

# The Role of the Public Library in Today's World

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Established in 1833, United States public libraries are still considered the most trusted and democratic of our public institutions.<sup>1</sup> Libraries remain universally accessible to anyone and are uniquely positioned in communities throughout the nation.<sup>2</sup> The 9,000 public library systems that stretch across the country consist of 17,000 physical locations.<sup>3</sup> These locations form a significant and impressive national information and education delivery infrastructure that provides a plethora of services and programs geared to meet the needs of local communities. For much of its history, the public library

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<sup>1</sup> *A New World of Knowledge*, ASPEN INST. OF COMM. & SOC'Y PROGRAM, <http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/Dialogue-on-Public-libraries/2014/report/details/0085/Libraries> [<https://perma.cc/JX4S-LHRP>].

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *About the Public Libraries Survey*, INST. OF MUSEUM AND LIBR. SERV., <https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey/explore-pls-data/about> [<https://perma.cc/Y7JN-XCDL>].

remained a stable, traditional, hierarchical organization that experienced modest change. Many people considered the public library to be an integral part of their communities—a safe, pleasant, reliable place that provided books, story hours, homework help, and targeted information assistance.

Since the proliferation of the digital environment—the Internet, computers, and rapidly changing technologies that appear to evolve daily—public libraries have been in a constant state of self-assessment, re-envisioning, and transformation. Public libraries are experiencing rapid change, primarily due to the rate and volume of changes occurring in technology. As a result, the relevance and role of libraries have been deliberated widely across sectors and in a number of different forums. Studies have been conducted, dialogues convened, conferences held and articles written—all focused on the role and future of the public library.<sup>4</sup>

This vigorous and contemplative activity surrounding the future of the public library is being propelled by the continuously changing economic, intellectual, and demographic environments in which libraries now find themselves. These environments are no longer static—changes are occurring at accelerated rates. The continual shift to globalization, a knowledge economy, and emphasis on speed, creativity, and innovation place various new demands on the public library. The confluence of all of this change has been disruptive to traditional library operations, staffs, and users. The rallying cry that has emerged from this laser focus on public libraries is that they must not only adjust their structures and staff to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but they must also become more agile organizations in order to deal with continuous change.<sup>5</sup> Some say, bluntly, that public libraries may have outlived their usefulness.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Libraries*, PEW RES. CTR., <http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/libraries/> [<https://perma.cc/VA97-CRWA>]; *Publications*, URB. LIBR. COUNCIL, <http://www.urbanlibraries.org/publications-pages-74.php> [<https://perma.cc/PX4M-HMDJ>]; *Dialogue on Public Libraries*, ASPEN INST. COMM. & SOC'Y PROGRAM, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/communications-and-society-program/dialogue-on-public-libraries/> [<https://perma.cc/5RTD-CP4A>]; *State of America's Libraries Report 2016*, AM. LIBR. ASS'N, <http://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2016> [<https://perma.cc/7XDV-A98D>].

<sup>5</sup> *Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries*, ASPEN INST. COMM. & SOC'Y PROGRAM, <http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/dialogue-on-public-libraries/2014/report> [<https://perma.cc/5U4X-9W2J>].

<sup>6</sup> Tim Worstall, *Close The Libraries And Buy Everyone An Amazon Kindle Unlimited Subscription*, FORBES (July 18, 2014),

There is consensus among observers of the nation's libraries that technology, more than anything, has greatly impacted library operations, spaces, services, programs, and user expectations. There is also consensus that reduced budgets, especially since the onslaught of the Great Recession, have greatly impacted libraries.<sup>7</sup> There are, however, disparate thoughts about the continued necessity, value, and relevance of the public library.

To some, the public library's usefulness and relevance in today's information rich, digital world has been depleted, or is quickly waning. Their view is that libraries everywhere are under threat and that libraries will experience the same demise as bookstores and other sectors facing the threat of extinction from massive disruption to their businesses. For instance, the last *Encyclopedia Britannica* was printed in 2010, with 40,000 articles and 100 editors in one language.<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, on the other hand, contains over 41 million articles that are continually updated by 70,000 editors in 294 different languages.<sup>9</sup> Observing this changing landscape, many in this group increasingly ask, "In the world of Google and Wikipedia, do we still need libraries?" or, "Are libraries still relevant?" or, "Who needs a library today, when it is possible, without even getting out of bed, to find and read almost any book or article that one is seeking?"

Alternatively, the public library, to others, is a fundamental part of their existence. It serves as a community anchor and a critical lifeline to the vast information universe—both digital and print. It is a civic and cultural engagement space, a place for workforce preparedness and educational pursuits, a safe place, and a center of community life. To this demographic, the public library is a vital intergenerational community resource they would be loath to lose.

For example, more than 30 million individuals, living mostly in low-income communities, are currently without broadband Internet

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<http://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2014/07/18/close-the-libraries-and-buy-everyone-an-amazon-kindle-unlimited-subscription/#5c534ffd75f4>  
[<https://perma.cc/4L9F-R32V>].

<sup>7</sup> See generally Gordon Flagg, *Special Report: The Recession and Public Libraries*, 22 AM. LIBR. 381 (1991).

<sup>8</sup> Sabir Shah, *Encyclopedia Britannica Goes Digital After 244 Years*, GEO TV NETWORK (Mar. 14, 2012), <https://www.geo.tv/latest/41363-encyclopedia-britannica-goes-digital-after-244-years> [<https://perma.cc/SW4G-UX9K>].

<sup>9</sup> *Wikipedia: About*, WIKIPEDIA, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>  
[<https://perma.cc/MX7Q-3BWX>].

service.<sup>10</sup> Without the public library, many in this group would not have free access to computers and the Internet. Access to broadband connectivity is critical because the technological landscape is changing at an astounding pace in a number of sectors that impact everyday life. If individuals find themselves outside of the technology bubble, they will be left further behind.

This essay proposes that the modern public library plays a role that mirrors its founding ideology—to serve as the community’s central democratic place—where anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, may have free access to information, recreational reading, a gathering space, and services and programs to enhance their lives. This essay also asserts that the dichotomous view of the public library in today’s world is closely correlated to wealth inequality and to social outcomes related to inequality such as illiteracy, unemployment or underemployment, the lack of access to technology, and fewer educational resources. Finally, this essay establishes that the role of the public library in the community is still vibrant and is still critical—perhaps even more now, in the digital world, than ever before.

## I. THE HISTORIC ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN THE COMMUNITY

Providing services to help bridge wealth and societal disparities is not a new role for public libraries. The establishment of public libraries in the U.S. gained momentum in the late 1800s through the early 1900s. Libraries were conceived in an age of information scarcity—where only the wealthy had access to books and higher education. Interestingly, the history of the establishment of public libraries reveals that the role of the library was seen as two-fold.

On the one hand, well-heeled citizens hoped that by providing free access to information and educational resources through public libraries to the poor and immigrants, society would benefit by having more people become educated and learn how to conform their

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<sup>10</sup> Allan Holmes et al., *Rich People Have Access to High-Speed Internet; Many Poor People Don't*, HUFFINGTON POST (May 12, 2016), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/high-speed-internet-center-for-public-integrity-investigation\\_us\\_57333405e4b0bc9cbo48a512](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/high-speed-internet-center-for-public-integrity-investigation_us_57333405e4b0bc9cbo48a512) [<https://perma.cc/4V82-B7TC>]; see also Giuseppe Macri, *FCC Reports More Than 30 Million Americans Have No Access to Acceptable Internet Speeds, Technology*, INSIDESOURCES.COM (Jan. 8, 2016), <http://www.insidesources.com/fcc-reports-more-than-30-million-americans-have-no-access-to-acceptable-internet-speeds/> [<https://perma.cc/7MTJ-KMPJ>].

behaviors to the morés of upper classes.<sup>11</sup> During the decades following the Civil War, the establishment of Americanization programs in public libraries helped quell increasing concerns that new non-English-speaking immigrants, if left to their own devices, would erode the moral and economic fabric of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Other well-meaning citizens supported the establishment of the public library because they believed that providing free access to books and educational programs was simply the democratic and humanitarian thing to do. These individuals believed that everyone should have access to ways to enhance their lives and they viewed libraries as a means to self-empowerment. Library historians Michael Kevane and William Sundstrom state that, “library expansion was robustly related to urbanization and greater immigrant diversity.”<sup>13</sup> They point to research by fellow historian, L.A. Martin, who surmised that the ideology for the public library movement came into existence because of four conceptual roles of libraries, namely as: (i) democratic organizations promoting good citizenship; (ii) educational institutions complementing public school and providing continuing adult education and self-education; (iii) a source of recreational reading material; and (iv) serving a humanitarian mission, offering an alternative to the saloon, elevating youth, and controlling the masses . . . or where the morals of wayward youth might be improved.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Michael Agresta acknowledges that “public libraries have long served a progressive, interventionist agenda, putting knowledge directly in the hands of the poor, the immigrant and those historically excluded from certain educational institutions.”<sup>15</sup> Library

<sup>11</sup> Michael Kevane & William Sundstrom, *The Development of Public Libraries in the United States, 1870-1930: A Quantitative Assessment*, 49 INFO. & CULTURE 117 (2014).

<sup>12</sup> *A History of US Public Libraries: Americanization Movement*, DIGITAL PUB. LIBR. OF AM., <https://dp.la/exhibitions/exhibits/show/history-us-public-libraries/immigrants-americanization/americanization-movement> [<https://perma.cc/7TV5-MZTB>]; Annette Lamb, *History of Libraries: Contemporary Libraries: 1910s*, EDUSCAPES, <http://eduscapes.com/history/contemporary/1910.htm> [<https://perma.cc/NF4C-RMNW>]; Linda Upham-Barnstein, *Americanization Programs*, IMMIGR. TO U.S., <http://immigrationtounitedstates.org/341-americanization-programs.html> [<https://perma.cc/LG6A-3T9V>].

<sup>13</sup> Kevane & Sundstrom, *supra* note 11, abstract.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 132-33.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Agresta, *What Will Become of the Library?: How It Will Evolve As the World Goes Digital*, SLATE (Apr. 22, 2014),

historian Wayne A. Wiegand has traced the history of the United States' public libraries since 1850 and shows why Americans value libraries not only as civic institutions, but also as social spaces for promoting and maintaining community.<sup>16</sup> Wiegand posits the greatest strength of U.S. public libraries is that they are community-based, genuine local institutions mirroring the morés and needs of residents. In other words, "[t]he American public library has been in a unique position to satisfy self-designed needs of multiple groups and at the same time help individuals make sense of their worlds in various ways."<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the evolution of the public library, it has maintained a position of trust and a standard of being open to people from all walks of life. Regardless of whether the public library was established to control immigrant and lower class groups or to empower them, both missions have evolved to create a longstanding, respected entity that allows anyone the opportunity to self-educate and move their life forward. To that end, the public library's role today, even in the digital age, is still very much the same.

## II. WEALTH INEQUALITY

Economic inequality is most often demonstrated by an individual's position within the distribution of pay, total income, and wealth. A person's economic position may also be closely related to other characteristics, such as ethnic background, gender or whether the individual has a disability. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened tremendously within the last three decades.<sup>18</sup> Income disparities have become so pronounced that America's top ten percent now average nearly nine times as much income as the bottom ninety

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[http://www.slate.com/articles/life/design/2014/04/the\\_future\\_of\\_the\\_library\\_how\\_the\\_y\\_ll\\_evolve\\_for\\_the\\_digital\\_age.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/design/2014/04/the_future_of_the_library_how_the_y_ll_evolve_for_the_digital_age.html) [<https://perma.cc/PPW2-7GD5>].

<sup>16</sup> Martin Rubin, *Book Review: Part of our Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*, WASH. POST (Dec. 29, 2015), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/dec/29/book-review-part-of-our-lives-a-peoples-history-of/> [<https://perma.cc/5Q8B-4YKX>].

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Mishel, *Key Numbers: Topic-Specific Fact Sheets of Key Findings in the State of Working America, 12th Edition*, ST. OF WORKING AM., <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/fact-sheets/key-findings> [<https://perma.cc/ZFN6-NREY>]; see also Holmes et al., *supra* note 10.

percent.<sup>19</sup> Americans in the top one percent average over thirty-eight times more income than the bottom ninety percent.<sup>20</sup> And, Americans in the top one-tenth of one percent make 184 times the income of the bottom ninety percent.<sup>21</sup>

While there has been sufficient economic growth to produce broadly shared prosperity, people on the uppermost rungs of the income ladder have claimed most of the growth in wages, captured a larger share of national income, and control a staggering amount of wealth. This is the primary reason that over the last decade, lower- and middle-income Americans have experienced wage stagnation and falling incomes. In addition, more than one in five Americans have zero or negative net worth.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Gillian White reports that the economic distance between the wealthiest and everyone else has been growing, creating an expanding economic gulf: “[t]he wealth discrepancy between upper-class and lower-class families is at its widest point in three decades with lower class families having a median net worth that is seventy times lower than the median worth of upper class families.”<sup>23</sup>

The Great Recession that occurred from 2007 to 2009 spawned deep economic craters from which people are still finding it difficult to recover. The Department of Labor reports that roughly 8.7 million jobs were lost making the Great Recession the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.<sup>24</sup> Among the populations in the United States that are most adversely impacted by economic disparities, African Americans had the highest poverty rate of 27.4 percent, followed by Hispanics at 26.6 percent, and whites at 9.9

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<sup>19</sup> Gillian B. White, *Inequality Between America's Rich and Poor Is at a 30-Year High*, THE ATLANTIC (Dec. 18, 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/12/inequality-between-americas-rich-and-americas-poor-at-30-year-high/383866/> [<https://perma.cc/224R-SEUW>].

<sup>20</sup> Marc Priester & Aaron Mendelson, *Income Inequality*, INST. FOR POL'Y STUD., <http://inequality.org/income-inequality/> [<https://perma.cc/J3AU-MPG6>].

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> White, *supra* note 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Consumer Spending and the US Employment from 2007-2009*, U.S. DEP'T OF LAB. (Oct. 2014), <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2014/article/consumer-spending-and-us-employment-from-the-recession-through-2022.htm> [<https://perma.cc/DTR4-ACLQ>].

percent.<sup>25</sup> Over forty-five percent of young black children under age six live in poverty, compared to 14.5 percent of white children.<sup>26</sup>

### III. THE DICHOTOMOUS VIEWS OF THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Wealth inequality has produced a wide economic schism in America. We can appropriately refer to the relatively rich and the relatively poor who reside in these different worlds as the Haves and the Have-Nots. A comparison of the life experiences of Haves and Have-Nots presents a stark contrast between the people who have significant resources and those who struggle. Of course, both Haves and Have-Nots use public libraries. Library users encompass people of every class, race, age, and educational level; blacks, Latinos, whites, Asian Americans, and Native Americans; old and young, poor and rich, high school dropouts, and university graduates. Nonetheless, because of their very different economic situations, Haves and Have-Nots may experience and, therefore, view the public library very differently.

Members of the Haves enjoy the ability to access the library's virtual services remotely from anywhere because of their personal access to the Internet.<sup>27</sup> They may download eBooks or access library resources from wherever they are in the world on their personal devices. The Haves most likely connect with the library periodically, but not every day.<sup>28</sup> Some Haves may visit the physical library to attend programs, a civic meeting, get a passport, or study genealogy. Many, however, are virtual users and may never or rarely visit the physical library space.<sup>29</sup> The library, in their view, might be a nice asset for the community, but is not essential to their existence.

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<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> ISSUES BRIEF, PUB. LIBR. AND CMTY. ACCESS, <http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/sites/default/files/CommunityAccess2015.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/68W7-SLJ3>].

<sup>28</sup> *First-Ever National Study: Millions of People Rely on Library Computers for Employment, Health, and Education*, BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUND., <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2010/03/Millions-of-People-Rely-on-Library-Computers-for-Employment-Health-and-Education> [<https://perma.cc/67ZJ-FYNK>].

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*



Have-Nots have limited personal access to the Internet, beyond what they can get from their phones. Instead, they must use the library building for a broadband connection. They routinely visit the library most days of the week. They often gather close to the library at all hours of the day to connect to the library's free Wi-Fi, using their cellphones. Because of the high demand for the library's computers, the Have-Nots often have to wait in a queue for their opportunity to go online for a one-hour session.<sup>30</sup> During that hour, a member of the Have-Not cohort may connect with loved ones, check on employment or housing opportunities, or explore the library's resources. The hour goes quickly, and often the person gets back in the queue for another turn. Another frequent experience of the Have-Nots is attending class to learn how to effectively use a computer so that they can search for a job or update a résumé.<sup>31</sup>

#### A. *The Haves*

The Haves, like most people, may have warm and fuzzy memories of the library when they were growing up.<sup>32</sup> Libraries, however, do not currently serve as a lifeline for them today. The Haves have multiple ways through which to receive a wide breadth of information. If they have not visited a public library in recent years, they may still closely associate them with their memory of libraries from their youth—as book storehouses staffed by stereotypical librarians. As a result, this group has a difficult time seeing the library playing a vibrant, relevant role in today's digital world. They are more prone to viewing the library as expendable, and make remarks similar to the following reaction submitted to a comment thread:

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<sup>30</sup> STUART WILLIAMSON, PUBLIC LIBRARY COMPUTER WAITING QUEUES: ALTERNATIVES TO THE FIRST-COME-FIRST-SERVED STRATEGY, INFO. TECH. & LIBR., <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ital/article/download/2164/pdf> [<https://perma.cc/LLN2-S8DT>]

<sup>31</sup> KATHRYN ZICKUHR, LEE RAINIE & KRISTEN PURCELL, PEW INTERNET & AM. LIFE PROJECT, LIBR. SERV. IN THE DIGITAL AGE: PATRONS EMBRACE NEW TECHNOLOGIES – AND WOULD WELCOME MORE. BUT MANY STILL WANT PRINTED BOOKS TO HOLD THEIR CENTRAL PLACE 7 (2013), [http://libraries.pewinternet.org/files/legacy-pdf/PIP\\_Library%20services\\_Report.pdf](http://libraries.pewinternet.org/files/legacy-pdf/PIP_Library%20services_Report.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/QE3V-U84R>].

<sup>32</sup> Mark Isero, *In San Jose, Poor Find Doors to Library Closed*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 30, 2016), <http://isero.tope.com/category/issuesineducation/> [<https://perma.cc/Y567-EK6X>].

The only surprise is that public libraries have survived for so long. Books are cheap; information is widely available on the internet. Libraries offer poor service - bad opening hours, poor quality buildings – their only selling point is that they are free! Yes – they offer community space, IT and are valued by users; but most of the populations are not users.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar vein, a reporter for local Fox News in Chicago posed the question, “Are Libraries Necessary, or a Waste of Tax Money?,” and broadcasted this response in 2010:

They eat up millions of your hard earned tax dollars. It's money that could be used to keep your child's school running. So with the internet and e-books, do we really need millions for libraries? . . . Shouldn't these institutions—that date back to 1900 B.C.—be on the way out?<sup>34</sup>

Also fueling the Haves' view of libraries in today's world may be their awareness that physical book stores have already succumbed to online retailers and that paper books are being replaced by electronic devices.<sup>35</sup> They are perhaps more mindful than the Have-Nots of the scale and pervasiveness of the technological disruption that many services and products are facing.<sup>36</sup> This disruption occurs through smartphones, tablets, and laptops that have rendered an array of products and services obsolete from address books to home telephones to pocket calculators.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Arguments against libraries, arguments for libraries*, PUB. LIBR. NEWS, <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2011/09/arguments-against-libraries-arguments-for-libraries.html> [<https://perma.cc/JA2W-4XX8>].

<sup>34</sup> Joe Strupp, *Fox Chicago Affiliate: 'Do We Still Need Libraries?'*, MEDIA MATTERS FOR AM. (July 2, 2010), <http://mediamatters.org/research/2010/07/02/fox-chicago-affiliate-do-we-still-need-librarie/188712> [<https://perma.cc/VMF7-MQGT>].

<sup>35</sup> Steve Denning, *Do We Need Libraries?*, FORBES, (Apr. 28, 2015), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2015/04/28/do-we-need-libraries/#655f29196b91> [<https://perma.cc/PQK2-P39W>].

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> Other services and products made obsolete include: video cameras, pagers, wristwatches, maps, books, travel games, flashlights, alarm clocks, answering machines, yellow pages,

Taxis are being replaced by Uber and Lyft. Video rental stores like Blockbuster have given way to online streaming by companies like Netflix and Amazon. And now television networks are facing a similar change.<sup>38</sup> Airbnb has 800,000 listings in 34,000 cities, in 191 countries, and is cutting into the hotel industry market.<sup>39</sup> Against this transformational landscape, the Haves are more likely to ask whether libraries are immune from all this technological disruption. They wonder if libraries are still relevant and if they have a future.<sup>40</sup>

### B. *The Have-Nots*

Instead of questioning the relevance and value of public libraries, the Have-Nots are more likely to strongly believe that the library's role in the community is a very important one. In 2014, the Pew Research Center released a study focused on library services in the digital age.<sup>41</sup> This study found that, compared to Whites, African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to say libraries are important to them, their families, and their communities.<sup>42</sup> The study utilized statistical analysis that controlled for a variety of demographic factors such as income, educational attainment, and age, revealing that race and ethnicity are significant independent predictors of people's attitudes about the role of libraries in communities, about current library services, and about their likely use of future library services.<sup>43</sup> However, in addition to race and ethnicity, the study found that those living in households in the lowest income bracket are more likely than those in households making at least \$75,000 per year to consider libraries very important to their community.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Jane

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wallets, keys, phrase books, transistor radios, personal digital assistants, dashboard navigation systems, remote controls, airline ticket counters, newspapers and magazines, directory assistance, travel and insurance agents, and restaurant guides.

<sup>38</sup> Denning, *supra* note 35.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> ZICKUHR, *supra* note 31, at 19.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

Edwards and Pip Williams have focused their work on the ways in which socioeconomic status shapes family experience. They found that public libraries are important community-building institutions that play a vital role in ensuring equitable access to a range of important resources.<sup>45</sup>

For low-income families, a critical ongoing role of the public library in the community is to be a key, locally accessible place that helps bridge the continuing divides related to wealth inequality. The 17,000 libraries that are embedded in communities across the country are positioned and equipped to successfully provide services and information to enhance lives of individuals who have indicated that libraries are very important to them and their families.

#### IV. LIBRARIES STILL PLAY A NECESSARY AND VIBRANT COMMUNITY ROLE

As long as there is economic inequality in our society, there will be the associated educational, informational, workforce, and digital disparities that impact low-income families and individuals. The public library is often referred to as “the people’s university” and considered to be a democratic, equalizing organization. In many low-income communities, libraries are where children learn to read, immigrants learn English, and job seekers develop résumés and cover letters, and where those who lack ready access to the Internet can cross the digital divide. John Palfrey, the former head of the Harvard Law Library and the founding chairman of the Digital Public Library of America posits that “the library, as an institution, has been instrumental in the success of our democracy.<sup>46</sup> Libraries provide access to the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill our roles as active citizens. As long as a library exists in most communities, staffed with trained librarians, it remains true that individuals’ access to our shared culture is not dictated by however much money they have.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Jane Edwards & Pip Williams, *The Role of Libraries in Helping Adolescents and their Families Juggle the Demands of Work and Life*, 23 AUSTRALASIAN PUB. LIBR. AND INFO. SERV. 84 (2010).

<sup>46</sup> Palfrey, *Libraries Matter More Than Ever in The Age of Google*, KNIGHT FOUND. (June 1, 2015), <http://www.knightfoundation.org/articles/palfrey-libraries-matter-more-ever-age-google> [<https://perma.cc/2GM3-YY9S>].

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

Mary A. Dempsey, the former Commissioner of the Chicago Public Library System, provided the following sterling example of vibrant public library use when she responded to the Chicago Fox News Affiliate that broadcasted the negative view of libraries mentioned above:

[T]he Chicago Public Library [. . .] serves 12 million visitors per year. No other cultural, educational, entertainment or athletic organization in Chicago can make that claim.

The Chicago Public Library, through its 74 locations, serves every neighborhood of our city, is open 7 days per week at its three largest locations, 6 days per week at 71 branch libraries, and 24/7 on its website, which is filled with online research collections, downloadable content, reference help, and access to vast arrays of the Library's holdings and information. Last year, Chicagoans checked out nearly 10 million items [. . .]

The Chicago Public Library provided 3.8 million free one-hour Internet sessions to the people of Chicago in 2009.<sup>48</sup>

Dempsey went on to highlight the economic divide, underscoring the value of libraries to those with fewer resources:

The Internet has made public libraries more relevant, not less, as your story suggests. There continues to exist in this country a vast digital divide. It exists along lines of race and class and is only bridged consistently and equitably through the free access provided by the Chicago Public Library and all public libraries in this nation. Some 60 percent of the individuals who use public computers at Chicago's libraries are searching for and applying for jobs.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Letter from Mary A. Dempsey, Comm'r, Chi. Pub. Lib., to Anna Davlantes, Journalist, FOX 32 Chi. (July 3, 2010), <http://kellyoconnormcnees.com/1723> [<https://perma.cc/V8AU-624R>].

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

In today's world, the importance of Internet access in libraries to communities with little to no broadband access is immeasurable. Access to the Internet has emerged as the most important equal right of our time, and it appears that wealth inequality also correlates with broadband access. A 2016 study examined the lack of technology access in low-income areas. It found that families in neighborhoods with median household incomes below \$34,800 — the lowest fifth of neighborhoods nationally — are five times more likely *not* to have access to broadband than households in areas with a median income above \$80,700.<sup>50</sup> Even in urban areas where ninety-four percent of households have access, low-income families are three times as likely not to have access as the wealthiest urban families.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, a 2013 study found that poverty rates in areas with a high-speed connection were significantly lower than those that did not have broadband.<sup>52</sup> They warn that some of the difficulties that lower-income populations now face will just be compounded if they do not have access to high-speed broadband.<sup>53</sup> Providing access to computers and the Internet to those who do not have access has arguably become one of the library's most important services. The connection between wealth inequality and technology inequality is riveting, and has served to make the library's role even more relevant today. Technological inequity is "the civil rights issue of our time."<sup>54</sup> The library's role in providing technology access helps to level the playing field.

## V. CONCLUSION

It is reasonable to surmise that the residents of the very different economic worlds of the rich and the poor may view and experience life very differently. By extension, they may also perceive the value of the public library in their communities very differently. To one group it is a lifeline to services, information, education, and Internet

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<sup>50</sup> Holmes et al., *supra* note 10.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> Brian Whitacre et al., *Broadband's Contribution to Economic Health in Rural Areas*, 64 *CARDI RES. & POL'Y BRIEFS* 1 (2015).

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> Holmes et al., *supra* note 10.

connectivity; to another group, it may seem like an institution that has already seen its best days.

As a library director, I am often asked, “Are libraries still relevant?” I submit that there is a large segment of the population whom we see each day in libraries that is not asking this question. They are not asking the relevancy question because the public library continues to fulfill its mission—connecting people with the information and resources they need to enhance and even transform lives. The segment of the population asking the question perhaps associates the library only with its book role. Although the book role is significant, public libraries have always been so much more than books. The good news is that once I explain the role of libraries in their communities as vital and necessary, most people seem to understand. One of the ways I explain the library’s critical role is to share stories about how lives are impacted like the story of Mr. Smith below.

At the Houston Public Library’s Carnegie Neighborhood Library and Learning Center, Mr. Smith had been a regular customer for about six months. He came in periodically to apply for jobs and to work on his résumé. One day he came in and asked to speak to the manager because he had a compliment he wanted to share. As described by the manager, Cylenthia Hoyrd:

Mr. Smith expressed such gratitude it brought tears to our eyes. Little did I know that this homeless, dirty, unshaven man was an aircraft mechanic with years of experience with the Aerospace Center and Continental Airlines. A bad break happened and Mr. Smith ended up with nothing and on the streets. Our staff had been helping him apply for positions and edit his résumé. When he didn’t have funds to print, they printed for him. When the company software was uncooperative, they sat with him and walked him through it. Recently, Mr. Smith was offered a job in Oklahoma with an aircraft support company that provides services to aerospace and defense industries. He also received a signing bonus. He showed us his Greyhound ticket and said: “It’s over, I’m ready to go!” I’m so proud of my team and of our customer. Every now and then

customers return to share their success and I'm so excited he did. It was very touching.<sup>55</sup>

Houston Mayor, Sylvester Turner, used this story in his 2016 State of the City Address as an example of why Houston's libraries needed to be supported and protected from budget cuts.<sup>56</sup>

The future of the public library continues to be widely documented, studied, and discussed. For example, in May 2014, the American Library Association convened a summit on the future of libraries at the Library of Congress.<sup>57</sup> The summit consisted of eighty librarians and representatives from organizations that work with libraries. The familiar overarching themes included the need to "rebrand" libraries in the digital age. In August 2015, the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program convened an Aspen Leadership Roundtable on Library Innovation.<sup>58</sup> The roundtable brought together thirty dynamic leaders who are re-envisioning the ways in which public libraries work to enhance lives and advance the development of individuals, communities, and the nation. Participants came from the fields of libraries, technology, philanthropy, education, and design to focus on three key aspects of the public library mission: access, learning, and community engagements. The evolving vision of libraries grounded in community priorities and democratic values sees the library not as a victim of digital disruption but as a platform for navigating and enhancing life in the exponential age.<sup>59</sup>

Providing information and technology access, educational opportunities and community engagement is work that public

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Cynthia Hoyrd, Manager, Carnegie Neighborhood Library and Learning Center (Apr. 4, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Mayor Sylvester Turner, 2016 State of the City Address, (May 4, 2016) <http://www.houstontx.gov/mayor/2016stateofthecity.html> [<https://perma.cc/UT32-87YL>].

<sup>57</sup> NANCY BOLT, LIBRARIES FROM NOW ON: IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES (2014), [http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/sites/ala.org.transforminglibraries/files/content/LibraryoftheFuture/LibrariesFromNowOn\\_ALASummitOnTheFutureofLibraries\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/sites/ala.org.transforminglibraries/files/content/LibraryoftheFuture/LibrariesFromNowOn_ALASummitOnTheFutureofLibraries_FinalReport.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/9TWV-MQXB>].

<sup>58</sup> AMY K. GARMER, ASPEN INST, LIBR. IN THE EXPONENTIAL AGE (2016), [https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/Libraries\\_Exponential\\_Age.pdf](https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/Libraries_Exponential_Age.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/U4J4-U3LQ>].

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*



libraries are already doing and doing very well. As long as there are wealth and technological inequalities, there will be a role for libraries to continue doing this work. The library has abundant resources and it serves everyone—people from all walks of life—every day. The services that the library makes available to those on the lower end of the economic spectrum, however, provide an important lifeline to those individuals and families.

Some wealthier members of the community may believe that the public library is no longer relevant because they have not been informed of the totality of the library's mission, which has always included a spectrum of services and programs. Library professionals and their supporters should work together to develop ways to share, more broadly, the contributions that libraries make to enhance the quality of life in their communities. We should be neither shy nor defensive in communicating the important role of libraries and their continued relevance in order to safeguard libraries for those most in need.

