Libraries: Reuniting the Divided States of America

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Libraries: Reuniting the Divided States of America

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by

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Abstract

To fulfill their civic mission in today’s polarized America, libraries must turn outward and actively engage citizens by bringing them together and involving them in democratic discourse. In the digital age, this means moving beyond libraries as book warehouse--breaking through their “edifice complexes” by reimagining their roles from collection-focused to engagement-centered services. Working closely with a diversity of partners, libraries can help rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and foster community problem solving. But listening to communities, curating local information, and convening deliberative conversations necessitates the adoption of new competencies by librarians and citizens alike. As the nation’s great experiment in democracy comes under increasing threat, librarians must shift from a mission that not only informs but also engages their constituents. In this role, libraries will reposition themselves as the cornerstones of strong democracy, bringing people together to make tough choices and bridge divides in their communities.
For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever-deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century” (Putnam 2000, 27).

Robert Putnam’s concerns about the decline of American communities in his best selling book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, captured the late 20th century decline of participation in American democracy, reflecting the alienation of many citizens. He carefully documents how citizens stopped voting, curtailed their work with political parties and service organizations, and attended fewer community meetings and political events. Democracy forums held around the country since the publication of *Bowling Alone* have revealed that citizens feel like bystanders instead of active members with a sense of ownership in our democracy; consumers in democracy, rather than citizen proprietors (Doble 2006).

One of the underlying concerns expressed during the 2016 election was that average citizens feel unrepresented and voiceless. Could this highly divisive election signal increased public engagement that will rejuvenate hope and public-mindedness-- a reversal in the trend Putnam so aptly described sixteen years earlier? Just as many Americans lament the outcome of a polarizing election, they are seizing the moment to take back their role in public life. They are demonstrating in record numbers, overflowing town hall meetings, speaking out and lining up to run for office (Corasaniti 2017). Indeed, as Eric Liu, Chief Executive Officer of Citizen University, suggested in his March 2017 *Atlantic* article, “How Donald Trump Is Reviving American Democracy,” this election just might turn out as “the greatest thing to happen to America’s civic and political
ecosystem in decades.” Liu goes on to describe Americans today as “rushing to make up for decades of atrophy and neglect in civic education and engagement. But as they do so it’s important to remember that citizenship is about more than know-how. It’s also about “know-why”—the moral purposes of self-government.”

The call to action by Putnam--embraced by political scientists, civic activists, and journalists--is shared by librarians who have joined a burgeoning movement to engage citizens by taking advantage of new opportunities to bring communities together, extending their reach further into the realm of civic life. Initially construed to fulfill Jefferson’s conviction that a healthy democracy depends on an informed citizenry, libraries--along with colleges and schools--were founded to create and sustain an informed populace. For generations, the idea of the informed citizenry has served as a guidepost for librarians who have amassed diverse collections so that people can make up their own minds about the issues of the day. But, as historian Richard Brown (1996) has suggested, the Jeffersonian ideal of the informed citizenry has evolved over time as more and more information has become readily available to all. Regrettably, though, despite almost universal access to schools, libraries, and information, contemporary Americans are no better informed today than in earlier times. If libraries are to embrace the aspirations of citizens to re-engage with the issues of the day, they must adopt a more engaged approach to service that helps citizens “participate fully in our system of self government, to stand up and be heard. Paramount in this vision are the critical democratic values of openness, inclusion, participation, empowerment [italics mine], and the common pursuit of truth and the public interest.” (Knight Commission 2009, 2).
While libraries have long championed their role informing citizens to ensure the public’s right to know, many now recognize they must “turn outward” (Harwood 2015) and engage more actively with their communities. Given the lessons learned from the 2016 election, they are ready and eager to move beyond the informed citizen model that Michael Schudson (1998; 2003) calls “monitoryal democracy”—where citizens only pay attention when things go wrong, to embrace a model that Benjamin Barber (1984) calls “strong democracy”—where citizens “know what they need to do with what they know” (2003, 311). In this model of democracy, citizens “regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society” (Barber 2003, 37) enabling them to “govern themselves in ‘the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic’” (1984, 148). Such a model shifts our information environment from “informing” to “involving,” because an involved—not just informed—citizenry is more likely to participate in democratic political processes (Lievrouw 1994, 350). In this context, Paul Jaeger and Gary Burnett suggest redefining the role of information in society that relies on “libraries, as established guardians of diverse perspectives of information, …to protect and preserve information access and exchange [italics mine]… facilitating and fueling deliberative democracy” (2005, 464).

History of Libraries Supporting Democratic Practices

If libraries are to foster strong democracy, they must move beyond the traditional transactional process that provides access to information (thin democracy) to more relational interactions where they deliver informal learning opportunities and spaces for citizens to engage in the civic life of their communities (strong democracy). This model,
prominent as far back as the late 19th century, envisions public libraries continuing “the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people’s university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life” (Ditzion 1947, 74). By the 1920s, the idea of libraries as informal education centers that advanced democratic ideals took hold (Learned 1924). As troops returned from World War II, libraries helped Americans understand the meaning of their democratic traditions and take action on issues of local concern. Such efforts to rejuvenate the democratic spirit in the country were considered ideal opportunities for libraries to assume community leadership roles by spreading “reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action” (quote by Ruth Rutzen, Chair of ALA’s Adult Education Board, in Preer 2008, 3). In 1952, during ALA’s 75th anniversary, the American Heritage Project reaffirmed the role of libraries hosting discussion groups to reconsider traditional American values (Preer 1993). That same year, ALA joined a national effort to increase voter turnout by distributing election information and organizing discussion groups and other activities, positioning public libraries to offer what library historian Jean Preer refers to as “an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it” (2001, 151).

After a 40-year hiatus in these library-sponsored democracy experiments—a hiatus that paralleled Putnam’s Bowling Alone era, libraries began using National Issues Forums and study circles to “bring people into the library for community discussions and, in the process, build support for, and use of, the library” (NIF 1993), reflecting a burgeoning tide of civic engagement. About the same time, a series of writings began reexamining the role of libraries in a democracy (Hafner, 1993; Molz & Dain, 1999; McCook, 2000; McCabe,
2001; Kranich, 2001; Schull, 2004; Willingham, 2008). These authors urged libraries to reclaim their civic mission by helping constituents address issues of public concern through non-partisan forums. In the new century, the trend picked up steam when the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (2011) stated its mission was to “inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, learning, and cultural and civic engagement by providing leadership through research, policy development and grant-making,” with a goal promoting: “museums and libraries as strong community anchors that enhance civic engagement, cultural opportunities, and economic vitality” ([italics mine] IMLS 2011, 12). In 2016, IMLS launched its Community Catalyst Initiative to strengthen the role of libraries, archives, and museums in support of community wellbeing and serve as catalysts in sparking positive change (Norton and Dowdall).

Simultaneously, the Urban Libraries Council (2011; 2012) called on public libraries “to shape and lead discussions, decisions, and strategies that encourage active and purposeful civic engagement,” recommending that librarians identify new roles that move them “from supporting players to valued leaders in today’s civic engagement space…[that will] broaden their impact as the go-to resource for building a culture of enlightened, engaged, and empowered citizens.” During this same period, the American Library Association forged a partnership with the Kettering Foundation, establishing ALA’s Center for Civic Life--one of many such centers around the country--that focuses on promoting and training librarians to convene community conversations and facilitate deliberative dialogue. More recently, ALA joined forces with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to launch the Libraries Transform Communities initiative, teaching thousands of librarians across the United States and Canada to “turn outward” and align
their strategies around the aspirations and concerns of community members--focusing on what they can do with the community, not just for the community. Supplementing that initiative is yet another ALA undertaking that demonstrates additional models for engaging communities. Examples of many of these efforts are described on the Libraries Transform Communities web site (ALA 2017) and the ALA Center for Civic Life blog (n.d.).

Now more than ever, as they confront an era of fake news and divisive politics, libraries must bridge divides in their communities by giving people a voice and opportunity to listen to fellow citizens. They can reposition their space and services to foster better public conversations and sounder public judgment so they can make progress on the most critical problems facing the nation. Communities need libraries to reclaim their vital role as cornerstones of democracy. And libraries have never been better positioned to step forward and engage their campuses, schools and local communities in new and innovative ways, bringing a diversity of citizens safe (and brave) spaces where they can share interests, concerns, and decision-making. But they need not undertake such initiatives alone. Instead, they should build strong collaborative partnerships that rekindle civil society, expand public participation in democracy, and increase the community’s social capital--the glue that bonds people together and builds bridges to a pluralistic and vibrant civil society (Putnam 2000; Kranich 2001). Such collective action will result in new constituencies, wider public support, broader and more diverse funding sources, and strengthened involvement with a wider array of community members and affairs.
Despite feeling alienated from their neighbors and each other, Americans yearn for a greater sense of community. They depend upon boundary-spanning anchor institutions like libraries, universities, and museums to bring them together to shape the future of their schools, campuses, and local communities. Libraries of all types serve as critical actors in such community-building endeavors by:

*Reimagining Civic Space.* Over the past two decades, communities, schools, colleges and universities have refurbished or built exciting new spaces for their libraries—spaces that also serve as public gathering spots that anchor neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, and campuses. Many offer welcoming, inclusive, safe as well as *brave* civic spaces conducive to democratic discourse—spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems. As Ray Oldenburg (1989) describes in *The Great Good Place,* such 3rd places are essential to the civic processes of democracy, giving citizens a chance to get to know each other, learn together, frame issues of common concern, deliberate to solve shared problems, deepen understanding, and connect across the spectrum of thought. The library serves as the community’s comfortable, neutral living room—a 3rd place where people of all ages and walks gather together to participate in civic life.

*Convening Civil Public Forums.* The library’s strong commitment to free expression need not result in rancorous town halls where caustic rhetoric drowns out reasoned voices from the public square. Instead, the library can convene civil forums that enable citizens not only to speak, but also to listen and learn from each other so they can find common ground and then act in the best interests of the whole community. Such inclusive public discourse empowers citizens to participate in conversations where they consider various options for solving problems of common concern, weigh alternatives,
resolve differences and move forward together. This type of democratic discourse encourages citizens to take responsibility—to act in a reasoned manner despite divergent self-interests. Although self-governance and human dignity benefit when citizens express their views, it takes more than diverse voices to make democracy strong. It takes civility—reasoned public discourse where respect, restraint, responsibility, and empathy coexist with free expression so that fellow citizens can hear each other. And it also takes safe spaces—public forums like those in libraries, where all are welcome to come together and strike their own balance between the boundaries and norms of civil discourse. As conveners of public forums, libraries can facilitate civil public discourse. Although convening such forums requires a new set of skills, librarians can enlist trained facilitators through networks like the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), the National Issues Forums, Everyday Democracy, and Choices, all of which encourage local public engagement.

Fostering Civic Literacy. Children and adults alike must learn a broad range of 21st Century skills if they are to become smart seekers, recipients, and creators of content, as well as critical-thinking, effective and responsible citizens (IMLS 2009; Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2006). Academic and school libraries have long led the profession in teaching students how to be information literate, based on standards and frameworks developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL 2016) and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL 2009). Although these laudable efforts focus primarily on college and career, they also need to emphasize a third “C”—citizenship. A 2016 study about online civic reasoning by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) found that students lack the skills to distinguish credible from unreliable
sources, raising concerns that democracy is threatened by disinformation that spreads and flourishes with ease. According to SHEG Director Sam Wineburg, “nothing less than our capacity for online civic reasoning is at risk” (SHEG).

Confronted by fake news, clicktivism and slacking, librarians are well positioned to seize this teachable moment to enhance civic literacy—“the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their world and to act as competent citizens.” (Milner 2002, p. 3). The recently adopted core curriculum C3 Framework for Social Studies affirms that, “Active and responsible citizens are able to identify and analyze public problems, deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues, take constructive action together, reflect on their actions, create and sustain groups, and influence institutions both large and small.” The C3 Framework goes on to state that, “They vote, serve on juries when called, follow the news and current events, and participate in voluntary groups and efforts. Implementing the C3 Framework to teach students to be able to act in these ways—as citizens—significantly enhances preparation for college and career” (National Council for Social Studies n.d., 19). Cricket F.L. Kidwell (2006), an educator who advocates for the civic mission of schools, considers civic literacy “a direct response against attitudes of alienation and distrust of government, disengagement of youth, and disconnectedness between school, community, and life skills.”

Although librarians share these concerns, they have yet to weave them into the library curriculum. An exception is Sara Jane Levin, librarian at the Urban School in San Francisco, who has collaborated with teachers to create a multi-year framework to develop student critical civic literacy skills—“skills that help our citizen students recognize how to
enhance service work and become agents of change in a democratic society” (2016, 31). If students are to become civic actors instilled with a sense of civic agency (Boyte 2007), school and academic librarians should incorporate civic literacy skills into their training strategies.

*Forging Civic Partnerships.* Numerous organizations already promote active citizenship, offering libraries ideal opportunities to join forces with them to strengthen democratic participation, extend their reach and achieve their civic mission. They can benefit from civic partnerships that provide expertise, financial support, experience, and publicity, along with new constituencies that broaden public support and deepen civic involvement. College and university librarians can link up with the Association of State Colleges and Universities—American Democracy Project, the Association of American Colleges and Universities Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) initiative, Campus Compact, and others—organizations that foster community service, citizenship skills and values, collaboration on campus and in communities, and public scholarship. School librarians can participate in civic education initiatives such as the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), and First Amendment Schools Affiliates Program—organizations committed to renewing and elevating civic education in America's schools and helping teach students the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Public librarians can partner with local civic organizations—organizations that build civic capacity and promote collective impact. Networks like the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), and Everyday Democracy sponsor local deliberative dialogues that libraries can convene with assistance
from trained facilitators. Another partner not to overlook is the media. Like librarians, journalists are deeply rooted in their communities as well as concerned about fake news, making them ideal and timely partners for undertaking civic and media literacy initiatives while shining a light on the library’s public engagement activities.

*Leveraging Anchor Institution Status.* The National Broadband Plan (FCC 2011) includes libraries within the definition of anchor institutions, focusing on their critical role providing access to public computers and high-speed Internet. As last resort providers of broadband access for community residents, public libraries have “become a lifeline for the many who are at the edges of digital life, fostering civic and economic engagement, skills training, and jobs advancement” (Goodman 2014, 1684). Furthermore, libraries are “strategically positioned to take a leadership role working with municipalities, schools and other nonprofits to increase access to and use of digital services.” (Siefer, Bates et. al. 2016). And that is exactly what anchor institutions should do around broadband deployment--not only connect people to the Internet, but also enable community members to connect with each other so they can build social capital and facilitate collective impact. Although residents depend heavily on libraries for broadband connections, e-content, and digital literacy, they are often perceived as “fielding problems as they walk in the door, not in going out into their communities trying to identify and solve community needs.” Amy Garmer, convener of the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries, goes on to state: “Librarians must go beyond the walls of the library and into the community, to engage different stakeholder groups and explore how to provide library services that are untethered from the library building itself.” (Garmer 2014, 43-44). In short, anchor institutions like libraries need to serve as e-democracy platforms to ensure that citizens can participate both in person and online in the digital age.

*Conclusion*
Libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic values that go beyond informing citizens to engaging them in the most important issues of the day. If they are to fulfill their civic mission and become the cornerstones of strong democracy in today’s polarized America, they must turn outward and find active ways to engage citizens in order to bring them together and encourage their involvement in democratic discourse and community renewal. In the digital age, this means that libraries evolve beyond the notion of book warehouses, breaking through their “edifice complex” (Kranich 2017, 47) by reimagining their service model from collection-centered to engagement-focused. Working closely with a rich and diverse array of partners, libraries of all types can help rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and increase community problem solving and decision-making. The realm of listening to communities, curating local information, and convening deliberative conversations necessitates the adoption of new competencies by librarians and citizens alike. As the nation’s great experiment in democracy comes under increasing threat, librarians must shift from a mission that not only informs citizens but also engages them. In short, in the words of R. David Lankes, library educator and prognosticator, “Librarians are the connective tissue that binds the community together…The potential reward is not in dollars or square feet but in better communities and improved lives.” (2016, 150).

Unquestionably, librarians are ready and eager to transform their communities. And citizens expect their libraries to do just that. Although libraries are among the most trusted of public institutions, as well as ideally positioned to span the boundaries of their communities, they are not always prepared to take advantage of “opportunities to strengthen their role in addressing serious problems in their own communities” (Public
Agenda 2006, 13). The Public Agenda report recommended that librarians would do well “to trumpet their esteemed place in communities and become more vocal about the resources necessary to support their newer, ‘nontraditional’ work…The public does not make the fairly obvious connection between libraries and solutions to those community challenges.” (2006, 61). In sum, in the words of Robert Putnam, librarians can ensure that “citizenship is not a spectator sport” (2000, 342).
References


https://www.benton.org/initiatives/libraries-broadband-adoption


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