# THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

## Turning the Page: Bringing Public Libraries into the 21st Century

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"The very existence of libraries affords the best evidence that we may yet have hope for the future of man." (T.S. Elliot). But, this hope may be starting to fade; around the world, the longevity of the public library is being threatened by budget cuts and an increasingly digital world. If current trends continue, public libraries as we know them may not survive for future generations. It's not too late to save this institution, though. Preserving the public library is possible, but it will require creative solutions that align library offerings with the needs of younger generations and increase the library's value proposition to the governments that fund them.

### 1. Introduction

Modern-day public libraries are the culmination of centuries of hard work by previous generations. Before mass-produced texts were available, and long before the internet gave us real-time access to limitless information, public libraries bridged the gap. Through the years, libraries have evolved beyond simply providing books. Now, many public libraries offer access to E-books, audiobooks, board games, laptops, tools, and even musical instruments. Many public libraries also offer extensive community programming, such as cooking classes, children's read-alongs, book clubs, and academic lectures.

Libraries are more than just buildings that store information; they are community grounds. Public libraries are one of the last remaining spaces where members of a community can gather, learn, and interact without any purchase or membership requirement. Researchers consistently find that libraries contribute to the development of social capital: an intangible network of interpersonal

connections that stimulates economic and social development in communities and improves quality of life[1]. Libraries are a key piece of social infrastructure, but they are at risk of collapse.

Global public debt is at an all-time high, and consequently, many countries are tightening their purse strings. Unfortunately, this cost-cutting has been done at the expense of public libraries. Over the past few decades, two global trends have developed: decreasing library funding and increasing library closures. In 2019, Ontario, Canada cut funding for public library services in half to curb the province's spending deficit[2]. The United Kingdom has closed over 700 public libraries since 2010 due to budget cuts[3]. Every year that Donald Trump served as President of the United States, he sought to eliminate almost all federal funding for libraries[4]. The increasingly digital world has also brought on new challenges for libraries. Despite their potential to create great social value as a community meeting space, libraries are struggling to sustain visitor traffic. Emerging research suggests that adolescents spend less time interacting face-to-face with friends and family members than previous generations and may even prefer digital modes of communication over in-person interactions[5]. This dilemma, combined with the financial strain many libraries face, has put the institution in a very difficult position. We must act now to ensure that public libraries can overcome these challenges and survive for future generations.

## 2. A Proposal to Preserve Public Libraries

Public libraries cannot operate without government funding. Public libraries also cannot operate without patrons. But how can we make the case for increased funding when governments around the world are actively cutting budgets and library attendance is declining? The answer lies in increasing the library's value proposition. My proposal is twofold. First, libraries must modernize their services to increase the value provided to library patrons. Today's world is vastly different than that which existed when many libraries started to digitize their collections and design their current offerings; E-books and internet access are no longer enough to attract a steady stream of visitors. Second, we must increase the perceived economic value of

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[1] Maja Dorota Wojciechowska, *The role of public libraries in the development of social capital in local communities – a theoretical study* (Feb. 16, 2021), The role of public libraries in the development of social capital in local communities – a theoretical study | Emerald Insight;
Chris Cyr, *Public libraries generate social capital that can save lives* (Nov. 6, 2019), Public libraries generate social capital that can save lives (oclc.org);
John B. Horrigan, *Libraries, Trust, and Social Capital*, ULC_White-Papers_LIBRARIES-TRUST-AND-SOCIAL-CAPITAL.pdf (urbanlibraries.org)
[2] Global News, *Funding for library services slashed by half in Ontario budget* (April 18, 2019), Funding for library services slashed by half in Ontario budget | Globalnews.ca
[3] The Guardian, Britain has closed almost 800 libraries since 2010, figures show(Dec. 5, 2019), Britain has closed almost 800 libraries since 2010, figures show | Libraries | The Guardian
[4] Book Riot, Trump 2021 Budget Seeks to Eliminate Library Funding (Again) (Feb. 11, 2020), Trump 2021 Budget Seeks To Eliminate Library Funding (Again) (bookriot.com)
[5] The Conversation, Teens have less face time with their friends – and are lonelier than ever (Mar. 20, 2019), Teens have less face time with their friends – and are lonelier than ever (theconversation.com)

libraries to the politicians and governments that fund them. This will partially be accomplished by effectuating the first step of my proposal; increased visitor traffic is one way to prove the quantitative impact of library services. However, libraries will have to go further than collecting visitor data if they hope to increase their budget allocations. Library administrators need to capture the economic benefits of libraries and use that data to justify why public libraries deserve continued investments as governments everywhere are cutting costs.

## A. Increasing Value to Library Visitors

High-value institutions receive high levels of funding. Public libraries delivered a high-value service to previous generations by meeting some of the most pressing needs of those generations: the need for centralized access to literature, history, and other information, resources to overcome barriers to education and literacy, and free access to the internet[6]. Before the dawn of universal public education and widespread internet access, the services offered by public libraries were a crucial stopgap. Educational inequalities and the digital divide certainly persist, but new generations have unique needs and interests that libraries aren't currently catering to. Children and young adults today are interested in exploring technologies, skills, and career paths that did not even exist at the time many of our public libraries were designed. To remain relevant as an institution, libraries must shift their services to meet the needs of Gen Z and beyond.

Libraries around the world have already begun adapting to the times. For example, Canada has set apart its Toronto Public Library by offering access to state-of-the-art robotics and 3-D printing technology[7]. The Library in South Africa employs a "social robot" to welcome guests and answer their questions[8]. Finland and China have had success attracting visitors to their libraries with perfectly "Instagram-able" architecture[9]. These innovative solutions may be out of reach for most libraries given the budgetary strain they are already facing, but they demonstrate that creative innovations can pay off.

I propose a more economical solution: reimagining a public library staple, the computer lab, by transforming them into "Content Labs". I envision a space where community members can access the tools needed to create digital content of all kinds. Content Labs would have microphones, cameras, and video editing software for producing podcasts, tripods, backdrops, and props for influencer-style photo shoots, access to the Adobe suite for digital artists, photographers, and

[6] R. David Lankes, Beyond the Bullet Points: Libraries are Obsolete (April 20, 2012), Beyond the Bullet Points: Libraries are Obsolete – R. David Lankes

[7] Penguin, How can we save UK libraries? A look at the innovative steps being taken by countries around the world (Aug. 20, 2020), How can we save UK libraries? A look at the innovative steps being taken by countries around the world (penguin.co.uk)

[8] Sowetan Live, Meet Libby - the new robot library assistant at the University of Pretoria's Hatfield campus (June 4, 2019), Meet Libby - the new robot library assistant at the University of Pretoria's Hatfield campus (sowetanlive.co.za)

[9] Penguin, How can we save UK libraries? A look at the innovative steps being taken by countries around the world (Aug. 20, 2020), How can we save UK libraries? A look at the innovative steps being taken by countries around the world (penguin.co.uk)

videographers, and access to professional audio mastering software for aspiring musicians. Content Labs would attract visitors looking to use the space for a wide variety of purposes. For example, Content Labs would attract students who will be able to use these resources to get creative with school projects and assignments. They would also serve as a unique and fun meeting space for teens and young adults, who just want to socialize and experiment with the equipment and software. Further, Content Labs would encourage entrepreneurship and provide community members with access to the tools needed to explore careers and "side hustles" in digital media. Access to the tools will remedy existing gaps in access to online opportunities and career paths; "as opportunities created by the internet increase, so do inequities for those who do not have access to the technologies, tools, and skills needed to participate in the increasingly digital world."[10]

Replacing outdated computer labs with Content Labs should significantly increase library traffic; we already have resounding proof that younger generations will be interested in these features. Take the wildly popular app, TikTok, for example: 60% of TikTok's 1 billion users belong to Gen Z, and 83% of those users have uploaded at least one original video to the app[11]. We can also look to the rise of "selfie museums": interactive art installations where social media influencers and amateurs alike pay money to take photos against colorful backdrops[12]. Gen Z and Gen Alpha are very interested in experimenting with digital content creation, whether as a casual creative outlet or a business opportunity.

Of course, there will be costs associated with the transition from computer labs to Content Labs. However, I believe my proposal is more economical than the available alternatives. One of the most attractive features of Content Labs is access to software that is prohibitively expensive for many visitors, and there are many ways for libraries to limit their spending on software. For example, some companies, like Adobe, offer volume discounts for government organizations; networks of libraries will be able to make software purchases as a group and benefit from bulk discounts[13]. Additionally, organizations like TechSoup offer software and hardware donations to qualifying libraries[14]. Libraries can also seek help from charitable foundations that offer grants to libraries investing in new technology.[15]

### B. Increasing Perceived Economic Value

[10] North Carolina Department of Information Technology, What is the Digital Divide?, What Is the Digital Divide? | ncbroadband.gov

[11] Wallaroo, TikTok Statistics (Jan. 20, 2023), TikTok Statistics - Everything You Need to Know [Mar 2023 Update] (wallaroomedia.com)

[12] Wired, Selfie Factories: The Rise of the Made-for-Instagram Museum (Sept. 27, 2017), Selfie Factories: The Rise of the Made-for-Instagram Museum | WIRED

[13] Adobe, VIP Advantages for Government, Government | Adobe Buying Programs

[14] TechSoup, What TechSoup Offers Libraries(Jan. 16, 2012), What TechSoup Offers Libraries | Articles and How-tos | TechSoup

[15] The Library Corporation, Library Grants and Funding, The Library Corporation | Library Grants and Funding (tlcdelivers.com); EBSCO Connect, Grants & Funding Sources for Libraries (Aug. 1, 2022), Article Detail (ebsco.com)

When public budgets are tight, cost justification becomes increasingly important. I believe that libraries face a significant hurdle in lobbying for the funding they deserve because they aren't equipped to sell a data-driven story. There is ample research on the benefits of libraries and their role in developing social capital, but this qualitative data doesn't always translate into dollar signs. The "soft" benefits of libraries may be enough to garner the support of community members, but politicians and government officials will require more concrete evidence that public libraries are a net benefit to taxpayers.

Library administrators must leverage data to prove that not only do libraries create social value, but they also create measurable economic value. This could be done with minimal resources. Some libraries have already begun conducting cost-benefit analyses, so a formula exists and could be shared across networks of libraries. Library staff would simply need to be trained in the relevant data collection procedures so they can gather the right information to plug into their calculations. The Canadian public library system provides a great case study into how striking this data could be. In 2013, the Toronto Public Library conducted a cost-benefit analysis of its economic impact and found that "for every dollar invested in the library, it offered a return of $5.63"[16]. Since then, 14 other library systems in Canada have undertaken this same analysis and found similar results; one library found a whopping 685% return on every dollar invested[17]. If libraries across the world undertook cost-benefit analyses, they could use that data to promote the reality that public libraries are a worthwhile investment with a much higher ROI than the average government-funded service.

## 3. Conclusion

Public libraries are worth saving, and it's far too early to give up hope that future generations will be able to enjoy their legacy. The path forward is clear; libraries cannot exist without visitors or funding. So, any attempt to preserve public libraries must necessarily target each of these aspects. Libraries can increase visitor traffic by offering access to technologies that inspire passion in younger generations. Library administrators also have a golden opportunity to leverage cost-benefit analyses and change the way that politicians and government officials view investments in libraries. If we can simultaneously increase the perceived value of public libraries to visitors and to the governments that fund them, we can preserve this institution for generations to come.

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[16] Global News,Beyond books: Why library funding cuts impact more than just readers (April 28, 2019), Beyond books: Why library funding cuts impact more than just readers | Globalnews.ca
[17] Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, The List: Canadian Public Library Impact Studies (Aug. 14, 2018), The List: Canadian Public Library Impact Studies – Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (fopl.ca)