

Episode 13 Summary — Straight Download Podcast

Live from the PLA Conference Floor

Libraries, Digital Transformation, and the Case for Collective Action

Recorded live from the Public Library Association PLA Conference floor, Episode 13 of *The Straight Download* captures a timely and wide-ranging conversation about the future of public libraries at a moment of profound cultural, technological, and political change. Hosts Ann Ford and Jeff Jankowski are joined by Jamar Rahming, CEO of the Cuyahoga County Public Library and incoming President of PLA, for a discussion that explores digital services, data and impact, advocacy, literacy, and the evolving role of vendors as true partners in the library mission.

Reframing the Library Ecosystem

The episode opens with a discussion of the modern library ecosystem including patrons, libraries, platforms, and content providers. Jamar emphasizes that vendor–library relationships are no longer optional or purely transactional. In a world shaped by rapid technological change, digital services are essential to keeping libraries relevant, visible, and responsive, even as physical buildings remain busier than ever.

Meeting Communities Where They Are

Jamar reflects on how library usage shifts based on community context. In Cuyahoga County, traditional print circulation and readership remain strong, while his experience in urban systems highlighted heavier reliance on technology-driven services and community support. The throughline, he notes, is that libraries must stay grounded in local community needs, balancing print, programs, outreach, and digital access while remaining accountable to taxpayers and stakeholders.

Digital platforms like Hoopla and other online services are framed as core infrastructure rather than side offerings, but Jamar calls out a persistent challenge. Libraries and vendors alike must market digital services with the same energy and intentionality as in-person programs if they want patrons to truly discover and use them.

Measuring Impact Beyond the Numbers

A major theme of the episode is the limitation of traditional library metrics. Jamar challenges the field's reliance on quantitative measures such as circulation and foot traffic, urging a shift toward capturing qualitative impact and how library resources actually change lives.

Through discussion and personal reflection, the hosts explore how digital access supports learning, career advancement, creative growth, and mental health. Jamar shares a powerful story of a patron who credited digital library services with helping them survive severe depression during the pandemic, underscoring how much library impact often remains unseen and undocumented.

Libraries as Anchors in Times of Crisis

The conversation places today's challenges in a broader historical frame. Jamar observes that libraries consistently see increased usage during periods of crisis from economic recessions to the COVID-19 pandemic to today's climate of political polarization, misinformation, and social instability. Libraries, he argues, serve as trusted civic institutions that provide stability, truth-seeking, and access when communities are most vulnerable.

These pressures are compounded by funding instability, escalating intellectual freedom challenges, declining literacy levels, algorithm-driven misinformation, and the growing influence of artificial intelligence. Together, these forces demand a more strategic and coordinated response across the profession.

Advocacy as Everyday Work

One of the episode's strongest calls to action is Jamar's insistence that advocacy must become a daily practice rather than a crisis response. Instead of mobilizing only when funding or policies are threatened, libraries must embed advocacy into their regular operations and storytelling.

Vendor partners, he adds, should play an active role in this work, standing alongside libraries not only as sponsors but as collaborators who bring data, insight, technology, and shared purpose.

Redefining Vendor Partnerships

Ann and Jeff reinforce the idea that vendors want and are ready to be more deeply involved in shaping the future of libraries. Beyond financial support, vendors can contribute strategic insight, usage data, marketing expertise, and industry context that libraries and associations may not have the capacity to generate alone.

Jamar agrees, noting that vendors should be part of the ongoing strategic conversation, helping libraries think differently about advocacy, engagement, digital discovery, and long-term sustainability.

Engaging the Next Generation of Library Users

The episode also addresses shifting demographics, particularly adults ages 20 to 40 who are less likely to have children and less likely to connect with libraries through traditional family programming. Jamar highlights the importance of digital usage data, especially eBooks and audiobooks, as a gateway for understanding this audience and designing engagement strategies that bridge digital behavior and physical library spaces.

Closing Reflections on Resilience and Purpose

As the PLA conference wraps up, Jamar reflects on the symbolic power of the event itself, successfully convened despite unrest, uncertainty, and logistical challenges. The conference, he notes, reflects the defining traits of libraries and librarians: resilience, adaptability, and determination. No matter how often libraries are challenged, they continue to pivot, evolve, and serve.

What They're Reading, Watching, and Listening To

The episode closes with a personal segment that reinforces discovery, curiosity, and culture as the heart of library work.

Jamar Rahming is reading *Judy Blume: A Life* by Mark Oppenheimer and revisiting Harlem Renaissance classics, including *The Living Is Easy* by Dorothy West

Jeff Jankowski is reading *Living Between Worlds* by James Hollis, a Jungian psychologist, which he describes as reflective, centering, and restorative during a challenging news cycle.

Ann Ford is celebrating National Poetry Month by enjoying Hoopla's *All Poetry, All Voices* BingePass and is currently reading *Break Your Glass Slippers* by Amanda Lovelace.