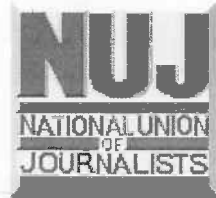


The modernisation review of public libraries: National Union of Journalists response



When the NUJ recently asked members about their attitudes to public libraries, those who responded were unanimously supportive of the concept. As one wrote:

Publicly-owned, three-dimensional libraries are extremely important – they educated me and provided a place to study.

It is disappointing that in this consultation there is but one allusion – and that commercially motivated – to the essential social function of the library-as-building: a warm quiet place to concentrate; a place to escape to do your homework when home is too hectic.

That NUJ member continued:

It is a presumption to think that everyone will have access to the means of connecting to a digital library: somewhere in there will be costs. Currently it is assumed that everyone has internet access and children and students who are not 'linked in' are already at an educational disadvantage. Libraries are far more than just places to borrow books from.

The drive to “modernise” libraries cannot include dematerialising them. Tempting as it may be to attempt to separate the library-as-building from the library-as-collection-of-works, no amount of putting the latter excitingly online will reduce the number of citizens who depend on the former to *get* online.

More profoundly, the temptation to engage in partnerships with commercial organisations to meet the very considerable costs of making libraries' collections accessible online raises a fundamental question about what a library collection is.

The proposed Google Books Settlement, to take one example of such a partnership, includes Google reserving the right to withhold certain books – as it must, if it is not to expose its shareholders to (for example) the vagaries of British libel law.

So is the digital library to be a *service* to citizens, offering the largest portion possible of the historical record?

Or is it to be a deposit library, a *key public institution* and a foundation-stone of our civilisation, the complete archive of everything published? This is the default position of librarianship and, it has to be said, its bulwark against censorship, both political and commercial.

The NUJ is, to repeat, wholeheartedly in favour of libraries as public institutions. Any move to make their collections online will involve enormous changes to the entire business of publishing: its effect will be at least an order of magnitude greater than the effect of physical lending that is compensated for by Public Lending Right.

We will expand on this very short response in the other consultations that form its context:

- That on the digital deposit library ;
- The consultation on exceptions (Gowers II); and
- The promised consultations on extended collective licensing, should the relevant section of the Digital Economy Bill pass.

NUJ, Headland House, 308 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP;