

The Straight Download Episode 14 Summary

Digital Collections as a Programming Powerhouse

As summer reading season approaches, one of the busiest and most impactful times of the year for libraries, Episode 14 of *The Straight Download* explores a timely and essential question: how can digital collections drive deeper engagement, stronger programming, and more equitable access year-round?

Joining the conversation are two innovative library professionals who are putting these ideas into practice: Storm Hawthorne, Teen Services and Schools Liaison Librarian at East Lansing Public Library, and Mandy Decker, Outreach Coordinator at Jersey City Free Public Library. Together, they offer real-world insight into how digital tools are reshaping the way libraries connect with their communities.

Meeting Patrons Where They Are

At the heart of the discussion is a simple but powerful principle: libraries have always met people where they are, and today, that place is increasingly digital.

Storm reflects on the rapid shift brought on by COVID-19, which accelerated libraries' ability to translate traditional services into digital formats, from virtual programming to online readers' advisory. Mandy adds that this shift has expanded the librarian's role beyond physical collections, positioning them as advocates for digital equity, access, and inclusion.

Digital platforms like hoopla make it possible to offer broader and more diverse collections than any physical space allows, helping libraries better reflect and serve their entire communities.

From Invisible Resource to Program Engine

Despite their value, digital collections often remain underutilized because they are less visible than physical materials. The conversation highlights a key opportunity: integrating digital content directly into programming and outreach.

Both guests emphasize practical strategies:

- Reframing digital content as “streaming” to emphasize instant access
- Regularly promoting digital offerings to staff and patrons
- Embedding links and access points into programs, book clubs, and marketing materials

By doing so, libraries can transform digital collections from passive resources into active drivers of engagement.

Patron Reactions and Value Perception

When patrons discover digital services like hoopla, the response is often immediate and enthusiastic.

Mandy shares a common reaction: patrons are shocked to learn they have been paying for services like Audible when similar content is available for free through their library.

Positioning hoopla as “like Hulu, but without commercials” helps make the value instantly relatable.

Storm echoes this, noting that patrons are often amazed by the breadth of content, from audiobooks and graphic novels to music, TV shows, and more, realizing that the library offers a complete digital experience.

Advancing Equity Through Schools and Community Partnerships

Digital collections play a crucial role in expanding access to required reading and educational materials.

In Jersey City, Mandy works closely with educators to align summer reading lists with titles available on hoopla, ensuring all students can access assigned materials regardless of budget or availability. These efforts are further enhanced by website carousels, direct links, and integration into school communications.

This approach removes barriers while supporting diverse learning needs, including multilingual learners who benefit from pairing eBooks with audiobooks.

Reimagining Engagement for Teens and Beyond

Teens often experience the library as a third space, a place to gather rather than a place to check out materials. Storm highlights the importance of bridging that gap by introducing digital services in ways that align with their habits, particularly mobile-first access.

By emphasizing ease, immediacy, and zero barriers, such as no wait times and no late fees, libraries can convert casual visitors into active users.

Programs That Bring Digital to Life

The episode showcases standout examples of digital integration in action.

Storm shares a Sherlock Holmes themed teen escape room that connected participants directly to digital content, linking streaming video, music, and related titles to extend the experience beyond the event itself.

She also highlights digital summer reading efforts that allow participation from anywhere, helping increase engagement even as families travel or stay busy.

Mandy discusses a partnership with the Office of Veterans Affairs that began with digital resource training and evolved into an ongoing community relationship.

She also describes Fun Fridays, a creative school program reaching thousands of students through a hybrid format that blends digital resources, storytelling, and community partnerships into an engaging and scalable experience.

These examples reinforce a key takeaway: digital content is most powerful when it is embedded into experiences, not just offered as a standalone resource.

Collaboration, Creativity, and the Idea Squad

The conversation highlights the importance of collaboration through hoopla's Idea Squad, a community designed to share best practices and amplify innovative library work.

Both guests emphasize the collaborative culture of librarianship, where ideas are shared freely to strengthen services for all. At the same time, Mandy underscores the growing need for libraries to demonstrate their relevance while competing with commercial platforms and digital entertainment for attention and engagement.

What Are You Reading, Watching, or Listening To

The episode closes with a look at what the hosts and guests are currently enjoying, offering a glimpse into their personal tastes and reinforcing the role librarians play as curators and cultural guides.

Storm shares that she is working through the Rory Gilmore reading list and recently completed *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, along with *1984*, and is preparing to start *Middlesex*.

Mandy is finishing *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which she describes as a standout favorite, while also reading *Coyote: The Dramatic Lives of Sam Shepard*. She is also diving into a Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood BingePass.

Jeff highlights a lighthearted series he is watching called *Margo's Got Money Problems* and shares that he is listening to Mitch Albom's *Twice*, a reflective work on love and second chances.

Ann is currently listening to *Wild Dark Shore* by Charlotte McConaughey, a layered and atmospheric novel that blends mystery with deeper reflections on human relationships and the future.

Looking Ahead

As libraries navigate an increasingly digital and competitive landscape, the message is clear.

Digital collections are not just supplemental; they are essential tools for programming and outreach. Success depends on visibility, integration, and staff advocacy. Equity, access, and relevance must remain at the center of every initiative.

By embracing these principles, libraries can continue to evolve as dynamic, indispensable community resources, both inside their walls and far beyond them.