Libraries and the Decline of Public Purposes

John Buschman

ABSTRACT. This article explores the idea of the democratic public sphere, and it is grounded in the work of Jurgen Habermas. Libraries help make possible the democratic public sphere ideal in the form of rational organization of human cultural production and they embody an essential element of democracy: a place where the ideal of unfettered communication and investigation exists in rudimentary form, hosting the turbulent discourse of a democracy and its culture. However, the trend of viewing and running libraries along business and profit models—“the new public philosophy”—represents a dismantling of the democratic public sphere. This can be seen in examples as varied as the rhetorical shift from “patron” to “customer,” the current struggles for funding and the justifications used in that process, to coffee bars, no retrospective collections, and the bias toward economically-useful electronic resources. The article ends with the argument that, if we forget this role and reason for being and abandon public purposes, then we are helping in the demise of the democratic public sphere and cutting away at the long-term justification for libraries. It is worth reminding ourselves that the value of a good library—like good teaching—is extraordinarily difficult to quantify. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]
Libraries have been in a self-declared state of crisis for decades now. Here are a few examples. A 1971 study concluded that there was “an intellectual crisis . . . and a deepening space and budget problem.”\(^1\) A respected library administrator who held a number of prominent posts over his career sensibly expressed skepticism in 1984 at the “vast gap between promise and reality” when the “wonders of the new information processing technology are described,” but only a few years later he described large print research collections built over time as “both an asset and a liability in the electronic future.”\(^2\) More recently other commentators have called libraries a dying “gigantic mausoleum of old information,”\(^3\) with an unpredictable future: “We have libraries on the frontiers of knowledge and libraries on the verge of extinction.”\(^4\) The current thinking is that libraries, “which used to be a major purveyor and ‘keeper’ of information, [are] now just one of the crowd [and are] barely considered as part of the information revolution.”\(^5\)

In the face of all of this rhetoric, are libraries really in a crisis? If so, why has it lingered so long? Further, why has this crisis been continually renamed, with differing causes and differing solutions, none of which deal with the root problems at issue?

The answer to the first question is yes; libraries are in something of a crisis. The answers to the second and third questions are more complicated, but answering them sheds light on the actual problems that libraries have faced and are facing, the nature of which is very different from the crises that have been declared over the last couple of decades.

Being an old history major, I do not look at libraries in isolation. I see them linked together with schools, universities, orchestras, and museums. In short, whether their leaders recognize the fact or not, in the United States, these public cultural institutions share a common fate. They are all essentially public institutions—whether they are Cornell University, a specialized music archive, Chicago Public Library, Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis, the National Gallery, Idaho State University, the Cleveland Orchestra, or my own small public library that operates as part of a county library system.

This commonality has many elements: all of the institutions share tax exempt status; state and local laws specifically protect them (from vandalism, from harassment of minority views, from censorship, etc.); the professionals in each enjoy varying degrees and versions of academic or intellectual freedom—which is recognized in the courts; and most were
founded or grew significantly in the 19th century era of American public institution building. Those under private control, such as Ivy League universities, tend to define their roles in national terms. Also, irrespective of whether they are publicly or privately funded, all would make the argument for their clear role in pushing forward the boundaries of human understanding, knowledge, and culture. Of these institutions, the largest and most studied is education, and, conveniently for us, it is the closest and most salient link to librarianship. Even if they play other roles, libraries are first and foremost educational institutions.

Scholars who study the history and culture of educational institutions recognize that over the past quarter-century, they have been redefined. The nature of this redefinition is articulated in the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education report, *A Nation at Risk*, issued by the United States Department of Education, National Commission on Excellence in Education. That report called for an educational “rearmament” with nothing less than world leadership at stake. Writing on behalf of the country’s educational establishment, the report’s authors claimed:

We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. . . . History is not kind to idlers. . . . We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America’s position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer. . . . In a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever-greater danger, and of ever-larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them, educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society.7

This proclamation of new purpose reflected a shift in public policy already under way. Because of this shift, educational institutions had to change their reason for being. Summarizing the report, an important educational scholar wrote, “Schools become important only to the degree that they can provide the forms of knowledge, skills, and social practices necessary to produce the labor force for an increasingly complex, technological economy.”8

In other words, schools of all kinds must educate students so they will have a positive impact on society. Just like private business, schooling
has to have a bottom line. This economic model of public thinking be-
comes both the reason for and the method to reform and shape public
policy—and that thinking directly affects the policies which determine
spending amounts and purposes for education. That has been the tenor
of public discourse for a generation now. My own local school board
makes the exact same point 20 years later in a newsletter on the pro-
posed budget: “Education must keep up with the demands of the world
our children will live in by giving them a wide base of knowledge. . . .”
What is that but a gentler restatement of the rationale for public schools
in *A Nation at Risk*?

This is all well and good you say—and you might even agree—but what
does it have to do with libraries? These broad trends did not stop at the
schoolhouse or university doorstep. They have been the basis of public
policy and funding for all public cultural institutions—including librar-
ies. To give one instance, a year after the federal government issued *A
Nation at Risk*, the government published a parallel report for libraries.
Titled *Alliance for Excellence*, this report linked “reforming” libraries
to the needs of the economy. “*A Nation at Risk* took a message of con-
cern into every state of the union [to] undertake stringent measures for
change. America’s well-being is at stake. The libraries of the nation can
and should be a part of the remedy.”9 The essence of the proposed “rem-
edy” was to shift libraries of all types away from public funding
sources, particularly local property taxes, and toward the technological
resources, namely networked computers, which were seen as central to
the “new” economy.

A second example is museums. In the 1980s, museums needed both
new audiences and new money. These needs were rooted in three re-
lated public policy trends which follow the general patterns established
for education and libraries: cuts in funding from governmental sources,
art price inflation, and new tax laws which ended many incentives for
the wealthy to donate art to museums. At the same time, art became ex-
ceedingly expensive for museums to acquire because prices were fueled
by the redistribution of wealth upwards in those years, and the commod-
ity value of the art (related to its remaining in private hands because of
the change in tax laws) became itself an attraction (e.g., going to look at
something worth $30 million). In this environment, the production and
marketing of art began to warp museum collections and programs. Ex-
amples include heavy marketing of blockbuster shows or allowing
hype, publicity, and the prices commanded by a relatively new and
less-talented artist drive decisions on shows and “retrospectives.”10
The political scientist Sheldon Wolin has called this time an era of a new public philosophy wherein “economics now dominates public discourse. [It] becomes the paradigm of what public reason should be [and] prescribes the form that ‘problems’ have to be given before they can be acted upon.” Economics as a new public philosophy now “frame[s] the alternatives in virtually every sphere of public activity, from health care, social welfare and education to weapons systems, environmental protection, and scientific research.” Historically, this has been a gradual, yet nonetheless radical, change. Previously American political culture had been grounded in a “stock of notions” based on English common law, Protestantism, and the Enlightenment. Public and political discourse had a common ground because people shared similar basic ideas of the meaning of power, equality, freedom, and authority. And, they held the bias that political and legal questions should be framed and debated in moral and religious terms. This, Wolin argues, had a tremendous grounding effect on American society, as witnessed by the “historical skepticism about the motives of businessmen” and the great era of public institution building (schools, universities, museums, hospitals, libraries) in the 19th century—all for the public purposes of democracy and individual equal opportunity.11

This new public philosophy has a logic all its own, and it has redefined the circumstances under which libraries along with schools, universities, museums, and orchestras all operate. Under a still-developing public philosophy that puts economic purposes ahead of the common good, public (that is, tax) monies available to public, cultural institutions has substantially dried up.

Two relevant instances will suffice to make the point. The old Library Services and Construction Act (LSTA), a consistently renewed federal source of funds for library buildings, renovations, collections and “numerous programs for social, educational and economic betterment,” was revamped in recent years into the Library Services and Technology Act. The LSTA’s two areas of funding (replacing the former spread of eight areas) make the focus very clear: “information access through technology” and “information empowerment through special services.”12 Gone are the areas of funding for buildings and collections—those now must be accomplished locally, with no hope for federal funding.

The second example involves the music library at my own institution which I chaired for a period of a little more than three years. We sought a grant from the Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Of the 14 Congressional Priori-
ties identified in FIPSE guidelines, more than half directly relate to technological projects, and a number of the remaining items can be interpreted as having technological bias. Our project was to catalog the remainder of the collection of scores, sound recordings, and music books for the university’s online catalog, directly addressing the Congressional Priority that encouraged “applications for conversion of library catalogs to electronic formats.” In reviewing the criteria by which proposals were judged, we found some that seemed to be at odds with applications which clearly addressed some of the priorities. For instance, applications were judged on the basis of “replicability” or providing “new strategies.” A meat-and-potatoes grant to finish the cataloging of valuable retrospective music materials would be downgraded on these standards (as it was in the first unsuccessful attempt). FIPSE is quite mechanical about the awarding of grants. Scores are allocated for each area of the Criteria, and those with the highest scores get the grants. I made a call to the program’s director to see if there was a strategy to address Criteria that didn’t seem to apply to a legitimate Priority project. She was quite blunt: yes, our project directly addressed one of the priorities that Congress set in funding the program, but no, our proposal “didn’t stand a chance.” The evaluation criteria were skewed to favor particular kinds of Priorities. These included “innovations” like “enhanced distance learning” and “demonstration programs to establish a state of the art science and technology program.”

So what’s the big deal? Technology is ascendant and public funding is following that lead. The issues are more important, however.

First, the funding of additional technological resources is not being funded with additional resources—nor are some of the still-existing needs like buildings and retrospective cataloging being funded either. It is not as if books and printed artifacts have diminished in number or importance. So one portion of our institutions’ work, books, is being sacrificed to fund technologies, which are seen as economically beneficial innovations.

Second, these spending and funding patterns are taking place within a framework of deep hostility to taxes—even to support institutions operated for the general public good like libraries or schools. Government must now be “reinvented” and we must “do more with less.” Basic funding for additional hours, buildings, essential repairs, and maintaining collections comes as a struggle in a time when funding for technology (from a variety of public and private sources) becomes much easier. An ideology is being pursued here: collections and popular services are cut to move libraries toward networked resources. The public funding
shift is essentially a way to “position” the library within the dominant economic trends of the “new” economy. In the process, the public function of libraries subtly but surely changes: from a space for research, reflection, and reading to part of a community’s “social capital.” Taking this change into consideration, one consulting firm “recommended that ‘public’ be dropped from ‘public schools’ because of the word’s similar use in conjunction with housing, libraries, radio, and assistance programs has come to have negative connotations.”14 Though libraries are frequently memorialized for their democratic heritage and role in the public sphere, making the funding argument to support the library as a source of democratic inquiry and critique becomes something of a sideshow (or an embarrassment) when the building of “social capital” is at stake.

Third, networked, technological, multimedia resources are redefining the economic value of information and knowledge. It has been pretty clear for some time that the Internet was not going to be a home for free information harnessed to the purposes of democratic debate and information inquiry. Rather, the Internet was rapidly transformed into a commercial space where entertainment is marketed, advertisements are sold, and information is for sale.15 To gain access for their users to the entertainment, information, and communications services that the Internet provides, public libraries have to purchase electronic databases and add more and more up-to-date networked computers.

Together these shifts mark something of a vicious cycle here: total library funding is frozen, cut, or grows so slowly that the public institutions cannot keep up with all of the demands that their customers place on them. When new library funding becomes available, whether from public or private sources, the advance is tied to technologically-based resources that mesh with the “new” economy. They are given priority in funding because they are “popular,” and therefore, the library must buy them to get the traffic to justify further (or even continued) funding. The President of the American Library Association inadvertently summarized many of these issues when she tried to defend libraries: “America’s libraries have always been great equalizers [but] faced with a revolution in information technology, our libraries must keep pace.”16 Bill Gates’ oft-repeated vision to eliminate books and paper does not have to be technically feasible at all. It only need crowd out permanent print resources in the market and in the funding priorities of libraries.

In sum, library funding has been tied to the agenda of the “new” economy through the logic of the new public philosophy embedded in blue-ribbon panels, government reports, and public policy over the last
25 years. That policy framework has shaped the pattern of overall funding (and increasingly, where and how those funds are acquired) and the manner in which funds are expended in tight times. As a colleague of mine has said many times, budgets are assumptions, values, and priorities written in dollar signs. Those priorities make libraries subject to the social and fiscal discipline of the “need” to turn every public resource to the service of the “new” economy.

Why is this bad? Management guru Henry Mintzberg sensibly lays out the central issues at stake: public cultural institutions do not conform to the business-based models that the new public philosophy presupposes. For instance, managing public institutions based on business models assumes, among other things, that there are “clear, unambiguous policies” (that is, agreed-upon purposes for the institution in the public and political sphere) “for the implementation in the administrative sphere. In other words, policies have to be rather stable over time” and social/political factors must be kept “clear of the execution of those policies.”

Mintzberg asks the appropriate question: “How common is that?” He answers in return that isolated, autonomous functioning of public institutions is an assumption bound to “collapse in the face of what most [of them] do and how they have to work.” Public institutions face political and social pressures and interference all the time. Examples leap to mind: libraries are often renamed and given a different purpose—like “learning and leisure centers”—by local boards trying to catch a trendy wave. And, museums have frequently had to respond to political pressures (Mayor Guiliani vs. the Brooklyn Museum and the controversy over the Smithsonian’s proposed Enola Gay display are two notable cases). Aping business management schemes to justify and guide libraries is based on inappropriate premises. As Mintzberg put it, “the belief that politics and administration [in public institutions] can be separated [in the same way as] formulation and implementation in corporate planning . . . is another old myth that should be allowed to die a quiet death.” If this premise is wrong, as he argues, then business models of accountability are not effective guiding principles, but rather inappropriate management models for public institutions, recasting their purposes as quasi-economic entities in the process.

Mintzberg also identifies another key weakness: the assumption that “performance can be fully and properly evaluated by objective measures.” Again, he asks the proper question: “How many of the real benefits of [public institutions] lend themselves to such measurement? Many
activities are in the public sector precisely because of measurement problems.” He goes on to give a wonderful example of different calculations of the “success rate” of an organ transplant, which vary from 9 out of 11 (by the surgeon who only counts patient survival), to 6 out of 10 (by a hospital administrator who reviews the costs vs. the benefits), to 3 out of 10 (by the nurses who take quality of postoperative life as the major criterion). Decisions in public institutions can not be nailed down as measurable quantities. They require, in his words, “soft judgement.”

In conclusion, libraries, schools, universities, museums, archives, etc., are in a crisis because they have had their purposes recast in economic terms in this era of economics as the basis of our public reasoning. To use a metaphor, we’re playing marbles with bowling balls. The model of the market, business management, and entrepreneurial practices has been ascendant in public policy for some time now—and it is about time our field, and especially our leadership, recognize this fact for what it is. Like education, our field has been called upon to play a “crucial” role in bringing the information society and the “new” economy about, but without the public funding support for that expanded (and essentially economic) mission. Therefore, libraries have closely paralleled the problems and biases of education’s public funding patterns and, like education, we also have carefully imitated the business management fashions, fads, and tactics appropriate to adapting to information capitalism. In the process, we have rhetorically transformed library users into “customers” and then adopted the corollary business practices of marketing and public relations, adopted the market model of “competition” with each other and our bookstore imitators, and utilized an entrepreneurial approach to funding shortages and library practices. This economic bias toward networked resources and the “new” economy represents a significant change in the purpose of libraries—one that has come about almost “naturally” and without much debate as part of the general trend of the new public philosophy for public cultural institutions. This is the essence of our profession’s crisis.

Implicit in this critique is the notion of disabling the democratic public sphere, and it is grounded in the ideas of Jurgen Habermas. In adapting Habermas’ ideas, I have proposed that libraries help make possible the democratic public sphere ideal in the form of rational organization of human cultural production. Essentially, my argument is that libraries embody an essential element of democracy: a place where the ideal of unfettered communication and investigation exists in rudimentary
form, allowing for critical and rational discussion of the issues of the day. Further, our various collections—at least in the ideal we’re assigned to ethically strive for—represent the variety of arguments over the public’s issues and democratic culture over time, implicitly refuting notions of once-and-for-all solutions. In other words, libraries embody the turbulent discourse of a democracy and its culture. However, the specific trends I’ve identified represent a diminution—or dismantling—of the democratic public sphere. If we are to abandon public purposes and be merely driven by what is now “necessary” to keep libraries alive (purely popular collections, coffee bars, no retrospective collections, an emphasis on the economically-useful electronic resources), then we represent yet another variation on the corruption of the communicative processes (think Jerry Springer here). Our acceding to the new public philosophy model is, in many ways, an active deconstructing of the democratic public sphere discourse that libraries represent.

Our governing boards and institutions need to be reminded that the value of a good library—like good teaching—is extraordinarily difficult to quantify. The effects of both may be profound, but latent for many years. Despite our best efforts to crack these secrets, this discomforting truth remains. And it remains true that informed deliberation and communication continues as the essence of both education and democracy, and libraries play a pivotal—if sometimes undervalued—role in both. This vision and purpose stands in stark contrast to the banal, economic purposes of a librarianship “transformed” in obeisance to the new public philosophy. The educational philosopher Maxine Greene reminds us that to accede to that purpose robs us—both librarianship and the society we serve—of an important, if ineffable, resource:

Who knows better how important it is to look at things, whenever possible, as if they could be otherwise? To speak that way is to summon up the idea of imagination. Imagination is, in part, the capacity to apply concepts to things, to recognize the range of applications, and to invent new concepts. It is the possibility to move between . . . ‘spontaneous concepts’ and more formal or schematic ones. It is the capacity to make metaphors, to create new orders in experience and to realize that there is always more in experience than anyone can predict. It is, also, the power to perceive unexpected relationships, to envisage alternative realities, and to reach beyond the taken-for-granted towards possibility.
Compared to transforming public libraries into a mere economic instrumentality, a democratic, public librarianship is a deeper, more sustainable vision for our institutions, keeping ideas and the spirit of possibility alive. What could be more important for a democracy?

AUTHOR NOTE

John Buschman holds a BS in history and sociology and an MLS from Ball State University, and an MA in American Studies from St. Joseph’s University. He has published two books: Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Libraries in the Age of the New Public Philosophy (2003) and Critical Approaches to Information Technology in Librarianship: Foundations and Applications, both by Greenwood Publishing.

NOTES


13. See my summary and sources in *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, 71-72.


19. Mintzberg.

20. Mintzberg.

21. See my summary and sources in *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, 37-53.


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