# TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PARTICIPATORY LIBRARY

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to debate the evolving relationship between libraries and users, justify the idea of participatory library and the use of the "participatory library" term. The paper also discusses the development trend of the participatory library and calls for empirical research on this area.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Various sources of literature are collected and examined. Together with the inclusion of personal ideas and experience, a wide range of opinions on the contemporary library is compared and synthesized.

**Findings:** The paper presents changes in the relationship between libraries and users in various periods of library development. It indicates an excessive attention on Library 2.0 while neglecting the participatory nature of the contemporary library. It also suggests that the term "participatory library" should be used as it reflects the true nature of the contemporary library, and calls for empirical work on participatory library.

**Originality/value:** This discussion is moving forward and challenging our thinking about participatory library. It provides librarians, library managers, scholars, and the library community with a fresh perspective of contemporary library.

**Keywords:** Participatory library, Library 2.0, Social media, Web 2.0, Participatory technologies, Library users

**Paper type:** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

The "participatory library" is an emerging concept that has captured the attention of the library community. The term was first coined by Lankes and Silverstein (2006). It refers to the idea that a participatory library as a truly integrated library system must allow users to take part in core functions of the library like the catalogue system but not the periphery. Whilst some discussion on the term has arisen (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007; Lankes, Silverstein, Nicholson & Marshall, 2007) the term has not yet been fully adopted into mainstream library discourse and practice, nor has it been discussed in empirical studies. This paper will build upon the existing discussions. First, it begins by stating the problem that exists and which this paper will explore. Next, it investigates the changing relationship of libraries and users. This is followed by a

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justification for the use of the term "participatory library" and a discussion on the development trend of the participatory library. The paper then raises a need for further studies on this area and it concludes by confirming the changes in the library evolution.

## 2. Problem Statement

Libraries and librarians have always had a certain relationship with the users. This relationship has been changing due to the introduction of emerging technologies in recent years. Libraries traditionally were a "temple of literature" in which librarians were "book keepers" or "temple guardians". Their typical roles and tasks included acquisition (review, selection, and purchase of resources for the collection), cataloguing and organising (description of resources and making them ready for use), and serving users (recommendation of books and materials to readers, checking materials in and out, and answering users' questions). All of these tasks were often carried out by librarians without the involvement of users. In such libraries, the relationship between libraries and users were purely viewed as "book providers - receivers" or "libraries - readers". This means libraries provided what they had or what they owned (mostly books and other paper-based formats) while users passively received what libraries offered. The library was a closed system and users usually could not directly access books or items on the shelves. Librarians were only persons who could access closed stacks. Users obtained items via a request slip with some brief bibliographic information about the item that was given to librarians. This one-directional service limited both users interaction with the library system as well as their contribution of ideas to the development of the library.

As new and emerging technologies came into existence and were adopted, this relationship has changed and evolved. The introduction of network technologies, e-books, e-journals, and various electronic information resources has enriched library collections and services, and upgraded the roles of both libraries (librarians) and users. From book keepers, librarians have now become information editors, information organisers, and information advisors. Similarly, from readers or viewers, library users have become watchers, listeners and browsers. The relationship between libraries and users has changed to "information services providers – clients" in which the library users have been more independent in choosing and using library services. For instance, they can access library online databases at anytime and anywhere, register to receive notifications on a topic of interest via email, or comment and give feedback on the usability of the library website. These mean that they can flexibly use library services as well as partially contribute to the service improvement.

The degree of user involvement has become clearer, especially the recent emergence of Web 2.0 which has brought in new opportunities for library users to be more involved in the library activities. Web 2.0 was a term coined by DiNucci (1999) and popularised by Tim O'Reilly (2005). Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web that allows a greater degree of participation, individualization, collaboration and co-creation. It includes things such as wikis, social networking spaces and micro-blogging. More and more of the world's libraries are starting to integrate the use of Web 2.0 within the design and delivery of their programs and services. Known as Library 2.0, a spin-off of Web 2.0, this new approach to library services is giving more power to users and providing them opportunities to be a real part of libraries (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007; Lankes, Silverstein, Nicholson, & Marshall, 2007; Maness, 2006a).

Library 2.0 represents a new type of library service; one that more fully embraces the principles of participation (the participation must occur at the core of the library, for example the catalogue rather than just adding a blog or a photosharing site (Lankes et al., 2007). We are witnessing the birth of a new library model that is more firmly grounded in user engagement and participation than ever before. Web 2.0 is challenging librarians to re-conceptualise and re-position the role of users within the context of the contemporary library. This context has raises a need to understand what is happening to the library evolution and what is the true nature of the contemporary library.

## 3.  Libraries and users: the relationship is changing

The emergence of digital technologies and social media has not only diversified information resources and services but also enabled library users to engage in and contribute to the development of library services. In other words, such emerging technologies and social media have enabled users to play new and extended roles which they were unable to do in the past.

### 3.1. From information users (consumers) to information (co-)creators and information providers

Because of Web 2.0 the line between users and librarians is beginning to blur. Users, like librarians, now have the means, and some have argued the responsibility, to be information contributors, information (co-)creators, and information providers (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007; Lankes, et al., 2007). The consumption and creation of content is dynamic therefore the roles of librarians and users are not always clear (Maness, 2006a). Users may be able to play various roles. For example, they can contribute their opinions on services via a blog, comment on library policies or other activities. They may also use blogs to review books, suggest information

resources, and share information with others. Librarians can also join in this process of creation and sharing information to enhance the services. Similarly, library users are able to utilise wikis as wonderful environments for collaboration among users and librarians. They can suggest resources via subject-based wikis or take part in the strategic plan in which all users and staff are invited to participate for the vision of the library future. Wikis may also be adopted to organise online study groups that users, librarians, and faculty members can collaboratively work and study on a topic of interest. Users can also join in competitions in which they will create podcasts and vidcasts in order to promote library services and resources to new students or share their learning and researching experiences. Thus the users' contribution will enrich the information resources and diversify services. Ultimately users benefit as they are more active in their working, learning and researching. They are no longer passive information consumers; they can now be active content creators and providers.

### 3.2. Users are becoming (playing the role of) librarians

To some extent, users have been playing the role of librarians. Stephens (2006) believes that "libraries have historically been places to receive information but with some rare exceptions, less places to contribute information". Even until the generation of the World Wide Web (Web 1.0), it was common that users could only read information on the library websites and could rarely comment or give feedback on services. Thanks to Web 2.0 and social media tools, users are now able to do the jobs of librarians. For example, they can carry out reference jobs by answering the questions of other users, advising or recommending useful sources of information via a diversity of tools like Instant Messaging, Facebook, and Wikis. They can also rate and comment on items in the library OPACs, or suggest relevant information sources for the library collections. In many cases, comments and reviews by users who are experts in the field are even more valuable in comparison to those of the librarians.

Similarly, cataloguing was the job of librarians in the past. The users are now expecting to be able to participate and interact in cataloguing online (Steele, 2009). Librarians no longer have a monopoly on cataloguing. The new generation of users has been empowered to determine their own cataloguing needs. "Metadata is now in the realm of everyone" (Gordon-Murnane, 2006). "With social bookmarking and tags, these users can see the library as more than just a building full of books. People are also enjoying the democratic nature of Web 2.0 and are no longer expecting to follow the rules of the experts to find the information they want. Therefore, the traditional metadata creator like the catalogue librarian should play the role of helper, not authoritarian" (Steele, 2009). It is now feasible for users to utilise tagging and social book-

marking tools to create and organise their own subject headings as well as share such information with others. Users can also add content such as comments, reviews, ratings, and tags to catalogue records. They can tag items and collections in the library in order to make them easier for others to search for information. Thus, the users have been engaged in the cataloguing process of the library (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006; Maness, 2006a, 2006b).

### 3.3. User-centredness is being heightened

It is notable that the centrality of the user is being intensified. Traditional libraries may have considered information as the centre of the library and users had to find ways to access this information. The situation is now changing. Information can find its way to users with the assistance of Web 2.0 via tools such as RSS or alert systems. Users just need to register to information channels or topics that they are interested in and then the information will be delivered to the place of their choice like RSS readers, inboxes, or virtual personal spaces. Miller (2005) describes this practice as "Web 1.0 took people to information; Web 2.0 will take information to the people". In early articles on the potential of Web 2.0 and its implications for the library, Maness (2006a, 2006b) confirms that "user-centredness" is one of the essentials of Library 2.0. In collaboration with others and with librarians, users can create information content, services, and virtual communities for libraries. Such communities encourage users to be more dynamic in the consumption and creation of information content and information services. As a result, the users become more important stakeholders in the library. Similarly, Case and Savastinuk (2006) emphasise that libraries are changing. They assert that "user-centredness" is a crucial feature of Library 2.0. It becomes the heart of the library. Users are encouraged to participate in the creation and development of both physical and virtual services. The library endeavours to better serve current users and creates a favourable environment for future users to take part in the change of libraries. This results in customer-driven services that meet the changing information needs of users (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006; Kwanya, Stilwell, & Underwood, 2009).

### 3.4. Users are being offered more power

From the discussions above there is no doubt that library users are being offered more power. According to Maness (2006b), "as communities change, libraries must not only change with them, they must allow users to change the library". In practice, users are taking more control over the library services and library operations. They now have more power and influence on libraries. Libraries become more open and users are more involved. The control of data and library services has been handed over to users at some extents. For instance, users can join in

the process of acquisition by reviewing, commenting and suggesting resources for purchase. Also, they can customise and personalise their library pages to suit their own needs, and contribute to the development of library policies and services via a wide range of tools like blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. Stephens and Collins (2007) stress that "we are no longer in a time when librarians can decide what is best for the users". The users should tell us what they need, what they want, and what they can do for the libraries. In an open conversation mode, the opinions of users are welcomed and embraced. They are engaged in planning library services, evaluating services, and suggesting improvements. Undoubtedly, users have been allowed to change the library (Maness, 2006a, 2006b).

### 3.5. The relationship is being balanced

The power between the library and the user is becoming more balanced. Users have more control over the services. They have become more independent in choosing and using information. Users have changed from readers to writers, from passive readers to active clients, from information receivers to information creators and contributors, and from low techno to techno-savvy consumers. They have been able to play an important role in customer-driven services of the library. Web 2.0 allows users to get more involved in the library services. Users are allowed to be, and in fact, they are playing the role of librarians in various services. This shows that a more balanced relationship between libraries and users has been established.

### 4. Participatory library: the contemporary library model

The concept of the "participatory library" has been little discussed in the literature. When talking about the contemporary library, people have tended to use the term "Library 2.0". However, as discussed above, it is observable that there is a movement towards a type of a library model that reflects its true nature. The term of "participatory library" is suggested because of the following number of reasons.

### 4.1. Library 2.0: a debatable, vague, and marketing term

Many attempts have been made to define the contemporary library that is so-called Library 2.0. However, the more Library 2.0 is defined and explained, the more people get confused, especially for the people who are new with this term. Library 2.0 is a controversial concept. The label and meaning of Library 2.0 remains debatable (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007; Kwanya, et al., 2009). In an attempt to find the meaning of Library 2.0, Crawford (2006) gathers statements on Library 2.0 from blogs, professional journals and forums and synthesises a list of 62 views and 7 definitions for the Library 2.0 term. He admits that Library 2.0 is the combination of tools and

attitudes. He also asserts that Library 2.0 is an ambiguous and a confused term (Crawford, 2006). Similarly, while some scholars believe that Library 2.0 is about technologies or depends on technologies (Bradley, 2006a, 2006b; Maness, 2006a, 2006b), others posit that Library 2.0 is not about technologies (Casey, 2005; Casey & Savastinuk, 2007).

The level of evolvement of Library 2.0 is another area of debates. According to Courtney (2007) , Library 2.0 is a real revolution. The use of Web 2.0 tools and other social media in libraries presents a significant difference from the application of information technologies into the library in the past. In spite of the fact that libraries and librarians have evolved over the years to meet changing community needs, the current context requires newer strategies, tools and models of services (Courtney, 2007). The author further notes that the key for librarians to be successful is to implement and experiment with Web 2.0 tools.

On the contrary, other scholars and practitioners hold the view that Library 2.0 is an evolution instead of a revolution. Brevik (2006) affirms that "Library 2.0 is the natural evolution of library services to a level where the library user is in control of how and when she gets access to the services she needs and wants". He also adds that "Library 2.0 is a reaction from librarians to the increasingly library relevant developments in information communication and technologies (Web 2.0 and social software) and an environment that is saturated with information available through new and more easily accessible channels" (Brevik, 2006). Furthermore, Fichter (2006) argues that books, other information resources, librarians and users have existed as long as library history. The participation of participants and a radical trust will create a Library 2.0 environment. The difference between Library 2.0 and its previous version is the involvement of participants who actively participate in the creation and development of Library 2.0 services. Thus, the core of Library 2.0 is the participation of the community.

Holding a different view from others, Crawford (2006) states that Library 2.0  may not even be something new as he argues that though the environment changes, the core functions of libraries still remain much the same. Therefore, Library 2.0 is neither evolution nor a revolution. Holding a neutral view, Kwanya, Stilwell and Underwood (2009) do not debate the evolution or evolution of Library 2.0. Instead, they consider Library 2.0 as the latest instance in the development of the library, and Library 2.0 is a combination of Web 2.0 and librarianship.

### 4.2. Participatory library: practically reflects the nature of a new library model

Whatever the contemporary library is called, Library 2.0 or other terms, the key issue here is the "participation". Many scholars mention "participation" as one of the crucial factors in a

contemporary library model like Library 2.0. For example, Fichter (2006) defines Library 2.0 by this formula:

*Library 2.0 = (Books 'n stuff + people + radical trust) x Participation*

In which:

- "Books 'n stuff": libraries have been providing access to materials for long;
- "People": libraries also have librarians and staff to serve users;
- "Radical trust" and "Participation": are issues that need to deal with in the Library 2.0 setting. Libraries need to demonstrate their trust in users and staff. The trust makes participation possible. Participation should be at all levels: by library staff, by library users, and within library systems.

In this formula, Fichter emphasises the importance of participation in the Library 2.0. Participation is a "must-have" component of a Library 2.0. Without participation, and its enabler, the trust, libraries will remain as they were in the past.

Participation in the library is also discussed by Casey and Savastinuk (2006, 2007). They define Library 2.0 as a model for constant and purposeful change which empowers library users through participatory and user-driven services, and seeks to improve services to current users and to reach future users. In this definition, the authors affirm that participatory and user-driven services are features of Library 2.0. The participation here is described in terms of a service model rather than a library model. User participation is one of the three essential ingredients of Library 2.0.

It is clear that participation is mentioned and analysed as an important factor, a must-have component of Library 2.0. However, it is likely that Library 2.0 does not reflect and represent the participatory nature of the contemporary library. "Participatory library" would be a more suitable term that practically reflects the participation that sits at the core of libraries. The principles of participation must be integrated and implemented at the core of the library, not on the periphery (Lankes, et al., 2007).

It is noticeable that the change has been taken place in many areas of the library. Users have been able to join in various roles and tasks of librarians. For example, development of library collections (reviewing and suggesting materials), cataloguing and organisation of information resources (rating, tagging, and bookmarking), and servicing users (answering other users' questions, recommending materials). In fact they are able to do more than that, for instance

contribution to the library policies and strategic plan, or promoting library services. Definitely users have been participating and changing the way libraries function.

### 4.3. Library 2.0 will be or already is dated

According to Evans (2009), Web 2.0 is an already dated term. Several months after the Web 2.0 term was born (O'Reilly, 2005), there was already a prediction about the future of Web 2.0 and what Web 3.0 may look like. Abram(2005) predicted that Web 3.0 will probably be even more distributed in form than Web 2.0 and maybe some of the Web 2.0 applications will disappear or merge with a new integrated whole. Web services or the emerging semantic web may replace such things as social networking sites and repositories.

Library 2.0, a spin-off of Web 2.0 has attracted the attention of many researchers, practitioners, and the library community. However, the Library 2.0 term is likely to be dated (or will be dated soon). Some scholars have mentioned or discussed alternative and new terms such as "hyperlinked library" (Stephens & Collins, 2007), "Library 3.0" (Evans, 2009; Kenefick & Werner, 2008; Saw & Todd, 2007), "Library 4.0" (Saw & Todd, 2007),  and "Library II" and "Library III" (Nesta & Mi, 2011). The term Library 2.0 is criticised  for its ambiguity limitations in the discussion of user-inclusive Web services (Lankes, et al., 2007). Similarly, a study by Nesta and Mi (2011) finds that the adoption by the public of "Library 2.0" has been low and they suggest that librarians should look towards a new version of the library  by developing new linkages with semantic web tools.

### 4.4. Library 2.0 has a strong focus on technology

Perhaps because Library 2.0 is a spin-off of Web 2.0 hence researchers have paid a lot of attention to the technological aspects when discussing Library 2.0. According to Lankes et al. (2007), the focus of Library 2.0 discussions is on technology and technology changes. In addition, under the observation of Stephens and Collins (2007), the majority of discussions in conference presentations and journal articles has a strong focus on technologies. The discussions loose the application of open and participatory thinking to library services. Library 2.0 is much more than a set of Web tools. Such tools can be utilised to open up conversations in the library, to enhance sharing among users, and especially to enable participation in the library community.

Many aspects of Library 2.0 have been discussed. However, a significant number of the discussions either introduce potential applications of Web 2.0 tools for building a Library 2.0 service model (Bradley, 2007; Courtney, 2007; Miller, 2005), focus on technical aspects of

Library 2.0 (Yang, Wei, & Peng, 2009), or concentrate on a Library 2.0 model or the use of Web 2.0 technologies in specific libraries (Cohen, 2007; Gross & Leslie, 2010; Pienaar & Smith, 2008). Clearly, the participation has been less discussed or paid less attention to even though it is considered the important factor in contemporary library (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007; Fichter, 2006). Therefore, the non-technical (and a combination of technical and non-technical) ideas need to be discussed and explored (Lankes, et al., 2007).

### 4.5. Participatory library focuses on participation

Even though the participation has been mentioned in Library 2.0 discussions, there have not many detailed discussions on it. Among Library 2.0 discussions, some have emerged as they emphasise the importance of participation in the library. For instance, Fichter (2006) proposes "participation" is a must-have component of Library 2.0. He also notes that it is necessary to have "trust" as an enabler for participation. In addition, Casey and Savastinuk (2006, 2007) describe participation in terms of a service model rather than a library model. They define Library 2.0 as a model for constant and purposeful change, empowers library users through participatory and user-driven services, and seeks to improve services to current users and to reach potential users. In this definition, the authors affirm that *participatory* and user driven services are features of Library 2.0. Also they stress that besides "constant and purposeful change" and "reaching current and potential users", user participation is the essential ingredient of Library 2.0.

Some scholars have discussed the idea of "culture of participation" in the contemporary library (Evans, 2009; Lankes, et al., 2007). Basically, the participation is still based on Web 2.0 technologies. Lankes et al.(2007) call them participatory technologies (i.e. Wikis, blogs, and RSS feeds). The problem is that Library 2.0 discussions are focusing excessively on technologies while the most important thing is that libraries should focus on participation (Lankes, et al., 2007). Whilst technology has been the stimulus for the new type of library service, it is important that participation must sit at its' core. Lankes et al. (2007) recommend that participation must be carried out at the core of the library rather than the periphery.

### 5. Participatory library: the trend of a long term library development

The participatory librarianship has been progressing. The libraries have been about participation. Self-checking out books, answering reference questions, and joining library discussions and seminars are good examples of participation (Porter & King, 2007). Participation is the crux of the whole thing. Participation is one of the first steps to build the future library on

the concepts of an open and participatory world (Stephens, 2007a). Openness and participation are expected and predicted as the hallmark of the future libraries. Openness is the new trend. It is important that libraries allow users to be able to join in. "Users and their knowledge have the ability to reshape library services, but library must first change the way they craft their services and tools so that users have a clear and open avenue on which to communicate and participate" (Stephens, 2007d). Lankes et al. (2007) also encourage not only users but also librarians to participate in. They assert that the participation should be taken place at the core of the library, for example the catalogue. Similarly, Westrum , Rekkavik and Enger (2011) emphasise openness is the key attribute of the future library catalogues.

It is notable that the participation is believed to occur in not only virtual but also physical library environments  (Casey & Savastinuk, 2007). "Besides making online participation possible, we should also provide ways for library users to participate physically within the library: planning, focus groups, decision marking, etc. " (Stephens, 2007d). It is important for the library to offer community space. "Podcast studios, video editing bays, flexible and collaborative group space for creating content will be a hallmark of future library buildings" (Stephens, 2007d).

The Web and the library have changed and they have become more engaging, interactive, and participatory. However, we are still in the middle of that change (Lankes, et al., 2007; Stephens, 2007b). We can see some advantages that support the development of participatory library and disadvantages that need to overcome. The advantages might be the availability and popularity of open source software, free tools like RSS, Blogs, Wikis, and social networking sites, etc. Also, the libraries have been aware of benefits of such tools, and in fact, they have adopted them. Besides, there are many things that need to be completed before reaching the truly participatory library. The first disadvantage is that the adoption of participatory technologies and tools such as blogs, wikis, RSS, and social networking spaces is still limited (Han & Liu, 2010; Holmberg, Huvila, Kronqvist-Berg, & Widen-Wulff, 2009; Nesta & Mi, 2011; Nguyen, 2008). Another barrier and probably the largest impediment, according to Lankes et al. (2007), is technological issue. The current integrated library systems have been existed for a long time. They include a wide range of library functions, and base on not really innovative infrastructure. They are not easy to be compatible with new and emerging tools while the future library systems should be very open for the involvement of users and community. This will restrict the easiness of exchange of a diverse set of information (Lankes, et al., 2007). This will also limit the openness of the library system while the participatory library considers openness is one of the most important features. This requires a lot of time, technological expertise, and budgets.

Other factors that need to be considered are the issues of privacy, policy, and culture. It is understandable that in digital and technological environments, privacy is one of the barriers for the libraries. The privacy always has a clash with openness and participation. For example, once a person wants to join a blog, a wiki, or a social networking site he or she must disclose some personal information (otherwise it will be hard for the library to control and keep things in order). According to Jones (2010), there are some barriers to libraries such as the differences of legal and regulatory environments, the differences of cultural interpretations for the meaning of privacy, and the conflict of priorities and values, or transparency and privacy. Those differences may limit the involvement of library users, or library community in a broader level. In fact, the belief, habit or culture of users also affects their participation. Users are often busy. They do not want more workload. They often access the library to take what they need and go. Therefore, it is crucial for libraries to build a culture of participation. More importantly, the library needs to demonstrate the benefits of contribution and participation, and encourage users to take part in. To make these possible, libraries need to have rules, policies, laws, and standards, etc. for the participation. No doubt that there are always pros and cons of openness and closeness. And there is a question of how to keep control over the data while the library still remains its openness and still encourages the community to participate in. Ultimately, participatory library will come (or has come), provided that users and the library community are aware of the benefits of participation and they manage to make it possible. Any problems will have solutions.

## 6. The need for empirical studies

While the "participatory library" concept has been around for five or six years since it was coined by Lankes and Silverstein (2006), little or no empirical studies on this concept has been identified. In spite of the fact that the "participation" in the contemporary library has been mentioned in many excellent discussions and studies about Library 2.0 (Fichter, 2006; Bradley, 2007; Casey & Savastinuk, 2007; Holmberg et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2009), these discussions look at different aspects of Library 2.0 rather than participatory library. In order to understand what is the level of the library evolution and how the library practice is changing, it is necessary to further investigate what the participatory library means in the context of contemporary libraries, how participatory library change the library practice and the way libraries perform their role or librarians do their job. In brief, empirical studies are in need to answer the question of "what is the participatory library?"

## 7. Conclusion

Libraries have been moving towards the participatory library. The changing relationship between the library and the users is observable. The development trend of participatory librarianship is undoubtable. It is believed that libraries always have been about some type of participation (Porter & King, 2007). The thing is we need to remain the same focus and continue to offers ways for users to participate. Library community should be familiar with the terms and concepts such as participatory library, participatory librarianship, participatory librarians, participatory technologies, and participatory resources, etc. (Lankes, et al., 2007; Stephens, 2007c). The concept of "participatory library" should be used as it reflects what has been taking place in the libraries.

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