

**JANUARY 2007**

**LIBRARIES**

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**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC**  
**GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“BOOKS SHOULD  
REMAIN THE  
ESSENCE OF PUBLIC  
LIBRARIES”**

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# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

**1** Until recently, most people’s idea of a public library [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] might have consisted of aisles of books covered  
**1** in varying levels of dust, watched over by a bespectacled, tyrannical librarian. Now, though, in response to concerns about  
**2** falling borrower numbers, libraries are being modernised and  
**4** some even re-branded as Idea Stores [Ref: [Idea Stores](#)]. The modernisers argue that libraries have to adapt to the demands  
**5** of the modern world, catering for literacy and lifelong learning, bringing the community together and providing services like  
**5** coffee shops and training and employment advice. Books, they say, will always be an important part of a library, but in some  
**6** cases may need to make room for the computers, DVDs and CDs demanded by the public. Reflecting this change in emphasis, spending on books fell from 15 per cent of total library service spending in 1990/91 to 10 per cent in 2000/01 [Ref: [Audit Commission](#)], with the result that libraries now have significantly fewer books. Those opposed to the new direction of libraries policy don’t dispute that a modern library must have computers. However, they claim that the real reason for the decline in library use has been underfunding, poor stocks and bad opening hours. And whatever the cause, they argue, libraries shouldn’t simply focus on increasing visitor numbers by the most efficient means possible, but must preserve what makes them unique institutions. On this view, the shift in focus away from books is symptomatic of a worrying trend away from a belief in the importance of making the knowledge and enjoyment contained in our literary culture available to everyone. What’s the greatest danger to the future of libraries: libraries failing to change, or changing beyond all recognition?

## KEY TERMS

[Museums, Libraries and Archives Council \(MLA\)](#)

[Public Libraries Act 1850](#)

[Public library](#)

[The Canon](#)



**LIBRARIES:**  
“Books should remain the essence of public libraries”



## THE LIBRARIES DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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### What are the origins of public libraries, and why do people argue they need to be modernised?

Although university and subscription libraries were quite common in Britain from the seventeenth century, it was not until the hard fought for Public Library Act of 1850 [Ref: [Spartacus](#)] that tax-funded institutions open to the public were first created. The move met with hostility from Conservative MPs who objected to the idea of public funding for a service that would mainly be used by the working class for self-education. Public libraries were hailed as ‘universities of the street-corner’, where access to the canon of ‘Great Books’ [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] was seen as opening up knowledge, and with it freedom, to the masses. So what has changed? Books are easier to acquire than ever before, whether from the supermarket or from Amazon, and the internet provides alternative ways of accessing information. In addition, the idea of a common culture defined by the classics has been criticised and replaced, in the view of many, by the need to cater for a multiplicity of groups with different interests.

### What are public libraries for?

The changes extolled by modernisers, which have seen libraries take inspiration from internet cafés and high street bookshops, are some of the things sceptics are concerned about. Modernisers believe that libraries need to compete in the modern marketplace and provide the level of experience consumers expect on the high street. Sceptics say libraries will never appeal to everyone and should focus on meeting the needs of users (both current and lapsed) rather than attracting non-users, as space for reading and studying tends to be reduced by the introduction of computers and other

services. The government has defended giving libraries £80 million of lottery money [Ref: [Times Online](#)] that cannot be spent on books. Culture minister David Lammy fronted the Love Libraries campaign [Ref: [Love Libraries](#)] and argues that ‘books are absolutely central to the library experience’. But some commentators argue [Ref: [Guardian](#)] the fact that such a reassurance needs to be made is evidence of a problem.

### Should a public library be a community hub or a gateway to a world of literature?

‘Public libraries have a vital role to play in helping local authorities achieve their communities’ social, economic and environmental aspirations - they are much more than just places to borrow books’ argues Andrew Stevens [Ref: [Guardian](#)] of the MLA [Ref: [MLA](#)]. This view is echoed in calls to recognise that libraries have become village halls that promote ‘social well being’ rather than simply being free book shops or book depositaries. Indeed, it has been suggested that libraries should not be defined by the stock on their shelves, but rather should be seen as ‘curiosity satisfaction centres’ [Ref: [Demos](#)]. However, such ideas have drawn criticism with the novelist Susan Hill [Ref: [Good Library Guide](#)] and other writers [Ref: [Times Online](#)] amongst those bemoaning the redevelopment of libraries as social centres. The campaign group Libri has argued that this represents an ‘unacceptable dumbing down of ambition and standards’.



### Is there anything special about books?

A further aspect of the debate is whether technological development will render printed books obsolete and whether we should be concerned if it did. Google is bus digitising libraries worth of books [Ref: [Times Online](#)] and digitised books could be printed on demand [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Libraries may remain focussed on books, but they won't necessarily be books as we currently know them. For traditionalists, though, the physical experience of entering the different world of the library and browsing bookshelves remains important. They argue (dead link) that a search engine can only sift information whereas an index of books is the work of a mind with knowledge.



## ESSENTIAL READING

Lammy answers his critics

Katherine Rushton interviews David Lammy *The Bookseller* 4 May 2006

Is this the library of the future?

Megan Lane *BBC News* 18 March 2003

### FOR

Who is going to save our libraries? The silence is deafening

Rachel Cooke *Observer* 11 June 2006

A treasure house for Moomins, Biggles and well-thumbed pages

Phillip Pullman *The Times* 25 March 2006

The good news is that libraries are getting £80m of lottery money. The bad news is...

Marcel Berlins *Guardian* 25 January 2006

Our public libraries are in dire need of renewal

Tim Coates *Guardian* 7 September 2005

The decline of the public library

Philip Pettifor *spiked* 2 September 2005

### AGAINST

The personal library - now there's an idea

Helen Rumbelow *The Times* 26 October 2006

Libraries begin uncertain new chapter

Chris Alden *Guardian* 22 February 2006

Foreword to Libraries impact project

Mark Hepworth *Laser Foundation* 1 July 2005

Public libraries changing lives

*Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)*

What's the big idea?

*Idea Store, Tower Hamlets Borough Council*

### IN DEPTH

Could this be the final chapter in the life of the book?

Bryan Appleyard *The Sunday Times* 21 January 2007

Study of 14-35 year olds for the future development of public libraries

*MLA, DCMS and Laser Foundation* 1 June 2006

From university to village hall

*Libri* 18 July 2005

Overdue: How to create a modern public library service

*Charles Leadbeater Demos* 22 May 2003

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## BACKGROUNDERS

A librarian's lament: books are a hard sell

Thomas Washington *Washington Post* 21 January 2007

When teacher turns into a mouse

Brenda Despontin *The Times* 8 May 2006

Are our libraries being neglected?

*Times Online Debate* 23 March 2006

The tyranny of reading

Hester Lacey *Guardian* 17 August 2005

The year literacy finally died

Andrew Cunningham *Daily Telegraph* 30 June 2005

Building better library services: learning from audit, inspection and research

*Audit Commission* 17 May 2002

The Good Library Blog

Tim Coates

Government approaches to the library service

*Literacy Trust*

Facts, figures and how libraries are changing

*Love Libraries*

Libraries

*Department for Culture Media and Sport*

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## ORGANISATIONS

Designing Libraries

Laser Foundation

Library Campaign

Libri

Love Libraries

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)

People's Network



## IN THE NEWS

Google plots e-books coup

*The Sunday Times* 21 January 2007

Net gains as library users go surfing

*Guardian* 17 January 2007

2.5m digital books on one £25,000 machine

*Observer* 31 December 2006

Library supply and demand

*The Times* 2 November 2006

Writer rues library changes

*Guardian* 11 September 2006

Libraries turn a new leaf to avert extinction

*Guardian* 4 July 2006

Love it or lose it

*BBC News* 22 June 2006

Rowling and Rushdie speak out for libraries

*Guardian* 15 May 2006

Love your library, forget the books

*The Times* 23 March 2006

Outcry over loss of public libraries

*The Times* 21 March 2006

Latest statistics show mixed fortunes for libraries

*Guardian* 4 January 2006

New challenges for libraries outlined

*Guardian* 4 July 2005

Library borrowing still declining

*BBC News* 13 January 2005

Library 'has no books', MP says

*BBC News* 18 November 2004

Upturn in visits to UK libraries

*BBC News* 1 June 2004

'UK libraries out of use by 2020'

*BBC News* 27 April 2004

Luxurious libraries?

*BBC News* 13 November 2003

Is this the library of the future?

*BBC News* 8 March 2003

Read not dead

*BBC News* 16 May 2000

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NOTES



## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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## FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS  
THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

