

The Fight for Public Library Funding

Demonstrate Value or Demonstrate in the Streets?

by Stavroula Harissis

It is an interesting time to be a MLIS (Master of Library and Information Science) student. Though professors usually stop short of telling us that the public library is in its death throes, there is a palpable sense of crisis ranging from uncertainty to doom in the curriculum and conversation. Between technological advances that supposedly threaten to make the public library obsolete and the economic strangulation of austerity policies that have decimated public funding, the future of the public library does indeed seem to be at a crossroads. Libraries have generally responded well to the first obstacle, adapting to changing technology by upgrading their materials (more computers, digital content, etc.) and by shifting their mission from merely providing books and information to a renewed emphasis on community building and lifelong learning. But budget cuts and the general climate of austerity in the United States stymie these efforts to continue evolving the identity of the public library, and thus the question of funding takes center stage.

The most common response in the current LIS literature to the question of funding revolves around the idea of “demonstrating value.” We are told that librarians have failed to adequately advocate for themselves or prove the worth of their libraries, and this is why library funding has suffered. Therefore, the prescribed solution is to develop better advocacy strategies and outcome measures to convince politicians and the public that libraries deserve more funding. But this is an incorrect diagnosis and an inadequate strategy that fails to address the systemic issues driving the problem. In reality, the primary cause of our funding woes has little to do with the perceived or real value of libraries and everything to do with political and economic power. We must address these power structures if we hope to truly overcome persistent underfunding and give the public library the resources it needs to survive and flourish in the 21st century.

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Is the value of the library really in question?

Recent surveys have shown that a staggering 82% of people in the U.S. believe public libraries are important to their community (Zickuhr, Rainie, and Purcell 2013, 19), 83% have used the library in their lifetime (Horrigan 2015, 15), and 49% have visited the library or its website in the past year (Horrigan 2015, 15). The public also tends to vote overwhelmingly in favor of tax levies to fund libraries. In 2009, in the midst of the “Great Recession,” 84% of referenda to fund library operations and 54% of referenda to fund library construction in the U.S. passed (Dempsey 2010). Given this massive amount of public support, even from non-users and even in tough economic times, it seems ludicrous to assert that libraries have failed to demonstrate their value.

Is it the politicians we have failed to convince, then? Not exactly. While many politicians have certainly cut library budgets, you would be hard-pressed to find one who did so because they did not believe the library was valuable to the community. Instead, the message usually boils down to, “We’re sorry, we don’t have enough money.”

Chicago provides us with an excellent case in point. Current Mayor Rahm Emanuel has been described by Chicago Public Library (CPL) Commissioner Brian Bannon as being “a staunch supporter of libraries” (Schwartz 2013) and Emanuel himself has held many press conferences in support of various library initiatives. Yet, in his first year as mayor, Emanuel proposed cutting \$10 million from the overall library budget, including over 300 layoffs and a reduction in branch hours to 40 per week by closing all branches on Mondays (Balde and Kaplan 2011). This amounted to 50% of the layoffs in his proposed city budget, despite the fact that CPL accounted for only 3% of the city’s overall spending (“Chicago Public Library Head Resigns...” 2012). If Mayor Emanuel was willing to decimate the CPL budget while simultaneously singing the library’s praises, it is clear that “demonstrating value” did not or would not have made an impact on his decision. What explains this disconnect?

Neoliberalism Wants Libraries to Fail

In order to understand the actions of politicians, we have to understand the political and economic contexts within which they operate. Currently, we are living in a historical period defined by neoliberalism, an ideology whose beginnings are most often attributed to the administrations of Ronald Reagan (U.S.) and Margaret Thatcher (U.K.) in the 1980’s. It is an ideology “mandating that decisions of government be based on what is best for markets” (Jaeger et al. 2014). This is accomplished by the government implementing policies which strengthen the private sector (e.g. deregulation and corporate tax breaks) while simultaneously weakening the public sector (e.g. austerity/budget cuts and privatization).

Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, and Sarin examined the intersection of neoliberalism and libraries in their 2014 book entitled, *Public Libraries, Public Policy, and Political Processes*. They discuss how neoliberalism destroys the idea of the public good by forcing all entities to demonstrate a direct benefit to the economy, which is at odds with the purpose of educational and cultural institutions like libraries. Moreover, they argue that professionals working in the public sector “threaten the assumption that markets know more than other social actors” (Jaeger et al. 2014, 68). In other words, the deprofessionalization of librarianship, another facet of the current public library crisis, is an intentional product of neoliberalism. Others have written more extensively on the topic of deprofessionalization, such as Bill Crowley who noted that “the logic of the marketplace provides a very limited role for the professional librarian and, at times, even the public library itself” (Crowley 2006, 77), owing largely to the fact that “from a business perspective, information is less a profession and more a commodity” (Crowley 2006, 76).

It seems logical then that Jaeger and colleagues would come to the following conclusion: “Simply put, the neoliberal economic ideology wants libraries to fail” (Jaeger et al. 2014, 68). Yet, despite this systemic diagnosis, the authors fail to offer systemic solutions. Instead, they offer the same recommendations as those who ignore neoliberal ideology altogether: demonstrate value in economic terms if you want to survive. Specifically, they state that “demonstrating these types of numbers may enable libraries to speak in the language of policy makers, who currently exist in an environment that requires even traffic lights to have a demonstrable economic value” (Jaeger et al. 2014, 115). This statement encapsulates the absurdity of the argument for demonstrating value—it demands we speak the language of sociopaths who want even the most basic functions of public safety to demonstrate an economic value. That hardly seems like a winning strategy for defending libraries and the public good. And in fact the authors do not seem convinced of their own strategy, concluding: “Even if libraries cannot be kept out of harm’s swift way, politically engaged and data-driven advocacy will at least make it more difficult for politicians and policy makers to render with impunity decisions that are detrimental to libraries” (Jaeger et al. 2014, 116).

This is a remarkably defeated prognosis and a baffling conclusion to draw from an otherwise solid analysis of the political landscape that the public library finds itself in. If we are operating within a system that we know is setting us up to fail, as the authors concede, then the only logical response is to challenge that system and its underlying assumptions. Anything less than that is to accept a slow, tortured death masked by denial.

Demonstrating in the Streets

The antidote to this death by a thousand cuts can be found by returning to our Chicago example. After Mayor Emanuel announced his budget proposal in October 2011, there was a swift response from AFSCME Council 31,

the union representing CPL workers. They organized a “Story Time at City Hall” protest on Halloween where they read books to children dressed in costumes outside the Mayor’s office and delivered a petition with thousands of signatures opposing cuts to the library (Balde and Kaplan 2011, Moberg 2011). This mobilized community members and garnered media attention that then led city council members to put pressure on Emanuel to revise the budget, not only in favor of libraries but also demanding reduced cuts to other public services as well (Moberg 2011). When the budget finally passed city council in November 2011, \$3.3 million in funding and over 100 staff positions were restored to CPL (Kelley 2012, Kaplan and Ahern 2012). AFSCME continued the fight into the new year, organizing letter writing campaigns and holding “People’s Library Hours” in protest of cuts in library hours, which eventually succeeded in fully restoring branches to 48 hours per week (Blake 2012, Brandel 2012).

This example shows how an organized labor force that mobilizes public support can put pressure on politicians to act in the interest of the public good. And although there were some elements of “demonstrating value” in the arguments from AFSCME, it is clear that what actually made the difference was the public pressure generated by organized protest. Mayor Emanuel did not restore funding because he was suddenly convinced that the library’s value warranted it. He restored funding because it became politically impossible not to. That should be the first goal of any library advocacy campaign: organize community support to put pressure on politicians to act in the interest of the public good.

Community support should of course focus on defending the library, but whenever possible we should also connect the fight for library funding to other community issues. This not only broadens the potential base of support but, more importantly, broadens the conversation to begin discussing the systemic causes of our shared financial woes. Another union in Chicago, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), has been leading the way on this front. Mayor Emanuel had barely been in office for a year when the CTU voted to authorize a strike in the summer of 2012. That fall, they went on strike for seven school days and held a massive rally that put thousands of teachers and supporters on the streets of downtown Chicago (Campbell 2012). The contract itself won some significant concessions from the city (Chicago Teachers Union 2012b, McCune 2012) but equally important was how they won. The CTU garnered massive public support and connected their contract fight to broader social and economic justice issues, centering their message around a report entitled “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve” (Chicago Teachers Union 2012a). This report connects educational theory, workers’ rights, racial equality, and economic factors to produce a comprehensive, evidence-based plan for improving schools.

Challenging Neoliberal Economics

The economic issues touched on in “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve” moved to the forefront of the CTU’s later contract negotiations.

In May 2015, the union issued a press release entitled, “Broke on purpose: Board of Ed continues to peddle budget myths to justify its starving of classrooms” (Chicago Teachers Union 2015). This statement debunks the myth that the city of Chicago is too broke to fund the kind of quality education that the CTU has been advocating for and shows how the city’s finances have been mismanaged—or rather, managed in favor of the private sector over the public sector. From Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds used to subsidize multi-million dollar luxury developments to \$1.2 billion in toxic swap liabilities (Chicago Teachers Union 2015), millions of Chicago’s public tax dollars have been funneled into the hands of private banks and corporations. Taken in combination with continuous corporate tax breaks, it is clear that Chicago’s bankruptcy is a manufactured crisis, a faithful execution of neoliberal doctrine.

Thus, one of the CTU’s main demands in the 2015 negotiations was for the city of Chicago to explore alternative revenue sources. They offered suggestions such as a progressive income tax, a financial transaction tax, and the return of TIF money to the public coffers (Chicago Teachers Union 2015). These are precisely the kinds of demands that libraries facing budget cuts should also be making. And they are not unreasonable demands to make of one the richest and most powerful governments in the world. We often hear about how the “Great Recession” of 2008 hurt “the economy,” but this narrative conveniently obscures the fact that some people have recovered quite nicely, while most others continue to suffer. “After adjusting for inflation, the average income for the richest 1 percent (excluding capital gains) has risen from \$871,100 in 2009 to \$968,000 over 2012 and 2013. By contrast, for the remaining 99 percent, average incomes fell by a few dollars from \$44,000 to \$43,900” (Wolfers 2015). Meanwhile, Wall Street and the stock market are also doing better than ever, as reported in a ThinkProgress article titled “The Wealth Gap Between Rich and Poor is the Widest Ever Recorded” (Salles 2014). So it seems that what is commonly referred to as an “economic crash” would better be described as a transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of the economic food chain.

No Such Thing as Neutral

Unfortunately, discussions of politics and economics on this level are generally considered taboo in U.S. society. This is perhaps even more so true within the LIS field, which has been dominated by an ethos of “neutrality” in recent decades. However, some librarians have pushed back against this mentality. A collection of essays from *Progressive Librarian* questioning the argument for library neutrality was published in 2008 (Lewis 2008). The first essay in the collection, an article by Mark Rosenzweig originally published in 1991, reminds us that the public library was an ideological project from the outset, “primarily concerned with the regulation of literacy, the policing of literary taste, and the propagation of a particular class culture” (Lewis 2008, 6). He goes on to briefly trace the history of the intersections of the public library and politics, from

librarians supporting censorship during WWI to the shift toward defending intellectual freedom in the 1960s, demonstrating that “the question... is not whether politics enters into professional matters (it always has), but rather what politics, and to what effect” (Lewis 2008, 7). Therefore, librarians who claim to reject “politics” are in fact lending support to the politics of the status quo. As Steven Joyce put it: “‘neutral’ librarians are not, in fact, neutral. Rather, they help to maintain an inequitable status quo created by and in the interests of the dominant forces within society... those who sit on the fence ought to give some thought about who built that fence and why” (Lewis 2008, 54). We should heed this advice when thinking about advocacy, funding, and the overall future of public libraries. It is in our interest to get off the fence and take a side in the political and economic forces that shape our communities and our profession.

Conclusion

Public libraries are a venerated institution in the United States. The public intuitively supports them and the research continually confirms their positive impact. While measuring outcomes can certainly help libraries improve their programs and services, these measures should not be used to justify or deny the existence of the library itself. In fact, more and more, the prescribed outcome measures often have little to do with impact on the community, as neoliberalism demands public services demonstrate their value in economic, rather than human, terms. It is alarming to see the field of librarianship adopt these terms.

The inherent value of the public library is not in question. The current emphasis on “demonstrating value” as a way to secure funding is a distraction, a misuse of time that could and should be spent attacking the real causes of the public library’s existential crisis: a political and economic system that wants public libraries to fail. If we hope to truly to preserve libraries as a public institution, we need to break through the immobilizing appeal to “neutrality.” We need to organize ourselves and our communities into a consciously non-neutral, consciously political force that actively fights for the right and value of the public good. Our survival depends on it.

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