

U.S. public libraries: We lose them at our peril

Libraries are an essential service in action, as well as an effective leveler of privilege and avenue of reinvention. As budget cuts affect more facilities, children will be the first to suffer.

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The U.S. is beginning an interesting experiment in democracy: We're cutting public library funds, shrinking our public and school libraries, and in some places, shutting them altogether.

These actions have nothing to do with whether the libraries are any good or whether the staff provides useful service to the community. This country's largest circulating library, in Queens, N.Y., was named the best system in the U.S. last year by Library Journal. Its budget is due to shrink by a third. Los Angeles libraries are being slashed, and beginning this week, the doors will be locked two days a week and at least 100 jobs cut. And until it got a six-month reprieve June 23, Siskiyou County almost became California's only county without a public library. Such cuts and close calls are happening across the country. We won't miss a third of our librarians and branch libraries the way we'd miss a third of our firefighters and firehouses, the rationale goes ... but I wonder.

I've spent four years following librarians as they deal with the tremendous increase in information and the many ways we receive it. They've been adapting as capably as any profession, managing our public computers and serving growing numbers of patrons, but it seems that their work has been all but invisible to those in power. I've talked to librarians whose jobs have expanded with the demand for computers and training, and because so many other government services are being cut. The people left in the lurch have looked to the library, where kind, knowledgeable professionals help them navigate the government bureaucracy, apply for benefits, access social services. Public officials will tell you they love libraries and are committed to them; they just don't believe they constitute a "core" service.

But if you visit public libraries, you will see an essential service in action, as librarians help people who don't have other ways to get online, can't get the answers they urgently need, or simply need a safe place to bring their children. I've stood in the parking lot of the Topeka and Shawnee County Library in Kansas on a Sunday morning and watched families pour through doors and head in all directions to do homework or genealogical research, attend computer classes, read the newspapers. I've stood outside New York city libraries with other self-employed people, waiting for the doors to open and give us access to the computers and a warm and affordable place to work. I've met librarians who serve as interpreters and guides to communities of cancer survivors, Polish-speaking citizens, teenage filmmakers, veterans.

The people who welcome us to the library are idealists, who believe that accurate information leads to good decisions and that exposure to the intellectual riches of

civilization leads to a better world. The next Abraham Lincoln could be sitting in their library, teaching himself all he needs to know to save the country. While they help us get online, employed and informed, librarians don't try to sell us anything. Nor do they turn around and broadcast our problems, send us spam or keep a record of our interests and needs, because no matter how savvy this profession is at navigating the online world, it clings to that old-fashioned value, privacy. (A profession dedicated to privacy in charge of our public computers? That's brilliant.) They represent the best civic value out there, an army of resourceful workers that can help us compete in the world.

But instead of putting such conscientious, economical and service-oriented professionals to work helping us, we're handing them pink slips. The school libraries and public libraries in which we've invested decades and even centuries of resources will disappear unless we fight for them. The communities that treasure and support their libraries will have an undeniable competitive advantage. Those that don't will watch in envy as the Darien Library in Connecticut hosts networking breakfasts for its out-of-work patrons, and the tiny Gilpin County Public Library in Colorado beckons patrons with a sign that promises "Free coffee, Internet, notary, phone, smiles, restrooms and ideas."

Those lucky enough to live in those towns, or those who own computers, or have high-speed Internet service and on-call technical assistance, will not notice the effects of a diminished public library system — not at first. Whizzes who can whittle down 15 million hits on a Google search to find the useful and accurate bits of info, and those able to buy any book or article or film they want, will escape the immediate consequences of these cuts.

Those in cities that haven't preserved their libraries, those less fortunate and baffled by technology, and our children will be the first to suffer. But sooner or later, we'll all feel the loss as one of the most effective levelers of privilege and avenues of reinvention — one of the great engines of democracy — begins to disappear.

Marilyn Johnson is the author of, most recently, "This Book Is Overdue!"