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## Libraries and Their Publics: Rhetorics of the Public Library

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## **Libraries and Their Publics: Rhetorics of the Public Library**

*Arguments about the future of libraries are more trenchant than ever. Yet questions about the nature of public libraries are inseparable from questions about their public character. Historically, competing arguments about the ideal relationship between libraries and their publics have mirrored evolving technologies that affect a library's potential content and accessibility. But today, when socially excluded populations need libraries to gain the cultural capital necessary to participate in civil society, threats to public libraries also threaten the public sphere's viability as a way for the disenfranchised to address the state.*

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The digital age finds public libraries undergoing major transformations.<sup>1</sup> The field of Library and Information Science (LIS) has bemoaned this “crisis” for decades (Buschman, “Decline” 2). Lately, however, the public has become more involved in debates about twenty-first-century libraries and the relationship they have with the people they serve. Vocal protests arose in 2012, for instance, when the New York Public Library announced plans to bring a substantial portion of its books to a storage facility in New Jersey. The renovation—only recently suspended—would have ended the flagship Fifth Avenue building’s role as a traditional research library and, opponents said, made it a large Internet café instead (Howard). In London, too, plans first proposed in 2010 to consolidate the borough of Brent’s entire library system have met with impassioned public resistance ever since. Although the NYPL and Brent cases have been highly publicized, they are not the only examples of public libraries in transformation. These transformations occasion this paper’s inquiry: a closer look at some rhetorics historically surrounding libraries and their publics.

For all its familiarity, the idea of a “public library” is deceptively complex. In their current iteration, public libraries have what Richard Rubin describes as five characteristics: They are (1) supported by taxes, (2) governed to serve the public interest, (3) open to anyone and with equal access to all, (4) voluntary institutions whose use is not mandated, and (5) free of cost (231). Rubin’s model helps to capture some of the constitutive features of public libraries by isolating the imperative of their free accessibility to all. But Rubin’s characteristics only help to explain what makes a library public. The problem of what makes a library a *library* is more primary still. My argument is that questions about the nature of public libraries are rhetorically inseparable from questions about the nature of their public character: Public libraries have always been shaped by evolving technological affordances that affect both a library’s potential content and its accessibility.

Although LIS boasts a large body of literature devoted to issues surrounding libraries and their public function, scholarship in the rhetorical tradition has remained surprisingly silent in this conversation despite having much to contribute. The rhetorical tradition is especially equipped to engage the subject for at least two reasons. First, rhetoric’s founding concern with the role of discourse in a democracy fits hand-in-hand with the varying roles that libraries have played, over time, in giving citizens access to the information and resources that are prerequisite for participation in civic affairs. Second, a rhetorical perspective offers a rich heuristic to understand how libraries have always been rhetorical products of the cultures and technologies by which they are surrounded. Converging these two affinities—part rhetorical pragmatism, part rhetoric culture studies—I will examine some *dissoi logoi*, or contrasting arguments, that have historically accounted for different visions of libraries and their role in democratic life.<sup>2</sup> Doing so should contribute, in the spirit of Edward Schiappa’s contention that all definitions have ethical and normative ramifications (3), a deeper understanding of how various attempts to define libraries in practice have always made them rhetorically contested sites.

The following pages accordingly proceed in three parts. First, I offer a condensed history of libraries as told through competing “Parnassian” or “Universal” visions of library service. Here, the standard of a selective library safeguarding the most important texts of human civilization clashes with the theoretical ideal of an infinite library. Second, I consider how late capitalism and the profusion of information technology have shifted library rhetorics to competing questions of “Needs” or “Reads.” Here, the question is whether libraries should serve the needs of the socially excluded by providing access to digital technology, or instead retain their traditional role as an accessible archive of printed books. Following these historical approaches, I conclude with a deeper look at our contemporary moment

by examining the *dissoi logoi* of the “Citizen-Consumer” or “Public Citizen” tacit in the recent protests over the aforementioned library closures in London. Today, the role that the public is expected or permitted to play in determining the nature of its libraries itself argues either for more commercial or democratic versions of library service.

### **A Condensed History of Libraries: The Parnassian and Universal Models**

As early as 2500 BCE, the ancient city of Ebla, Syria, housed thousands of cuneiform Sumerian clay tablets in a referenced and shelved collection at its palace archives (see Wellisch 488–500). Although not “books” in the sense we know them today, the clay tablets at Ebla nevertheless represent a proto-library insofar as they indicate the human penchant to preserve documented language as a way to safeguard a society’s important information and knowledge. Of course, print technology has changed some since the days of clay tablets. In times when the available technology made documentation difficult, as with clay or stone etchings, only that which was thought to be most important or practicable would be recorded (and, naturally, what was most important varied by local, cultural, and historical context). In such times, if something was worth recording, that meant it was worth preserving. From our vantage it’s easy to see how, as print technology has advanced from tablets to papyrus to parchment, through Gutenberg and on to our own information age (where our tablets are electronic), the link between what is worth recording and what is worth preserving has been ruptured. Now, just about everything is documented; the question is how to sort what is most important from what is least.

In his history of the library’s evolution as a concept, Matthew Battles describes two visions of libraries: the Parnassian and the Universal. The Parnassian, he says, is concerned with “the essence of all that is Good and Beautiful (in the classical formulation) or Holy (in the medieval)” (9). The Universal library, meanwhile, is “not to be praised for particular influences or qualities” of specific volumes but for the sheer breadth of the collection as a whole (9). In their respective models of quality and quantity, Parnassian and Universal libraries indicate a conflict between privileging the rarefied status of a canon, or privileging the notion that all information is important to preserve and catalog. As topics of argument, these models underscore—from the very outset of libraries in the ancient world—a dialectic of content and access that has been integral to the concept of public libraries throughout their history.

For instance, the famous library of Alexandria, constructed under the Ptolemies in the third century BCE, attempted to “to hold everything”—all Greek

literature, all foreign works, all manuscripts authoritative or apocryphal (Battles 30). With so rich a collection, scholars from Euclid to Plutarch traveled great distances to study there, creating an early model of the modern university and its principle that knowledge is a form of cultural capital. Such a library, however, no matter how comprehensive its holdings, cannot be called public in the sense we would imagine today. The old oral culture was just becoming textual, and literacy was the unique privilege of the elite. The library's accessibility to scholars, as opposed to laypeople, in turn served to make its Parnassian features more enduring than its Universal intentions. Scrolls in Alexandria's library were vulnerable. Fire, decay, war, looting, floods, all could (and did) destroy precious manuscripts with no warning. For the sake of preservation, scribes and scholars thus had to select which manuscripts were most worthy of painstakingly copying by hand. As Battles notes,

The chief role of an ancient library was the provision of exemplars from which readers would transcribe copies for their own use; naturally, only the major works were copied in any great quantity. The rest—the secondary, the extra-canonical, and the apocryphal—dropped out of view. (31)

This curatorial process, whereby scholars weeded out the work they deemed of scholarly value, in turn obstructed the ancient library's universality and public accessibility. To a large extent, in other words, both the content and accessibility of libraries have always been limited by technology and literacy. Only as improvements in print and preservation technologies modernized libraries—diminishing the need for expert curators to control a text's reproduction and distribution, thereby making it easier to preserve and disseminate innumerable texts—did it make sense for modern libraries to become publicly accessible to all.<sup>3</sup>

It would be difficult to say when and where the first modern public library appeared. In the 1420s the Guildhall library opened in London after Lord Mayor Dick Whittington bequeathed an endowment to start such an institution following his death. The Guildhall library was accessible to anyone, though as a matter of practice, its patrons were mostly clergymen in the annexed Guildhall Chapel (see Pearson). Similarly, Cosimo de' Medici in Renaissance Florence endowed the library of San Marco in 1444. By stocking the library with his private collection of books (by this point, manuscripts were bound into codices and resembled the artifact we know as books today, though Gutenberg's press had yet to become a ubiquitous technology), Cosimo publicly displayed the Medici family's taste, elegance, humanism, and power, building "a reputation for civic benevolence" as the books he chose for the library could be used, in accordance with Renaissance

values, for the benefit of society (see Grafton and Jardine). Indeed, as Battles tells the story, during the Renaissance

[s]uddenly it became important to bring lots of books together in one place, to make them accessible, not only to friends, family, and sponsored artists and writers—the denizens of the private home—but to a public, to translate all those private acts of reading into public performances. (70)

This “translation” is the first antecedent of today’s modern public library, which by now takes for granted the belief that information—and access to it—can enlighten any citizens so exposed to become more wise and humane members of society. At the time, the notion was a novel one.

By the seventeenth century, though, Gutenberg’s press from nearly two centuries before had so accelerated book production that those controlling libraries had to *choose* between the Parnassian and Universal ideals as never before. The time had come when minimal technological affordances (and correspondingly low literacy) no longer dictated the most expedient vision of libraries as if one model were somehow inevitable. Instead, the new viability of opposing arguments for a library’s normative nature began to influence social mores surrounding how libraries were understood. Benefactors began making their private collections available to the public, founding and expanding such libraries as the Ambrosiana in Milan (1606) and the Bodleian in Oxford (1602)—libraries that, because they could, now welcomed books of all stripes and for all stripes of people. It was around this time that English settlers in America began establishing libraries in the new country.

The comparatively late advent of American libraries meant that they did not carry the same cultural baggage as Europe’s. From the start, Americans linked their libraries to the free ideals of their new republic. The theoretical function of libraries had more or less been fixed: American libraries would inculcate the education and *savoir-faire* necessary to participate in their new society. For example, one of America’s first libraries was bequeathed to present-day Newton, Massachusetts, in 1636 by the Puritan clergyman John Harvard when the colony decided it wanted to start a college modeled after England’s Cambridge University. Clergyman Harvard’s gift of books and substantial endowment was greater than the colony’s itself, earning him the namesake of Harvard University, though “Harvard” as we know it today was a library before it was a school.<sup>4</sup>

America’s first libraries complicate the Parnassian/Universal *dissoi logoi* by suggesting that arguments about a library’s *content* can no longer be separated from questions of a library’s *accessibility*. Critically, American libraries never

existed without an integral relationship between a library and a public. The question of America's libraries has been not just a matter of who has access to what kinds of knowledge but a question of what danger or good this access can do for a people. From John Harvard's private library to Benjamin Franklin's 1731 library in Philadelphia, said to be the first lending library in the colonies (Haynes 11–23), American libraries have existed primarily thanks to benefactors interested in educating and sharing knowledge among the people they deem worthy of access.

Centuries later, during the heyday of modern public libraries in America, the importance of benefactors to public libraries remained evident in steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, whose columned libraries stipple the country to this day as monuments to his munificence. That Carnegie's libraries are mostly repurposed or razed these days and that he built most of them on the condition that the towns themselves provide the books and funding for his libraries' maintenance (Manguel 101–02) indicates that the benefactor model for public libraries may be showing its age. If, in its place, libraries are funded by the state, the bias of a benefactor able to determine a library's content and hence shape the minds of the patrons given access to it is replaced by the imperative that democratic public institutions now must serve the needs of all their citizens. In that case, immanent in the modern, democratic notion of the public library is now a *sine qua non*: that libraries serve everyone because not to do so is to shortchange someone's potential to participate in public life and thereby fulfill the privilege of their citizenship. How and to what extent this obligation is fulfilled remains a point of serious contention between policy-makers and public constituents—and now more than ever, when accelerated advances in information technology have changed the potential of what libraries might be and do.

### **Late Capitalist Libraries in Crisis: Needs or Reads**

The contemporary scene finds the Parnassian and Universal ideals evolving into other positions that have reshaped the conversation about the relationship between libraries and their publics. The ability to digitally archive huge quantities of text and other printed materials at relatively low cost, and with little need for physical space, has begun to change the classical imperative of deciding between a Parnassian or Universal vision of library service. The affordances of digital technology have thus led implicitly to a Universal model that jibes well with a concomitant (and by now well-entrenched) postmodern tendency to shatter the Parnassian canons and treat all texts, even the most mundane, as worthy of preservation and attention. By comparison, the high expense and material enormity of preserving hard copies begins to seem untenable, leading library policy-makers to shift their rhetoric about what local libraries ought to offer. The



shifting rhetoric has seen library funding receive serious cuts worldwide as the confluence of digital technologies, capitalism, and democracy creates a perceived sense that “traditional” libraries are hoary substitutes for the Internet. Although no one appears to contest the democratic “right” to free library service, or even the ongoing value that public libraries serve for building local communities able to participate meaningfully in the public sphere, the rhetorical exigence confronting postmillennial libraries is different than ever before.

John Pateman and John Vincent have characterized this exigence as a problem of “Needs or Reads” (126–27). Should libraries de-emphasize tangible books and buildings, focusing instead on providing the technological resources that match a community’s needs for engagement and development? Or should libraries emphasize their traditional service of book-lending, and accordingly prioritize the acquisition of new books and the building space necessary to accommodate them? Rhetorically, the *dissoi logoi* of Needs or Reads leverage opposing accounts of what issues are most salient in the constitution of contemporary libraries. The Needs argument is about the “transformation of libraries into needs-based services” while the Reads argument promotes “the modernization of the traditional library service” (Pateman and Vincent 126). These divisive perspectives now beset policy conversations about one of democracy’s more cherished public institutions.

In part, each model derives from interpretation of statistical evidence about trends in library usage over the past decades. These data, usually taken in the form of surveys, vary widely across contexts. For instance, a 2013 British survey, undertaken by The Department for Culture, Media, and Sports, found that only 36% of people surveyed said they had visited a library during the previous year (“Taking Part” 5). A similar survey in America, undertaken by the Pew Research Center during the same period, found that 53% of surveyed Americans reported visiting a library in the year prior to being interviewed (Zickuhr et al. 4). Similar comparative analyses reveal that the reasons patrons give for using libraries are the same as the reasons others give for not using them: library-goers increasingly use libraries for access to technology, and nongooers ascribe their lack of interest to the Internet’s having made visiting libraries unnecessary. Technology, in this example, plays a rhetorical double-duty. To cede that libraries are not necessary because the Web offers similar affordances available from home is at once to cede that libraries offering Web services *are* valuable to the extent they provide such services as are not available elsewhere. Conversely, to identify a library’s value in the access it affords to technology is to be divided from libraries if they neglect to provide such access when it is needed.

Following the logic only a step further reveals a critical subtext underwriting the Needs or Reads question. Although seemingly concerned with the nature of *libraries*, the opposing arguments are rather motivated rhetorically by the

attributes of a library's perceived *public*. In other words, the definitional issue of what libraries ought to be in the coming years depends upon how we understand their users. Even if all agree that access to information and communication technologies has become ever more essential for the acquisition and sustenance of social and cultural capital, ongoing evidence of a digital divide suggests such access remains largely a privilege of the enfranchised classes. Debates about a library's role in providing such access therefore are also debates about the extent to which libraries should or should not specifically address their services to the socially excluded.

It so happens that European cultural policy over the last thirty years has institutionalized an interest in treating "social exclusion" as a key index for the health of democratic life (see Percy-Smith). Library policy in particular has taken social exclusion as a guiding principle (see Gehner; Pateman and Vincent; Dutch and Muddiman; Muddiman et al.). Under the social exclusion paradigm, at least in theory, cultural policies pertaining to libraries should be directed toward developing library services that foster *inclusion* by ensuring all citizens the opportunity to participate civically in their communities. As the Commission of European Communities reports, "Social exclusion refers to the multiple and changing factors resulting in people being excluded from the normal exchanges, practices and rights of modern society" ("Background Report" 1). In this view, the onus of public libraries is not just to overcome the digital divide by offering computer terminals for the poor but rather to foster more comprehensive kinds of cultural capital and social inclusion that communities with multiple deprivations are not generally vouchsafed otherwise (Gehner). Along these lines, an eighteen-month inquiry into the inclusivity of British libraries, compiled in 2000 by Dave Muddiman and several collaborators, found that even under the social exclusion model, library policy tends not to take as comprehensive and community-driven an approach to inclusivity as it should. As opposed to the regnant "take it or leave it" approach, the report advocated policies that actively offer excluded people more say "in the design and development of services" by "focus[ing] not simply on 'access' but on equalities of outcome as an overarching goal" (57). The failure to do so may point to some more structurally entrenched aspects of our late-capitalist moment that impede more widespread and efficacious participation in public affairs.

Jodi Dean, for instance, has maintained that the notion of open and inclusive civic participation today is but a fantasy within the residing paradigm of *communicative capitalism*. The term is Dean's way of describing the kind of capitalism that characterizes global culture since around the turn of the millennium, and it has near equivalents in Manuel Castells's *capitalism in the information mode*, Dan Schiller's *digital capitalism*, and Luis Suarez-Villa's

*technocapitalism*. All these terms critically engage the free-market logic that has come to pervade contemporary life as a consequence of corporate interests exploiting network and communication technologies for their own ends. Dean's communicative capitalism specifically describes "the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism" (2). Dean does not address libraries in particular, but her model invites the inference that libraries today may promulgate the fantasy of influential participation in public life, but in practice are democratic institutions enslaved to capitalist market imperatives.

Over the last few years, fiscal threats to public libraries both in America and abroad would seem to corroborate such a notion. Diminished funding from the state, alongside the senescence of the benefactor model, has meant that (in England especially) a "Private Finance Initiative" has increasingly been regarded as a helpful way to support the survival of public libraries (Davies 27–30). David McMenemy has noted that public libraries today are surrounded by a "discourse continually advocating a more commercial approach to service design and delivery" (16). McMenemy suggests that because the "citizen-consumer" now expects "the same levels of service from their public services as they do from any commercial service they deal with," the burden of policy-makers is making libraries attractive choices for a public who can choose to use them or not (16). In this view, the *dissoi logoi* of Needs or Reads may function as normative arguments supporting different ideals, but what matters is creating libraries that people choose to use.

From a rhetorical perspective, though, policies that privilege the public's choice can be said to promulgate "choice" merely as an ideograph (see McGee). Communicative capitalism may blithely assure us of our liberty to choose—and, in principle, who could disagree with such a liberty?—but the reality is that not everyone has alternative options for access to the kinds of services and resources that public libraries can provide. Practical wisdom thus suggests that the way to make libraries more appealing depends largely upon which people one hopes to make them more appealing to. Given the public's heterogeneity, however, contrasting policy arguments about Needs or Reads can seem rather limited by their respective one-size-fits all programs. At issue, then, is not just whether libraries become Internet cafes or large free bookstores. The tacit but more crucial stakes are how libraries interpellate the publics they purportedly serve, and how publics resistant to being accordingly subjected endeavor instead to shape library policy in their collective self-image. As I turn now to illustrate, nowhere today is this more evident than when ordinary library-goers join the public sphere hoping to have some say in how their library service evolves.

### A Public Sphere Rises in London: Citizen-Consumers or Public Citizens?

In November 2010 a council overseeing cultural affairs for the London borough of Brent invited public proposals for the consultation of its “Libraries Transformation Project” (LTP). The transformation would be radical: It proposed to permanently close half of Brent’s twelve libraries and devote resources to enhancing the six that remained (“Proposals for Consultation”). Almost immediately, ordinary citizens by the thousands joined the public sphere to assert the importance of libraries to their daily lives. Overshadowed in the international media by the contemporaneous Arab Spring and Occupy movements, the protests over Brent’s library closures nevertheless came to form the burning center of a veritable national crisis that found six hundred libraries across England—20% of the total—threatened with closure by 2011 (Cooper and Cooper).

Most scholars agree that issues spark public spheres into being (see Marres). When public spheres emerge around issues related to public libraries, however, something peculiar happens: The public sphere becomes a kind of metasphere, whereby the key issue of public discourse is not just the libraries but the importance of the public sphere in their sustenance. One reason this might happen can be illustrated by the LIS scholar John Buschman’s work, over several articles and a book, to show that libraries enable and enact the ideal of a Habermasian public sphere. For Buschman libraries are essential to thriving democracies because they are “a place where the ideal of unfettered communication and investigation exists in rudimentary form, allowing for critical and rational discussion of the issues of the day” (“Decline” 9–10). When these issues happen to concern the degradation of public library services, then, they also concern the imperilment of the public sphere that libraries help make possible. In turn, public spheres attending to public library issues fight vigorously for state recognition of the public sphere itself when determining the future of library service for local communities.

In short, when potential changes in library service bring forth public spheres intent upon resisting these changes, the salient emphasis in library rhetorics shifts from defining public libraries to defining a library’s *publics*. In that case, it is possible to identify a third pair of *dissoi logoi* emergent in library rhetorics: arguments about whether a library’s public consists in *citizen-consumers* or *public citizens*. As Buschman suggests, the purpose of libraries may well be the cultivation of citizens equipped to participate in the public sphere; but, if libraries “have had their purposes recast in economic terms in this era of economics as the basis of our public reasoning,” then “we have rhetorically transformed library users into ‘customers’” (“Decline” 9). The *dissoi logoi* of Citizen-Consumers or Public Citizens capture this problematic.

Both positions underscore how understanding a library's public in a certain way is tacitly to define their libraries similarly. *Citizen-consumers* comprise the version of public envisioned in a free-market model of public libraries. Such a public performs its citizenship effectively by consuming: in this case, by going to libraries and partaking of their services, whatever those happen to be. The logic holds that if people are not using their libraries, then libraries are not fulfilling the market's demand; underused libraries thus need either to be shut down, consolidated, or transformed. The opposing position, which treats library-goers as *public citizens*, works differently. Public citizens enact their citizenship not by consuming, but by participating rhetorically in civil society in order to identify and advocate the diverse needs of their social interdependence so that the state might act accordingly. The logic here follows the deliberative path of a rhetorically modeled public sphere, in which public consensus, achieved through the vernacular discussions of informed and reasonable citizens, forms a signpost for state action (see Hauser 61–64). The question in both arguments is what role ordinary citizens play in shaping the libraries that are meant to vouchsafe the fulfillment of their citizenship in the first place. Looking closer at the Brent case provides an excellent illustration of how this question plays out rhetorically.

Most of the libraries in what is now Brent opened around the end of the nineteenth century, riding the momentum of a “public library movement” that swept England for several decades following the Public Libraries Act of 1850 (Minto and Hutt). The Act had given municipalities throughout England the authority to establish public libraries in their communities using local taxes, for the first time in British history codifying the belief that free public libraries were essential to ensuring a free and civil society. When Brent became a borough in 1965 (consolidating the municipal boroughs of Wembley and Willesden, which were divided by the River Brent), it absorbed the region's libraries in the process. At the time, England was undergoing another major change in its library policies. Just the year before, parliament had passed the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964, requiring all local councils to make public library services a statutory duty. Pushing the Act of 1850 even further, public libraries were no longer left to the generosity of donors or taxpayers who voted them in; they were now among the fundamental services that all local governments were mandated to provide for their citizens, and failure to do so would be subjected to oversight by the Secretary of State.

The Act of 1964, still England's presiding law on such matters, calls for local councils and library authorities to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service for all people “whose residence or place of work is within the library area or who are undergoing full-time education within that area” (“Libraries and Museums Act” Chapter 75, 7.1). The Act moreover requires that these services be

free of charge and promoted publicly. Within these requirements, however, local councils have considerable wiggle room to interpret what “comprehensive and efficient” library services means for each local context.

With that in mind, it is essential to notice that Brent is an exceptionally diverse and deprived place. Britain’s Index of Multiple Deprivation found in 2007 that Brent has steadily been growing more deprived, and is now among the 15% most deprived of the 354 boroughs in all of England (“Brent’s Borough Profile”). As we have seen, the policy model of social exclusion treats multiple deprivations such as Brent’s as related to a person’s ability to participate equally in the public sphere—not just to participate in commerce. The rhetoric of social exclusion policy, that is, purports to cultivate public citizens, not just citizen-consumers. If British government has legislated the imperative of a robust library system for the cultivation and enrichment of the public, then in no place is that more important than somewhere like Brent, where deprivation is so high. More than elsewhere, Brent’s libraries provide resources and access to interactions that would otherwise be impossible. When these resources and opportunities were threatened, the people responded by collectively protesting their rights: not just their right to libraries but their right to have a fair say in determining the nature of their library service.

After announcing the impending closures in its LTP report, the Brent Council agreed to a three-month period of “extensive public consultation” for the report to be deliberated (“Proposals for Consultation”). It was during this time that the first public outcries began: in part for the obvious reason that the LTP’s plan to overhaul library services had just been made public but also because the Council had agreed to entertain public opinion about the proposal—and to accept alternative proposals from public interest groups—only during this three-month time of consultation. Agreeing to do so, of course, can be read as the welcoming of public citizens whose influence might have some weight in the state’s choices. But if Dean’s thesis about communicative capitalism is right, the public consultation period is better understood as an entrenchment of free-market logic by appeasing citizen-consumers with the mere belief that they have a discursive say. Close inspection of the forum minutes, meeting transcripts, email correspondence, and other Q&A evidence from this period reveals a disenfranchised public keen to be more than citizen-consumers; these people want to be truly public citizens, included fairly in the deliberative process.

Much of the protestation during this time consisted in claims that the consultation process was itself unfairly limited, stained with flawed evidence, and generally inhospitable to truly public citizens who were keen to participate civically in debating the decisions affecting their communities. The public meetings designed for the public to question members of the Council were particularly

rife with such claims. Many challenged the Council's low figures about library usage and accused the Council of a rigged game. One attendee said the Council is "disguising from people what is going on" and another asked outright, "what is the point of a consultation" if the outcome is already predetermined ("Public Meeting"). Indeed, the indignant feelings recurred at a "Willesden Green Open Day" where one attendee complained that the public meetings had been a sham: "Councilor Powney ignored us in the public meeting; therefore it wasn't a public consultation" ("Willesden Green"). Others likewise bemoaned the inadequate publicizing of the meetings, and what one person called the Council's "deliberately misleading" published information about the consultation period at large. Some also derided the Council's questionnaire as "appalling" and full of "leading question[s]," and the general mood appears to have been a feeling of inequity and unfairness when it came to citizens' opportunities to be included in the debate ("Willesden Green").

While the problem of social exclusion was thus central to the public's concern, it remained curiously sidelined by the Council whose policies presumably operated under such a framework. Meeting minutes from the public Q&A sessions, emails to interested citizens, and the original LTP proposal all point to a Council motivated more by an economic perspective than by the model of social exclusion. At one public meeting, Councilor Powney told the audience, "This is not a referendum. We have to make changes. . . . The key thing I want everyone to understand is that we're in a position where saying let's carry on spending money is not an option" ("Public Meeting"). In email correspondence the Council repeatedly responded to public inquiries by emphasizing that the Council was in an "extremely difficult" or "very difficult financial situation," so "a rationalization strategy is necessary" ("Correspondence Log"). The original report had also listed seven reasons for the LTP's existence in the first place. Several issues more or less related to social exclusion appeared on the list, but on top was "the current economic situation and impending public sector spending reductions" ("Proposals for Consultation").

The Council had pointed toward statistics comparing the annual cost of maintaining libraries with annual library usage in order to arrive at a cost-per-visit for each of Brent's libraries ("Proposals for Consultation"). According to these figures, those libraries threatened with closure accounted for six of the eight highest cost-per-visit numbers because they saw the least traffic in relation to their operation expenses. Cleverly, such evidence allowed the Council to take a consubstantial position wherein economic needs and social exclusion were inextricable considerations. Effectively, the Council could make its case on either basis: Not enough people use these libraries, so we can't justify their cost; or, if these libraries cost so much to run, then they need to include more people.

Both positions firmly abide a citizen-consumer model despite “selling” the public an ideograph about its chance to participate in a fashion that, literally, has no currency. Conversely, though, the voices emergent from the public during the consultation phase positioned themselves decidedly as public citizens, and hence were concerned with social exclusion in a twofold sense: first, to ensure their libraries be saved because libraries vouchsafe their capacity to be socially included in the public life of their community and, second, to ensure their voices will actually be heeded in conversations that would determine the fate of such libraries.

After the consultation period, the Council moved quickly. Only a month later, by April 11, 2011, they had published their final LTP executive report (“Library Transformation Project”). While ostensibly having considered the results of the public consultation, the final report nevertheless remained recalcitrant on the issue of branch closures that had been its major point of contestation. It also rejected every alternative proposal submitted by public interest groups. In response, that July three Brent residents—backed by thousands of supporters—filed a High Court suit against the Brent Council, claiming the Council “adopted a fundamentally flawed approach to the objective of making savings in its budget” and instead “started from the false premise that library closures were an inevitability, thereby closing its mind to alternative means” (Bailey v Brent Paragraphs 4–5). Most of all, the claimants said, the Council “acted unfairly by failing properly to consult the public on the proposals generally, by withholding relevant information from consultees and by failing to undertake adequate inquiry and consultation in relation to the needs of those groups protected by equality legislation” (Paragraph 5). Crucially, that is, the stakes here concerned not just what happened to Brent’s libraries, but the chance for their fate to be determined by the local public’s will.

The British press accordingly billed the lawsuit as a “landmark” case that would establish a precedent for how library closures would be treated across the country. No one disputed that the state was still obligated to provide “comprehensive and efficient” library service for its citizens. Instead, the disputation concerned the state’s duty to let local library-goers determine how the obligation to provide such service would be fulfilled. Accordingly, the case’s import was partly legal: What responsibility does the state have to heed public opinion when determining library policy, and what measures of public consultation suffice to fulfill that charge? But, read through the evolution of *dissoi logoi* that I have described, it also pitted citizen-consumer and public citizen arguments against one other in ways that reveal how inseparable understandings of a library’s publics are from understandings of a public’s libraries.

With rampant library closures imminent throughout England, these debates were very much national news. But, in the end, public citizens were unsuccessful.



On October 13, 2011, the high court ruled in favor of Brent Council. That morning, all twelve of Brent's libraries were closed in anticipation of the ruling. After the verdict, six were immediately reopened—and the ill-fated six immediately boarded up. Vernacular protests continue to this day, but the policy has been fixed from above: Brent's libraries are definitively reduced.

### A Chiasmus Emerges

This essay has tried to show that the long history of public libraries, and their imperilment today, can be understood through a rhetorical dialectic of content and access, and that this larger dialectic has played out through pairs of competing arguments about the interplay of libraries and their publics. Certainly, the Parnassian/Universal, Needs/Reads, and Citizen-Consumer/Public Citizen *dissoi logoi* have not been the only models leveraged for engaging questions about public library policy or services. They have, however, figured prominently in library rhetorics and the attempt to isolate the key stakes underwriting normative definitions of library service. Ultimately, the opposing models illustrate the chiasmatic dynamic of the public library: *Libraries determine the nature of their publics and publics determine the nature of their libraries*. In a functioning democracy, both sides of the chiasmus must hold. The American poet and ninth Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, wrote famously in 1972, "What is more important in a library than anything else—than everything else—is the fact that it exists" (359). While the sustained existence of public libraries is undoubtedly important, today more than ever, what also matters is the public's opportunity to choose how they define the nature of that sustenance.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I thank *RR* editor Theresa Enos and peer reviewers Frank Farmer and Steven Mailloux for their valuable help with this essay's development.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Mailloux has given the name *rhetorical hermeneutics* to "the theoretical practice that results from the intersection between rhetorical pragmatism and the study of cultural rhetoric" (52). In this sense, my project in these pages might be described as a rhetorical hermeneutic of the public library: To use Mailloux's felicitous phrase, it "uses rhetoric to practice theory by doing history" (52, 63).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the Parnassian and Universal models are also highly imbricated. For instance, a Universal model could be supported by the rationale that humans are fallible in our ability to gauge which texts will matter later; therefore, it is better to collect and archive as much material as possible in order to accommodate shifting judgments about which texts will count most in an unforeseeable future. In such an argument, a Parnassian ideal justifies a Universal policy; the *dissoi logoi* are deeply enmeshed. Conversely, though, the modern trend toward collecting all forms of human knowledge in a Universal library is itself a Parnassian endeavor to the extent that some genres of text tend to

be collected more than others. Inasmuch as certain genres have little standing in library collections—*ephemera* being a good example—even modern libraries devoted to more Universal principles practice a tacit Parnassian elitism.

<sup>4</sup>Harvard's Puritanism may be revealing. The Puritan worldview, which takes God to be just and the greatest sin to be pride, seems to invite a Universal model for libraries by favoring the humility that would grant all humankind a capacity to read, reason, and arrive at the knowledge necessary to take care of others. Although Puritans of the time were highly influenced by Calvinists, we might speculate that Calvinist theology implicitly invites a Parnassian model insofar as Calvinists feared that if knowledge were not held by a select group of religious leaders, then others would interpret scripture and misread it.

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