



## The Contribution of Street Libraries in Australia to Literacy, Community and the Gift Economy

Peter John Chen

To cite this article: Peter John Chen (2022): The Contribution of Street Libraries in Australia to Literacy, Community and the Gift Economy, Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association, DOI: [10.1080/24750158.2022.2028332](https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2022.2028332)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2022.2028332>



Published online: 14 Feb 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH



## The Contribution of Street Libraries in Australia to Literacy, Community and the Gift Economy

Peter John Chen 

Department of Government and International Relations, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of Australian 'street libraries'. Enthusiasts have suggested that they contribute to their communal fabric, providing increased sociability and promoting reading and literacy. Street libraries have been associated with 'placemaking' activities. Seen as part of the 'gift' economy, their 'Take a book. Give a Book. Share a Book.' motto promotes their role in recycling. International research has contested some of these claims, with some critics suggesting their role in addressing 'book deserts' is limited, that they represent a highly individualised paternalism by social and economic elites, and they are associated with the neoliberal assault on public libraries. This paper finds mixed evidence in support for the views of advocates and critics. Australian street libraries are skewed towards localities with the highest socio-economic measures of advantage. They are less 'interventions' into the landscape, as associated with private ownership. Street librarians are not, however, disproportionately urban, and their maintainers have greater economic diversity than their 'elite' characterisation would imply. Street libraries can be seen as an example of a gift economy, recycling about \$11 million in value in 2021. In addition, some social capital advantages in establishing and maintaining a street library can be identified.

### KEYWORDS

Street libraries; Little Free Library; Australia; social capital; gift economy; urban interventionism

### Introduction: Street Libraries and Their Origins

Street libraries are commonly small freestanding or parasite structures located in, or accessible to, public space. Street libraries are often recognisable by their bright colours and 'cute' design elements, being diminutive structures that commonly have the appearance of dolls-houses. They are established to facilitate the free exchange of books and sometimes other goods. The types of exchange they facilitate is commonly anonymous and asynchronous in nature (Webster et al., 2015, p. 6), as they are predominantly 'unstaffed'. The premise of these initiatives is to invite members of the public to take and leave books at no financial cost to participants in the exchange.

Some street libraries maintain registers of books exchanged, but the majority do not. A small number of street libraries are associated with the 'BookCrossing' movement. BookCrossing uses unique codes in freely exchanged books that permits some degree

of geo-tracking of materials.<sup>1</sup> Kutt has characterised street libraries as not ‘an administered or private collection of books but rather a type of commons. This non-bureaucratic, community-oriented means of sharing, distribution and release of high-quality books strives to find new readers’ (2018). Street libraries tend to be distinct from public and commercial libraries, however due to the unregulated character of their deployment and operation, they can be found as satellite extensions of existing public libraries (Davis et al., 2015), in commercial and quasi-commercial spaces (such as shopping centres, health and aged care facilities, and childcare centres), and associated with (predominantly primary) schools.

Internationally, some of these types of public ‘interventions’ have been associated with explicitly political objectives, such as a trilingual library in Jerusalem promoting inter-communal co-existence (the *Abu Tor Book Stop*) (Kavaler, 2021), or the Occupy Wall Street *People’s Library* in New York (Lingel, 2012) (largely destroyed by police in 2011). The latter is an example of a ‘guerrilla library’ which have a focus on the distribution of alternative and counter-hegemonic content, as well as demonstrating a different system of the distribution of goods.

Outside Australia, the Little Free Library initiative is a well-recognised name for this type of activity. Associated with an organisation established to promote these initiatives it initially operated within the United States, but now operates internationally. Starting with their first library in 2009, this organisation estimates it has inspired the establishment of over 100,000 libraries in more than 100 countries (Little Free Library, 2021). In North America this initiative receives considerable media coverage and has received formal recognition (such as by the Library of Congress in 2015) and formed partnership with government and community groups to expand access to these libraries and customise their offerings for local conditions.

While the Little Free library model had previously been adopted in a small way in Australia – with notable preceding activities include the Sydney-based ‘footpath library’ established in 2003 providing reading materials to people experiencing homelessness (The Footpath Library, 2019) – it was not until after 2015 that this country saw a dramatic increase in the number of exchanges. This is largely due to the popularisation of the idea by a Sydney based social entrepreneur and the creation of Street Library Incorporated (Street Library Incorporated, 2019). It is estimated that there are approximately 5,000 of these structures operating in Australia as of the start of 2021.<sup>2</sup> In the October-December 2020 period, approximately 340 new street libraries were established in Australia.

Street Library Incorporated is modelled after the Little Free Library organisation strategy, operating as a not-for-profit organisation that promotes the concept, provides newsletters, plans, kits and pre-built structures, and maintains a registry of street libraries, accessible online. The Australian organisation differs from its US counterpart in that, while the US organisation requires registered exchanges to have paid a fee for a ‘charter sign’, the Australian organisation does not charge for registration.

What makes this phenomena worthy of study is the claims that have been made about street libraries’ contributions to the communities in which they are located. The Little Free library organisation promote them as a form of local volunteering that fosters community and promote literacy through the provision of books to people who might otherwise struggle to access them (Bol in Aldrich, 2015, pp. 1–2). In Australia, Street Library

Incorporated focuses on *literacy* and *community* as its key mission objectives (Street Library Incorporated, n.d. a) and work with the media and other organisations to promote the idea and its uptake. Much of the popular press writing on these installations, both in Australia and internationally, presents them as attractive and beneficial contributions to the localities in which they are positioned. Examples of this include ‘Canberra woman with brain cancer’s dream is for a street library on every corner’ (ABC News, 10 November 2019), ‘Tiny vestibules of happiness’: street libraries help bind community ties’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 10 April 2020), ‘Yass local shares her joy with the community’ (Goulburn Post, 21 September 2021). Webster et al. have observed in their study of media coverage of street libraries in North America (2015, p. 6) there tends to be a very strong positive public presentation of them as beneficial for the community and in the promotion of literacy.

Given their purported benefits, these claims are worthy of empirical investigation. While there is not a large literature on street libraries, some of the key claims made about street libraries’ capacity to achieve their core literacy and accessibility objectives has been challenged by empirical research done in a small number of North American cities. The Australian case provides a good opportunity for a more systematic study of this phenomena, using a variety of methods to examine three topics: To what extent are street libraries likely to service communities most in need of their services; If street libraries promote community building and the formation of social capital, and; To what extent they represent an example of an authentic gift economy that liberates static assets and promotes reciprocity.

### **Nomenclature**

This paper employs the following terminology. ‘Libraries’ is a generic term. ‘Public library’ is used to describe publicly funded organisations staffed by ‘professional librarians’. ‘Street library’, ‘street librarian’, and; ‘patron’ are used to describe the key phenomenon of study in this paper, their builders/maintainers and the people who use their services. Alternatives for these terms include, but are not limited to: Little Free Library®, community/neighbourhood book exchange/depository, guerrilla libraries, corner libraries, birdhouse libraries, books swaps, ad hoc or pop-up libraries, BookBoXX (Germany) or *vāchanālaya* (‘reading place’, India); Steward, and; user, visitor. The term Little Free Library and steward is used when referring to research on this phenomenon from the United States and Canada explicitly.

### **Research Methods and Approach**

To examine the phenomenon of Australian street libraries, I employed a mixed-methods design involving interviews, a questionnaire, spatial analysis, and observation. A mixed methods approach is one that involves multiple data collection methods that include both qualitative and quantitative data collection (Creamer, 2018, p. 5). A well-designed study of this type recognises the pragmatic use of a range of methods to provide insights on the phenomenon under study, where different types of evidence are integrated into a coherent analysis, rather than the selective use of data.

Given the scarcity of research on this topic, an initial pair of focussed group discussions was undertaken in June 2021. These discussions were undertaken using videoconferencing and comprised of 12 adult street librarians located in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory. Following recruitment from the *Street Library: Librarian's Corner* Facebook group, three participants were men, and nine were women. Anonymised transcripts of the discussions were employed to provide qualitative material for the analysis, as well as shaping the topics and language of the questionnaire component of the research.

During June-July 2021, a questionnaire containing 28 questions was distributed via the *Street Library: Librarian's Corner* Facebook group and via an email list maintained by Street Library Incorporated. The questionnaire was also promoted on this organisation's blog. The call for participants directed respondents to an online survey with a print-and-post paper version of the instrument available. The instrument included a mix of response types: freetext boxes, scales, categorisation, and numerical responses. Completion rates of the instrument were very high. 502 valid responses were received, three by mail. Based on the estimated universe of street libraries in Australia as at 15 March 2021, this participation rate provides the questionnaire data a margin of error of 4.15% given a confidence level of 95%. Responses fell broadly within the distribution of street libraries by state and territory, with the largest variation in responses by jurisdiction 4.3%, very close to the margin of error.

Using the list of registered street libraries maintained by Street Library Incorporated as at 15 March 2021 ( $n = 2846$ ),<sup>3</sup> I undertook a geospatial analysis of the location of street libraries to identify their spatial distribution, as well as analysis of library locations against existing Australian Bureau of Statistics census data and other relevant data sets.

This location data also permitted me to employ Google Street View to undertake remote observation for the purposes of identifying the rate to which street libraries are likely to be decommissioned over time. Due to the limits in the availability of Street View images, the obsolescence of some images, or the position of libraries beyond streetscapes, this observation study included 1031 (36.2%) of the provided list of registered street libraries.

The human research was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee, protocol number 2021/361. The research results are limited in that it was unable to capture a meaningful sample of former street librarians, some survivorship bias will be present in the analysis.

### **'Oases in a Book Desert'**

One of the most significant claims made about street libraries is that they promote reading and literacy (Martell, 2017). Street Library Incorporated's first mission objective is to encourage literacy, and in doing this, address the question of the undersupply of books in some areas, stating 'Books have the power to transport people to a different world, experience the impossible, and unlock people's potential. The hope is that one day, a little boy with no books in his house can pass by a local Street Library and discover a new world of opportunities' (n.d. a). This aligns with the objectives of the international organisation and has been discussed extensively in writing about street libraries, and from an analysis of freetext responses to a question about the motivations of street

librarians is an important driver in their establishment: 45.6% of respondents listed distribution of books (most common reason), 26.7% the love of reading (3rd most common), and 20.1% the promotion of literacy (5th most common).

At its most basic, a street library provides access to books. In this way, these exchanges have been presented to overcome what is sometimes referred to as ‘book deserts’ – the undersupply of books in some locations. Writing on this phenomenon in the United States, Neuman and Moland (2019) argue the absence of accessible books in areas associated with high levels of poverty ‘may seriously constrain young children’s opportunities to come to school “ready to learn”’ (p. 127). Speaking from the perspective of educators, Miller et al. observe (2018) the ‘gap in access to books perpetuates inequalities between low-income students and middle-income ones’ (p. 45).

Developing *literacy* is more complex concept. Snow and Verhoeven (2001, p. 3) list a range of factors that shape literacy, including pre-experiences with books, early reading development at the pre-education stage of life, personal motivation (understanding why reading is useful and important), the role of exposure to adult literacy practices as a child (modelling reading-for-pleasure), the quality of instruction, and access to appropriate reading materials (cultural, reading level, and fit-for-purpose). Many of these elements, and the capacity of individuals and communities to access them, are shaped by the political and socio-economic contexts. Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between the socio-economic status of parents and the literacy performance of their children, demonstrating a complex relationship between economic means (book access), the educational attainment and relative importance of education articulated by parents, and the location of people within communities and the collective resources available to support education and post-education reading (Hemmerechts et al., 2017). Thus, as Hume et al. (2015) observe, literacy interest in children is a complex construct and cannot be easily predicted using simple measures.

Socio-economic analysis of the distribution of Little Free Libraries in the United States and Canada has been undertaken by several researchers. Largely, this research has been limited to one or two cities, commonly employing census data and geo-spatial analysis.

One of the early studies of this type is Schmidt and Hale’s (2017) analysis of Little Free Libraries in Toronto, Ontario and Calgary, Alberta. Using an analysis of the spatial location of the libraries, the authors did not demonstrate their effectiveness in addressing ‘book deserts’, but were more likely to be in locations physically close to established libraries and in areas where the residents are more highly educated and renumerated. This study is also important in the way the authors developed a critical reading of the role of Little Free Libraries as expressions of the ‘non-profit industrial complex’ that reflects a corporatised approach to charitable organisation and action that strips them from their politically disruptive possibilities, as well as a critique of the politics of street libraries in their urban landscapes.

Schmidt and Hale’s initial geospatial analysis was confirmed in Sarmiento et al.’s (2018) geographical study of Madison, Wisconsin. They found a positive correlation of street libraries in localities that possessed higher family income, lower levels of poverty, and smaller numbers of children. Similarly, Rebori and Burge (2017) have provided an analysis of the location of Little Free Libraries in Reno, Nevada, demonstrating mixed evidence about the location of these relative to gaps in coverage of existing public libraries and in areas of lower literacy.<sup>4</sup>

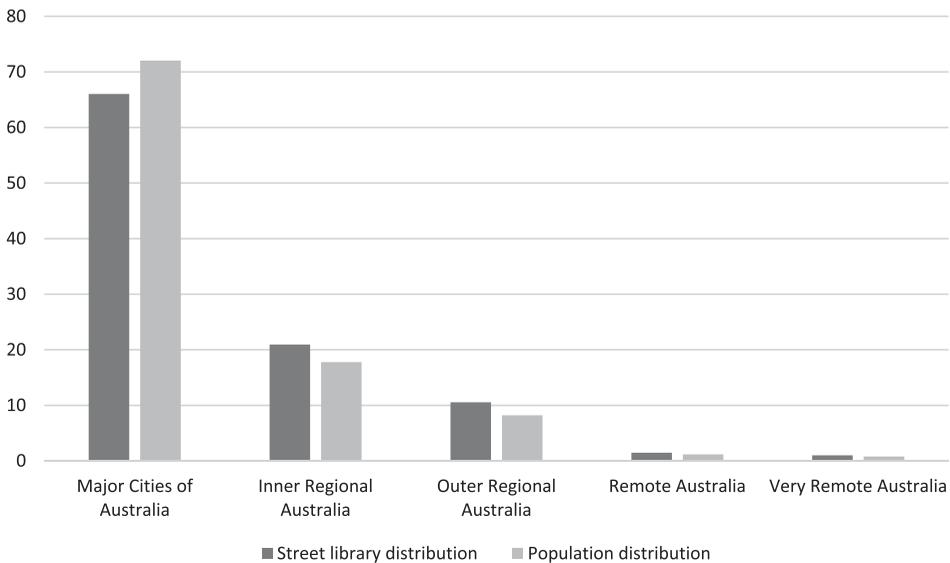
In a 2020 study of Portland, Oregon and Detroit, Michigan, Wilson geographically mapped the location of Little Free Libraries against several socio-economic measures: household income, education levels, and racial profile (2020). While Wilson confirmed some of the findings of Schmidt and Hale, particularly the positive correlation between the location and higher levels of income, Wilson demonstrated that the uptake of these initiatives varied considerably between the two cities, particularly in terms of the education level and racial profile of areas where the Little Free Libraries are likely to be in these cities.

Overall, the American literature points to questions about the capacity of Little Free Libraries to address the literacy and book desert question. What the existing literature does not do, however, is provide a very systematic evaluation of this question beyond a handful of cities.

### ***Are Street Libraries Located in Areas of 'Need'?***

The questions asked by authors like Wilson can be systematically examined in the Australian context through access to the national registration database for street libraries. The first thing that this dataset allows us to establish is that, unlike the assumption of most of the scholarship in North America, Australian street libraries are not – on a per capita basis – a phenomenon associated with major cities. Looking at the location of street libraries compared with the population distribution of Australia in [Figure 1](#), we can see that street libraries are more likely to be found in regional Australia than its capitals.

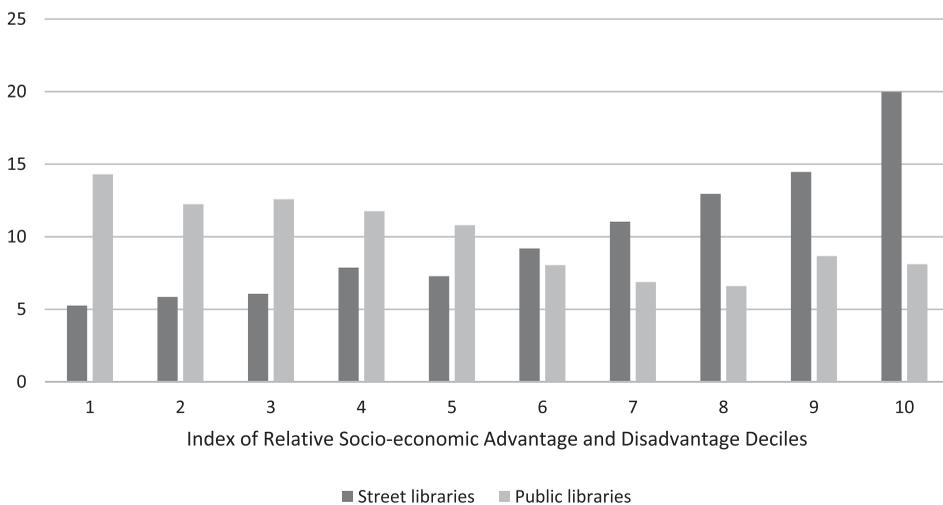
Turning to the question of literacy, a meaningful spatial analysis of street libraries in Australia considers their capacity to service areas with low levels of socio-economic advantages. This is presented in a figure where street libraries are assessed in relation



**Figure 1.** Distribution of street libraries by remoteness classification.

to the population characteristics of their immediate locality. Here the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Statistical Area Level 1 has been employed for each registered street library location. This geographical area is composed of mesh blocks making up a geographic area of about 400 people. Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of public and street libraries that fall within the decile bands of the ABS’s Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) for their locality. This index is a compound evaluation of multiple measures that permit and understanding of the relative advantages and disadvantages a locality experiences. Given the more complex notion of literacy as going beyond the material resources of a locality, the IRSAD is presented in this analysis as a useful indicator because of the way it offsets advantages, but also includes a wider set of measure than simply ‘income’ or ‘education’ (including income, education, employment, occupation, housing, and other factors, such as poor English language skills).<sup>5</sup>

In line with the general findings of the North American research, the placement of street libraries in Australia positively corresponds with relative advantage, but in a more linear relationship than some of those studies identified (Schmidt and Hale observed a higher proportion of Little Free Libraries in the medium and lower income neighbourhoods than identified in this study). Overall, while almost half of Australian street libraries are in the top 30 percent most advantaged areas (47.4%), less than one in five are in the bottom three deciles. It is worth reiterating Sarmiento et al.’s (2018) observation that this implies that as ‘a semi-autonomous urban intervention dependent on the initiative of actors, the spatial distribution of [Little Free Libraries] has the potential to reflect existing disparities rather than counter them’ (p. 240). Underlining this notion of the disparity associated with autonomy, the addition of public libraries in Figure 2 is provided as a comparator.<sup>6</sup> Public libraries tend to be distributed in greater deference to the needs of people in the lower IRSAD bands. This reflects the capacity of these planned institutions to be better targeted to local needs than the ad hoc nature of street library construction under the current promotion and adoption model.



**Figure 2.** Socio-economic distribution of street and public libraries in Australia.

As might be anticipated from this finding, the survey research confirmed that street librarians themselves are not as diverse a group of people as the Australian population. 1.3% of street librarians report as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, compared with 2.8% of the national population (46.4%) (1% of professional librarians; Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, p. 11). 7% speak a language other than English at home, compared with 20.8% of the national population (33.6%) (12% for professional librarians; Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, p. 23).<sup>7</sup> They are also almost two decades older than the average Australian (55.3 years), and – with higher levels of people of retirement age in their ranks (Table 1).

While this might be seen to support Schmidt and Hale’s extrapolation of Little Free Library stewards as representative of the higher socio-economic areas in which they reside and thus condescending elites who engage in a ‘performative act of literary philanthropy’ (2017, p. 24) with regards to their charitable activities (this earlier study might suffer from an ecological fallacy), the Australian evidence does not conform to that finding. Yes, street libraries are associated with areas of greater advantage, but Australia has 1000 of these exchanges in the bottom three IRSAD deciles. While street librarians are likely more culturally homogenous, their income distribution is very similar to that of the Australian population, as illustrated in Table 2. Thus, while street librarians may be more likely to be in areas with higher levels of relative advantage, they are not disproportionately economic elites. It should be noted here that the household income figure is a useful measure because of the highly feminised nature of street librarianship (78.6%; this compares with 84% for professional librarians; Australian Library and Information Association, 2019, p. 9). However, men play a role in street libraries. In addition to the 1 in 5 street librarians who report as male, just under half of all street libraries that are not constructed or installed by the librarian by themselves (39.6% of cases) involve a male relative, and 80% of street libraries created by/with a relative involve a male relative. This appears to reflect the gendered delineation of labour in our society.

### ***The Political Meaning of Street Libraries I: A Threat to Public Libraries?***

Street libraries may serve as a form of general increase in the accessibility of books, but another question of their impact is the extent to which they might displace existing places to access books. On this question we should consider Schmidt and Hale’s (2017) argument that, in North America, the ‘Non-profit Industrial Complex’ of the Little Free Library organisation represents neoliberalism and can play a role in undermining traditional public institutions through promoting street libraries as an individualised

**Table 1.** Comparative age of librarians in Australia.

Age band	Professional librarians <sup>a</sup>	Street librarians	Difference
20–39	21	11	–10
40–49	26	22	–4
50–59	34	26	–8
60–69	19	27	8
more	0	14	14

<sup>a</sup>Source: Australian Library and Information Association (2019, pp. 7–9).

**Table 2.** Street librarians' weekly household income.

Income band	Street Librarians	Australian population	Difference
Nil income	4.0	1.5	2.5
\$1–\$149	1.0	0.8	0.2
\$150–\$299	1.5	2.3	–0.8
\$300–\$399	2.3	3.1	–0.9
\$400–\$499	2.5	7.2	–4.7
\$500–\$649	5.3	4.8	0.4
\$650–\$799	3.8	7.9	–4.1
\$800–\$999	7.3	7.4	–0.1
\$1000–\$1249	11.3	9.0	2.4
\$1250–\$1499	6.8	8.1	–1.3
\$1500–\$1749	5.8	6.6	–0.8
\$1750–\$1999	8.3	6.3	2.0
\$2000–\$2499	12.8	11.7	1.1
\$2500–\$2999	8.3	7.1	1.2
\$3000–\$3499	5.3	4.6	0.6
\$3500–\$3999	3.3	4.2	–0.9
\$4000 or more	10.6	7.4	3.1

alternative to a narrow form of library service provision (books) that appeals to political elites' preferences for privatisation but fails to capture the wide range of services and activities that conventional libraries engage in and their value as sites for the provision of public programmes. Examples of Little Free Libraries and similar exchanges being employed where public library provision is withdrawn can be identified in El Paso, Texas and Detroit, Michigan (Cottrell, 2018), and the organisation has targeted small towns in the United States that lack libraries as foci for the installation of their exchanges (Aldrich, 2015, p. 6).

At this point in time there is no evidence of this having occurred in Australia. Table 3 provides aggregate expenditure on public libraries in Australia during the period that street libraries have been very active, there is no clear linear association between their rise and funding changes in library funding. A rhetorical linkage between street libraries as a form of 'self-help' and defunding public provision is imaginable however in an era of political austerity. Indeed, the topic of street libraries as alternative sources of provision was not mentioned by the State or Local Governments during the 2020–21 library funding issue in South Australia. Though the linkage need not be framed in terms of a trade-off. For example, Hughes's survey of rural libraries in the United States and Canada identified areas where libraries have expanded their service reach to older people through the use of Little Free Libraries within aged care facilities, as part of generalised outreach and partnership strategies (2017). Given the comparative newness of street libraries in Australia as a widespread phenomenon, this question should be tracked over time.

**Table 3.** Funding for Australian Public Libraries 2015–2020 (National and State Libraries Australia, 2021).

Financial year	Total expenditure on public libraries	Year-on-year change	Per capita collection expenditure
2015–16	\$1184.79m		\$5.25
2016–17	\$1227.81m	+\$43.02	\$5.14
2017–18	\$1224.06m	–\$3.75	\$5.18
2018–19	\$1331.17m	+\$107.11	\$5.28
2019–20	\$1286.9m	–\$44.27	\$5.36

## ***The Political Meaning of Street Libraries II: A Threat to Professional Librarianship?***

While it might be easy to dismiss little library boxes on fences as a threat to public libraries, a related critical reading of street libraries that should be considered is their wider ‘political’ meaning and the type of librarianship they encourage on the part of their owner-maintainers.

This takes several forms. At the level of professional practice, Mattern (2012) identified tensions between information professionals and street librarians. She observes that a ‘phonebooth full of books’ fails to capture the complexity of traditional libraries and the skills that go to producing their service offerings, and is critical of the role of Little Free Libraries in promoting a notion that librarianship can be reduced to an activity able to be undertaken by amateurs as a hobby. Here the concern is that the popularisation of a folk librarianship comes at the expense of the standing of information professionals and a failure to recognise the skills and training developed by contemporary information professionals.

Using the Australian case this concern can be examined in several ways. First, we should note that this ‘hard binary’ between the professional and the amateur can be overstated. In survey freetext responses, a non-trivial number of street librarians spontaneously identified themselves as current or former librarians or teachers.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the type of practices street librarians engage in can be examined through their curatorial activities. Professional librarians engage in the practice of selection and management of their collections, using underlying philosophies to inform the choices they make. In Kozak’s (2019) study of Little Free Library stewards in the United States, she considers their practices and the extent to which they might be reflective of the general professional commitment of professional librarians in providing uncensored access to books or be ‘book challengers’ who censor their collections actively in line with personal social and political philosophies. From her set of interviews with 14 stewards she identified both tendencies were present among stewards. This is a somewhat false comparison, however. Kozak does recognise that, contrary to an idealised view of public libraries as free-speech havens, ‘silent censorship’ exists that contributes to a ‘prescription of orthodoxy’ to some extent in public library settings.

Using the mixed method research, it is clear from the focus group discussions and the questionnaire responses that street librarians do engage in both ‘positive’ (the solicitation of content that balances their collection) and ‘negative’ (culling and censorship) management of their collections.

Questionnaire responses show 48.3% positively add to their street library collections (moving material from and to their personal collections, buying new or second-hand material, or soliciting for material from others as donations) on a weekly or more frequent basis. This commonly focuses on ensuring that the libraries are both fully stocked, and have a range of books available. Children’s books, in particular, appear in high demand, with freetext questionnaire responses and focus group participants highlighting efforts to provide these, however street librarians often have a sense of their ‘patrons’ and use this mental schema as the basis of determining what a ‘balanced’ collection might look like. Reflecting the tendencies for street librarians to identify as bibliophiles, very few respondents nominated specific types of books that they promoted

through their positive management of their libraries (such as religious material or works of the ‘Western canon’, one respondent noting each interest in their positive management strategy).

Negative collection management is less common, with 20% of questionnaire respondents indicate street librarians cull material on a weekly or more frequent basis. Street librarians cite the reasons for removing this material in roughly equal measure: Physical quality – due to the poor condition of materials deposited by others (29.9%); freeing space – low perceived demand for material in the street library (31.2%), and; subject matter – the ‘inappropriateness’ of the content (28.4%).

Of those that do cull their collections, how many represent ‘book challengers’, as identified as a concern in Kozak’s work? [Table 4](#) provides a sense of this practice, confirming that a small proportion of street librarians engaging in culling on the basis of book content, but the underlying basis for choice are considerably variable – commonly driven by the disproportionate availability of some material (aside from religious proselytising materials, extremely popular recent novels are often over donated). Some street librarian practices can be seen as a folk iteration of the well-known MUSTIE criteria for the management of library collections, where content is ‘weeded’ (or the other euphemism ‘deselected’) on the basis it might be misleading, ugly, superseded, trivial, irrelevant, or found elsewhere (Slote, 1997). Some material is clearly removed on the basis that its content conflicts with the social and political views of the street librarian (the essential content of the work, but also sometimes it’s ‘low quality’, such as ‘pulp’ novels).<sup>9</sup>

## Placemaking for Community Building

A commonly promoted benefit of street libraries is fostering ‘community’. Street Library Incorporated state they ‘have the simple goal of bringing neighbourhoods all over Australia closer together’ ([n.d. a](#)), and community related objectives are the second most common reason street librarians cite as their motivation in establishing their exchange (30.2% of respondents). In considering this topic, the literature on street libraries and

**Table 4.** Reason for culling ‘inappropriate’ material from the street library.

Material type	Percentage reporting this reason for removal
Religious material	23.6
Explicit content (adult)	17.1
Deemed out of date	7.9
Political material	6.7
Textbooks/manuals	5.9
Advertising material	5.6
Explicit content (violence)	5.4
Magazines	4.3
Low ‘quality’ literature	4.1
Offence (racist, sexist, -phobic)	3.4
Non-book content	2.9
Self-help / diet book	2.3
Unpopular material	2.2
Cookbooks	1.8
Large size of book	1.6
Excessive content of one type	0.9
Supernatural themes	0.7
Other	3.6

similar activities around the world links two concepts together: street libraries as generative of local ‘places’ that promote local interaction and exchange, leading to the generation of a number of benefits, a key one measurable as the interconnections we call ‘social capital’.

‘Placemaking’ is a way of thinking about shaping public spaces that involve collective and democratic participation. One appeal of this concept is its link to increased individual and community wellbeing through creation of public space where people can engage in positive activities, such as exercise, socialisation, and community activities that produce social, economic, and environmental benefits (Hes et al., 2019, pp. 10–11). Placemaking can be seen as a formal, top-down process (Thomas, 2016) and a more anarchic set of interventions into the local landscape, sometimes referred to as ‘making place’ or ‘tactical urbanism’ (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). In Australia, Street libraries have already become integrated into the lexicon of planners’ more formal placemaking strategies (the City of Paramatta, among other Australian municipalities, has incorporated them into placemaking activities; n.d.), while examples of ‘guerrilla’ interventions into the landscape can be seen in examples of unregulated artistic works, gardens, commercial and non-profit exchange activity.

On this latter point, Thorpe has identified Australian street libraries firmly in the field of making place, describing them as ‘DIY urban interventions’, that provide ‘inclusion, community, power and political voice’ through an expanded notion of people’s ‘sense of ownership’ of their local area (2018, p. 26). Internationally, Topaloğlu and Çebi (2018) argue these types of interventions ‘disturb ... everyday practices and routine spatial choreographies, they create experimental, interactive and reflective mediums in which citizens can communicate with their surroundings and re-structure their spatial perceptions and conceptions of the city.’ Sarmiento et al. (2018) contend that Little Free Libraries ‘can be considered part of an emerging trend in micro-urbanist interventions ... where the owners and stewards see their libraries as interventions encouraging reading, art, space for community gathering, and creating cost-effective reuse and distribution systems’ (p. 233).

This ‘disruptive’ character of street libraries is contested in the international literature, however. Webster et al.’s (2015) study highlights the ‘grassroots’ nature of street libraries in their interviews with librarians in Portland. Contrary to the perception that these were expressions of a global movement heavily influenced ‘top-down’ by the Little Free Library organisation, they argue they are local practices responding to their situated communities:

particularities manifested themselves in form and function and were directly related to the practices each steward emphasised, which often differed in subtle ways. While the exchanges in our study were influenced by other exchanges and sometimes inherited common characteristics, the stewards were often only peripherally aware of other exchanges in the same neighbourhood. The exchanges were intended for the local population – the immediate neighbours and, sometimes, people who pass through the neighbourhood on their daily commute or frequent visits. (p. 14)

Alternatively, Schlesselman-Tarango is critical of the political work the ‘cuteness’ of Little Free Libraries performs (2017). Reading the physical cuteness of Little Free ‘dolls house’ Libraries in terms of manifestation of nostalgia, she argues this represents a denial of the political present. Due to this she observes that ‘... their element of craft too gestures

to a simpler and perhaps safer and less “confusing” time. Their appeal turns on idyllic notions of “fairytale” communities so safe that they can support a thriving free book exchange ...’ (p. 9).

The linkage between placemaking and fostering community necessitates the use of a concept like social capital to enumerate this potentiality. This is not unproblematic. Engbers et al. (2018) observe that social capital is a contested concept with a variety of meanings and methods for operationalisation. Our interest in this study considers social capital in terms of the intra-communal ties that provide sociability, but also expand the networks of people which facilitate collective action, provide support to people in need, and enrich our social lives. In this sense, social capital facilitates community projects through both linking people together to allow information and resource exchange, as well as establishing common goals and shared norms (Cao et al., 2013, p. 1672). Social capital has been identified as key to a wide range of community benefits (such as lower rates of crime and higher school retention),

In considering the relationship between libraries and social capital, Goulding (2004, pp. 3–4) has highlighted the role of traditional libraries as physical places that provide sites for interaction and community building, but this is contingent on service design that facilitates a diversity of patrons to be engaged in spaces that permit sociability. This has been demonstrated by empirical work undertaken by Johnson (2010). Social capital can, therefore, potentially be created both through the operations of street libraries as ‘places’ that foster community interactions, but also as part of the ‘methodology’ of placemaking as a participative process that has people come together to collaborate around the creation of this shared space (Kelkar & Spinelli, 2016), and as examples of communal practices that promote a particular mode of living and giving.

The existing literature on street libraries and Little Free Libraries has relatively limited empirical evidence on the question of their social capital and community building effects. In North America, Schmidt and Hale have questioned the community building aspects of Little Free Libraries in their Canadian study: ‘generalizing from comments on the closed Facebook group for stewards, many did not desire interaction with people who came to look at their LFL<sup>o</sup>; in many examples, it was studiously avoided’ (2017, p. 25). In Australia, experiments have examined them as a potential solution to locations that lack social interactivity. For example, the University of New South Wales’ City Futures Research Centre report a street library as an effective way of connecting local people in a large strata complex in the suburb of Canterbury, Sydney (2017). The importance of communal interactivity around these places has been highlighted by further work of Johnson, who focused on the role of librarians in building community interactions and providing support to library patrons (social and instrumental supports) (2012). Thus, the street library may not generate social capital due to its physicality, but through the social and communal practices and interactions that go into its establishment, management, and use.

This limited evidence base requires us to consider the nature of the social connections that may be generated by street libraries in the Australian case.

### ***Placemaking Processes and Ownership Characteristics of Street Libraries***

Before examining this question of social capital, it is important to consider the type of ‘placemaking’ that street librarians are engaged in as a type of intervening variable.

Looking at [Table 5](#), one of the most striking results of the survey of street librarians is that the location of these exchanges is dominated by their position on private property, and particularly detached or semi-detached private houses (compare this with the 32% of the Australian population who rent; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). Following Thorpe's interest in the way placemaking activities can be connected with formal and informal notions of 'ownership', this demonstrates strongly how street libraries are associated with formal ownership regimes, but also formal regimes where ownership is not shared in *any* way – observe how privately owned multi-dwelling structures (e.g. apartment buildings and units) are considerably very under-represented (compared with 13% of Australian households that live in these types of arrangements).

The evidence in this figure and that presented above has several implications for our understanding of street libraries in relation to places and placemaking.

First, it helps us understand the type of 'intervention' they represent. Namely, while 'bottom-up' activities largely undertaken outside of formal planning processes, Australian's street libraries are not the preserve of stereotypical 'DIY' interventionists reshaping the public urban space (likely to be younger, urban professionals who are not yet formal property owners; Douglas, 2015), but middle-aged and established property owners who are using the boundaries of their private space for community purposes in and outside of urban areas.

Second, this data also explains the longevity of street libraries in Australia. On average one in twenty libraries will be decommissioned each year, making the 'half-life' of street libraries ten years on average.<sup>10</sup> Homeowners are far less likely to move in any given year than non-owners, permitting installations like street libraries to have greater permanence. Thus, they are rarely examples of placemaking practices by people who have precarious relationships with space (Hinkson, 2017).

Third, it explains the type of interactions that street librarians might have with other members of their community. The association of street libraries with the boundaries of privately-owned homes – the 'fence line' – largely confirms Webster et al.'s observation about Little Free Libraries in Portland, Oregon being located at 'soft edges' or the 'nebulous zone of semi-private space dividing private and public space' where neighbours are likely to interact in 'scaffolded' interactions (2015); in this case, that the interactions between property owner-occupier and passer-by are shaped through the clear sharing framework of the street library's exhortation: 'Take a book. Give a Book. Share a Book.'. This explains why street librarians seldom report their activities create problems

**Table 5.** Location of Australian street libraries, by location type.

Location	Percentage
Single private home (e.g. a house), owned by your/your family	73.3
Single private home, rented by you/your family	4.8
Multi-dwelling private home (e.g. a unit block), owned and on owner space	1.0
Multi-dwelling private home, owned and on common space	1.4
Multi-dwelling private home, rented and on rented space	0.6
Multi-dwelling private home, rented and on common space	0.4
Commercial property (e.g. a business, private school)	3.0
Public open space (e.g. a park)	3.0
Government property (e.g. a local government building, public school)	1.6
Property owned, rented or used by a non-profit organisation (e.g. community club, religious school)	3.8
Other	7.0

**Table 6.** Street library construction method.

Construction	Percent
It is a unique design	30.2
Kit from Street Libraries Australia	24.6
It is an old shelf / fridge / or other recycled object	24.6
Ready to install library from Street Libraries Australia	7.8
Commissioned	3.2
Using plans from somewhere else	2.6
Other, please elaborate	2.4
Using the plans from Street Library Australia	2.2
Kit from elsewhere	1.4
Ready to install library from elsewhere	1.0

with neighbours (98.5% reporting this ‘never’ occurs, with only 1.5% reporting this occurs ‘frequently’ or ‘occasionally’). Street librarians ‘own’ these boundaries, both in the legal and cultural sense. Unlike media coverage from the United States – where there are regular reports of conflict between stewards and local governments over issues like planning and neighbour disputes (Aldrich, 2015, pp. 156–158) – street librarians in Australia report problems with local governments occur never in 98.8% of cases.

These findings need to be moderated against the known diversity of street librarians and their geographic distribution. The motivational diversity of street libraries is consistent with Webster et al.’s view of their management as localised and individualised practices that are not overly determined by a discourse promoted by the ‘global movement’/ Little Free Library organisation or Street Library Incorporated. This is also seen in the non-homogeneity of their design and manufacture. As Table 6 demonstrates, street libraries take a range of material forms, and thus deny – to some degree – their strict characterisation as a specific type of bourgeois and depoliticised activity following Schlesselman-Tarango’s critique of their deployment of a neutralising ‘cuteness’.

### ***Street Libraries: Generators or Expressions of Social Capital?***

The questionnaire asked several questions of street librarians that can inform our understanding of the social capital benefits of establishing and maintaining a street library, as well as the social capital of people who become street librarians. These include a question explicitly about new forms of interactions with people because of maintaining a street library, about maintaining and establishing the library, and a question asking participants to nominate if they know someone socially from a list of occupations. This ‘occupations’ question was recently employed in a national study of social capital in Australia conducted by Sheppard and Biddle (2017) and provides one of the few ‘baseline’ studies of social capital in Australia.

The responses to these questions refine our understanding about street libraries and social capital. First, using a comparison with the national data collected by Sheppard and Biddle, we can see that Street Librarians do not have unusually high levels of social connectivity. This is illustrated in Table 7 which demonstrates their cited connections are slightly lower than the population average.<sup>11</sup> This allows us to conclude that street libraries are not a ‘preserve’ of people with high pre-existing social capital. They are not, therefore expressions of advantage of this type. Establishment and management of street libraries helps us develop this understanding of the social ‘embeddedness’ of

**Table 7.** Number of people known socially, by occupation type.

	Street librarians	Population
Average	8.7	9.7
standard deviation	4.6	4.1

street libraries. Of the respondents who did not establish the street library themselves (53.9% of total), non-relatives were involved in 38.9% of cases. In the day-to-day management of street libraries, only 6.7% involve non-relative friends (1.1%) or community groups (5.6%). The latter include church groups, service groups, school/childcare communities, and environmental organisations. This does talk to an individualised ‘ownership’ of these projects, consistent with the position of them in ‘private’ public-private space as identified above, but also a practice of creation that does not capture the participative social capital benefits of undertaking placemaking via co-design.

This question also allowed us to determine if running a street library improves an individual’s social capital. Further analysis of responses from the ‘occupations’ question would suggest that the answer is ‘No’. Looking at a correlation between the length of time spent running a street library (in years) and the number of occupations selected, a positive correlation of 0.059 can be reported, far too low to suggest a meaningful relationship. This, however, needs to be tempered by the comparatively short time window that the average street library in Australia has been in operation: 19.2 months.

While the correlation between social network diversity and street library ownership is weak, there are social interaction benefits associated with street libraries. From the questionnaire’s explicit question regarding new interactions, 23% of street librarians reported that they had ‘come to know another person who runs a street library’ following their engagement with this practice. Further, 23.2% reported they had ‘joined a social media group about street libraries’ and 53.8% that they had ‘come to know a person who uses your library’. While less than one in five reported none of these interaction benefits (17.6%) and 42.1% reported one of these sociability benefits, 24.3% reported two, and 15.8% reported all three.

Overall, therefore, community interaction benefits of street libraries are real, if apparently restricted to a narrow band of people who may not be dramatically outside of the existing type of people with whom street librarians socialise with prior to initiation of this activity.

### **“Take a Book. Give a Book. Share a Book.”**

The final question for investigation about street libraries is the role they might play in the alternative economy. This topic has been of considerable interest in recent decades, particularly as new technologies has facilitated peer-to-peer markets associated with accommodation (i.e. Airbnb) and transport (i.e. Uber). In this area several different, but related concepts are relevant, that of the ‘gift’, ‘sharing’ and ‘circular’ economy.

The ‘gift economy’ is a ‘mode of exchanging goods, services, or other socially valued things that does not involve the medium of money and is founded on the principle of reciprocity’ (Rogers et al., 2013). While the anonymous nature of street library use can be read in terms of an individualistic isolation from the community, the Street Library

Incorporated motto highlights the reciprocal nature of the exchange. This aligns with gift exchange theory, which denotes a threefold obligation: giving, receiving, and returning a like gift (de Peyrelongue et al., 2017). Thus, the 'branded' exchange does not just serve as a 'gift' to the community, but invokes and promotes the notion of reciprocity. As Street Library Incorporated state 'When people take a book and leave a book, they create a cycle of generosity that allows them to share what they love with those around them' (n.d. a).

The related concept of the 'sharing economy' has been plagued by considerable definitional ambiguity, creating problems in its meaningful application (Schlagwein et al., 2019). But relevant elements for the purposes of this paper focus on creating *systems* for exchange among peers, and the role of these systems in extracting use from under-utilised assets. In this regards, Fagundes (2018) and Noh (2016, pp. 98–102) have argued that street library systems reflect this form of 'collaborative consumption', through their role in building communities around the exchanges in question. What is particularly relevant, however, is the role that street libraries might play in freeing 'static assets' from personal book collections and increasing the number of uses that these objects receive prior to final disposal. This reflects the public good characteristics of the information stored in books, in that, while books may be privately held for longer or shorter periods of time, their 'consumption' does not limit reconsumption of their content many times (in economic terms, they may be excludable goods, but their content is non-rival).

This liberation of static assets links the sharing concept to environmental interest in reducing waste and the 'circular economy' (Schwanholz & Leipold, 2020). While the extent to which the most popular examples of the sharing economy reduce consumption in practice is contested (see, for example, Lee et al., 2019), aspects of the exchange where 'the value of products, materials and resources is maintained in the economy as long as possible' reflect the notion of economic and exchange practices that reduce the demand on new resource extraction and waste creation (Merli et al., 2018).

### ***Economic-Equivalent Value of Street Libraries***

Beyond their contribution to and of the community, we can also establish an economic value of the type of economy created by street libraries. Based on the estimate of their total number and questionnaire data about the average estimated turnover each street library has per week, it is possible to estimate that in 2021 the average street library had 721 books pass through it, with the national total annual circulation estimable as 3,599,631 volumes. This compares with the total collection usage of 141,966,136 items in 2019–2020 (National and State Libraries Australia, 2021), or 2.5% of the national public library circulation. While there is no recent Australian economic data on the used book market, if the value of each volume is estimated as worth AU\$2.93,<sup>12</sup> the economic value of street libraries' circulation is just over AU\$10.5m in 2021 and increasing.

To some extent this represents value that has been liberated from the static assets of people who maintain and use street libraries. While we don't know about the contribution practices of patrons, 44.2% of street librarians add material from their personal book collections on a weekly or more frequent basis and 29.7% of street librarians access book donations from others as frequently. This talks to the value of these activities in reducing waste through asset recycling. In a smaller way, these libraries also have a

**Table 8.** Activities of street librarians in maintaining library content.

	Add material to the library from your/their personal collection	Purchase new materials for inclusion in the library	Purchase second-hand materials for inclusion in the library	Acquire free or donated material for inclusion in the library
Daily	5.9	0.0	0.0	3.6
Weekly	38.2	3.1	2.8	26.1
Monthly	35.0	7.3	13.8	33.7
Less than monthly	18.0	17.4	29.7	26.9
Never	2.8	72.3	53.7	9.7

relationship with the private and charitable sectors of the economy: 3.1% of street librarians purchase new materials on a weekly basis, and 2.8% used materials in this timeframe. Overall, street libraries do present the environmental benefits of substitution of new book purchases. A complete breakdown of the frequency of these supply management activities is provided in [Table 8](#).

It should be noted that street libraries have a relationship with the charitable book sector, serving as competitors for donations, sources for purchased content, and receivers of surplus material. As the number of street libraries continues to expand, the question of significant diversion from the charitable supply chain may need to be considered as an economic impact of these activities.

### **What Type of 'Economy' are Street Libraries?**

The discussion above and the questionnaire results illustrated in [Table 8](#) assist in our evaluation of the nature of the type of economy that street libraries represent. Put simply, we can ask: to what extent are street libraries generative of a system of positive reciprocity that makes them comparatively self-sustaining systems?

In this area we can identify that the regular (weekly or more frequently) intervention of street librarians to ensure that their libraries have additional content occurs in 57.7% of cases. This reflects an imperfect gift exchange model captured by these libraries (not all who take, give), but also some degree of a tragedy of the commons. When asked about problems faced by street librarians, the most recurrent issue reported was periodic 'cleaning out' of collections (bulk removal) which 3.5% of street librarians reported occurred 'frequently' and 24% 'occasionally' (compared with the second most common problem, vandalism/graffiti, which never occurred frequently and occurred occasionally for 12.2% of survey respondents).

Thus, street libraries are a 'leaky bucket' that needs to be refreshed with newly sourced content regularly. However, this is not a universal experience of street librarians, and the current practices of street librarians does not appear to be too onerous, given the estimated ten-year half-life of street libraries. Further, given the comparatively small amount of new material purchased to add to these collections, street libraries do reflect circular economy practices, significantly recycling books that are reused, including diversion from landfill. This can be institutionalised. For example, Street Library Incorporated works with a waste collection social enterprise called Junk in Victoria to identify books suitable for distribution in street libraries and divert them to those exchanges (interview: Sean Harken, 9 June 2021).

Street librarians clearly do not see themselves as simply maintenance and janitorial staff for these community exchanges, but active in both curating (as discussed above) and sustaining these quasi-public spaces. This explains a higher level of intervention and the motivation to be engaged with the collections and what they represent to the community. Thus, street libraries represent both functional sites for local 'sharing' economy practices, but are sustained by the 'gift' of their maintainers – both through their personal giving of book content, and through the time spent in acquiring 'free' material for their collections.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided new knowledge about the nature of, and practices around, street libraries in Australia. Some of the findings align with the evidence produced in North America: the comparatively focused distribution of street libraries into locations that are less likely to need their services to address disadvantages in accessing books. In expanding on these small studies with a wider geographic analysis, however, our understanding of the spatial distribution of street libraries is enhanced. This adds depth to our interpretation of the distribution of street libraries in more affluent areas beyond North American analysis that focuses on individualised displays of public giving as a primary driver for their establishment. The importance of the ownership of, and rights of access to, particular boundary spaces has been identified in this analysis.

In addition, while some interesting claims have been made about the possibility of practices around street libraries to generate community spaces, social capital, and a sharing economy, the research presented in this paper has assisted in quantifying the likelihood that these communal and personal benefits are realised. In this study street librarians have been discovered to be both like and unlike the characterisation of their peers in the international literature, and this paper contributes to debates about place-making, community, and alternative economic practices.

As this phenomenon is likely to continue to expand, a more fulsome understanding of the implications of street libraries and the possible benefits that they provide to their patrons would benefit from a study of the people who frequent these local book exchanges. This paper has implications for those organisations who may want to utilise this model of social sharing for policy objectives like literacy support, waste reduction, community building, and placemaking.

## Notes

1. Street Library Incorporated has not established an online book registration and tracking system at the time of writing.
2. This estimate was made by comparing the number of street libraries located in the Australian Capital Territory in Street Library Incorporated's database with a second list maintained by the Lil Street Libraries Facebook group. The second list included a larger number of street libraries in that territory as it does not rely on voluntary registration, but allows 'spotters' to add libraries to the list, making the list more accurate. This allowed the national registration list to be adjusted based on the estimate it included a 57.4% reporting rate.
3. This list is publicly available information which includes location, registration date, a photo, name and description. The information is embedded in an online map (<https://streetlibrary.org.au/find/>).

4. This study, however, represented more of a proof of concept of the value of geographical information systems in identifying locations where these services should be targeted, rather than an analysis of their performance per se.
5. The complete set of census measures employed in the IRSAD are INC\_HIGH, INC\_LOW, NOYR12ORHIGHER, NOEDU, CERTIFICATE, ATUNI, DIPLOMA, DEGREE, UNEMPLOYED, OCC\_LABOUR, OCC\_DRIVERS, OCC\_SERVICE\_L, OCC\_SALES\_L, OCC\_PROF, OCC\_MANAGER, LOWRENT, OVERCROWD, HIGHBED, HIGHRENT, HIGHMORTGAGE, OWNING, SPAREBED, CHILDJOBLESS, ONEPARENT, NOCAR, DISABILITYU70, ENGLISHPOOR, SEPDIVORCED, NONET, HIGHCAR (ABS, 2018).
6. The geospatial analysis in this figure employed a smaller geographical area for street libraries than for public libraries. The latter used the IRSAD at the much larger postcode level, as a means of recognising the significantly different 'catchment areas' for each type of library.
7. The questionnaire and its recruitment materials were only distributed in English, which may suppress this figure to some degree.
8. Seven percent of respondents spontaneously reported currently or previously working in libraries and/or teaching and related fields. A further study would be required to explore how their professional expertise and experiences inform and shape their practices as street librarians.
9. The exact criteria used to classify inappropriate books for removal is personal. In the focus groups, examples of books were often cited as illustrations of books that might be removed (for example, the erotic *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel was cited on more than one occasion), rather than the type of more precise criteria that might guide professional librarians. Unlike the Little Free Library organisation, Street Library Incorporated does not provide guidance on collection management (Street Library Incorporated, n.d. b).
10. This estimate was created through a remote visual inspection of registered street libraries using the Google Street View tool. Where the location of registered libraries could be identified using this tool (1,031 street libraries), it was possible to determine if the library was still in its original location and compare the date of registration (as the assumed establishment date) with the date of the Google image. This allowed a decline over a five-year period to be calculated, and then a longer-term projection to be made including an upper and lower confidence boundary at ten years (59.1% and 48.9% respectively).
11. Note the two studies employed different collection methods: CATI for the original social capital study, online questionnaire for the street library study.
12. This book value was determined by taking the average value of 1,000 random books from the Brotherhood of St Laurence second hand book sales website (<https://www.brotherhoodbooks.org.au>) (excluding antiquarian books). To create a conservative estimate, this average was quartered, as the Brotherhood report that 'dedicated volunteers sort, clean and price high-quality donated books', and thus the quality of books sold via this service might be higher on average than those passing through street libraries.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the reviewers for their incisive comments on the draft, Myfanwy Chen for her input in the development of this paper, and Cecile Schuldiener and Street Library Incorporated for their assistance in the research implementation.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Dr Peter John Chen* is a senior lecturer in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney.

## ORCID

Peter John Chen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-7146>

## References

- Aldrich, M. (2015). *The Little free library book: Take a book • return a book*. Coffee House Press.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Technical paper: Socio-economic indexes for areas (SEIFA)*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021, June 30). *Home ownership and housing tenure*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/home-ownership-and-housing-tenure>.
- Australian Library and Information Association. (2019). *Workforce diversity trend report 2019*.
- Cao, Q., Lu, Y., Dong, D., Tang, Z., & Li, Y. (2013). The roles of bridging and bonding in social media communities. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, 64(8), 1671–1681. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.22866>
- City Futures Research Centre. (2017). *Strata social interaction. Case study: Broughton street Canterbury*. UNSW Australia.
- City of Parramatta. (n.d.). *Placemaking projects*. <https://www.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/council/place-management/placemaking-projects>.
- Cottrell, M. (2018). The question of Little Free Libraries: Are they a boon or bane to communities? *American Libraries Magazine*, January/February, pp. 32–36.
- Creamer, E. (2018). *An introduction to fully integrated mixed methods research*. Sage.
- Davis, A., Rice, C., Spagnolo, D., Struck, J., & Bull, S. (2015). Exploring pop-up libraries in practice. *The Australian Library Journal*, 64(2), 94–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.2015.1011383>
- de Peyrelongue, B., Masclaf, O., & Guillard, V. (2017). The need to give gratuitously: A relevant concept anchored in catholic social teaching to envision the consumer behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 145(4), 739–755. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3130-x>
- Douglas, G. C. C. (2015). The formalities of informal improvement: Technical and scholarly knowledge at work in do-it-yourself urban design. *Journal of Urbanism*, 9(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2015.1029508>
- Engbers, T. A., Thompson, M. F., & Slaper, T. F. (2018). Theory and measurement in social capital research. *Social Indicators Research*, 132(2), 537–558. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1299-0>
- Fagundes, D. (2018). Why less property is more: Inclusion, dispossession, & subjective well-being. *Iowa Law Review*, 103(4), 1361–1418.
- The Footpath Library. (2019). *About us*. <https://www.footpathlibrary.org/about/>.
- Goulding, A. (2004). Editorial: Libraries and social capital. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 36(1), 3–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000604042965>
- Hemmerechts, K., Agirdag, O., & Kavadias, D. (2017). The relationship between parental literacy involvement, socio-economic status and reading literacy. *Educational Review*, 69(1), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2016.1164667>
- Hes, D., Mateo-Babiano, I., & Lee, G. (2019). Fundamentals of placemaking for the built environment: An introduction. In S. Hes & C. Hernandez-Santin (Eds.), *Placemaking fundamentals for the built environment* (pp. 1–13). Springer.
- Hinkson, M. (2017). Precarious placemaking. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 46(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102116-041624>
- Hughes, C. (2017). Rural libraries services for older adults: A nationwide survey. *Public Library Quarterly*, 36(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2017.1275626>

- Hume, L. E., Lonigan, C. J., & McQueen, J. D. (2015). Children's literacy interest and its relation to parents' literacy-promoting practices. *Journal of Research in Reading, 38*(2), 172–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.2012.01548.x>
- Johnson, C. A. (2010). Do public libraries contribute to social capital?: A preliminary investigation into the relationship. *Library & Information Science Research, 32*(2), 147–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2009.12.006>
- Johnson, C. A. (2012). How do public libraries create social capital? An analysis of interactions between library staff and patrons. *Library & Information Science Research, 34*(1), 52–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2011.07.009>
- Kavaler, T. (2021, April 4). First trilingual street library to open in Jerusalem. *The medialine*. <https://themedialine.org/by-region/jerusalem/first-trilingual-street-library-to-open-in-jerusalem/>.
- Kelkar, N. P., & Spinelli, G. (2016). Building social capital through creative placemaking. *Strategic Design Research Journal, 9*(2), 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.4013/sdrj.2016.92.01>
- Kozak, N. (2019). 'I can't have that in there': Little Free Library stewards and intellectual freedom. *The Library Quarterly, 89*(3), 185–202. <https://doi.org/10.1086/703466>
- Kutt, K. (2018). The BookboXX: A sustainable street library. *Going green: Implementing sustainable strategies in libraries around the world* (Vol. 177, pp. 94–102). De Gruyter.
- Lee, K., Jin, Q., Animesh, A., & Ramaprasad, J. (2019). *Ride-hailing services and sustainability: The impact of Uber on the transportation mode choices of drivers, riders, and walkers*, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3244207>.
- Lingel, J. (2012). Occupy Wall Street and the myth of technological death of the library. *First Monday, 17*(8). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v17i8.3845>
- Little Free Library. (2021) About. <https://littlefreelibrary.org/about/>
- Lydon, M., & Garcia, A. (2015). *Tactical urbanism: Short-term action for long-term change*. Island Press.
- Martell, E. (2017). Oases in a book desert: Little Free Libraries and environmental literacy. *Legacy*, July/August, pp. 34–35.
- Mattern, S. (2012). Marginalia: Little libraries in the urban margins. *Places*, May. <https://placesjournal.org/article/marginalia-little-libraries-in-the-urban-margins/>.
- Merli, R., Preziosi, M., & Acampora, A. (2018). How do scholars approach the circular economy? A systematic literature review. *Journal of Cleaner Production, 178*, 703–722. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.12.112>
- Miller, D., Sharp, C., Minnich, C., & Sokolowski, K. (2018). Book floods and book deserts. *Voices from the Middle, 25*(3), 45–47.
- National and State Libraries Australia. (2021). *Australian public libraries statistical report 2019–20 (March)*.
- Neuman, S. B., & Moland, N. (2019). Book deserts: The consequences of income segregation on children's access to print. *Urban Education, 54*(1), 126–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916654525>
- Noh, Y. (2016). A study on applying the sharing economy to libraries. *Journal of the Korean BIBLIA Society for Library and Information Science, 27*(3), 75–98. <https://doi.org/10.14699/kbiblia.2016.27.3.075>
- Rebori, M. K., & Burge, P. (2017). Using geospatial analysis to align little free library locations with community literacy needs. *Journal of Extension, 55*(3), 1–6.
- Rogers, A., Castree, N., & Kitchin, R. (2013). *Gift economy. A dictionary of human geography*. Oxford University Press.
- Sarmiento, C. S., Revel Sims, J., & Morales, A. (2018). Little Free Libraries: an examination of micro-urbanist interventions. *Journal of Urbanism, 11*(2), 233–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2017.1387588>
- Schlagwein, D., Schoder, D., & Spindeldreher, K. (2019). Consolidated, systemic conceptualization, and definition of the 'sharing economy'. *Journal for the Association of Information Science and Technology, 71*(7), 817–838. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24300>

- Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (2017). How cute! Race, gender, and neutrality in libraries. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 12(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v12i1.3850>
- Schmidt, J., & Hale, J. (2017). Little Free Libraries<sup>®</sup>: Interrogating the impact of the branded book exchange. *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 3, 14–41.
- Schwanholz, J., & Leipold, S. (2020, October 1). Sharing for a circular economy? An analysis of digital sharing platforms' principles and business models. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 269, 122327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.122327>
- Sheppard, J., & Biddle, N. (2017). Class, capital, and identity in Australian society. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), 500–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2017.1364342>
- Slote, S. J. (1997). *Weeding library collections: Library weeding methods*. Libraries Unlimited.
- Snow, C. E., & Verhoeven, L. T. (Eds.). (2001). *Literacy and motivation: Reading engagement in individuals and groups*. L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Street Library Incorporated. (2019). *How to spread the word, build and sustain support*.
- Street Library Incorporated. (n.d. a). *Our mission*. <https://streetlibrary.org.au/our-mission/>.
- Street Library Incorporated. (n.d. b). *What makes a great librarian?*. <https://streetlibrary.org.au/street-librarians/>.
- Thomas, D. (2016). *Placemaking: An urban design methodology*. Taylor and Francis.
- Thorpe, A. (2018). Hegel's hipsters: Claiming ownership in the contemporary city. *Social & Legal Studies*, 27(1), 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663917701304>
- Topaloğlu, İ., & Çebi, D. P. (2018). New interventions in public space: Spatial readings through art and architectural installations. In N. Prowse (Ed.), *Intervening spaces: Respatialisation and the body* (pp. 132–155). BRILL.
- Webster, T., Gollner, K., & Nathan, L. (2015). Neighbourhood book exchanges: Localising information practices. *Information Research*, 20(1), 1–17. <https://InformationR.net/ir/20-3/paper684.html>.
- Wilson, D. (2020). *Spatial politics and literacy: An analysis of Little Free Libraries and neighborhood distribution of book-sharing depositories in Portland, Oregon and Detroit, Michigan* [Unpublished masters dissertation]. Portland State University.