Tany Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi, welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering ground-breaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week's guest is Polly Thistlethwaite the chief librarian at the Graduate Center. She joined the GC in 2002, and became chief librarian in 2011. Since then she has increased the library's participation in networks to bring meaningful access to the world's academic and cultural heritage. Among these initiatives include a collaboration with the Manhattan Research Library Initiative that enables access for CUNY faculty and students to the New York Public Library and private libraries at Columbia and New York University.

Tanya Domi: Polly's early career work with queer archives and AIDS activism primed for present-day advocacy for public scholarship and open access publishing. She firmly believes that the academic output of the world's universities should be freely available to everybody. She is co-author of Being a Scholar in the Digital Era, published in 2016 by Policy Press. Welcome Polly.

Thistlethwaite: Thanks Tanya, it's so nice to be here.

Tanya Domi: Yes, when I first met Polly, I was surprised because when you read the words Polly Thistlethwaite, you actually think of a library with a woman behind the desk quite serious.

Thistlethwaite: With a [inaudible 00:02:02] and one of those chains to hold it together-

Tanya Domi: Exactly.

Thistlethwaite: ... and maybe a tightly wound bun.

Tanya Domi: Exactly. But she defies that stereotype upside down.

Thistlethwaite: I'm not like that. I don't look like that.

Tanya Domi: No, you don't.

Thistlethwaite: People are sometimes startled when they see me at the reference desk.

Tanya Domi: This is true.

Thistlethwaite: They startle.

Tanya Domi: But it's great. Anyway, what I wanna talk about now is open access publishing movement and what you have brought to that at the GC. And let's just elaborate just for a moment. That resistance movement began actually I think
with the arrival of Aaron Swartz and his reaction to the JSTOR controversy at MIT, he became a activist at MIT while he was a student.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah. Aaron Swartz sort of popularized the open access movement through his bold courageous activism in exposing the corpus of JSTOR to open access and open mining. The movement began before Aaron kind of like in the mid to late 80s. There are a lot of different origin stories about open access and the crisis in scholarly publishing. But one of them is that the ... There is the serials crisis, that is the one that librarians kinda light on is that the costs of journals, particular science journals, but all journals overall, have just skyrocketed. They've gone up like 500%-600% since my career began in the mid 80s, and it's just eating like huge amounts of our funding.

Thistlethwaite: And the irony is academics generally give their work away for free to these publishers, who then sell the work back at exorbitant prices to the libraries. So-

Tanya Domi: And put it behind a paywall so nobody can access it.

Thistlethwaite: Right, right. So the market retains its like privacy. But scholars publish because we wanna be read. We don't wanna be read by just the patrons of libraries who can afford to buy back the material that we're publishing. We wanna be read widely and cited as widely as we can, as a rule.

Tanya Domi: So do you think that with the rise of the Internet, that that really probably served as a mechanism to begin to really share beyond the dusty stacks, and out from behind paywalls?

Thistlethwaite: Well, yeah, exactly, I mean it used to be you had to photocopy, you had to put some labor in, if you could get access to a copy for free of an article, you could photocopy. But you were limited. The distribution was limited by amount of copies that you could make, or the friends who would read it and pass it along. But yeah, exactly, you're right with the Internet as platform to share, the ubiquitous PDF or HTML language, it just transformed the possibilities for disseminating, for sharing scholarly information.

Tanya Domi: So how have you advanced your support of open access to tell the listeners about what you've done as a chief librarian?

Thistlethwaite: Well, let me tell the story about how I came to it. In the late 80s, I was working at New York University, it was my first library job in the City, and I also joined the activist group, the AIDS activist group Act Up. My friends were sick, the government wasn't saying anything about it, the press wasn't saying anything about it. It was a crisis, it was the crisis of my young existence.

Thistlethwaite: And one of the things that I started to do in Act Up was to sneak my friends into libraries so that they could get access to the medical and scientific and demographic information that we needed in order to do our work. So I kinda got
into the business. And there were others like me who had institutional-based access to medical and scientific and academic literature. But we had to use our privileges to bring our friends in, or to show them how to get access to libraries.

Thistlethwaite: Where I'm from in the Midwest, if you bring a utility bill into an academic university, you can usually get to it. But here in New York City, the libraries are closed for reasons that are kind of ... I really don't ... I haven't fully explained. But I think it's ... I don't fully understand but I think that it's probably because of the fear of being overrun but too many interested and curious people. So the practice is that academic libraries are closed to the public in New York City. So that's why we had to like create this underground access, system-

Tanya Domi: Guerrilla tactics.

Thistlethwaite: Exactly. Guerrilla librarianship to give our colleagues access to the questions. And through that process, it's just outrageous that I had to broker, or any of us had to broker somebody's access to the medical information that was gonna give him or her information about the trials that they needed to stay alive. Ridiculous.

Tanya Domi: This is an aspect to the AIDS movement and Act UP that I wasn't really aware of. It's really interesting and makes a lot of sense, because when you read about what happened in that period, it was a massive immersion in medical and drugs, and people became like patient advocates-

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:08:19] So rise of-

Tanya Domi: ... and they had to be armed with the knowledge.

Thistlethwaite: They had to educate ourselves in a serious way. And I think [Joe Epstein's 00:08:27] worker, Jennifer Brier's work, recognized how seriously the AIDS activists shifted the way science worked, inserted ourselves into the way drugs are approved, changed the way the trialing system worked, changed the way science worked. Like Act UP activists are showing up in labs, and certainly outside the windows of labs at the NIH and FDA, making the people working there excruciatingly aware that the whole world is watching.

Tanya Domi: At the that time the NGLTF leader was inside the NIH, and outside of the NIH was hundreds and hundreds of people, and you said, "Do you wanna deal with me or do you wanna deal with them?" And so I think that isn't this sort of interesting that while the Internet was ascending, it was at the baby-

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:09:34] very baby steps.

Tanya Domi: ... at that time. And since then, in parallel to, you not only had the ascension of the Internet, but at the same time too going back to how the access was not
available, and the high cost of library journals, that was parallel to the rise of the Internet. So they happen at the same time.

Thistlethwaite: They did, sort of pretty much at the same time.

Tanya Domi: So I just wanna go back to that. So a lot of people ... You mentioned a lot of people feel it, it's just exorbitant and it's maxed out library budgets.

Thistlethwaite: Well, yeah, and the irony, the painful irony, is that we're providing ... universities are providing faculty salaries to produce this work, and then we have to buy it the heck back.

Tanya Domi: So some of the ways that I'm personally familiar with that you have done since you've been a librarian for one thing there's no longer ... all dissertations are now deposited digitally.

Thistlethwaite: That's right.

Tanya Domi: That happened during your tenure. And also one of the things that you did that I was personally involved in. So I'd like to talk a but what I know, is that you also deposited digitally all the data reports by the Center for Latin American Caribbean and Latino Studies, which became a media partnership during 2016 election year.

Thistlethwaite: Right. Long about 2012, the Grad Center and CUNY as a whole got access, or we purchased a platform that we renamed CUNY Academic Works. And it's a platform that allows faculty and librarians and any affiliate really to place their work in a context, it's gonna be ... on a platform that's gonna be open without the paywall that you mentioned before. So that's what CUNY Academic Works is about. And now we're pretty much just constrained by the labor, the limits of our labor, and publishers agreements about what can and cannot be placed in an open context.

Tanya Domi: And shared, right?

Thistlethwaite: And I'll tell you, most of the ... like almost 90% of the academic journal articles published can, at some time, maybe after a brief embargo, in some form be placed in that repository for open publication.

Tanya Domi: That's really great to know. Well, that's really key. Especially we need to start talking about public intellectuals, [inaudible 00:12:27] available.

Tanya Domi: I think one of the things people don't know about you that you've been a driving force behind the Manhattan Research Library Initiative, which the acronym is MaRLI. But you've been a driving force in forging a formal relationship with the New York Public Library, and also uptown with the [inaudible 00:12:53]
Columbia which has 27 libraries, who just always amazes me, and downtown with NYU.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, the MaRLI consortium actually wasn't of my creation, but we come to it by virtue of our long-standing relationship with the New York Public Library. And actually, thanks for crediting me there, but honestly this agreement that we've had with the New York Public Library goes back to the late 60s, and I just sort of blew life into it again, and rekindled that relationship through the former-

Tanya Domi: [crosstalk 00:13:31] So you re-energized it really, because I know-

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tanya Domi: ... Yeah, because I know you do a lot meetings there. You do a lot of collegial collaborations and-

Thistlethwaite: Well, you know what? At CUNY with our budgets being so flat and kind of being in the sort of austerity decade, everything that we've gained resource-wise, we've gained through blowing ... we've gained through energizing our networks, through activating and expanding our network activity. We solidified first before I talk the Manhattan Research Library Initiative, I'll talk about the CUNY libraries, that form a very rich resource in collaboration with each other for supporting CUNY coursework.

Thistlethwaite: And then this relationship that we have with the New York Public Library going back to the late 60s, was actually quite beneficial to the New York Public Library back in the day, 'cause they were having a financial crisis. The then Mayor of New York offered $2 million a year to the New York Public Library to be the research library supporting CUNY's then new beginning graduate programs.

Thistlethwaite: So over the decades since then, that support that came from ... originally came from the New York City Mayor's office has shifted and become part of the New York Library state aid system. So there's an annual 2 million, generally a little bit attenuated because of the budget situation, but it's about $2 million a year that the New York Public research libraries receive in order to support CUNY graduate programs.

Tanya Domi: Oh, that's something-

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:15:23] It's huge.

Tanya Domi: ... all of us should know about, and be informed about 'cause it's critical.

Thistlethwaite: And in the earlier days, the New York Public Library supported the Grad Center programs with intra-library loans, with particular acquisitions, with sort of early review of books that the faculty would order, and certainly with space. The Wertheim room and the Allen room are New York Public Library spaces that
graduate students and faculty can apply to use there, compensating for the lack of office space that we have here in midtown.

Tanya Domi: So in the MaRLI situation, can a Graduate Center student take their ID card and go uptown to Columbia and get access to their stacks?

Thistlethwaite: Yeah. Well, every registration for a few years now, New York Public Library comes down and gives every new Grad Center student a barcode card, a New York Public Library card. And then if we want to become. So automatically, just by virtue of us being Grad Center affiliates, we get access to the New York Public Library borrowing privileges, which are incredible. We get 120 day loans from the research libraries with that New York Public Library card that they issue us, just by virtue of our affiliation.

Thistlethwaite: I'd love it if all this worked with our Grad Center card and we just use one card and one login, we're moving towards that with any luck. But right now, it's two separate. But by virtue of our ... Just present a current Grad Center ID to the New York Public Library, one of the Research Library circulation desks you can get this card that gives you the borrowing privileges from the collection. Tremendous, like what is it? Are they 13 million now? Tremendous kind of-

Tanya Domi: In there-

Thistlethwaite: ... research.

Tanya Domi: ... 13 million.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, I think I might be-

Tanya Domi: [crosstalk 00:17:32] Volumes. 13 million. Wow, that's incredible.

Thistlethwaite: Huge. Depending on how you count, that you count volumes or series.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Thistlethwaite: And then if there was a particular section of the New York University or Columbia University libraries collection that our scholarship would be supported by, then we make application through the MaRLI application page-

Tanya Domi: Network, I see.

Thistlethwaite: ... in order to get the semester-long or the year-long access to NYU or Columbia. So we have to step through New York Public Library in that way in order to get access to Columbia. But it has just greatly expanded the access that we have to support graduate research here.

Tanya Domi: So that's pretty incredible. And if-
Thistlethwaite: It is.

Tanya Domi: ... anybody has gone to the New York Public Library or personally seen, because I have, the Columbia Libraries, you can't imagine it, it is really unbelievable. And it's like ... I think they should be in the world registry of the antiquities, I mean like they should be protected. That's how I feel about libraries.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, well, librarians are all about preservation. Discovery-

Tanya Domi: [crosstalk 00:18:59] Cultural preservation.

Thistlethwaite: ... preservation, and access. Those are our three ... our pillars of our existence, our professional existence.

Tanya Domi: So not only do you work with all this and provide access through your advocacy and your role as chief librarian, but you yourself are a scholar, and you have co-written with Hunter colleague Jessie Daniels, Being a Scholar in the Digital era, and recently published, it's two years ago. Talk about that because one of the things that I tell people in my job as director of media relations is that you have more platforms available now than you've ever had, available to you as a public intellectual.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, this being one of them, heck, a podcast, who'd a thunk a decade ago.

Tanya Domi: No, I know it was brilliant-

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:19:50] That we could be doing this on work time.

Tanya Domi: It's brilliant that I came up with the idea, I have to say. But anyway, what's pretty amazing is that you have everything from Twitter to Facebook to WordPress-

Thistlethwaite: Instagram-

Tanya Domi: ... Instagram-

Thistlethwaite: ... [crosstalk 00:20:04], oh my goodness.

Tanya Domi: Yes. And the social science is showing, and I know that you guys have written about this, the social science shows that now more scholarly research, the stuff that used to be behind a paywall is now moving into the public domain as never before, because of access to the Internet and particular Facebook and Twitter. They're showing that the shares of scholarly work has never probably been more accessible to the public.

Thistlethwaite: Great citation, Tanya, that's really great for you to know this. And I have no doubt that it's true-
Tanya Domi: I've shared that with my colleagues uptown in Columbia by the way.

Thistlethwaite: Well, good, they gotta learn from us at the public institution-

Tanya Domi: They do, they do.

Thistlethwaite: ... down here. Yeah. Well, yeah, in addition to just ... I think there's a moral imperative for any public intellectual, anybody who's a scholar activist to make their work public. And you know, that's most of us. Somebody who's trying to have engagement with the world outside the academy.

Thistlethwaite: There is ... Just professionally and morally responsible to put your work in open spaces. But in addition to that, the Twitter, and the Facebook, and the blogging, and the posting, and the interaction with professional journalists are elements of bringing that work, bringing understanding of that work, bringing interactivity of that work to the people who are gonna use it, apply it in productive ways.

Tanya Domi: Applied research.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, so there are two parts to it; getting your work out in the public, as you write in academic language, and then talking about it in working with your working, putting your work back to the communities who are gonna-

Tanya Domi: Benefit from it.

Thistlethwaite: Exactly, who are gonna benefit from it. So the impetus for the book was this Ford Foundation grant that Jessie got when she was working with-

Tanya Domi: JustPublics.

Thistlethwaite: ... JustPublics. The JustPublics@365 work that she did in conjunction with Bill Kelly, and Chase Robinson, and Matt Gold. But it was a-

Tanya Domi: And you.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah. I was like second-tier. I came in second-tier. I became chief and then it was already underway. So there were several elements to that. There were like public events called summits, there was a focus on digital media, and then we had these media camp workshops that you were actually a part of-

Tanya Domi: Yes, I was.

Thistlethwaite: ... Very, very popular. So we'd invite faculty and grad students, and people from the communities, you know, public funding, institution reps, to come and learn how to tweet better, you laugh.

Tanya Domi: No, and write an op-ed-
[crosstalk 00:23:08] Write an op-ed-

Tanya Domi: ... write an op-ed.

Thistlethwaite: Distill that-

Tanya Domi: All that knowledge.

Thistlethwaite: ... 2000, 9000 word article-

Tanya Domi: Article into a 850 words.

Thistlethwaite: ... into. Exactly.

Tanya Domi: Which is an art-

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:23:20] Harder than it seems.

Tanya Domi: It's very hard.

Thistlethwaite: It shouldn't be that hard, but golly it is.

Tanya Domi: It is.

Thistlethwaite: And how to create a WordPress blog, and how to conduct an on-camera interview. Those were the kinds of media camp workshops that we sponsored. Very popular. And in some cases replicated around campuses since the grant-

Tanya Domi: Expired.

Thistlethwaite: ... [crosstalk 00:23:47] was over. Yeah. But not as much as we'd hope. Anyway, Jessie and I kind of just wrote up the politics and the practices that we invoked with that grant. And that's Being a Scholar in the Digital Era.

Tanya Domi: It's very cool. So what about the future of preservation in research and libraries? Was this something that you've talked about? I mean now more than ever I with seem that there has to be a huge investment in computers, the architecture, how to expand to absorb all this information, and then to take care of it. I mean it used to be where you have books, and books, and books, which are still very important. But a lot of the information now is being preserved digitally as well.

Thistlethwaite: Well, you've got the born-digital stuff to wrestle with, and that's ... We just haven't been able to ... The archival profession is just like having its mind blown right now trying to figure out how to prioritize what we archive and then how to do it.
Thistlethwaite: I was just reading an article in The Atlantic monthly not long ago, that was talking about the impossibility of even the Library of Congress, who has got the authority to archive Twitter, the impossibility of doing that. I mean it takes so long, it's unpractical to search, one year's rifling through the Twitter feed for a year is gonna take more than a day, that it's just like the archival demand is so great.

Thistlethwaite: So like with every preservation activity we have to make decisions about what's gonna be archived, what's gonna be prioritized, and what's not. And we lose something every time. But similarly, with the advent of the telephone, we didn't record telephone calls. Letters-

Tanya Domi: Richard Nixon did.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Richard Nixon did, and now it is preserved.

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:26:01] Happy sad about that. Happy sad.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and it was preserved, and we actually have a graduate student-

Thistlethwaite: [crosstalk 00:26:06] that's good, that's bad.

Tanya Domi: ... who was ... Yeah, so we actually have a graduate student-

Thistlethwaite: For-

Tanya Domi: ... who's actually-

Thistlethwaite: ... President Nixon.

Tanya Domi: ... done scholarly work on his conversations that are in the National Security Archives.

Thistlethwaite: Yeah. Micki Kaufman's work-

Tanya Domi: Yeah, Micki Kaufman's work.

Thistlethwaite: ... on Kissinger and the kinds of language that were used in those phone conversations, and-

Tanya Domi: It's fascinating.

Thistlethwaite: ... the meanings that can be extrapolated from those conversations is really brilliant. But yeah, so in the phone conversations that were recorded, we have this archival access. But anyway, most of them were not recorded, your
conversations, my conversations during that time period, thankfully, were not recorded.

Tanya Domi: Were not recorded, right.

Thistlethwaite: So we're gonna miss some the brilliance of the Twitter and the Facebook. But honestly I think that the going notion is that we have to harness the self-archiving, this crowdsourcing, the self-archiving is the way that we're going to best ensure the preservation of bodies of work. It's just like if you saved your great grandfather's letters, then he would make his way into the historical record. Men's writings made their way into the historical record at much greater numbers than women-

Tanya Domi: Women.

Thistlethwaite: ... and the complications of race, and language, and location, all like shape the nature of what we know about what has past.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and who tells history, and who tells history, from what perspective. I mean-

Thistlethwaite: Yeah, and it's same thing in the digital age. There are gonna be political advantages to some people, and political disadvantages to others. We've seen this grassroots archive movement emerge in our lifetimes, like from the 70s forward, to sort of correct some of those social, or speak to some of the social political pressures that shape the archival record.

Tanya Domi: I mean when you think about it, it is absolutely remarkable that the only book in America, trilogy written on a woman is by Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt. And that is remarkable. The only woman in the history of this country to have a trilogy written about her, and of course there has been a lot of fight over what her archives meant, her relationship with women, intimate relationships-

Thistlethwaite: We should just have like a women biography trilogy context.

Tanya Domi: Oh, not, Blanche would love that. So anyway, thank you so much for being here today.

Thistlethwaite: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: And thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Polly Thistlethwaite, the chief librarian at the Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production, engineering,
and technical assistance by Sarah Fisherman and Jack Horowitz. I am Tanya Domi, tune in next week.