

# Public Libraries Versus the Echo Chamber

**T**he provocatively titled book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert D. Putnam (Simon & Schuster, 2000) uses declining participation in bowling leagues to illustrate the erosion of in-person social intercourse in America. The author blames this development on technologies like television and the internet that make it easy to spend our leisure time alone. Since the book's publication, social media and our ability to curate what we read, watch, and listen to when and where we want have accelerated expectations for individualized experience. We are increasingly aware of the consequences, good and bad.

One consequence is the “echo chamber,” that popular metaphor for a closed system that amplifies or reinforces a certain, often narrow, point of view. Echo chambers are not new—they seem part of that tribal mentality inseparable from the human condition. What is new is the social influence exerted by echo chambers that are nourished by the internet. Echo chambers are designed to exclude and polarization naturally follows.

As we figure out how to address the growing influence of echo chambers, one well-established institution already stands as a natural antidote to modern echo chambers—the public library. Public libraries are inclusive institutions; they literally welcome everyone. They have a democratizing influence by providing access to resources we may be otherwise excluded from by lack of income or social status, resources that help us better ourselves and our communities. By design, public libraries have resources for all but the most extreme interests and points of view.

Today's public libraries feature differentiated environments that support individualized experiences for children, teens, adults and the elderly, for school students and the home-schooled, for businesses and the unemployed, for book clubs, artists and makers. In light of the loss of in-person social intercourse, public library environments offer a significant, if unanticipated, benefit—they are physical places, settings for in-person social interaction.

Public libraries seem to have intuitively recognized the advantage of being a public place, but they have struggled to explain it. ‘Community center’ is one popular characterization that public libraries have used to rebrand themselves, but this, while true, fails to distinguish libraries from park districts and other facilities that claim a similar role. The recent characterization of public libraries’ role in our “social infrastructure” comes closer to the mark.

Public libraries build social infrastructure by responding to the needs of their communities. David Seleb, Director of the Oak Park Public Library, thinks that “the willingness and ability of public libraries to act with intentionality in meeting community needs earns them an unusual degree of trust among public institutions.” Oak Park’s recent community survey confirmed that the library is the community’s most trusted government agency.

[continued on page 12]



Acting with intentionality gives public libraries social agency that is essential to building public trust. One way that libraries exercise their agency is by curating information, an activity that is increasingly valuable as social media amplifies bias and local newspapers struggle to stay in business. Why do we entrust librarians to curate information? One reason according to Emily Faulkner, Director of the DeKalb Public Library, is that “librarians prioritize professionalism.”

Librarians’ professionalism is rooted in a fundamental sense of civic duty that extends beyond traditional library services. The Illinois Heartland Library System serves more than five hundred central and southern Illinois member libraries, many of them small, rural and lacking resources. Membership Coordinator Anna Yackle sees these libraries exercise their social agency in a wide range of ways, from providing on-line testing services for truck drivers and food handlers to operating food pantries and distributing feminine hygiene products to the most vulnerable in their communities. According to Ms. Yackle, strong civic values that emphasize “respect, privacy and dignity” underlie this diverse range of services.

If there is an overarching value that resonates across public libraries, it might be equity. Ms. Yackle describes the efforts of Illinois Heartland Library System libraries as “trying to level the playing field.” For Mr. Seleb, it is about addressing the needs of the community’s most vulnerable because, “once people feel safe, that they are having their most basic needs met, they become open to other things” that help them establish a more secure place in society. Randall Yelverton, Director of Peoria Public Library, says simply, “We believe in equity.” All of these are contemporary variations on the early twentieth century idea of public libraries as “everyman’s university.”

The public trust that libraries have earned allows them to initiate meaningful programs and activities not entrusted to other institutions. Some programs are relatively neutral like those that address physical isolation, which can be a substantial challenge in rural communities. The Illinois Prairie District Library, which consists of six branch libraries, two of which Director Joel Shoemaker describes as “very rural,” recently initiated a program to make lap blankets that were distributed to seniors isolated by their rural locations. Illinois Prairie District Library makes a point of attending local school and chamber of commerce meetings as a way of connecting with members of the community they serve.

Photo credits: Mark Ballogg Photography



“Whether driven by a sense of civic duty, by ideas of what makes for a healthy democracy, or by social conscience, underlying all of these public library programs is an idea that isolation is unhealthy.”

Other public libraries leverage the trust they have earned to present programs that address pronounced social and cultural divides. As Mr. Yelverton notes, “Programming in the public interest is a duty of public libraries.” One example is Peoria Public Library’s Peoria Speaks program, which is funded by Illinois Humanities initiative “aimed at strengthening the democratic process through community dialogues across the state of Illinois.” Recent programs have addressed challenging topics like opioid addiction and marijuana legalization.

The DeKalb Public Library curates programs on polarizing subjects like immigration. The City of DeKalb is distinguished by a rural/urban dynamic born of its rural location, its large public university, its strong commercial history and its ties to the city of Chicago. This makes it a natural home for divergent opinions. According to DeKalb Public Library’s Director, Ms. Faulkner, “the library is recognized as a place of no uncivil discourse,” which has allowed them to host constructive discussions about divisive issues.

Whether driven by a sense of civic duty, by ideas of what makes for a healthy democracy, or by social conscience, underlying all of these public library programs is an idea that isolation is unhealthy. Besides programming, public libraries also address isolation by simply being a place, perhaps a unique place, that welcomes you without expecting something in return, without trying to sell you something. The virtue of place allows Illinois Prairie District Library to host baby story-times aimed at giving new parents an opportunity to get together and share experiences.

It gives retired farmers in the Illinois Heartland Library System a fireplace to gather around and share stories. In a community with few places for young people, many of whom live in apartments, the DeKalb Public Library is a popular destination for teens. Ms. Faulkner notes that the library is “the first public place these kids are independent, the first place they must learn how to interact with others including those they may dislike.”

By contrast, today’s virtual echo chambers deliver a false sense of inclusion that addresses isolation with isolation. Uncivil discourse is their lifeblood. Dissent is not only unwelcome, but often triggers intimidation and threats. As community places trusted by the public, libraries are an antidote to these kinds of echo chambers. As Mr. Yelverton says, “It is easier to caricature people in social media than in person.”

There is an unspoken caution that public libraries seem to understand, which is that public trust depends on, as Mr. Seleb put it, “learning how to listen to what the community needs and then responding with intentionality.” This is not a neutral position, but a proactive stance that requires ongoing vigilance.

As we embed ourselves in virtual worlds, we may either become lost in the medium or we may question the value of the simulated comforts they offer. A healthy and civil democracy and a more just society may depend on unpredictable and often challenging in-person social intercourse. Public libraries play a significant role. **ILA**

**SHEEHAN  
NAGLE  
HARTRAY  
ARCHITECTS**



**25 YEARS OF AWARD WINNING PUBLIC LIBRARY DESIGN**

SNH-A.COM | 130 E RANDOLPH, STE 3100, CHICAGO, IL 60601 | 312.633.2900