

Public Libraries in the Community

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Some pundits, observers, and even a few government officials have questioned the continued relevance of the public library in an era of information abundance and technologies that can deliver knowledge and entertainment to a device that rests comfortably in the palm of your hand. With Internet access at home and work, and Wi-Fi increasingly ubiquitous in public and private spaces, it is usually quicker and easier to find information online through search engines like Google, websites like Wikipedia or social media like Facebook. It is easier to download an e-book from an online retailer to a tablet, smartphone, or e-reader. Why go to the library?

In its mission and core values, the public library of the 21st century continues the tradition of libraries serving as the cornerstone of American democracy, a strong and vital thread woven into the fabric of the social compact. Public libraries inspire and cultivate learning, advance knowledge, and nurture and strengthen communities. They promote reading and literacy, anchor communities, and provide free, unbiased access to information, technologies, and skills. They serve as stewards of local history and culture, connecting the present to the past and, increasingly, to the future as well. Public libraries are stalwart champions of First Amendment freedoms, opposing censorship and protecting privacy more reliably than perhaps any other institution.¹ Principles of equity, access, openness, and participation are at the center of this mission. They are a bedrock in communities buffeted by the forces of globalization, economic upheaval, and technological and social change, demonstrated by their heavy use during the Great Recession.²

Yet, even as the mission and core values remain little changed, public libraries are on the brink of truly transformative change in how they pursue this mission and live out these values. The library experiences of future generations will be vastly different from the library experiences of generations past. This moment of change

¹ The American Library Association's Washington Office, the Office for Intellectual Freedom, its Committee on Intellectual Freedom and the IFC's Privacy Subcommittee monitor challenges to library patron freedoms and maintain a constantly evolving set of resources for librarians to protect important intellectual freedoms, including the right to know and the right to privacy, and to educate patrons on how to protect these rights for themselves. One of the most highly anticipated and promoted initiatives in the library sector is Banned Books Week, which takes place in September every year.

² See Ray Lyons & Keith Curry Lance, *The Recession's Effects*, LIBR. J. (Nov. 1, 2011), <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2011/11/managing-libraries/lj-index/class-of-2011/the-recessions-effects/> [<https://perma.cc/WE65-KEBD>].

reflects also a new understanding of the value that public libraries bring to their communities in an age of ubiquitous information and instantaneous communication.

The current transformative moment for public libraries is best captured, first, by focusing on the ways in which libraries develop and organize critical assets in the community and, second, by identifying the ways in which these assets are deployed in support of emergent new roles for public libraries. Following brief introductory discussions of the historic role of public libraries and the changing information environment they confront in the digital age, this essay examines how public libraries are re-orienting their focus to people instead of collections, reimagining their physical spaces, and redesigning the platform they provide for access to information and participation in the conversations that democratic society relies on to create a better world. Then, the essay examines three increasingly critical roles that public libraries serve in the digital age: a community-based platform for learning and innovation, an engine for civic development, and a champion for a strong public option and intellectual freedom.

My central argument in this essay is that, as society moves deeper into the digital era, the value proposition and functions of public libraries are shifting in ways that redefine the look and feel of public libraries in the community. They transition from a relatively detached, often passive role in providing access to information and organizing stable stocks of knowledge to a more intentional and central role as a networked community hub. This hub allows citizens to go beyond information access to gain new skills as lifelong learners, creators, and innovators; to build new connections for civic participation; and to manage new tensions that arise in an increasingly networked world. If public libraries are to continue to be a cornerstone of democracy, libraries and the communities they serve must embrace these new roles and strengthen libraries' capacity to excel in them.

I. THE PAST: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

American democracy has never known a time without a public library. In 1731, Benjamin Franklin incorporated the Library Company of Philadelphia after persuading fellow members of his Junto debate society to “pool their resources and purchase a collection of books” that would have been too costly for any single individual to amass on

his own.³ An annual subscription fee bought access to the library's collection, which enlightened and enlivened the society's debates in keeping with the Library Company's motto, "Communiter Bona profundere Deum est," or, "To pour forth benefits for the common good is divine."⁴ The Library Company of Philadelphia became colonial America's first lending library.⁵ Forty-five years later, a revolution gave birth to the United States of America.

One hundred years later, the nation's public libraries were on the brink of a new era of growth and civic prominence. A comprehensive survey of libraries prepared by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Education in 1876 described public libraries as an important educational and social asset.⁶ Free libraries and public reading rooms began to proliferate as the principles of free public education took root across the country. Public libraries emerged that reflected the unique character and culture of their communities and embodied diverse organizational structures, governance, and funding models from one state to another, in some cases from one community to another. The development and expansion of public libraries during

³ *About LCP*, LIBR. CO. OF PHILA., <http://www.librarycompany.org/about/> [<https://perma.cc/K84G-4SKS>].

⁴ WALTER ISAACSON, *BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: AN AMERICAN LIFE* 103 (2004).

⁵ Whether or not the lending library of Franklin's *Junto* society, available to select individuals on a subscription basis, constituted the first *public* library in the American colonies is a topic worthy of debate in the salons of modern-day *Juntos*. By today's common understanding of a public library – an institution that provides free and open access to knowledge resources to every member of the community and is financed in largest measure through taxes or fees collected by local governments or the library entity itself – Franklin's library appears to be in the same family but not of the same species, although the underlying value proposition of sharing resources to deal with the high cost and relative scarcity of information is similar to the public library that we've known throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. The broadly understood concept of a public library did not reach general prevalence throughout the country until the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Before then, the library landscape included a small but growing number of libraries offering access to book collections and knowledge resources to distinct subgroups (children, merchants, scholars, theologians) and sustained through different funding models. As we look at the evolution of public libraries alongside the emerging sharing economy today, it is interesting to observe a progression toward, again, shared resources as a manifestation of *publicness* (as opposed to being defined by government sources of revenue), and toward the creation of spaces for engaging in enlightened civic discourse that would certainly please Franklin.

⁶ *See generally* DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR, BUREAU OF EDUC., *PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: THEIR HISTORY, CONDITION AND MANAGEMENT* (1876).

this period coincided with the rapid expansion and innovation in the industrial economy, greater mobility among the population and new waves of immigration. American society is at a similar inflection point today.

A few years later, industrialist Andrew Carnegie began his philanthropic investments in public libraries. By 1919, Carnegie had spent \$55 million (the equivalent today of about \$3 billion) to create 1,689 public libraries across the United States.⁷ In many American communities, the Carnegie library was, and remains, the most important and cherished building in town, a natural hub of civic life.

Today, we are in the midst of another revolution which has ushered significant economic, technological, and social change into local communities across the United States. The rapid development and diffusion of powerful information and communication technologies have touched every aspect of daily life, creating new opportunities for many while widening gaps for others. Recognizing the need for individuals and communities to keep pace with the digital revolution, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and Melinda Gates launched the Gates Library Foundation in 1997, with the foundation's first grants going to establish free computer and Internet access in public libraries. The foundation's vision was encapsulated in a simple statement — If you can reach a public library, you can reach the Internet — that recognized the need for people to have ready access to information and the opportunities that come with digital skills and connectivity. When the Gates Foundation began its work in 1997, only about 25 percent of U.S. public libraries were connected to the Internet. By 2004, after foundation investments totaling \$240 million, 99 percent of U.S. public libraries offered Internet access to patrons; today it is 100 percent.⁸

Over the last decade, public library use in the United States has risen. According to the most recent survey of public libraries

⁷ *Andrew Carnegie's Story*, CARNEGIE CORP. OF N.Y., <https://www.carnegie.org/interactives/foundersstory/#/> [<https://perma.cc/ZWZ9-9UHV>]. Present day value of \$55 million is calculated based on the labor cost of Carnegie's building projects. See MEASURINGWORTH.COM, <https://www.measuringworth.com/> [<https://perma.cc/US27-WZNP>].

⁸ CHRIS JOWAISAS, SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUND., ADDRESS AT THE INSTITUTE OF MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES HEARING: LIBRARIES AND BROADBAND: URGENCY AND IMPACT (2014), https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/events/hearing_transcript_panel_one.pdf [<https://perma.cc/DP9P-UHVG>].

published by the federal Institute for Museum and Library Services, visitation to public libraries increased 17.6 percent from 2003-2013, although visitation numbers have begun to trend downward more recently.⁹ For millions of Americans, especially those affected by the Great Recession, the public library is a lifeline to information and services necessary to adapt to changing economic circumstances and social environments. Nearly all libraries (98 percent) offer free Wi-Fi access.¹⁰ Just as important, libraries offer access to digital technologies, content in many forms and trained librarians to help patrons use these technologies, navigate information environments, and participate in the economic, educational, cultural, and civic ecologies of American democracy.

II. THE PRESENT: THE IMPLICATIONS OF MOVING FROM INFORMATION SCARCITY TO INFORMATION ABUNDANCE

One of the most significant transformations of the digital revolution has been the explosion in the amount and accessibility of information in many forms, including via open source and open data networks. The disruptive effects of this information explosion and the evolution of digital technologies on the economy and society are

⁹ INST. FOR MUSEUM & LIBR. SERV., PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE UNITED STATES SURVEY: FISCAL YEAR 2013, at 7 (2016), <https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/plsfy2013.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/63BT-DM9J>]. The survey notes that, while overall visitation to public libraries increased over the ten-year period, the number of visitors began to decline from a peak in 2008-2009. This decline may be attributed to several factors. One of these is the increase in online or virtual library visits and engagement with public library services outside of the walls of the physical library building itself, which are not captured in the overall count of library visits. Other factors include fewer people needing library resources and services as the economy has improved and the effects of significant cuts to public library budgets during the recession that have meant reduced hours, reduced services and slower acquisition of new materials sought by patrons. An April 2016 report by the Pew Research Center based on surveys conducted in November 2015 found that Americans' library use is trending downward, with the study comparing reported visits to a library or bookmobile and use of library websites falling between 2012 and 2015. See Lee Rainie, *Libraries and Learning*, PEW RES. CTR. (Apr. 2016), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/04/07/libraries-and-learning/> [<https://perma.cc/HL6N-BH7E>].

¹⁰ JOHN CARLO BERTOT ET AL., INFO. POL'Y & ACCESS CTR., 2014 DIGITAL INCLUSION SURVEY 3, 5 (2015), http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/2014DIExtendedSummary_o.pdf [<https://perma.cc/B2NP-TDNP>].

considerable. Many leading institutions of the past century have been required to undergo significant change to survive—to rethink their roles in society, their business models, and their relationships with other institutions and the public. Institutions of higher education, facing such challenges, have begun to break open time-worn educational models that do not work well for many of today’s “non-traditional” students. Government agencies, likewise, are adjusting to the new realities and imperatives of conducting the public’s business in a hyper-connected, digitized world. Public libraries are no different. They are confronted with the need to adapt or die in an environment where Google, Amazon, and Netflix provide quicker, more convenient information services with a more highly personalized, customer-oriented service model than many public libraries.

The public library as most Americans know it was conceived in an age of information scarcity, while today’s networked world is one of information abundance and mobility. This abundance has highlighted a new set of needs for individuals: the ability to gain value from information, to produce new knowledge, to develop skills and then develop new ones when the old information and knowledge become obsolete. The importance of these new sets of skills, or digital literacies, is highlighted by the research of MIT’s Frank Levy and Harvard University’s Richard Murnane. According to Levy and Murnane, jobs that involve routine manual or cognitive tasks can be computerized or outsourced; consequently, such jobs have declined over the past 40 years.¹¹ Advances in the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning indicate that this trend is likely to increase.¹² The researchers also point out that jobs that involve solving unstructured problems or working with new information have increased. In other words, there is a premium for knowledge work in

¹¹ FRANK LEVY & RICHARD MURNANE, *THIRD WAY, DANCING WITH ROBOTS* 16, 30 (2013), <http://content.thirdway.org/publications/714/Dancing-With-Robots.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/QTK2-26X5>].

¹² See, e.g., Jack Clark, *Google Sprints Ahead in AI Building Blocks, Leaving Rivals Wary*, BLOOMBERG NEWS (July 21, 2016), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-21/google-sprints-ahead-in-ai-building-blocks-leaving-rivals-wary> [<https://perma.cc/C7F2-MXBV>]; see also Todd Bishop & Taylor Soper, *Apple acquires Turi in major exit for Seattle-based machine learning and AI startup*, GEEKWIRE (Aug. 5, 2016), <http://www.geekwire.com/2016/exclusive-apple-acquires-turi-major-exit-seattle-based-machine-learning-ai-startup/> [<https://perma.cc/G6XW-TMYR>].

the knowledge-based economy.¹³ Public libraries are uniquely positioned to provide access, skills, context, and trusted platforms for sharing in this new environment.

The spread of information and communications technologies has transformed communities as well. Communities were once almost exclusively defined by geographical proximity; people interacted with others who were in close physical proximity to them. Today, individuals connect with a vast number of people across town, across the nation, and around the world, and they can form their own communities based on mutual interests. Moreover, the ubiquity of social media and other technologies that connect people to one another enables them to harness the power of network effects, i.e., the greater the number of individuals participating in a network, the greater will be the perceived and actual value of the network and its resources, and more people will join the network and use its resources. It is a virtuous cycle. Take Facebook as an example. The value of one's Facebook page (to the individual as well as Facebook's other users) grows in proportion to the number of friends one accumulates on the social media platform. Through network effects (as well as strong leadership and an astute business plan), Facebook has become for many people a vital platform for communicating, sharing information, and forming social relationships and networks. The community becomes larger, more cohesive, and more impactful, and the need to belong to a community and participate becomes more urgent.

The new digital ecology presents two critical challenges that public libraries are positioned to address. First, communities¹⁴ are challenged to ensure that there remains equity of access to information, digital tools, and the knowledge to use them productively. While information is widely available, there is reason to be concerned over access to the information that people need in their daily lives. As digital technology continues to advance and challenge traditional business models, public libraries and their communities are justifiably concerned over the continued access to and

¹³ The concept of a knowledge economy has been around for a number of years, and has more recently given way to new descriptors that highlight newer phenomena shaping economies and markets; the creative economy and the sharing economy are examples.

¹⁴ At this point, I refer to communities as geographically-based communities. Geography still matters as it defines our mechanisms for self-governance and, for most public libraries, defines access to locally-funded public libraries.

affordability of content as it migrates to new digital forms. Second, communities are challenged to ensure that all members of the community have opportunities to participate and build their social connections.

To meet these needs, as this author has argued previously, public libraries must be re-envisioned for a networked world, in which the value of networks grows as more connections are made. Innovations built on the old distributed model of the lending library will not suffice.¹⁵ Library and community leaders need to take a fresh look at how public libraries are leveraging their assets in pursuit of their mission and how these assets can be aligned better with the goals and priorities of the communities they serve. This entails measuring the outcomes that libraries help to achieve in the community. Library and community leaders must also embrace a new level of interdependence and focus on developing new relationships to be successful in the new digital ecology. Doing so will illuminate a unique new value proposition of public libraries for this century, one based on information abundance and a new understanding of the assets that public libraries bring and the different roles they can play in the community.

III. THE FUTURE: AN ASSET-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN COMMUNITIES

The old library model was built around information scarcities, namely, the high cost of storing and searching for information. The modern value proposition of the public library is embedded in three critical assets that every public library brings to the community: people, place, and platform.¹⁶ This asset-based model for considering public libraries focuses on how libraries leverage their assets to provide access and development opportunities to people and communities, places for people to convene and connect, and a host of platform services that address the changing needs of communities in a more mobile and connected society.

¹⁵ AMY K. GARMER, ASPEN INST., RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: RE-ENVISIONING PUBLIC LIBRARIES 9 (2014), <http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/AspenLibrariesReport.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/K874-WTSQ>].

¹⁶ *Id.* at 10-20. The framework of people, place and platform was first presented in the 2014 report of the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries.

A. *The Library as People*

People are at the center of the library's mission as noted above, i.e., to inspire and cultivate learning, advance knowledge, and nurture and strengthen communities. Thinking about the library as people, not as collections of books and other physical forms of information, reflects a shift away from building collections to building human capital, relationships, and networks in the community.¹⁷ With technologies and the know-how to deliver individualized information and social experiences, the public library at its best delivers a high touch experience to support personal goals as defined by the individual—anything from entertainment and personal enjoyment, to help with school work, job training or career retooling, to accessing healthcare or government services, to starting a new business, expanding an existing small business, or creating the next great film or novel. As one librarian observed to this author, “We like books, but we like people more.”¹⁸

Librarians are the other half of the people equation in libraries. Highly skilled librarians who are committed to the best tenets of customer service are a public library's greatest asset. They facilitate learning and they play a key role in the new education and learning ecologies, for children and adults alike. As the role of public librarians shifts from building and maintaining collections, there is a renewed focus on the information needs of the community and a new emphasis on creating and nurturing relationships.

Libraries have always served their communities, but the main way they have done so is by responding to inquiries from the individuals who have walked through their doors. The current transformations require librarians to take on new roles and to be more active in anticipating individuals' and communities' needs.

In many ways, this shift in the librarian's role is analogous to the shift under way in the relationship between students and classroom teachers in many schools. In the past, teachers and textbooks held all the knowledge, and the teacher's task was to provide students with that information. Now, when students can gain access to information outside of school as easily—or more easily—than they can in class,

¹⁷ *Id.* at 10.

¹⁸ Off the record comment by Felton Thomas, Director, Cleveland Public Library in Indianapolis, Ind. (Mar. 2014).

teachers are guides of learning, pointing students to available resources, helping them evaluate the quality of the information they find, and helping them use what they learn to solve problems or produce new knowledge. Similarly, librarians help users develop the skills they need to solve problems by connecting to the knowledge resources they need, wherever they are available. Increasingly, librarians are collaborating in the creation of new partnerships and networks across the community, the nation, and the world that respond to individual and community needs, and to connect the community to itself (i.e., residents and organizations to others in the community) and to the rest of the world.¹⁹

In his book *Biblio TECH: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google*, John Palfrey argues that the future of libraries rests on the creation of a “human network of librarians.” Palfrey writes, “Networked, collaborative library work makes the most of the great public information systems under development today, but these systems will not be much use if we do not have skilled people who know how to make them work for particular audiences.”²⁰ The most effective libraries will use the power of networking to draw talented and creative librarians and, Palfrey writes, “measure their success by the quality of the collaborations they establish and by how well they share materials with their patrons compared to their peer libraries.”²¹

B. *The Library as Place*

As people live more of their lives online, the physical sense of place that the library provides becomes even more valuable to the community. One often hears the library spoken of as a third place, a welcoming space that is neither home nor work, a public institution that people voluntarily choose to engage unlike other public institutions where the association is less than fully voluntary (e.g., schools, courts). Some have called it “the family room of a

¹⁹ See generally *Top Innovators*, URB. LIBR. COUNCIL, <http://www.urbanlibraries.org/top-innovators-publications-pages-197.php> [<https://perma.cc/5QBD-37GB>] (annual reports that highlight the innovative partnerships and initiatives that public libraries across the country are engaged in).

²⁰ JOHN PALFREY, *BIBLIO TECH: WHY LIBRARIES MATTER MORE THAN EVER IN THE AGE OF GOOGLE* 137 (2015).

²¹ *Id.* at 147.

community.”²² The reduction in physical materials, greater personal mobility, and the desire for more collaboration and creation are changing the nature of the library’s physical space.

A Pew Research Center survey on library usage found that a large percentage of Americans, even those who seldom visit a library, consider libraries important institutions in their communities and believe that their communities would suffer a loss if the library closed.²³ In part, this is because libraries champion literacy and represent high aspirations for communities. This sentiment also reflects the fact that libraries are considered highly trusted institutions that serve all members of the community regardless of age, gender, social status, race, or ethnicity.

The value of place, of proximity, cannot be overstated when concerned with fostering healthy relationships within neighborhoods and across communities. The library’s physical presence in the community, down to the neighborhood level, is what enables it to be effective in understanding and serving the distinct needs of the community. The public library as a strategic partner has impact not only through its physical presence but also through its relationships with individuals in the community. The full impact of the library’s assets is realized not when individual assets are exploited individually (e.g., simply providing space for a community organization’s meetings), but when all assets are leveraged fully in combination. Thus, the community organization meeting at the library leads to the growth of new community connections and networks and the use of the library’s platform assets to extend learning and civic engagement in the community.

To accommodate its new roles, however, the physical space and structure of the public library must change. The space within libraries signals that the library is there for people and community, no longer a

²² GARMER, *supra* note 15, at 13.

²³ Kathryn Zickuhr et al., *How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities*, PEW RES. CTR. (Dec. 11, 2013), <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/libraries-in-communities/> [<https://perma.cc/4QYH-22EA>]. For a more qualitative assessment of the ways in which communities’ value their public libraries, see Deborah Fallows, *The Library Card*, THE ATLANTIC (Mar. 2016), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/03/the-library-card/426888/> [<https://perma.cc/W2LW-WPUW>]. In particular, Fallows summarizes three areas in which libraries serve as the center of their towns: technology, education and community. Her examples illustrate the deployment of library assets and the development of the three critical roles outlined in this essay.

warehouse for books. It has open spaces to allow visitors to sit alone or with friends. It has meeting spaces, spaces for public events, co-working and collaboration spaces. Its makerspaces, technology labs, and incubators have the tools and technologies necessary for creation, discovery, and inspiration. It is not always quiet.

Anythink Libraries serve several of Colorado's front-range communities and provide an excellent example of how changing the look and feel of the place can change perceptions about what a public library can be. Recognizing that overdue fines and the Dewey Decimal system were barriers to patrons' use of the library, Anythink scrapped the fines and turned to a more user-friendly system to organize materials. Library staff heavily weeded the library's collection of books and redesigned its interior space for how people actually use libraries. "We made the library a learning space," said Director Pam Sandlian-Smith, resulting in a library system that has drawn new users to the library, including many young professionals and creative economy workers moving into the community. "Our strategy was to shift perceptions," Sandlian-Smith explained, "so that people understand the library isn't just a place where you can get a book. Rather you want people to think about how the library affects their quality of life. We needed to be more sophisticated in how we presented our image, like Apple and Nike do, where you build a unique emotional connection to the library."²⁴

Importantly, the library's physical presence in the community extends outside the walls of the library building itself. New thinking about how the library can better meet the needs of the community where members live, work, and play have led to some innovative places to find library services and the development of virtual library spaces. For example, the Free Library of Philadelphia partnered with the Philadelphia Airport Authority to open a Virtual Library at the Philadelphia International Airport (other airports have library kiosks, too). The Free Library's virtual reading room at the airport is outfitted with comfortable lounge chairs. Customers can log on to the Airport's free Wi-Fi to access the Free Library's e-books, podcasts, and other digital content.²⁵

²⁴ Comment by Pam Sandlian-Smith, Director, Anythink Libraries (Aug. 2013).

²⁵ Ashley Winchester, *Have a Layover? Hit the Library*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 13, 2014), http://intransit.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/have-a-layover-hit-the-library/?_r=0 [<https://perma.cc/5EVQ-73AV>].

Public libraries are creating a presence outside the concept of a traditional library building. There are libraries in health and recreation centers, shopping malls, theaters and other non-traditional venues. Another notable example involving the Free Library in Philadelphia is the South Philadelphia Community Health and Literacy Center that opened in May 2016 and touts itself as “the future of community health.” A public-private partnership involving the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), the Free Library, the Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation, and the city’s Department of Public Health, the center includes a pediatric primary care center, a city-run community health center, a state-of-the-art library, and a playground and recreation center. The center represents one model for reimagining the built environment of the library.²⁶

In addition to the physical space, the library in the digital age is a virtual space. At its best, the virtual library is always on, accessible from anywhere. By and large, public libraries have been slower to reinvent the library experience in virtual space. Just as individuals can gain access to information from home, from the workplace, and from coffee shops, individuals increasingly are able to access the library at any time and from any place. In reality, public libraries have a long way to go to bring the same richness of discovery, learning, and social connection that individuals often experience in the physical library to the virtual library experience. For most public library patrons, the virtual library is still mostly a transactional experience.

C. The Library as Platform.

The library as a community-based platform for learning, creativity, and innovation is at the core of the public library’s 21st century value proposition. The library as platform incorporates all of the resources that the library makes available to the community—librarians, books, video, technology, tools, images, software, other knowledge in the community—and then allows its users to customize these resources for their own learning and creativity. At its best, the library as a platform allows for innovation that its creators cannot anticipate.

²⁶ *The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia Celebrates Grand Opening of South Philadelphia Community Health and Literacy Center*, THE CHILD. HOSP. OF PHILA. (May 9, 2016), <http://www.chop.edu/news/children-s-hospital-philadelphia-celebrates-grand-opening-south-philadelphia-community-health#.V7JkoZgrJho> [<https://perma.cc/VCN6-H3LR>].

According to David Weinberger of Harvard University, a library platform may be thought of “as an infrastructure that is as ubiquitous and persistent as the streets and sidewalks of a town, or the classrooms and yards of a university. Think of the library as coextensive with the geographic area that it serves, like a canopy, or as we say these days, like a cloud.”²⁷ Others have described a library platform as a third place, “an interactive entity that can facilitate many people operating individually or in groups.”²⁸

As a platform the library exploits its assets—content, human capital, expertise—and opens up those assets for community engagement. It draws on knowledge in the community and allows people to contribute their knowledge and experiences back to become part of the platform’s assets. In enabling the creation of new knowledge, it moves beyond the “lending content” model. There is a crowdsourcing role in this, especially in the context of having questions posed by the community and having them answered by the community.²⁹ Ideally, this opens up dialogue and surfaces new expertise in communities. At its best, this process creates social knowledge.

The library as platform reflects the disposition of an entrepreneurial learner – seizing opportunities to fill gaps and advance progress in the community where it sees them by inviting community members to create, learn, share and innovate.

One example of a public library embracing the library as platform concept is the Chattanooga Public Library, where the library converted an otherwise unused space on the building’s 4th floor into a makerspace and event venue. The library has created innovative partnerships with professional design organizations, business incubators, and local artists to generate awareness about the library’s new and innovative resources, including its 3D design and printing

²⁷ David Weinberger, *Library as Platform*, LIBR. J. (Sept. 4, 2012), <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/09/future-of-libraries/by-david-weinberger/> [<https://perma.cc/2T7T-UHS5>].

²⁸ GARMER, *supra* note 15, at 17.

²⁹ See *Building Inspector*, N.Y. PUB. LIBR., <http://buildinginspector.nypl.org/> [<https://perma.cc/G43X-5GR7>] (project which welcomes “citizen cartographers” to participate in the New York Public Library Labs’ curation efforts).

technology.³⁰ The library's commitment to providing a community platform for learning and innovation led to its purchase of a floor loom and introduction of classes to teach local residents how to weave using the loom. In partnership with Etsy, the online marketplace for original craft goods, the Chattanooga Public Library hosted a pilot Craft Entrepreneurship program for residents to build their own microenterprises by selling online the goods that they produced from their newly developed weaving skills. The library has provided a place and platform to develop new knowledge and expertise in the community (weaving, entrepreneurship), can curate that knowledge, and tap that knowledge and expertise in the future when needed.

The Boulder Public Library in Colorado is another public library that is mastering the library as platform. The city's Small Business Development Center is located at the library, and the library has developed successful partnerships with faculty and students at the nearby University of Colorado that have helped the library to configure its makerspace where it offers a variety of programs including one designed for underserved teenage girls to instill confidence and mastery using technology. The "Learn, Build, Design Grow" (BLDG) program is a 12-week apprenticeship program in which the girls design, plan, and create a new product and meet with local business people to learn and sharpen entrepreneurial skills. Innovation and makerspaces such as these are appearing in public libraries of all sizes and geographies across the country, expanding the capacity of public libraries to inspire and support creativity and economic success in their communities.

IV. THREE CRITICAL ROLES FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE COMMUNITY

Knowledge, education and social connection increasingly are the drivers of opportunity and success in today's economy and society. Recent academic research, press coverage, and public discussion surrounding the state of economic mobility in the United States undergird this point.³¹ Consequently, community leaders and the

³⁰ Jeff Goldenson & Nate Hill, *Making Room for Innovation*, LIBR. J. (May 16, 2013), <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/05/future-of-libraries/making-room-for-innovation/> [<https://perma.cc/4MT3-MCWQ>].

³¹ David Leonhardt, *In Climbing Income Ladder, Location Matters*, N.Y. TIMES (July 22, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/business/in-climbing-income-ladder-location-matters.html> [<https://perma.cc/C2WE-RU7F>]. It is interesting to compare the map of mobility in Leonhardt's article to the map of public libraries by locale in the United

public can no longer view their libraries simply as nice-to-have amenities. Public libraries are an essential part of a community's infrastructure and an important public service, as vital and necessary as good schools and safe streets. Public libraries must be strong partners in a community's information, learning, and civic ecologies. The digital world is a world of continuous churn and change, as discussed below. In this churning world, networks have become a dominant form of social organization, connection, and information sharing. These changes have broad implications for the skills that people will need to succeed and, consequently, new roles for public libraries in supporting learning and network connections. The following section highlights three key roles that public libraries are fulfilling to meet the challenges of the digital age and expand opportunities for their communities.

A. Role #1: Libraries provide a vital platform for learning and innovation in the community.

The exponential pace of technological change is shifting everything people once thought they knew about knowledge and how to learn. Throughout much of the 20th century, knowledge remained relatively stable, following the trajectory of an S-curve in which a period of change was followed by decades of stability.³² This situation allowed sufficient time to reinvent economic and social practices and institutions, including education. Today, however, the curve of change is continuous, with change to knowledge occurring at an exponential rate. John Seely Brown, co-director of the Deloitte Center for the

States. INST. FOR MUSEUM & LIBR. SERV., PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE UNITED STATES SURVEY: FISCAL YEAR 2010, at 8 (2013), <http://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/PLS2010.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/GP8M-4TEN>]. An overlay of one map on the other shows a striking correlation of regions with greater mobility and more public libraries, although this correlation does not equal causation. See also David Leonhardt, *Upward Mobility Has Not Declined, Study Says*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 23, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/23/business/upward-mobility-has-not-declined-study-says.html?_r=0 [<https://perma.cc/5FN6-ZRGV>]; see also S. Craig Watkins, *Poorly Educated and Poorly Connected: The Hidden Realities of Innovation Hubs*, THE YOUNG & THE DIGITAL (May 24, 2013), <http://theyoungandthedigital.com/2013/05/24/poorly-educated-and-poorly-connected-the-hidden-realities-of-innovation-hubs/> [<https://perma.cc/YM9T-PEYF>].

³² JOHN SEELY BROWN, CULTIVATING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNER IN THE 21ST CENTURY 1 (Mar. 22, 2015), <http://www.johnseelybrown.com/el.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/X93N-X32T>].

Edge, has estimated that the half-life of a skill is less than five years and new waves of change arrive as rapidly as eighteen months apart.³³

This situation creates at least two challenges to traditional educational institutions, institutions that were not designed for such a fluid environment. One challenge is to design for continuous renewal. As Brown has observed: “We’ve shifted from stable stocks of knowledge and an archived world to a world of information flows, participation, and states of confusion. Now we create as fast as we learn.”³⁴ This raises a second challenge of learning how to participate in flows of knowledge.

Building on their deep credentials as educators and civic connectors, public libraries can deploy their people, place, and platform assets in new ways to respond to the challenges presented by life in an era of exponential change. Participating in flows of knowledge reflects a new understanding that the learner herself is at the center of the learning enterprise, and that learning takes place anytime, anywhere. Public libraries have been particularly effective in supporting informal and nontraditional learning as well as learning for a variety of individual goals, from entertainment and self-fulfillment to learning that fills the gaps between formal educational experiences (e.g., pursuing a college degree) and structured training opportunities (e.g., professional certification or workplace training). With the always-on virtual library, a ubiquitous library platform, and the expansion of library programs and services outside of the walls of the library, public libraries are perhaps best positioned in the community to provide anytime, anywhere learning opportunities. As they build their own skills and expertise as platforms for community learning, public libraries will become more adept at helping communities to design for continuous renewal.

1. *Early Childhood and Student Learning*

Consider the public library’s important role in the areas of early childhood and prekindergarten learning as an example. Public libraries have used their people and place assets to address early learning needs in communities for a long time, with special emphasis

³³ AMY K. GARMER, ASPEN INST., LIBRARIES IN THE EXPONENTIAL AGE 8-9 (2016), http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/Libraries_Exponential_Age.pdf [<https://perma.cc/7NVS-67PE>].

³⁴ GARMER, *supra* note 15, at 4.

more recently on addressing the needs of children in low-income and struggling families. With an expanded concept of the library as a platform for early learning, and intentionally connecting to additional resources in the community that support the learning needs of children and their families, libraries play a powerful role in boosting student readiness as children prepare to enter kindergarten.³⁵

As public libraries step up to own afterschool and summer learning programs, partner with schools in new ways, and provide new and innovative teen tech spaces,³⁶ they can extend their impact on student achievement as children move through elementary and secondary school. By surfing the Internet, browsing through digital libraries, hanging out with other teens and mentors, and using new technologies and digital media, learners find information that interests them and construct new knowledge based on what they already know. In this dynamic environment, not bound by school bells and mandated curricula, libraries can provide opportunities for students to pursue their own learning paths, express their views, and find their own voices to participate in civic life.

2. *Adult Learning*

Public libraries are responding to newer trends that impact adult learning in contemporary learning ecologies as well. Education consultant Andrea Saveri has identified several important trends that are reshaping the ways in which individuals and organizations, including public libraries, will approach learning opportunities in the future.³⁷ First, an entrepreneurial mindset is leading to the creation of new incubators, networks, and platforms that promise to democratize learning opportunities. Second, new tools and analytics allow for

³⁵ INST. FOR MUSEUM & LIBR. SERV., *GROWING YOUNG MINDS 4* (2013), <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/growingyoungminds.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/X5LP-RS3F>] (a comprehensive assessment of how libraries and museums support community early learning efforts).

³⁶ See Lizzie Johnson, *At new teen library space, nobody's hissing 'shh'*, S.F. CHRON. (June 18, 2015), <http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/At-new-teen-library-space-nobody-s-hissing-6336358.php> [<https://perma.cc/775Z-P8GH>] (San Francisco Public Library recently opened a dynamic new teen space called The Mix).

³⁷ Andrea Saveri, *Five Future Trends That Will Impact the Learning Ecosystem*, EDUTOPIA (June 19, 2013), <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/5-shifts-regenerating-learning-ecosystem-andrea-saveri> [<https://perma.cc/RXU9-94CV>].

increased personalization in learning experiences and new school formats are emerging which will further diversify these learning experiences. Finally, credentialing and certification are also undergoing diversification, with career pathways less dependent on requirements set by a single institution or industry.

Public libraries are responding to these trends in a variety of ways. Many public libraries have created makerspaces, hacker spaces, media labs, and technology petting zoos that allow library patrons to try out new technologies and gain new skills before those technologies are widely available. Library-based makerspaces with advanced technologies such as 3D printers provide the community's first introduction to advanced manufacturing tools and technologies in a setting that provides mentoring, encourages experimentation, and tolerates risk-taking and failure.

Public libraries offer a variety of classes, lectures, concerts, and exhibitions for adults of all ages and stages of life. A growing number of libraries are offering coursework to obtain a high school diploma for adult learners who previously dropped out of school and for students for whom traditional classroom settings do not work. Others are partnering with new enterprises in the educational ecosystem such as The Khan Academy, Peer to Peer University (P2PU), and massively open online courses (MOOCs) offered by universities and companies.³⁸ While these learning resources are part of the new virtual learning ecosystem, there is a growing recognition that learning happens best when people have an opportunity to interact and share with others, to learn by doing and to structure collaborative, supportive learning environments, the kind of environments that public libraries already offer in many communities.

A survey of American adults by the Pew Research Center supports value of the library's place-based assets. Pew found that "a large majority of Americans seek knowledge for personal and work-related

³⁸ See JOHN B. HARRIGAN, PEW RES. CTR., *LIFELONG LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY* (2016), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/03/22/lifelong-learning-and-technology/> [<https://perma.cc/XRY6-KW97>]. According to the Pew Research Center, despite the excitement in education and tech-savvy communities surrounding some of the new digital platforms and methods of learning, there is not widespread public awareness of some of the key resources that are becoming available. For example, notable majorities of Americans say they are "not too" or "not at all" aware of the following: Distance learning (61 percent of adults have little or no awareness of this concept); The Khan Academy (79 percent of adults have little or no awareness of it); massive open online courses (MOOCs) (80 percent of adults do not have much awareness of these); digital badges (83 percent of adults do not have much awareness of these).

reasons.”³⁹ While digital technologies are important resources for Americans to pursue their lifelong learning objectives, Pew’s research found that place-based learning remains vital to many Americans, particularly to those who say they are pursuing learning opportunities for personal reasons. Among this group, 23 percent cited public libraries as a place where they had pursued learning in the past year.

3. *Civic Innovation*

Joshua Kaufman, an entrepreneur and designer of technological innovation for social impact, noted in a white paper prepared for the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries: “While both knowledge and information are easier than ever to locate, it can still be difficult for people to produce and add value to them. This disparity is significant because adding value to information is the main source of productivity in the knowledge economy. It’s also what many consider to be the highest use of human capital.”⁴⁰

Libraries are uniquely suited to foster ecosystems for innovation that provide what individuals and communities need to be producers, to add value, to be creative. This is because the combination of the library’s key assets – people, place, and platform – can yield the right ecology to spark innovation. Innovations often occur at the edges of institutions, where those edges overlap with other institutional or communal edges. Thus, to foster ecologies of innovation, communities need to create places where people with different expertise, experience and perspectives can come together and participate in conversations, knowledge flows, experimentation, and creative activities. The public library is just such a connecting place. The example of Chattanooga Public Library’s 4th floor cited above provides an example of the library as community innovation platform.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ JOSHUA KAUFFMAN, KNOWLEDGE, NETWORKS AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY: A DISCUSSION PAPER HIGHLIGHTING KEY ISSUES FACING PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY 1 (2013), http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/Knowledge_Networks_Public_Library.pdf [<https://perma.cc/QHK7-S8RB>].

B. Role #2: Public libraries are vital engines of civic development.

The library is a central institution of civil society; it can be thought of as democracy's makerspace.⁴¹ As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the early days of the American republic, the voluntary associations that connect people and create social capital are important for nurturing democratic communities that function well and flourish. By design, public libraries provide the information, interpersonal connections, physical and virtual gathering places, and inspiration necessary to power the engines of civil society. As public libraries become more adept at exploiting their platforms and spaces and forging partnerships with organizations in the community, they not only contribute to the formation of social capital but also positively impact the formation of other forms of capital (e.g., human, financial) and lead to sustainable improvements in community health and development.

1. Meeting Human Needs

Public libraries address a range of human needs in their communities. They help to address basic physical needs and safety by partnering with local governments, social workers, schools, and nonprofits. For example, at the Topeka Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas, the library provides space and staff during the summer months to serve meals to children who receive free meals at school during the regular school year. Public libraries provide a safe place for children and teens to go after school where they can get help with homework when a parent or other guardian is not available to care for them at home. They also provide shelter to homeless people during extreme weather conditions (extreme heat in summer, extreme cold in winter). In Santa Monica, California, public library employees are working with the city and local service providers to deliver targeted services, including counseling, educational, and health services, to homeless people when they spend time at the public library.

Public libraries also address higher order needs in the community, helping to create a sense of belonging in the community. Public libraries are at the forefront of managing the integration of immigrants into their communities by providing English language and

⁴¹ GARMER, *supra* note 15, at 6.

citizenship classes for new Americans. The Los Angeles Public Library has developed signature “citizenship corners” in its library branches that create welcoming spaces with the resources that people need to navigate the path to citizenship. Hartford Public Library in Connecticut’s capital city has trained staff who are authorized by the U.S. Department of Justice to provide legal advice and representation to new Americans.

Public libraries are also recognized for their role as trusted community leaders that promote civil discourse and community problem solving. A number of libraries across the country have begun to host community conversations on race relations and any number of difficult issues that benefit from having the library as a neutral convener. During the 2016 Republican National Convention, the Cleveland Public Library launched a new civic dialogue series called America’s Civic Square that convened diverse leaders and interested residents from the community at the main library for a facilitated discussion on a range of different issues of public interest.⁴² Unlike the rancorous debates that occur on national televised news programs, the public library provides an ideal platform for rational, productive, and civil discourse.

2. Developing New Literacies

As a champion of literacy in all its forms, the public library brings a unique value to the community as all aspects of healthy living and community life now involve knowledge of a range of different literacies. The list includes basic, digital, civic, health or medical, financial, legal, cultural, STEM, visual, and digital literacies. Increasingly, people are expected to have the ability to search for and locate information related to a specific issue (for example, information about health matters, banking, Social Security), and to interact with devices, technologies, and databases, to get the information. They must filter large amounts of information to select the right information, and select the right tools for knowledge creation and management. Other institutions and community organizations are finding the value in public libraries as partners in pursuing positive community outcomes. Public libraries bring to the table highly valuable assets: trained librarians who have established relationships

⁴² *America’s Civic Square*, CLEVELAND PUB. LIBR., <http://cpl.org/americas-civic-square/> [https://perma.cc/UL2U-DMYZ].

of trust with the community and recognized expertise in helping people to acquire new literacies, and library spaces and resources already existing in the neighborhoods and communities where people live and work.⁴³

3. Addressing the Digital Divide

While the spread of information technology has undoubtedly transformed life for many people, the benefits have not been experienced by everyone. There are significant gaps among groups of Americans in access to technology and high-speed Internet service at home or work. Moreover, an emerging challenge is digital readiness. John Horrigan, senior researcher at Pew Research Center who also served as research director for the development of the National Broadband Plan at the Federal Communications Commission, reports that roughly a third of Americans have low levels of digital readiness, which he defines as “the capacity for online and offline populations to improve their skill levels and knowledge base for next generation applications.” Horrigan notes that digital readiness is important due to two key developments: the emerging “Internet of things” in which sensors and other smart technologies embedded in the objects and devices we use every day will impact all aspects of daily life on a much more granular level of decision-making, and the development of public sector uses of information technology that are on the cusp of revolutionizing how we learn, interact with health care providers, and get government services.⁴⁴ Public libraries are a critical institutional defense against the well-documented divide in broadband access, skills, and participation.

⁴³ Many public libraries worked with state and local agencies and subcontractors to enroll local residents in the Affordable Care Act’s new health exchanges. Not only did librarians help residents to navigate the confusing patchwork of insurance options and the sometimes clunky computer networks, but they were also in a position to help enrollees understand some basic elements of health and medical literacy and where to go to get more information.

⁴⁴ John B. Horrigan, *A Modern Makeover for Discussions on the Digital Divide*, KNIGHT BLOG (Feb. 14, 2014), <http://www.knightfoundation.org/blogs/knightblog/2014/2/14/modern-makeover-discussions-digital-divide/> [https://perma.cc/9CYM-MW8H].

C. Role #3: Libraries embody and reflect the importance of a strong public option and champion intellectual freedoms.

Public libraries and librarians are trusted to be objective. They place a premium on information access, neutrality, and credibility. This is not true for many other knowledge and information resources and platforms that people use on a daily basis. An important feature of the library as platform, one that distinguishes the library platform from other information and knowledge platforms, is that the public library is trusted to be objective and operate in the interests of its users. The public library's steadfast commitment to these values, manifested in the work performed every day by librarians, is central to the unique value proposition that the public library brings to the community.

Corporations and nonprofit organizations are also providers of knowledge and media. In the case of corporations, they have struggled to find a satisfactory solution to the conflict between profit seeking, on the one hand, and open access to information on the Internet, on the other. One consequence is that the benefits of broadband technologies have been distributed unevenly. The costs of access are too high for some individuals to afford, or entire communities are bypassed because they are not perceived to be profitable to serve. The result is that some people are not able to access the economic, educational, and other opportunities available through the Internet. On the content side, the search for successful pay models for e-content and the fear that making content available at little or no cost will jeopardize the business model has led to restrictions on access to some content. New licensing regimes and terms of sale that include, in some cases, higher prices for e-content also serve as barriers to access. It is difficult for corporations to simultaneously maintain allegiance to shareholders and the public. For this reason, there is value in having the public library to provide a public option.

At a time when the forces of privatization are reshaping key industries and core knowledge and learning institutions, the public library makes direct investments in the public and its resources.⁴⁵ It is a bulwark against the creation of second class citizenship and of separate but vastly unequal economic, educational, health, and social opportunities. It embodies all of the values and promise of American democracy, continually pouring forth benefits for the common good.

⁴⁵ KAUFFMAN, *supra* note 40, at 2.

In addition to providing a bulwark against the creation of second class citizenship, the public library is also the steward of two fundamental rights: the right to know and the right to privacy. These freedoms complement each other. Without the right to know and to access information, the rights of free expression and association can never be fully realized. Similarly, the right to privacy is necessary to fully protect one's freedom of conscience. Together, these rights form the heart of the intellectual freedoms that public libraries champion every day. These are also rights that are under increasing strain from a variety of forces including technology, private interests and government. These rights as we have understood and experienced them in the past are caught in the tensions of the digital information age, tensions between public and private, scarcity and abundance, the individual and the collective, the physical and the digital, and liberty and security.⁴⁶ Public libraries play an important role in helping to mediate these tensions in ways that strengthen communities and American democracy. Of particular importance is the growing interest that many public libraries have in offering programs to teach people how to protect their privacy and security online. Having networks of public libraries offer model programs would fill a pressing need for developing better, more comprehensive approaches to empowering individuals in their capacities as consumers and citizens.

V. CONCLUSION: FINAL THOUGHTS ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN COMMUNITIES

In the future, public libraries will be successful to the extent that they work more intentionally and more directly with other civic leaders to align the library's assets, programs, and services with the community's priorities and goals. Communities and libraries together must build on what the library does best in the community and support the future development of the library as a platform for learning and innovation in the community, as a civic makerspace, and as a champion for intellectual freedom and important public policies that support that freedom.

Libraries are well positioned to help individuals and communities navigate through the new information, learning, and civic ecologies. Communities that thrive will be those that equip their public libraries with the mindset of continual and purposeful adaptation and

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 1.

strengthen the library as a key node in knowledge and information networks of all kinds. These are functions of leadership. Leadership must be cultivated within the library, but also within the community itself. This leadership is needed to support the critical roles that libraries play in the community and ensure their long term sustainability so that they will continue to play their part in sustaining democratic communities.

While substantial progress has been made in recent years, there are still troubling inequities with regard to the broadband access, skills, and participation divide. This is one reason why we still need public libraries. Furthermore, public libraries are about much more than ready-reference and book lending. The 21st century public library challenges old stereotypes as it breaks out of the “warehouse of books” model that has persisted in the collective public consciousness for so long, despite so much evidence to the contrary.

Public libraries are at the forefront of tackling inequalities in broadband access and digital readiness. Many public libraries report that they are the only source of free Internet access in their communities. Public libraries introduce preschoolers and their parents to new, imaginative worlds and the joy of reading through creative play and specialized programs. They provide safe, supportive learning spaces for youth and teens after school. They are woven into the fabric of the social safety net, providing a lifeline to jobs, literacy, government and health services, and civic life especially for new Americans, the elderly and disadvantaged populations. They are also, increasingly, centers of entrepreneurship, makerspaces, and business incubators. They are partners in the emerging landscape of highly personalized learning experiences, and bustling creative spaces for artistic and cultural performance and civic engagement.

Moreover, public libraries are highly trusted institutions rooted in the communities that they serve. At a time when surveys show troubling declines in public confidence in many traditional authorities and institutions, public libraries are prominent examples of what government does right.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, *Confidence in U.S. Institutions Still Below Historical Norms*, GALLUP (June 15, 2015), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183593/confidence-institutions-below-historical-norms.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/44UK-BKCC>]. See also Jeffrey M. Jones, *Confidence in U.S. Public Schools at New Low*, GALLUP (June 20, 2012), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155258/confidence-public-schools-new-low.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/4S97-4HCL>] (comparison of other local institutions).

Public library services can well satisfy many needs of the digital age in a cost effective manner for all. This is not a new idea, even if public libraries are pursuing the mission in new ways. Since Benjamin Franklin's founding of the first lending library in America, the public library has always been a great societal equalizer. Andrew Carnegie, at one time the wealthiest man in America, recognized this benefit, saying: "Whatever agencies for good may rise or fall in the future, it seems certain that the Free Library is destined to stand and become a never-ceasing foundation of good to all the inhabitants."⁴⁸ Today is no different.

⁴⁸ Charles Clarence Williamson, *Andrew Carnegie: His Contribution to the Public Library Movement*, 23 W. RES. U. BULLETIN 6, 10 (1920).