Straight Download Episode 18 Summary

Episode Title: When the Math Isn't Mathing

Every library director knows the budget moment: the line-item review where you ask what you can live without. For Shannon Midyett, Director of the Poplar Bluff Municipal Library, Hoopla was on that list, and she was ready to cut it. But when she dug into the real cost-per-circ numbers and her own unique-borrower data, the math sent her in the opposite direction. Shannon joins hosts Ann Ford and Jeff Jankowski to share how she went looking for a reason to cancel a service, and came out defending it to her board instead.

Episode Summary

Episode 18 of The Straight Download features hosts Ann Ford, Hoopla's VP of Sales and Customer Support, and Jeff Jankowski, President of Hoopla, in conversation with Shannon Midyett, Director of the Poplar Bluff Municipal Library in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, and current President of the Missouri Library Association. Shannon spent 28 years at the library, starting as a clerk and moving through technology coordinator and assistant director before becoming director a little under four years ago.

The episode traces a data-driven journey that began with a budget-driven plan to cut hoopla and ended with Shannon defending the service to her board and finance team. Facing a tightening budget and a hoopla invoice that had grown alongside the library's post-pandemic outreach efforts, Shannon set out to build the case for cancellation. Instead, digging into unique borrower data, cost per circ comparisons across digital and print collections, and audiobook usage trends convinced her that cutting hoopla would harm far more patrons than she initially realized, and that reallocating the budget elsewhere would not actually save money.

At its core, the conversation asks: what does it really cost to serve a community digitally, and how should libraries measure the true impact of the collections they are considering cutting?

Key Themes & Insights

Rising Costs Forced a Hard Look at hoopla

As Poplar Bluff ramped up community outreach coming out of COVID, hoopla usage, and its invoice, grew steadily. Even though hoopla represented only 10 to 20 percent of total circulation, it consumed 50 to 60 percent of the materials budget, pushing Shannon toward a decision to drop the service entirely.

Key Takeaway: Rising invoices can look unsustainable in isolation, but circulation percentages alone do not capture who is actually being served.

Unique Borrower Data Changed the Calculus

Before finalizing the decision to cut hoopla, Shannon ran the numbers on unique borrowers rather than raw circulation. She found that 69 percent of users borrowed from digital collections, 57 percent borrowed only from digital collections, and 36 percent relied only on hoopla, meaning the cut would have affected roughly 2,300 to 3,400 patrons in a city of about 16,000.

Key Takeaway: Measuring impact by unique users, not just circulation share, revealed a far larger and more vulnerable population than the invoice math suggested.

True Cost Per Circ Is Difficult to Calculate, and Rarely Favors Alternatives

Shannon compared cost per circ across hoopla and OverDrive using several methods, including best-case metered licensing math, top-title analysis, and a real-world community read program. She found she could rarely match or beat hoopla's cost per circ elsewhere; one community read audiobook on OverDrive cost $9.50 per circ. The exercise reinforced how opaque and labor-intensive true cost comparisons are without vendor-provided transparency.

Key Takeaway: Reallocating budget away from hoopla would not have generated meaningful savings once true cost per circ was calculated.

Digital Borrowers Are Often Invisible to the Library

Shannon and the hosts discussed how libraries build personal connections with in-person visitors, through storytime, programs, and recommendations, but rarely with digital-only borrowers. At Poplar Bluff, only 31 percent of patrons borrow exclusively from physical collections, and roughly three times as many people access digital collections daily as visit in person to check out books.

Key Takeaway: As digital borrowing grows, libraries need new strategies, especially in marketing and outreach, to connect with patrons who may never walk through the door.

Print Collections Have Waste Too

Using a third-party analytics tool, Shannon discovered that a meaningful share of newly purchased print titles never circulate within their first 15 months, described as "dead on arrival." She compared cost per circ across several print titles, ranging from 19 cents to $4 per circ, arguing that libraries scrutinize digital spending far more closely than print, even though both collections carry waste.

Key Takeaway: Responsible stewardship means analyzing performance across all formats, not just digital collections, when making budget decisions.

Audiobook Growth Is Reshaping Digital Budgets

Audiobooks now make up 62 to 64 percent of Poplar Bluff's hoopla borrows, reflecting a broader industry shift as digital audiobook sales have overtaken ebook sales at the publisher level. Because the statewide OverDrive consortium allocates a smaller share of its budget to audiobooks, Shannon determined that dropping hoopla would have shrunk her community's audiobook catalog from nearly 500,000 titles to fewer than 20,000.

Key Takeaway: Format trends matter. A collection decision that looks reasonable in aggregate can create a severe gap in a fast-growing category like audiobooks.

Better Vendor Reporting Would Save Libraries Significant Time

Shannon described how no single report from any platform answered her questions directly. She had to pull raw data from four different systems, her ILS, hoopla, OverDrive, and a paid analytics tool, and manipulate it manually, at times turning to AI tools to work through the formulas. She suggested vendors offer customizable, on-demand reporting built around the specific questions libraries need answered.

Key Takeaway: Greater transparency and more flexible reporting tools from vendors could dramatically reduce the burden on library staff trying to make data-informed budget decisions.

Final Thought

Shannon's story is less about the conclusion she reached than about how she got there. Rather than accepting a vendor's reassurance at face value, she pulled her own data, brought her board and finance team into the process, and let the numbers lead her somewhere she had not expected. Her experience is a reminder that budget decisions built on partial metrics, like circulation share alone, can obscure the true reach and impact of a service. As she plans to pursue fair pricing legislation in Missouri, Shannon's approach offers a model for any library director facing a similar cut-or-keep decision: run the numbers first, and be prepared to be surprised by what they show.

What We're Reading, Watching & Listening To

Shannon (Reading)

A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck

A short, coming-of-age novel about a 12-year-old boy growing up in rural Vermont in the 1920s. Shannon called it one of the best-written books she has ever read and shared it as her all-time favorite, first discovered through an adult book club at her library.

Jeff (Listening)

The Calamity Club by Kathryn Stockett

A 20-plus-hour audiobook about a resilient orphan during the Great Depression. Jeff listened with his wife while visiting their new grandson and called it a moving, compelling listen he highly recommends.

Ann (Reading)

Daughter of the Moon Goddess series by Sue Lynn Tan

A fantasy series following a young heroine standing up to a powerful ruler. Ann praised the series as beautifully written, colorful, and multi-layered, blending romance, adventure, and mythology.