Libraries are Obsolete

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There are few of us who can know the exact moment their career ended. However when a professor of library science argues libraries are obsolete against a Harvard law school professor and the head of the lead funding agency in the field I think that moment has arrived. This was where I found myself April 18th when I took part in an Oxford-style debate as part of Harvard Library Strategic Conversations. The idea was to mix humor with serious debate on the proposition that "Libraries are Obsolete." I was asked to argue for the proposition: Libraries are obsolete.

This argument is useful to have, even for the most ardent supporters of libraries. After all, if we don't honestly debate the point, how can we truly be sure we are not headed towards obsolescence?

In looking at most of the cases against libraries many are focused on one type of library. For example, some argue against public libraries because they do not feel it is a wise use of tax dollars. Other arguments that fall apart in the face of evidence include the editorial from the *News Leader* (Florida's oldest weekly newspaper) where Mike Thompson opines:

> *While local taxpayers pick up the biggest tab for America's libraries, most librarians are little more than unionized pawns for the social-activist bosses of the American Library Association (ALA) … Today … ALA controls 62,000 members and, through its czarist accreditation program of many libraries, largely dictates what books are available for the most impressionable members of U.S. society, our children.* (Thompson, 2011)

This might be a valid argument if ALA did in fact accredit libraries, or if ALA had any supervisory power in libraries' workforces.

Other arguments have merit, but only from a given political view: libraries are a socialist attempt that interferes in the free market. Tax dollars would be better spent in other ways, namely giving it back to the taxpayers. If libraries are so valuable they should charge for their services and operate like businesses. These arguments are difficult to counter, because you often have to refute a basic tenant of ideology that is not likely to yield to evidence.

So frankly, in preparing for the debate I was both relieved that I couldn't find an argument worthy of Harvard, and dismayed that I was about to stand up before a crowd and have to half-heartedly make these weak arguments. Until I came upon an argument that scared the hell out of me. A very compelling argument that spans library types and ideology.

Libraries are obsolete because they act as institutions of remediation. Libraries were either created to fill some deficit in existing institutions, or over the years have adopted the role of remedying some deficit in the community. While this deficit model of libraries made sense at one point, today many of these deficiencies either no longer exist, or libraries now divert precious resources we should use to solve the underlying problem and/or institutions.

What scared me (and still does) is that the predominant message libraries use to justify their budgets and continued existence presents libraries as a sort of societal band-aid ministering only to what ails our communities. As with any argument about libraries in the abstract, the argument lacks nuance and parts are easy to refute, but I ask you to look to the core of the argument. This deficit model thinking has big implications for library advocacy, and even the evolution of the institution.

Community Deficiency: Access

So how do libraries present themselves as remediating institutions, and why is that a problem? Take the idea of libraries as sharing institutions. Many public and university libraries were created to pool and share information resources of a community (in the form of manuscripts, books, letters and so on). These libraries filled a need in the community to increase access to a commodity that was rare and expensive. The library, in this case, was a remediation for a larger problem of access.

Today one can argue that this function is obsolete for two reasons. The first is obvious to anyone who has ever been on the web. There are plenty of sites that let you share resources. From sites like LibraryThing and Goodreads for books; to Flickr (and Instagram, and Facebook) for photos; to YouTube for video; there are ample alternative, and arguably better ways to share ideas and resources. The second reason this deficiency argument no longer works is that libraries that began as sharing institutions have become lending organizations.

When Benjamin Franklin put together his subscription library in Philadelphia in the 1700s, more members joining increased access and the resources available. As more joined, they brought in more books, so there was more to go around. Today libraries don't share, they lend from a finite collection owned by the library. As more people join the library (use their services), they add demand, but not more resources. So when four people used the library, there were plenty of copies of Harry Potter to go around. Yet as hundreds of people use the library, demand increases, resources don't, so Harry Potter becomes scarcer. Access is actually decreased.

One clear way to see the difference between library as lending versus sharing comes from a story Eli Neiburger told me. Eli, Associate Director for IT and Production at the Ann Arbor District Library, had a member of the library ask, "If the catalog can keep track of books for lending at multiple locations (branches), can't it also include books at my house? I'd be glad to share them as well." This idea makes perfect sense in a sharing model; it makes no sense in a lending model.

A deficit approach to collections is to say the community doesn't have access to information, so we'll fix the community by making resources available. A sharing model says the community is full of information assets (books, letters, photos, ideas, expertise, stories, music); let's build a platform to allow community members to easily share with each other. Lending will lead a library to obsolescence as demand increases, information resources costs escalate, and the library collections look more and more like everywhere else instead of like the community itself.

Community Deficiency: Democracy

When Carnegie wrote that, "There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library" he was right. Public and academic libraries had minimal fiction collections and were one of the few places you could track the workings of government. The advent of the depository library program made up for a deficit in the public's access to the workings of the federal government.

However, today the government often bypasses the depository program and publishing this material directly to the public via the web. Before you say that we can't trust the government to be transparent, I ask you how housing microfiche of government-produced materials is equivalent to advocating for transparency? If anything it is a dodge of the true issues.

If indeed public libraries are meant to bring to the masses information that can be used to promote and further democracy, why then do our fiche cabinets full of government documents sit unused as the holds for romance novels and spy fiction grow longer?

Community Deficiency: Internet Access

The focus libraries have on remediation continues in the area of internet access. The argument is made that libraries of all sorts provide internet access to the disadvantaged and disconnected. To be sure, this is a real problem that needs a solution. Yet rather than divert funding to rural libraries to provide internet access, why not follow the model of rural electrification and take it to the home where it can be used? Imagine in the days of the Tennessee Valley Authority if they ran a power line to the library and told rural citizens that if they needed light at night or to listen to the radio they needed to go to the library.

The money we spend on libraries would be better spent buying the underprivileged a tablet and expanding eRate to include monthly allowances to buy quality information. Already states and universities are licensing databases for public use. Is there something so special about libraries that acquisition of resources can't be done by existing procurement procedures at these institutions?

Community Deficiency: Literacy

This argument hinges on the belief that our public and school libraries are necessary to promote reading. That might have made sense when universal public education wasn't so universal. When the color of skin and gender were barriers to accessing education. Libraries were the people's university. In essence, we need libraries to provide remedial reading education to fix our communities.

Today, while racial and gender discrimination are far from gone, the world has changed. Women now constitute the majority population of college students. In terms of race, rather than creating a separate system of education for minorities, affirmative action, minority scholarships, and other mechanisms are integrating minorities into the same high performing educational institutions as white males. Separate, but equal, was discarded long ago.

The answer to increasing literacy rates is to improve the performance and lower the barriers of access to education. The money and time spent on libraries would be better spent on our schools and teachers. Instead of using libraries as a "work around" for test-driven K–12 schools, we should focus our time and talents on getting a "No Child Left Behind" system that actually works. Instead of believing that librarians who have little formal training in reading instruction (and math instruction, and science instruction) can somehow solve the education gap through a do-it-yourself-here-are-the-books model, we should be focusing on enabling teachers to teach.

Community Deficiency: Information Seeking

What about the deficit in people's ability to find information? We need libraries to make sense of the glut of information now coming at our students and citizens. It is no wonder our reference statistics drop. Who needs a librarian to use a search engines that can traverse billions of pages in milliseconds when we can now do it for ourselves. Has Google become like a new DIALOG, where we must have patrons line up to our gatekeeping search abilities? Rather than use librarians as band-aids to bad search tools, let's fix the search tools.

Community Deficiency: Embedded Librarians

There was one thing that all the speakers agreed upon at the debate: even if libraries are obsolete, librarians aren't. Rather than dividing our time and effort on compensating for an inadequate educational system, or inequalities in the market place, we should free up our brilliant librarians to work within these organizations to make the institutions better. Why take amazing information professionals and saddle them with leaky roofs, security at the door, and maintaining physical artifacts in often duplicative collections just waiting to be digitized? We see this at the Cushing Academy, a boarding school in Massachusetts that made the press when they significantly downsized the physical collection of the library. They did so at the same time they hired more librarians. Close the library and hire more librarians.

Real Danger of the Deficit Model of Libraries

If libraries continue to be remedial organizations, focused solely on the problems and deficits of our communities, the communities themselves will find libraries obsolete. How long will our communities tolerate being told how they are broken? How long will we be welcome if all we do is highlight what doesn't work and add little value beyond filling in the gaps of other organizations?

Rebutting the Easy Reactions

Now, if you are anything like me you have been mustering your counter arguments as you have read this. For example, there is a big assumption in here that all information will be digital. And you would be right. But we must be careful of the rebuttals to this argument as well. Many approaches to rebutting these arguments feed right into the deficit model argument.

Fixing organizations is a great idea, but it's not realistic

So our big argument here would be that life sucks, get used to it (great replacement for the READ posters)? This is also very reminiscent of the arguments that not all information would be available digitally. Then Google started scanning books by the literal truck full. The perception of what is available in digital or physical form has shifted in those we serve. More than that, you are still saying the reason for the library is to care-take stuff not important enough to be digitized yet, or that we are a temporary organization until the technology catches up.

Supporting democracy is more than just government documents

Being informed in a democracy is more than simply keeping up with the information and documents that government produces. It involves reading newspapers, treatises, even keeping up with pop culture. This is true: have you seen the internet lately? Where once libraries filled the gap of providing a rich and diverse corpus to enrich our communities' thinking, the internet now represents a richer and more diverse corpus of thought.

Fostering a love of reading

Literacy is more than just reading, you say. Libraries foster a habit of reading and a love of reading. What exactly is it about four walls and stacks that does this better than, say, a living room? You can read anywhere, and with digital delivery to e-book readers you could argue that people are better able to follow their passions with instant delivery.

But use of libraries is increasing

This fact, if arguing a deficit model, only points out that there is need for remediation, not the form of the remediation. For example, in the unprecedented economic downturn over the past years, the number of soup kitchens and beds in shelters have probably also increased. I think we can all agree that instead of building more soup kitchens and shelters, we should fix the economy.

You callous careless bastard

First, remember that I am playing devil's advocate here (and give me another paragraph until I talk about how libraries aren't obsolete). Second, assuming that wasn't just an ad hominem attack, this is about the idea that a deficit model isn't a bad one, because there will always be a role for a safety net. The deficit argument isn't against the social safety net, but rather that we can fix the net through mechanisms other than libraries.

The Real Rebuttal

The real retort to the deficit argument that libraries are obsolete is not to find new and bigger problems, but to focus on (or at the VERY least include) aspirational arguments for libraries. Now before I dive into this, let me say that most of these approaches are already in full effect. My point is to highlight them and support them.

Illustration by Lizz Leizer

For example, let us take the deficits and show how libraries add value and have positive effects on communities (rather than mitigating the negative effects):

Internet Access
The library uses the internet to push the passions and possibilities of our communities to the whole world. Yes, folks can use the internet connection to check mail and apply for jobs, but they can also use it to create businesses and start global conversations.

Literacy and Reading
The library allows you to explore the great thoughts and imaginations of the world throughout time, and add to that pool. Come to the library, get inspired, and add your great ideas.

Democracy
Did you know your government came with an owner's manual? It's at the library. Help shape the direction of your town, your state, your country: the library can help you learn how.

Shifting From Sharing to Lending and Back Again

Like I said, these approaches are hardly unique to me. But there is one point of the deficit model that takes more than just sloganeering, the shift of libraries from places of sharing to lending organizations. To me, this is the real damning argument against libraries. If libraries continue to see themselves as focused on things that can be borrowed or consumed, and

continue to build collections *for* the community not *of* the community, there is real danger.

Libraries must become true platforms of the community. Want an example? I have been working with Polaris on a community portal to be added to their ILS. With it librarians can add information about community organizations (locations, services, events) directly to the catalog. So now you can search for materials on first aid, and the Red Cross will show up beside the results.

However, the system is built to allow community organizations to add and maintain their own information. Very small organizations or even individual community members (if the library chooses) can add their information and get a landing page on the net that they may not have had before. For organizations with their own websites already, they embed library and community information in their own websites easily. So now the Red Cross can embed books about first aid on their website.

This is taken one step further, because the same mechanism that allows this embedding can be used by other software and platforms. For example, a doctoral student at Syracuse University is building an iPad app to mount on local buses. At any stop, a passenger can find out what events and services are available community wide within a given distance.

This is library as community platform. The iPad app is not built or owned by the library. The information being presented is not owned by the library. Yet the library is indispensable in making this happen. The library is a platform that helps the community do something new, innovative, and helpful. The most powerful arguments for libraries, aside from the brilliance of librarians, position libraries as community platforms for improvement and advancement.

The people's university (when presented as a place of knowledge acquisition, not as a bandage to other educational institutions), the agora, the creation space, idea factory, all of these metaphors present a compelling and positive vision of the library that communities can take pride in. Now, rather than being associated with the library out of charity, or desperate straits, community members are part of an exciting and progressive organization. Rather than trying to fix the community, or bring everyone up to some sort of norm, libraries are foundations for individual advancement.

Let me be clear, I believe both in the necessity and importance of libraries and the social safety net. I know our communities face terrible problems, and our service mission is necessary. However, if you lift someone out of hell and don't tell them about heaven, how much hope have you given them? Libraries are not obsolete. They serve a vital and important mission in today's society, and in tomorrow's society. That mission that has driven libraries for the past 3,000 years is in service of a better tomorrow. That mission is hope through knowledge and the empowerment of the individual.

Libraries as band-aids may be obsolete, but that is not why we need libraries. We need libraries so we can fix our education system, so we can fix our economy, so we can fix our democracies, yes. But we need libraries even more to discover new knowledge not found in any textbook. We need libraries to create whole new opportunities for innovation. We need libraries to give our communities a voice and power in the working of government. Libraries will never be obsolete so long as our communities dream, and strive, and work to ensure a world of insurmountable opportunities. ❧

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References

Thompson, M. (2011). *VIEWPOINT/Save our libraries, fire the librarians.* | News Leader. [Available online] http://tinyurl.com/62j4auq (accessed June 6, 2012)