

Blockchain National Forum

Executive Summary – John Bracken, DPLA Executive Director

As industries across the business, media, and cultural sectors begin to explore the uses and implications of the blockchain, libraries have a critical role to play. First, the public trust we hold, which is sadly diminishing among most other civic institutions, enables us to advocate for new tools, services, and approaches that will advance the public good. Second, the networked nature of the technology, and its reliance on open source developers, plays to our strengths as community centers. Third, our ability to build and contribute to the technology itself puts us in a position to contribute to its crafting.

In this period of exploration, experimentation, and innovation, one challenge is to look beyond the blockchain's function as a medium of data storage and instead interrogate how the distributed network of disparate parties with common interests that powers a blockchain system can also be employed for the common good. By creating networks in which libraries and members of their communities—or civic society more broadly—are working together to record and verify knowledge, there is potential to build new dynamic, trusted sources for public information.

Two potential ideas for pursuing this goal are to explore blockchain's implications for social media archiving, specifically for Twitter, and for documenting news and evaluating its veracity. As social movements, international politics, and even revolutions take place on Twitter (perhaps most visibly in [Documenting the Now](#)) the need to accurately document and preserve tweets is essential for the historical record and public information. What if librarians and citizens around the world worked together as a distributed network to record, and validate, tweets as blocks such that even if users delete messages on Twitter, an immutable record would remain?

Likewise, there are flaws in current systems of news archiving in our increasingly digital media landscape. If news stories are not scraped early (and often), we risk losing a record of changes, edits, and redactions that might take place as that news story evolves. Additionally, as we as a society grapple with the dangerous implications of “fake news” and media distrust, there is a critical need to be able to document and share true information. A blockchain browser app could empower any citizen reader to record news to a blockchain. In this scenario, librarians and other trusted reviewers could play a role as validators, signing off on articles that are valid. Such a system would generate a public record that captures more information than we do currently and has a built-in mechanism for assessing how truthful its content is.

Both of these possibilities, which represent just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential implications of blockchain in libraries, offer examples of new ways that libraries could interact with the public to foster civic trust. Conversations like this one—multidisciplinary gatherings that pull us out of the limited perspectives of our day-to-day realities—are in important start. Society will benefit from tighter connections we can build among technologists, educators, journalists, librarians, artists and and others. The Digital Public Library of America, an open, distributed network can help to facilitate these connections and conversations. In fact, as we explore this new topic together, the process that led to the founding of the DPLA could serve provide lessons. We brought together diverse stakeholders inspired by an idea, and, through an intentional, national collaborative process iterated on that concept to build a plan of action.