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Space and the Social Worth of Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT In spite of the growth of digital information and the resultant questioning by some of the value of public libraries, library usage data indicate there were 497,600,000 more visits to public libraries in 2013 than in 1993. Why do people still visit public libraries in the digital age? While many factors drive people to visit public libraries, one thing that public libraries offer that cannot be duplicated online is physical space. Over the decades, library space has been the glue holding the library universe together even as the specific activities that take inside libraries have evolved. While public libraries do an excellent job of promoting their important role in providing access to information, educational resources, technology, and a host of valuable services, they must also promote the value of public library space itself. This requires more than trotting out numbers; it requires telling compelling stories of how public library space is used and reminding the public that the kind of spaces public libraries provide are, in fact, a vanishing resource. The post-911 tightening of security in public buildings of all sorts—coupled with the increasing privatization of what were once public spaces—has left public libraries as perhaps the last remaining indoor public spaces where an individual can remain from opening until closing without needing any reason to be there and without having to spend any money. Public libraries should promote the uniqueness of their spaces in much the same way that National Parks promote the unique spaces they preserve and make available to the public.

When governments come under financial pressure, regardless of whether that pressure is imposed by harsh economic realities or swings of political pendulums, politicians and officials instinctively look to eliminate from public ledgers any expenses whose absence would cause little or no perceived pain—at least to themselves. In such political climates, cuts to public library budgets, whether actual or threatened, tend to rise to the surface (Kavner 2011). The early 2017 example of President Trump's proposal to eliminate the Institute of Museum and Library Services from his FY2018 budget certainly sent a chill through the
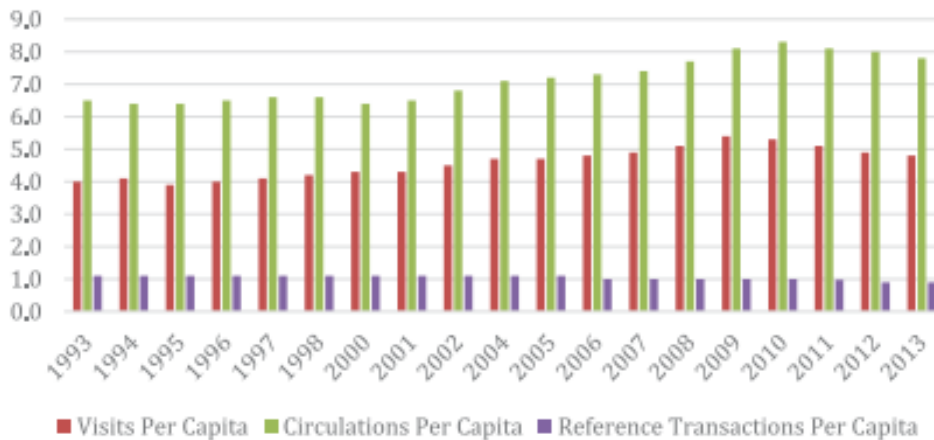
Figure 1. U.S. public library usage statistics: 1993–2013. Chart created by Donald A. Barclay, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

public library world. But for anyone who approves of cutting the cost of government, the existence of vast amounts of information—a lot of it free— on the Internet suggests that the public library has outlived its usefulness, that it has become an irrelevant waste of public investment in a world in which, so it seems, anything can be Googled.

Popular culture certainly has no problem employing the stereotype of the irrelevant public library. No less a cultural barometer than *The Simpsons* animated television series features an episode, "Margical History Tour," depicting Springfield's public library as dilapidated, lacking books, and largely patronized by the homeless, while a later episode, "Lisa the Greek," shows library habitué Lisa Simpson entering a virtually empty public library to be greeted by an idle (and stereotypically mousey) reference librarian who gasps, "Oh, it's been a madhouse, Lisa."

Easy jokes about run-down libraries and sweeping generalizations about "everything" being on the Internet aside, is the public library really a dying anachronism in a digital world? The hard numbers say no. In spite of a survey in which Americans say they are using public libraries less (Horrigan 2016), the most recent usage numbers reported by libraries indicate the opposite of a dying institution. In the last two decades, the total number of U.S. public libraries slightly increased—inching up from 8,921 in 1994 to 9,091 in 2013—a gain of 1.9 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2014). Over the same period, the data also show that use of public libraries in the United States went up as well, rising from 4 visits per capita in 1993 to 4.8 visits per capita in 2013, a gain of 16.7 percent (see Figure 1) (National Center for Education Statistics 2014). Looking at these statistics as raw numbers based on U.S. population estimates, the data indicate there were 497,600,000 more visits to public libraries in 2013 than in 1993. For those keeping score, that is an increase of close to half a billion (with-a-b) visits.

Over the same twenty-year span, public library circulation grew along with in-person visits. The number of books and other items borrowed from U.S.

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public libraries increased from 6.5 items per capita in 1993 to 7.8 items per capita in 2013—up 20 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2014). In raw numbers, the data show 809,350,000 more public library items circulated in 2013 than in 1993.

The one major public library usage measure that decreased from 1993 to 2013 was the number of times library users asked questions of reference librarians, dropping from 1.1 reference questions per capita in 1993 to 0.9 reference questions per capita 2012, a decline of 22.2 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2014). Over the same period, a similar steep drop in reference questions took place in academic libraries. There is not much mystery behind these decreases. In the bygone era when print-format reference books were go-to sources for factual information, the public had little choice but to visit a library to make use of such reference staples as *Places Rated Almanac*, *The Physician's Desk Reference*, or *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Today, on the other hand, even formerly esoteric facts like the address and phone number of a small business located in a distant country, the exact dates of Ramadan in 1902, or the name of Napoleon's favorite horse can be looked up in a matter of seconds via a smartphone. And as for that old reference warhorse, the printed encyclopedia? Like it or not, Britannica churned out its final set in 2010. Further contributing to the decline of in-person reference service is the fact that the public is increasingly able to consult with librarians through the Internet, either via email or online chat. Services like Online Computer Library Centre's (OCLC's) 24/7 Reference Cooperative allow public and academic libraries to provide around-the-clock, chat-based reference without the need to hire (and pay the salaries of) librarians willing to work graveyard shifts and holidays.

Going just by the numbers, one can say that the popularity of U.S. public libraries is stronger today than it was before the Web became a household word (much less a household necessity). But are numbers themselves enough to convince the public at large of the value of public libraries? How does approximately 1.5 billion visits per year to U.S. public libraries stack up against Google's approximately 11 billion U.S. desktop searches per month? ("100 Google Search Statistics and Facts" 2016). The challenge of trying to defend public libraries through numbers alone is well expressed by a pair of researchers studying the perception of public libraries in the Netherlands, as follows: Hitherto, much attention has been paid to the outputs of the library (numbers of materials, loans, visits, etc.) in addressing the importance of public libraries for Dutch society. What is considerably less well known and documented are the outcomes of the library, or, in other words, its real social worth to society. (Huysmans and Oomes 2013)

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So, while hard numbers about the use of public libraries may help in demonstrating their popular appeal, it is just as, if not more, important to document the social worth of libraries. This, however, poses a real challenge for the public library community. Compiling and sharing usage statistics is easy, while documenting social worth is hard. Comparing library visits to Google searches is simple (and simplistic), while demonstrating to the average person that these two things are different—and that their difference is meaningful—is hard. That said, it is a matter of basic survival that public libraries demonstrate their social worth.

Space itself: An underemphasized social worth of public libraries?

Public libraries have tended to demonstrate their social worth by focusing on the public library's important role in providing access to information, enhancing education, providing access to technology, and promoting self-improvement through services such as, for example, assistance in finding employment or learning English as a second language. A visit to the Public

Library Association Advocacy webpage provides ready examples of the many ways public libraries are promoting their social value (Public Library Association 2016).

While public libraries do a good job of promoting the good things that happen within libraries, I propose that public libraries and their supporters should also actively promote the idea that public library space—in and of itself—is a key social value of public libraries. Just what is so special about public library space? It is special because it is unique. No space quite like public library space has managed to survive the changes wrought by an increasingly privatized and security-obsessed world.

If I may, a personal anecdote to illustrate my point: While growing up in Boise, Idaho during the 1970s, my friends and I would occasionally ride our bicycles down to the state capitol building to wander around the marble halls and gawk at the larger-than-life equestrian statue of George Washington. In those days, the statehouse doors were not locked during daylight hours, and the guards, if there were any, remained out of sight. In a post-9/11 United States, the idea of walking into a government building—much less a state capitol building—without, at the very least, passing through a metal detector staffed by armed guards reads like some Norman Rockwell fantasy of an America that never really existed. (Though, of course, that more open and, in most ways, freer America really did exist.) The tightening of security in public buildings of all sorts—coupled with the increasing privatization of what were once public spaces (Low and Smith 2006, 1–2)—has left public libraries as perhaps the last remaining indoor public spaces where an individual can remain from opening until closing without needing any reason to be there and without having to spend any

money. The need to not spend any money quite possibly explains why visits to public libraries topped out in 2009 and 2010, the toughest years of the Great Recession. Sadly, it also explains why public libraries have reluctantly become the unofficial daybed for some the homeless, many of whom suffer from mental illness (Stevens and Gunderman 2015). That said, the overall disappearance of shared indoor public space has only served to increase the social value of public library space.

Without minimizing the importance of the public library's crucial provision of information resources and services, public library space itself is the glue that holds everything together. Over the decades, library space has been the constant even as the specific activities that take place inside library walls have changed. Decades ago library activities largely revolved around reading and borrowing books, but even so public libraries would open up their spaces for lectures, classes, and public meetings. Before the advent of word processors, people would visit libraries to make use of a technology known as the "typewriter." Today you do not find a lot of typewriters in public libraries; instead, you find things like computers and makerspaces. And though thirty years from now library computers and makerspaces will have likely gone the way of coin-op typewriters, public libraries will no doubt be providing access to different, as-yet-unimagined technologies. Assuming, of course, that public library space still exists thirty years in the future.

Promoting the social value of public library space demands good story telling. For a striking example, consider the many stories of New Yorkers flocking to their public libraries on the day of, and in the days following, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Yes, after the attacks New Yorkers crowded into their public libraries in search of information, but they also went there in search of community (Novacek 2001). While few stories of the social value of

public library space are as dramatic as the stories of 9/11, there are many compelling stories that library supporters could, and should, tell about the value of public library space, about the good things that happen in libraries only because library space is there as a tangible physical presence. Library space makes it possible for people to learn, socialize, escape, and connect in ways that no other present-day space—private, governmental, or commercial—can.

Another important aspect of the social value of public library space is that it is inherently local in character. Sure, you may find many of the same books and technologies and services in public libraries across the country, but it is not the case that public libraries are part of some global franchise in which a library in Pekin, Illinois is the carbon copy of a library in Odessa, Florida. And although public libraries are government entities, rather than operating as agencies of giant federal or state governments, the local city or county government typically finances public libraries. The friendly—often romanticized—small-town public library stands in antithesis to the uncaring, unapproachable government bureaucracy. And though it is true that the public library systems of populous cities and counties are often large and bureaucratic, it is the local neighborhood branches to which many

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members of the public feel most connected, in no small part because these local branches have done a wonderful job of positioning themselves to meet the specific needs of the local communities they serve. The spaces provided by some 17,000+ such public libraries across the United States have huge social worth because they truly belong to the local publics they serve. While it is possible to imagine an entirely virtual public library with no physical spaces to which people can come, it is as hard to imagine such a soulless entity as it is to imagine, say, a virtual national park that has no presence in the physical world. Indeed, one reasonable answer to the question of, "Why do we need public libraries when everything is on the Internet?" is, "Because the Internet is not a real place to which people can physically come. The public library offers real space that people occupy and share to the benefit of themselves and others."

Extending my earlier analogy, public libraries are, in many ways, like national parks. National parks fill a very up-to-date need for providing the public with opportunities for education and self-improvement. As do libraries. In fact, the jobs of those park rangers who provide tours and educational programs are quite a lot like the jobs of people who work in public libraries. Most importantly, national parks preserve and provide access to a special kind of space that is not found—easily or at all—anywhere else. Similarly, public libraries preserve and provide access to a special kind of space that has disappeared from other parts of our society. Like national parks, public libraries should make every effort to demonstrate to the public the essential value of their spaces in and of themselves; should demonstrate that public library space is unique; and should explain, again and again, that public library space has a timeless value that transcends changes in technology and which would be sorely missed if it were to be plowed under and paved over. Public library space, like the lands of America's national parks, is a survivor of a more open and freer time. As such, it deserves to be preserved, respected, and treated as part of our cultural heritage.

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