

The Future of Public Libraries in an Internet Age

BY RUTH A. WOODEN

With the Internet reshaping so many aspects of our lives, it has become common for prognosticators to speculate about the ultimate demise of all sorts of institutions that many of us have come to take for granted. So when Public Agenda set out to investigate public and civic leaders' thinking about public libraries today, we were not at all certain what we would hear.

The first message that came was loud and clear: there is a future for public libraries in the Internet age. Even with the vast and growing amount of information available on the Internet and more competition for public funding, Americans say that public libraries will continue to play a vital role in communities. A strong majority say that if their public library were to shut down, they would feel "that something essential and important has been lost, affecting the whole community" (78 percent). The feeling that libraries are central to healthy communities is even more common among those who are most actively engaged in communities: the voters, volunteers, and contributors who make communities strong and can usually be counted on to raise a ruckus when things go wrong.

In our recent report on the research, "Long Overdue: A Fresh Look at Public and Leadership Attitudes About Libraries in the 21st Century," Public Agenda documents the strong beliefs people have that their communities must have well-functioning public libraries in order to be healthy and strong. Large majorities said that all children should have a good, safe, appealing library in their neighborhood; that libraries play a crucial role in preserving permanent and unalterable records; and

that government should support the wiring of libraries so that low-income people can have access to the Internet.

Americans Say Libraries Are a Good Public Investment

At a time of broad concern about wasteful public spending, and as we hear of communities refusing to pay more taxes for public education or "essential services," 71 percent say that libraries spend public money well. Fifty-two percent say that if their local library needed additional funding, they would favor a tax increase to generate the necessary resources—significantly more than the number who favor charging users (32 percent) or reducing services (16 percent) as options for solving a financial shortfall.

In many ways, people believe that libraries are more essential now than ever before. Americans say that since so many businesses are selling information, we absolutely need public libraries to provide vital information free of charge to anyone who needs it. They also strongly agree that libraries are an important, quiet oasis from fast-paced, stressful lives.

In an age when people are often deeply cynical about the performance of all sorts of public services, from public education to the police to cultural institutions, public libraries are rated A more often than any other public service we asked about. Indeed, public libraries seem almost immune to the distrust that is associated with so many other institutions.

More than one hundred years ago, the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie saw the potential of the public library to be the center of enlightened learning in

every community. He offered to build libraries if communities would contribute land, furnish money for annual maintenance, and exercise governance and oversight. He gave communities the incentive to participate in a national movement and between 1881 and 1917 invested the equivalent of \$3 billion to build 1,689 libraries across the nation.

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The result of Carnegie's investment and the involvement of communities helped educate generations of Americans. His commitment helped fix the library in the American consciousness as a significant public institution that needed and deserved broad public support. A century after this compact with American communities, nearly 90 percent of library funding derives from local public dollars—which can be seen as either a curse or a blessing.

Libraries for Today, Libraries for Tomorrow

When people think about their expectations of libraries today, they generally think about the traditional services that most libraries carry out so well. Topping the public's list of priorities is that the basic services they have come to expect from libraries remain free of charge to the public. They also expect libraries to have enough current books for children; numerous reference materials; and friendly, knowledgeable librarians available. Libraries should offer convenient reading hours and special programs for children, and they should have well-maintained buildings along with books and information that are organized for easy self-service. The top-ten list of public priorities for libraries also includes making available safe and productive gathering places for teenagers, being open on evenings

and weekends, and having plenty of current books for adults.

For the most part, these public expectations are matched by libraries' performance, the public told us. People give especially high grades to their public libraries for having buildings that are well maintained; comfortable places to read; and enough friendly, knowledgeable librarians to supply help when needed.

Although people clearly want libraries to ace the basics—materials, hours, and service—they also expect more and more from libraries in this age of the Internet. "Long Overdue" reveals a great deal about libraries and technology. Libraries are anything but relics of the past. They are viewed as key players in our digitized future. Two-thirds of survey respondents say that having enough computers and online services for people should be a high priority for their local library. Seven in ten favor wiring libraries so that those who might not be able to afford a computer in their home can learn computer skills and get online.

Those who think that libraries are merely becoming "information resources of last resort" for those who can't afford a home computer seem to be mistaken. Advanced computer users and families with higher income are even more likely to use public libraries and the technology services they offer. But, not surprisingly, people with few computer skills are the most likely to say wiring libraries to provide for "have-nots" should be a high priority.

Where Is the Love?

Public libraries are beloved institutions, but they can't survive on accolades alone. With the advent of computers and search engines, digital libraries, and the Internet, some question if libraries are essential and whether they should command priority in the competition for public dollars. Public Agenda's research shows public libraries are not seen as objects of nostalgia, but rather as essential commu-

nity players in the effort to increase equity, opportunity, and community development in the information age.

A growing number of communities are determined to keep their libraries at the leading edge of technology: affording small businesses the resources to compete globally; giving residents access to credible, current health information; and making libraries vital information access points for everyone. These communities reveal the vast potential of libraries for the future.

But only a small percentage of communities invest in public libraries to the extent necessary to produce maximum dividends. In those communities where the case for libraries is less clear and competition for public funds is high, there are disturbing indicators that support for libraries is slipping.

The precarious financial condition of the nationwide public library system (to the extent that there is a cohesive system at all) that we heard about from library advocates was reinforced in our interviews with civic leaders across the nation.

Civic leaders do see the great strengths of the public library as being an information center in the digital age, an important resource for those who have the fewest resources available to them, and the “go to” place for all manner of public functions (including health information, job services, immigrant acculturation, and adult literacy training). But they also see challenges for libraries that need to be addressed by library supporters. Many civic leaders pointed to public libraries’ seemingly infinite variety in governance structure as a major stumbling block. Public libraries’ lack of marketing, impassive advocacy, and isolation from the community were also cited as shortcomings in library performance.

Our research identified four specific areas where civic leadership, public citizens, and library leaders all seem to agree that there is a major opportunity

for public libraries to step in and address community needs: (1) developing better programming and services for teens, (2) addressing illiteracy and poor reading skills among adults, (3) offering ready access to information about government services (including making public documents and forms quickly and easily available), and (4) permitting much greater access to computers for all.

Yet venturing into these areas would likely require financial resources that many libraries do not currently have. The civic leaders we spoke to questioned whether a groundswell of citizen support for public libraries would emerge in their communities. “Long Overdue” suggests that there is, in fact, strong potential for vocal support from activist citizens who could argue effectively for consistent and reliable financial support for public libraries. But library supporters, especially leaders with governance responsibility, must take the steps necessary to harness this potential and make it a reality.

Leveraging Public Goodwill for Financial Support

There are people in every community who make things happen but don’t necessarily hold any official post. These are the folks we refer to in our research report as “community soldiers,” because no battle can be won without them. The good news for libraries is that these citizens—who nearly always vote in local elections and involve themselves in community organizations and activities—are heavy users and big fans of libraries.

But even though they may be considered champions of libraries, currently they are not very aware of the potential financial vulnerability of their local libraries. Although 45 percent of the civically engaged think their local government has not furnished enough money and assistance to the public libraries in their communities, 42 percent think they have, and 13 percent say they simply do not know. It appears that those citizens who can be counted on to rally to the cause if libraries are in financial peril

are no more likely than the general population to be aware of the challenges facing libraries today.

Public lack of awareness of the financial challenges libraries face aside, there are other reasons everything is not milk and honey in the land of libraries. Libraries face real challenges today. Only 35 percent of survey respondents say their local library gets an A when it comes to having convenient hours so people can use the services; only 28 percent give libraries an A for offering access to catalogues and databases through the Internet; 26 percent give an A for having enough computers and online services in the library for the people who want to use them; and just 24 percent give an A for making available reading hours, homework help, and study space for children and teenagers. These are services that the public rate among the highest priorities for libraries. Clearly there are opportunities to improve service delivery on the part of local libraries.

Library leaders would like to do much more in the way of customer service and innovative programming. But as our interviews with public leaders attest, finances are always a challenge. The civic leaders we interviewed generally share the public's high regard for libraries but are more conscious of the tenuous financial condition of many public libraries. Some public libraries are comfortable with the funding they receive, but the vast majority are not so well supported. Though the public remains largely unaware of the fiscal pressures on libraries today, civic and business leaders believe that public libraries are often first on the chopping block when state and local budgets are cut.

Recent history in Salinas, Calif., a community that closed almost all of its libraries (and is profiled in our study), points to the passion for libraries that can emerge when a funding crisis imperils a treasured institution. But since the vast majority of the public do not sense that their own libraries may be at risk, most people do not see a reason to raise their voice in concern. It is simply not something on their

radar screen today. The “canary in the coal mine” metaphor has a place here. Leaders have pricked up their ears to the distressed calls of the canary, but the public seems to hear only a sweet song and no hint of impending trouble.

Libraries: Essential Community Problem Solvers

To identify the most favorable potential opportunities for libraries to strengthen public support, Public Agenda asked the public about their priorities for urgent action in their communities and in which areas they think government should be more effective because current performance is relatively poor. Researchers explored the same terrain in the interviews with national and local leadership.

Four areas of opportunity resonated most with the public and leaders alike:

- Providing stronger services for teens. The public is greatly concerned about teenagers and feels (72 percent) that offering safe and productive activities for teens should be a high priority for their communities. This is also an area where the public potentially holds local government accountable, believing local government both can and should do more for teens. In the public's reckoning, libraries can potentially fill the gap: three out of four Americans (74 percent) believe providing services for teens should be a high priority for libraries.
- Helping address illiteracy and poor reading skills among adults. Another major opportunity for libraries to fill community needs is with supplying literacy and reading programs for adults, which many civic leaders tied to strengthening workforce skills and economic development. Sixty-eight percent of the public said adult literacy programs should be a high priority for the community, very few said it was something their community was doing a very good job of providing, and a large majority (68 percent) said it should be a high priority for their local library.
- Affording ready access to information about government services, such as making available gov-

ernment forms or information on literacy programs.

- Ensuring even greater access to computers for all. Almost two-thirds of Americans say having enough computers and online services for the people who want to use them should be a high priority for libraries.

For public libraries today, the greatest challenge is not in convincing the public of their worth—in the present or for the future. People clearly see many valuable roles for libraries to play. Our research yields ample evidence that libraries are highly valued public institutions serving multiple needs that, the public notes, will certainly continue to be needed with changing times.

A Time of Reckoning

America's public libraries are facing a pivotal time in their history. There is a rich tradition of public service that infuses citizens with great respect for the mission of libraries. Libraries have received significant public and private financial support over the years, ranging from local property tax support to state budget funding and a high level of private philanthropic funding. But funding level and mechanisms vary tremendously from one community to the next—and that's part of the problem.

During the past several decades, there has been a major effort to upgrade technology and Internet access to bring the benefits of these new technologies to all citizens, regardless of economic circumstances. This has added further to public approval of the all-important contributions of libraries. Of course,

libraries have also long held a position of special importance in educating schoolchildren and older students.

The kind of action required for libraries to position themselves securely in the future will demand active and engaged governance. When change happens in communities, it is often a product of the passion of engaged citizen leaders who demand change from elected officials. But our research into a variety of library environments would suggest that libraries may suffer in some cases from a kind of “benign neglect” on the part of those who are most civically engaged. The reasoning here may be a variation on the theme that if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Although the public's strong feelings about how well libraries are doing their job make clear that libraries aren't broken, this doesn't mean there aren't cracks in the foundation. Those who are most passionate about the importance of libraries in communities, if they are to secure their future, must make certain that the local and state governance structures that determine funding understand all that libraries are able to do for citizens and just how successful their constituents perceive them to be.

Reference

“Long Overdue: A Fresh Look at Public and Leadership Attitudes About Libraries in the 21st Century.” New York: Public Agenda, 2006.

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