

"Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone":

Does the Disinvestment in America's Libraries Signal the End of Civil Society?

by Tracie D. Hall

In the fall of 2023, after leaving the position I'd held for almost four years as executive director of the American Library Association, I accepted a fellowship at Royal the University of London's Royal Holloway College. Leading during what one of my colleagues had termed the "dog years" of the pandemic, I'd seen libraries in the United States navigate two unanticipated crises, COVID-19 and an unprecedented tide of book censorship, which despite being opposed by an overwhelming majority of Americans (ALA 2022) has continued almost unabated. Last year, fueled by a determined minority, book bans targeting school and public libraries occurred in nearly half of 50 US states (Duster 2024).

Both the coronavirus, which dampened in-person visitation, and book banning, which placed the right to read in its crosshairs, left American libraries completely vulnerable at a time when they should have been most championed. During the same pandemic years in which library workers heroically innovated new service delivery models and fought to expand their digital (and analog) resources to ensure that their communities had uninterrupted access to critical education, employment, and public health portals, libraries saw their position as most-trusted public-service institutions (Geiger 2017) destabilized as they became accused harbors of

obscenity and librarians as potential criminals for protecting free access to books (Chernikoff 2024) by pro-censorship parties.

After almost a quarter century, nearly half my adult life, working in and around libraries, nothing in my opinion has posed the level of existential threat to libraries as the recent wave of censorship. Though America had suffered through the brutal and largely unabated reign of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 1940s through early 1950s (who in banning and promoting the burning of thousands of books, set out to make authors and free thinkers public enemies and reading itself a contraband activity), that effort under the auspices of the House Un-American Activities Committee had largely been a one-man witch-hunt in contrast to the contemporary censorship campaign, which has successfully garnered state-level complicity if not full compliance. In the wake of these efforts, US school and public libraries have suffered savage cuts and physical displacement (Kahle 2023; Weill 2023). In 2023, some 28 Houston school libraries were scheduled for redesignation as in-school detention centers (Goodman 2023). A police chief in a central California city declared that turning the only public library into a new police precinct to replace the aging one would provide residents greater value (Gallegos 2022). Several public and school libraries have

had staffing levels and book budgets cut to lows that have made them almost inoperable (Frost 2024). Several others have had major service outlets or branches closed altogether (Dethrage 2023). The toll on public information access as well as library workers' morale has been observably grave, even if not yet fully calculable.

With the responsibilities of my former position requiring global awareness, I had noted the similar impact that Brexit had on UK libraries (Kelly 2023). Though book censorship had certainly reared its head in Great Britain (Shaffi 2023), it was primarily the discourse and resulting action leading up to the British exit from the European Union that had begun to utterly destabilize library funding, especially in England, Scotland, and Wales. I knew the fellowship would offer a timely comparative analysis. What I discovered in Great Britain offered a sobering and cautionary tale. Shaped by and in reaction to Europe's austerity measures, which began in 2008, Brexit sought to shine a light on unnecessary government spending. Taking the lead of the Conservative Party, municipal libraries run by township councils began to be cast as too high cost and too low priority in communities facing growing wealth disparities (Flood 2019). In Camden, one of London's most expensive boroughs, the town council cited budget woes as justification for selling its flagship library in King's Cross (Usborne 2019), which it operated for four decades just down Euston Road from the fee-based British Library, a private membership institution. That sale in 2011, raised nearly £60 million to relocate into a mixed-use building now shared with the town council itself and a gym, but ultimately saved the council only an estimated £500K a year in annual operating costs

(Wilson 2019), a savings that must be calculated against the value of that land today and the reach of the library's resulting iteration. The building's provenance as a former library attracted its buyer, the upmarket Standard Hotel company. A subsequent *Forbes* article would later tout Standard for being in the vanguard of guest-attracting amenities, calling a library a "new hotel must-have" (Turner 2019). The notion of the library as a *must-have* for a paying audience that can afford it, but too costly as a public service in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the world is sobering.

The fate of a library in Lambeth, a southern borough of London, provides an even starker example of what happens when short-term planning obscures the long-term impact of library access on community well-being. Shutting down two libraries just before the intensive, national pre-examination study period for high school and post-secondary students as a purported cost-saving measure, the *Guardian* reported in 2016 that the Lambeth Council actually spent "three times as much per day on private guards to secure the buildings as it would have cost to keep them open" (Walker 2016). A young social services leader I met from Brent, a borough in northwest London, recalled how the closing of her local library (Press Association 2011) affected her and her peers,

It was the only place our parents allowed us to go by ourselves. My friends and I used that library every single day after school. When they closed the library, they didn't take the books out. We could still see them on the shelves even though

the doors were chained. One of my friends cried the first time we walked past. She was so upset. After that we didn't have a library at all. I wouldn't have a library near where I lived again until I became an adult.

During the Brexit decade, the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland, excepted—closed nearly 800 libraries and reduced library ranks from 24,000 to just over 15,000 staff. As a result, aggregate library spending declined by more

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than £250m, from £1B in fiscal year 2009–10 to under £750M in 2017–18. But *Guardian* writer Allison Flood pointed out in 2019, "As the number of branches and paid staff have declined, so have library visits: there were 226 [million] visits to libraries over the last year, compared with 315 [million] in 2009/2010." What is the educational or civic cost of millions of fewer visits?

Today in the United Kingdom, as in the United States, libraries valiantly endeavor to offer critical information services to their communities despite hollowed out budgets and staffing. This year, Brooklyn, New York, and Queens Public Libraries, arguably three of the most iconic libraries in the country, narrowly beat back a planned collective budget cut of \$58.3 million (Rothenberg 2024) that would have severely cut operations and personnel. In neighboring

New Jersey, the Rahway Public Library Board of Trustees announced in August 2024, that severe budget challenges would mean "the library would no longer be open on Wednesday evenings or Saturdays); an immediate halt on the purchase of new physical materials for the library, including access to several digital resources; an immediate end to all library programming (with one exception...); and the end to the library's Mobile Hotspot Program" (Brighthouse 2024). In a public statement, Rahway's mayor pointed his finger at the library's board and administration rather than addressing the potential affect of these cuts on residents or presenting a possible way forward. In doing so, the mayor compounded the notion that the survival of libraries is neither a shared responsibility nor integral to the larger municipal infrastructure.

What is happening in the United States and the United Kingdom though born of different origin stories—the former, book banning and the simultaneous devaluing of intellectual activity and public education; the latter, Brexit austerity measures and the resulting increased privatization of formerly public services and space—is having the same fiscal chilling effect. Communities are being deprived of the vital library and information services they rely on for continuous learning, economic mobility, and informed civic engagement. According to Institute of Museum and Libraries Services statistics (IMLS 2020), prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries across the United States experienced a collective 1.3 billion visits. There were more than 172 million registered users, more than half

of the total US population. Over 118 million people attended library programs indicating that a good number of users turn to libraries for deeper learning services and in-person interaction that cannot easily be replicated by e-commerce. Though libraries, like other brick-and-mortar institutions are still finding their way back to pre-COVID usage statistics, there is already data that indicates that those returning to in-person library use are coming with even more critical needs related to navigating a profoundly changed post-pandemic landscape (Negron 2022).

Despite compelling pre- and post-COVID library user data, policymakers continue to seemingly ignore or discount the direct role and benefit that libraries play in the lives of many. Could it be because the class of people who largely set the legislation for the library users are the least likely to have to rely on library services themselves? Perhaps their children don't attend the public schools whose libraries are being attacked, displaced, and drained of staff. Might it be that most of these decision-makers have not had to line up outside public libraries hours before they open to be first in line to use computers or printers because they do not have them at home, or to get a librarian's help deciphering complex but critical information because they do not have anyone else to turn to?

Those who do not have to rely on libraries for crucial information access are the most likely to see them as fungible cost-centers. But can the rest of us—those of us who have observed the rise and normalization of misinformation and disinformation; the persistence of adult low literacy (Chernikoff 2023); and the documented decline in critical reading (Gelles-Watnick and Perrin 2021)—afford to lose our libraries? And if we lose them, as gradually as that may occur, what will that cost our schools

and neighborhoods, our society as a whole? How will we tell future generations that we once had places where we freely shared books and new ideas, where we could seek out new concepts and learn new skills because we wanted to? How will we justify allowing those places to be defunded and the profession that managed them to be displaced?

On long drives with my mother, she would often listen to the oldies station. I'd always listen in disbelief as Joni Mitchell sang, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

"Who'd stand around and let that happen?" I'd ask myself. Now, I'm starting to understand.

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