

Check It Out! Podcast Transcript  
Episode #2, "Can Amazon really replace public libraries?"  
Sno-Isle Libraries, Aug. 8, 2018



- Ken Harvey: Welcome to episode number two of Check It Out, the podcast for lifelong learners with inquiring minds. This podcast is brought to you by Sno-Isle Libraries and the Sno-Isle Libraries Foundation.
- Ken Harvey: So Jim Hills and I are sitting here in the studio and we are gonna be ... we're gonna talk about an article and a little piece of controversy that just kind of swirled up recently, where a writer wrote something that stirred a lot of conversation around the globe when he said that Amazon should replace local libraries to save taxpayers money. Jim, walk us through what the article was about and the writer.
- Jim Hills: Interesting guy, I'm going to have to punt on his name. You said that you think that you can pronounce his name-
- Ken Harvey: I can try.
- Jim Hills: Give it a shot.
- Ken Harvey: Let me try. I think the person's name is pronounced Panos Mourdoukoutas or [Morda-kottis 00:01:07]
- Jim Hills: I've tried that a few times. I did the pronounce this word thing and I struggle, so I'm going to call him the Professor.
- Ken Harvey: Okay.
- Jim Hills: He's a professor of economics from Long Island University which has multiple campuses on Long Island. They have one near Brooklyn, they have a couple of campuses that are further out on Long Island. He's a regular contributor to Forbes, and he wrote this piece and contributed it to Forbes. It was first published over this past weekend and it lasted a day. The outcry that came with this opinion piece was so overwhelming to Forbes they pulled it.
- Ken Harvey: And pretty immediate too I think, right?
- Jim Hills: Immediate, yup I the just unleashed a sense of outrage that someone would be attacking the necessity of public libraries. I think that was really interesting-
- Ken Harvey: Well, give me the article title again.

(Continued)

- Jim Hills: Sure. It's, Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Tax-Payers Money. And the first line is, "Amazon should open their own bookstores in all local communities. They can replace local libraries and save tax-payers lots of money while enhancing the value of their stock." He goes on to talk about what libraries used to do, and it was really interesting to me because to me, he's saying what libraries are doing. That they are providing a third place in the community, they are providing residents with a comfortable place to enjoy books. They are providing, and he's making a strong case for what libraries are doing well in the communities and why they're beloved but-
- Ken Harvey: But in his article he was always speaking in past tense not present tense.
- Jim Hills: Past tense, right. So it's a very interesting piece. I think one of the reasons that he was taken to task, in addition to attacking public libraries that I think are seen within their own communities as key pieces of those communities. The other reason is his logic was not well thought out, and he was taken to task for that.
- Ken Harvey: So why do you see his logic wasn't ...
- Jim Hills: He's comparing the cost of using Amazon to the taxpayer cost of public libraries. I think we all know that public libraries are the model, especially in the United States, that's been in place for more than 150 years is primarily tax supported not fee-based. So it's not a pay to play, it's recognized as a societal infrastructure investment. It's all about making knowledge and information accessible to all, regardless of ability to pay. So I think he does make a case and an interesting point that libraries are also not free, but there are a lot of things that we're investing in with our taxes for a better society-
- Ken Harvey: Such as roads that are-
- Jim Hills: I'm talking about roads but you know the one thing that I think is probably a better analogy would be public schools. I have two children, neither of them are in public schools anymore. They've both gone on, they're young adults. But I'm still paying taxes to my local school district.
- Ken Harvey: Why would you do that?
- Jim Hills: Well, because I think that it's an acknowledgement that public schools and public education, a well-educated populace benefits all. And that's something that I certainly don't disagree with. I think there are obviously discussions that come along with any tax. We're making these decisions in terms of the degree and where we want to spend our money. But it's not a disagreement that public schools, public roads, other the things that the public in general enjoys, public libraries. But those are not good investments, and we're doing that by societal agreement. His case, again I'm gonna call him the Professor because I struggle with his last name. The Professor is making a case that that agreement can be

replaced by a service that is pay to play. Amazon is a business, it caters to customers who are willing to pay for that service just like any other retailer in providing a service.

Ken Harvey: And I'm one of those customers, by the way-

Jim Hills: As am I.

Ken Harvey: I buy things from Amazon and I'm Amazon Prime member.

Jim Hills: As am I. Actually, my wife is. I love the benefit of having her Amazon Prime benefit in my house.

Ken Harvey: But you're right, other than being able to go online and read reviews that other customers have left, and getting information about different books and materials that I might be interested in purchasing. If I actually want to enjoy that item, I have to pay for it.

Jim Hills: Right.

Ken Harvey: So with what you were saying earlier, his argument is that in his mind that works better than simply paying taxes that go to support a public library. But I know that in my case, I might not be able to afford all of the things that I enjoy from my library if I were having to pay for them through Amazon.

Jim Hills: Absolutely. Libraries across the country have done value calculators that show what a regular Amazon user and what those services, what those products might cost if-

Ken Harvey: Yeah, I love using those things.

Jim Hills: Yeah. So it gives you a sense of, okay so yes as a property owner my taxes are going to support a variety of things including public libraries. And the value that I get back at the public library through my library card as a resident, it is phenomenal. The ability to and the access to use those services and those materials far outweighs my tax bill.

Ken Harvey: So that value calculator works like you put in how many times you use these kinds of things from the library and it totals that up and gives you a sense of how much you would have spent, or what the value of that library is to you?

Jim Hills: So if you can look at the services that you might get through a retail operation, whether it be Amazon or any other service provider. For example, streaming services, you can get streaming services through your local library these days. And you can buy those on the open market too as a consumer. The value that you get with your library card versus the value that you pay for those services on the open market. And you can get to compare that and see the value of your

tax dollars at work. So that's a real personal calculation, which is different than valuing the societal investment. And combined with both of those, I think start to give a sense of the level of outrage that we saw immediately to this article in Forbes. It was amazing.

Ken Harvey: Well, I think you may have brought with you one of those individual ... the response from one of the individuals who was outraged. Do you wanna share that with us? What did this person have to say?

Jim Hills: So there's a guy named Nick Kolakowski who is credited as being one of the first to take on the Professor on Twitter in response. Kolakowski also elaborated on his views on Medium.com. I think that the interesting piece is that Kolakowski, he also pointed out how the Professor fails to back up his argument with logic as he compares the values of what libraries can bring versus the investment level. Because he points out that it appears in the Professor's piece that he is most concerned about his own personal tax burden, which is something we all have to take a look at.

Ken Harvey: Yeah, I care about my taxes.

Jim Hills: Absolutely. It was really interesting I think though, when you see again this level of immediate concern and outrage that this was not a well thought out argument. And the breadth of the concern that caused Forbes to pull it from their website within 24 hours.

Ken Harvey: So Forbes actually pulled the article.

Jim Hills: Yeah. You can still find it online. There's a Google archive piece that you can find it but you have to look. It's no longer available on Forbes and they have a little disclaimer that says that that file is no longer available.

Ken Harvey: So why would an institution like Forbes pull an article like this?

Jim Hills: Well, I would say that they are also a business.

Ken Harvey: And let me just say I'm asking you because you used to be an editor of a newspaper chain, right?

Jim Hills: I was.

Ken Harvey: So you understand journalism and the institution of the press.

Jim Hills: I do have a background in public journalism. And I think it is an interesting piece that we have businesses that are based on Constitutional rights, the First Amendment of Free Speech. But they are businesses for sure, and those businesses cater to a readership and to advertisers who depend on that readership. And when they step outside of that comfort zone, that's a problem

for the business. It's not about whether you're exercising your right, it's about whether you're a viable business. Those are governors on the First Amendment for publications and Forbes felt that sting and they pulled the piece. It hasn't stopped the conversation, we're having that today. But I think that's a business decision.

Ken Harvey: A business editorial decision.

Jim Hills: Yeah, absolutely.

Ken Harvey: Well, the argument and the response, the argument that libraries in some way are obsolete and they can be replaced by commercial interests. That's not necessarily a new one, like you said, it's an ongoing argument and idea. We hear it from time to time here at the library as well, and our librarians out in the community libraries hear about it from different individuals. With this one guy, Nick Kolakowski who responded to this, he also had some ideas though about I think the role that libraries continue to play that he thinks makes them irreplaceable.

Jim Hills: Yeah, and if could paraphrase what he wrote. The issue that comes up since we've had the rise of the internet, the democratization of technology, the phones that many of us are carrying in our pockets. The access to information is different than the library's role. Public libraries in the United States have been around since the mid-1800s. They were in place 1500 years before that, excuse me 1000 years before that.

Ken Harvey: Actually, I can tell you, 2600 BC-

Jim Hills: There you go.

Ken Harvey: Is when libraries first really came into being in recorded history.

Jim Hills: The idea of a repository of knowledge, right?

Ken Harvey: Yeah.

Jim Hills: The idea of a public repository of knowledge in the United States is like I said, about 150 years old. But the conversation and the question that comes up, especially more recently over the last 20 years is technology driven. And that's a key weakness in the argument from the Professor. This is about technology, it's not about the concept of a public repository of knowledge. There was a comment that I read online from the New York Public Library. It was a tweet, it was short it said, "Libraries aren't going anywhere." And I get in the context of the argument and the conversation that's going on that that makes sense. It rang a little two-edged to me, a little bit of a two-edged sword to me.

Ken Harvey: Why do you say two-edged?

Jim Hills: Well, because I think libraries are going places. Libraries continue to evolve with the needs of the customers, and that's exactly what they're doing in communities across the country. That's exactly what Sno-Isle Libraries is doing, evolving with the needs of the customers. For example, I was talking to our executive director, Jonalyn Woolf-Ivory a couple of months ago and she pointed out that we used to lend art. You could check out art for the walls of your home.

Ken Harvey: So these are like pieces of classical art-

Jim Hills: Yeah, paintings.

Ken Harvey: They're framed-

Jim Hills: Yeah, you could check out art. We didn't use to have-

Ken Harvey: Class up your home for a couple of weeks.

Jim Hills: Yeah, there you go. You could have a party. I don't know if we have-

Ken Harvey: A little cultured-

Jim Hills: I don't know if we had Picassos but you know, that would be cool. I don't think we did but you never know. But the other interesting thing is, so think about what technology is available through your library that wasn't available through your library 20 years ago. Everything, everything, we used to have VHS tapes. We don't really have VHS tapes anymore but we do have DVDs. Are DVDs still the thing, the dominant technology? No, downloads are but you can get the downloads through the library now too. So it's not about the technology, it's about the concept of having a public repository that is equal access to everybody in the community. And that I think is more important now than ever.

Ken Harvey: So, meaning a place where everyone can share this information and they can borrow it and use it or download it, or stream it without paying extra.

Jim Hills: Without paying extra, right. So it's available to all. And I think that's another really interesting thing that Kolakowski brought up in his piece, that Amazon, and this I think really comes back to the difference between business and the difference between a publicly funded resource like a public library. The concept of the public library is to have a breadth of material and thought available to all. A business is beholden to the customer and the bottom line and that return on investment. So if you've got something in a business that's not returning your investment, if it's not being purchased you're gonna take it out of inventory. A public library-

Ken Harvey: Meaning you're gonna get rid of it.

Jim Hills: Yeah, absolutely.

- Ken Harvey: You're gonna stop carrying it, you're not gonna-
- Jim Hills: It's not available. The public library's role is different, and this is a fundamental difference between I think of business and publicly funded agencies like libraries. The public agency is designed to serve all. The business is designed to serve the paying customer. And I think that's a core difference and that's why this idea of Amazon replacing public libraries is I think an interesting and recurring kind of comment, whether it's about Amazon or Barnes and Noble or whatever it has been in history is just fundamentally flawed, because the roles are different between a business and a publicly funded by acclamation. So when the public library, the funding model goes back to the voters and the voters say, "Yes, we value this. We're willing to give you our tax dollars to continue this service for the purpose that you told us it was going to be, access to all."
- Ken Harvey: Well, I just think about a typical bookstore is going to be keeping track of what items on the bookshelf people are buying, and when they see that there is demand for it, they'll continue to buy more of those and make them available. When the demand goes away, they'll stop stocking that particular title or author and no longer available. Public libraries are a little different that way. We will hold on to some things and provide them even though there are not a thousand people asking for that particular title every day.
- Jim Hills: So the library is gonna stock, for example, the library will stock what are considered to be the classics. And classics get to be defined in a bunch of different ways for me, I grew up as a huge Hemingway fan so I know that Sno-Isle libraries is gonna have a full list of Hemingway titles available to me anytime I wanna go back and re-read those. But they may not always be available through an online retailer. There are lots of definitions of-
- Ken Harvey: Online or brick-and-mortar retailers.
- Jim Hills: Exactly, yup. So that's just one example but it is an example of the different kind of role and the mission of a public library versus a for-profit business.
- Ken Harvey: I wanted to just touch on a few other things in the last minute or two of this discussion. And that is there are some other things that libraries provide, or functions that we bring that seem to be valuable to your communities and society in general, I'm thinking too that reflect that kind of evolution that you talked about. Some of our ... more and more our libraries are being considered learning spaces, a learning common space where people can come and learn. And in some cases that shows up as a place where students can come and work on a project together. Be around a table, work collaboratively to get something accomplished that's an assignment.
- Jim Hills: Absolutely. I think the phrase that has become common is third place. There's a third place in people's lives. Your home is your first place, your place of employment, you work is your second place. And there's a third place in your

life. The Professor makes note of that, although, he outlines how libraries function as third places and then discounts that and says Starbucks is the third place of today. I don't disagree that Starbucks is an option for a third place, but if you're going to go to Starbucks you'd better buy something to be able to sit there. We did see some headlines on that recently, I'm not sure exactly where they have fallen on whether or not you can just go in and use their wifi. But you can go in and use the wifi at your public library whether you have a card or not, and enjoy the quiet space, the access to knowledge, and in some cases, even the other pieces that come along with Starbucks.

Jim Hills: So I went to a ... I had a chance to go to the downtown Kansas City library which is a phenomenal facility and they have a Starbucks inside. So the combination of what people are looking for as that third place evolves just like the library evolves because we have society, we have our residents, we have customers who are evolving along. And the library evolves along with them.

Ken Harvey: Well, I know that one of the other ways that libraries are evolving, and Sno-Isle libraries, in particular, is also offering opportunities to and using its role as kind of a neutral space to help convene people to come together and talk about things that can be kind of controversial, that can be really impactful. For example, Issues That Matter are discussion form panels that get together like recently explored the mental health issues swirling around our communities. And before that homelessness and teen suicide and other things.

Jim Hills: I do think that's based in the libraries fundamental mission of being a non-partisan even-handed access place for all ideas. It's not a place where the library itself advocates a particular point of view, but it is a place where those points of view can be looked at. As you were talking, I was thinking also about as we're coming up into the primary election season here. So public spaces are available to other community groups, the League of Women Voters and another non-partisan organization that is there to facilitate a conversation. The League of Women Voters regularly sign up for public library spaces so they can have that kind of conversation available to the public. And you're absolutely right, Issues that Matter. The past few years few years the Sno-Isle libraries, the TEDxSnoIsleLibraries series, these were all available and made sense to come from the public library because that's the fundamental mission.

Ken Harvey: Well, we wanna just make sure that listeners understand that in no way was this discussion meant to demonize the Professor who essentially stated a position and kind of laid out an argument. It's just interesting that that argument is one that we've seen that has echoed a little bit, libraries are obsolete, libraries can be replaced with an Amazon or other retail commercial organization that can provide many of the same services. And yet the response to those arguments are really logical that no, in fact, it cannot completely replace what the library provides.

Jim Hills: Yeah. The Professor's right to share his opinion is unchallenged. Just as he gets to comment, so does the rest of the world, they get to comment on his idea.

And there is nothing wrong with Amazon either. I'm a user, you are, they have many. It's really about the conversation, and I think it is about understanding fundamental differences of purpose.

Ken Harvey: Right. And I would just say in closing that one of the comments that came in in response to the Professor's assertion was that a library is essentially a passport. So an individual who takes advantage of their library by getting a library card or simply walking into that library has a passport of entry into learning. So whether they are an early learner, a child leading up to the first few years of school, or a lifelong learner. The library provides you a passport to some tremendous discovery opportunities and can help any of us refine and redefine our life and life course.

Jim Hills: I love that, that image of a passport. It's a passport to ideas.

Ken Harvey: Well, thanks very much, Jim.

Jim Hills: Thank you.

Ken Harvey: I'm glad we explored this a little bit more.

Jim Hills: It was great.

Ken Harvey: Coming up next, Book Notes. In this Book Notes segment, we have a member of our reader services team with us, Denise Douglas-Baird.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Thanks. Hi.

Ken Harvey: Denise works in our reader services team and that group puts together suggestions for our readers, music lovers, movie fans of things that the reader services team feels can really whet the appetites of and satisfy the passions of those folks from our collection. And so we're delighted to have her with us. So Denise, in your work you come across different titles that you think you'd like to suggest to others that they'd consider. So what do you have for us today?

Denise Douglas-Baird: Well, for my picks today, I have something completely different. Alternative history vintage glam spy thrillers. Amberlough and Armistice are the first two volumes in The Amberlough Dossier trilogy by Lara Elena Donnelly. A colorfully seedy and vibrantly free-wheeling city on the eve of election. A haunted spy, his cabaret star lover, and a sassy red-haired dancer. When the unthinkable happens and the fascist party wins the election, totalitarianism moves in to tamp down the fun. Then the subtly terrifying drama of this intricately plotted fantasy political spy thriller intensifies. Submerge yourself in an intoxicating setting reminiscent of 1930s Europe and Asia. Rendezvous with intriguingly flawed and unforgettable characters. Ponder the unthinkable queries of living in a polity gone wrong. What will you sacrifice for love? Who will you betray for revolution? And join me in anxiously awaiting the final volume, Amnesty, which

is due out next April. And hoping that Ms. Donnelly has more beguiling tales up her sleeve.

Ken Harvey: So those were two in the series?

Denise Douglas-Baird: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ken Harvey: And it'll be a trilogy?

Denise Douglas-Baird: It will be a trilogy.

Ken Harvey: All right. So there's time for individuals to dive into these two titles.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Yes, and I would-

Ken Harvey: And then await the third.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Yes, and read them very carefully because I'm not a big spy thriller reader but you really need to pay attention to the details and the relationships between the characters and ...

Ken Harvey: Because it those details will matter.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Yes.

Ken Harvey: So you mentioned the description of this as alternative history vintage glam spy thriller.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ken Harvey: That is very descriptive.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Well, I have to admit that I got vintage glam spy thriller from the author's own Tumblr blog, and I just had to use it. Because it kind of has this feeling of what you imagine the Weimar Republic felt like, but it's all in a very made up world that she has ... she actually provides a map at the beginning, and I love books with maps.

Ken Harvey: So just for those who don't know their history dates or timeframes really well, the Weimar Republic was-

Denise Douglas-Baird: We're talking 1930s between World War I and World War II in Germany where cabaret was very big from what I've heard.

Ken Harvey: That's what I've heard as well.

Denise Douglas-Baird: So a couple of the main characters are involved in the cabaret.

Ken Harvey: So how did you come across this series?

Denise Douglas-Baird: I read a lot of book reviews for Book List, Library Journal, notices from the publishing companies, and I can't remember exactly. And it was one of those books that something about it sounded intriguing to me, and I do read fantasy. As I picked it up and loved it, but I couldn't really explain it. And then I just finished the second one last week and I was like, oh, these are the ones I'm gonna talk about for ...

Ken Harvey: Well, so you loved it, you couldn't quite explain it but now you've explained it as alternative history vintage glam spy thriller. And hopefully, that intrigues our listeners to find these two titles and dive into them. So they are available in our collection.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Yes, they are. They're on the shelf right now.

Ken Harvey: They're on the shelf right now, and available just in print or ...

Denise Douglas-Baird: No, we have them also in e-audio. And I listened to part of the second one and their voice ... the different characters have different voices. You will miss the map but it helps a little bit if you get the e-audio.

Ken Harvey: Then you can listen to it while you're commuting.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Yes, you could. And it will pull you away into this completely different world.

Ken Harvey: Well, I think that that's something for our listeners to consider. And hopefully, they'll let us know.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Yes.

Ken Harvey: What they thought about it.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Exactly. I'd love to hear.

Ken Harvey: Okay. Well, thank you very much for joining us, and we look forward to having you back with some suggestions in the future.

Denise Douglas-Baird: Okay, sounds great. Thanks.

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