constrain your access to all the quality accumulated information of humanity? Why should the kid growing up in the South Bronx or in Oklahoma or in Soweto, South Africa not have as great access to the full collection as someone who lives at 42nd and Fifth Avenue? Maybe even faster access. And not just to those books, but potentially to every book ever written. This may sound crazy, but it was the founding vision of the industry that we're here to talk about. We got stuck. We can talk about that if you want. Libraries can solve this problem, and we are on the path to doing so. We are the only source for so many of those missing books. We are, according to polls, and I know it's a low bar, the most trusted institution in America.

[LAUGHTER]

And we have a mission, that is about public good and public access. Ben Franklin understood it, we understand it. The civic space, the learning space of libraries in every neighborhood, from the smallest to the greatest, are the foundation of a civil society and an informed democracy. So I'm here very simply to say, help me seed this movement. Help me bring quality content and technology back together. Our motto at the library is more people reading more. Let me be clear: it's more people creating more, it's more people problem-solving more, it's more people learning about themselves, and it's more people learning about others. Technology can help us learn and live together rather than tear us apart.