

## Don Katz

Like others of my generation, I maintain warm, if sepia-tinged, memories of Saturdays at the public library of my 1950s and 1960s middle-class youth. I learned the vagaries of the Dewey Decimal System back then, just as I learned basic Spanish. Some years later, I was lucky enough to read and write, surrounded by piles of books and elevated by the power of intellectual history, in vaulted, cathedral-like public reading rooms in the British Museum and the Main Branch of the New York Public Library.

But that was then and things have changed for public libraries across the nation. Many library systems have experienced annual double-digit year-over-year cuts to their public funding formulae – at a time when the Pew Foundation reports that only 19 percent of Americans under 30 regard the closing of their public library as something that would affect them. Most public libraries already apportion a single-digit percentage of their operating budgets to "materials" (books and databases) with the lion's share of library budgets supporting staff that often includes highly skilled and mission-driven practitioners of the information sciences (though in 2012 Forbes deemed a master's in library and information science as the number one worst for getting a job). And yet the reaction to this pressing sustainability and core mission challenge to the public library status quo is far too often to hunker down around the sustenance of "the catalog," and to threaten to curtail circulation hours, as community officials scramble to prioritize schools and public safety support with limited local funds.

Meanwhile, there is new thinking about the future of public libraries emerging from progressive experimentation and thoughtful policy-level and academic innovations happening across the American public library ecosystem. From an historical perspective the shared theme of this important work is that public libraries must reclaim their original purpose as leveling institutions. Free public libraries in the United States were spawned, at first via philanthropic largesse, so as to democratize access to the elite artifacts that then were books. This public liberation of information and literature was designed to address a key source of inequality per the analysis of opportunity gaps at the time. Whether Andrew Carnegie was inspired to finance more than 2,500 public libraries was driven by his fear of hell fires to come is far less important than his belief that inequality of access to knowledge exacerbated the then – as now – gaping divide between those with and without privilege.

Those library systems that are leading the return to the original vision of addressing inequality of opportunity are drawing the attention and financial support of local officials overseeing budget priorities, and they are tapping into vast pools of philanthropic capital. We live in a time when basic access to English-language words at home or at school divides haves and have-nots to the extent that 10-year-olds from less privileged homes can recognize and use several million fewer words than children from higher-income backgrounds. Recent studies of the digital divide point out that those without equal access to broadband Internet – largely families qualifying for free and reduced school lunch and those with lower household incomes who buy Internet access on phones rather than broadband to desktops – are far less likely to succeed in school or gain employment than those with full broadband access. Try pulling up a job application to work at Walmart on your phone sometime if you doubt this reality of the current state of things.

Libraries can become program-rich community centers where those without economic or educational advantages learn how to find jobs, become fluent in English, become citizens, or how to gain literacy and digital-age research skills that can help close academic achievement and income gaps. Advanced digital kiosks can now turn public libraries into community access points where government services ranging from health education to licensure, fines, immigration requirements, and tax services are both dispensed and explained. Some libraries have forced themselves to recast their measurement of success as part of a broad reconsideration of purpose. In Washington, D.C., the library system looks to usage of computer-based training programs, new job applications generated, online GED exam wins and other measures of programmatic change as primary success indicators versus materials checked out or library cards issued. In Brooklyn, the public library-based BklynShare program aggregates volunteered expertise from community members that can be "checked out" by residents in need of help and advice.

Digital literacy and the nominally understood social cost of the digital divide is front and center for libraries shedding nostalgia and looking ahead to acknowledge that "digital skills are 21st century workforce skills," as Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel put it when announcing reforms including a dedicated focus on escalating the tens of thousands of tutorial sessions for students in need conducted after school in public libraries. In St. Paul, Minnesota, an "outcomes driven" digital literacy program includes instruction, assessments, and a "certificate of mastery" of computer literacy. In Aurora, Colorado,

the local library operates a computer and Internet access outlet in a local Kmart. In Chattanooga and Cleveland, the public libraries house "maker space" environments where citizens can learn next-generation 3-D printing machines, advanced scanning and other job-market-ready skills.

This active experimentation and recasting of public purpose, alongside a realistic financial sustainability rethink, is critical to the sustenance of public libraries and to addressing the dire economic, vocabulary, academic achievement, digital access and related gaps that mark our times. The Montclair Public Library's 2013-2016 strategic plan speaks to the need for change. It is even titled "Time for Renewal," but the pace of innovation and insight emerging by the day – along with continued budgetary distress – calls for continuous reassessment, and the courageous, aggressive and perpetual shedding of "catalog" versus services-based success objectives.

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