MARCH 2016

LIBRARIES

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MOTION:

"THERE IS NO LONGER A NEED FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES"

DEBATING MATTERS ISRAEL

CONTENTS

KEY TERMS

Librarian

Public library

NOTES

"Libraries provide meeting places for different age groups, different education levels, and ethnic backgrounds, and they offer enriching activities mostly for the weaker segments of society. In Israel the enormous potential of public libraries is nearly untapped, due to budget shortages. Many are of the wrong opinion that lending libraries are an institution whose time has passed." [Ref: Ha'aretz] This editorial statement in Ha'aretz, Israel's oldest daily newspaper, has shed light on a 40% decline in state and municipal funding for public libraries in Israel from 1975 to 2007, in recognition of the fact that "a mere 16 percent of the public registers at the local library", and that "the average in books loaned per person in the country is 1.8 per year" [Ref: Ha'aretz]. Declining public library membership, the proliferation of high-speed internet access and continued competition for state funding means the future of public libraries, in Israel and beyond, is being questioned. In 1975 the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, passed The Public Libraries Law, establishing the right of local councils to establish libraries at public expense, making charges for book rental illegal and providing universal access to literature and information [Ref: IFLA]. Today there are over 1000 libraries, with 1.28 million members, where local authorities have a statutory duty to contribute to the provision of public libraries, overseen nationally by central government. But do they fulfil the same role they did in the past? What exactly is the purpose of a public library today? Have our reading habits changed to the extent that we no longer require a national network of public libraries, instead accessing books and information online and via E-books? Or in the process of using and promoting new technologies, do we miss something vital about the purpose of libraries within society? Can the seemingly limitless information we are able to access on the internet be a replacement for these "cultural and intellectual" centres [Ref: Wall Street Journal]?

A timeless institution?

Public access to books was initially provided by both synagogues and secular initiatives, predating the creation of the State of Israel. In the 100 years from the establishment of the Montfiore Collection in Jerusalem in 1874 to the passage of The Public Libraries Law in 1975, libraries have catered to the changing needs of Israel's population. Whilst the reading rooms and mobile libraries of the Histradut Labour Foundation of the 1920s provided Hebrew language instruction and critical educational materials to urban workers and agricultural settlers [Ref: Wikipedia], the public libraries of the 1960s onwards, coordinated and maintained by the Service Center for Public Libraries, further encouraged reading as an aid to acculturation and social integration in the face of diverse and "massive waves of immigration" [Ref: IFLA]. In spite of the 1975 libraries law stipulating that the central and municipal governments "contribute to the funding of all activities, the buying of books and the salaries of librarians", these contributions dropped from 50% of library budgets in 1975 to an average of 10% by 2007 [Ref: Ha'aretz]. With membership of public libraries as low as 15% and the government continuing to run a budget deficit, some ask if public libraries still needed. Stricken library membership and squeezed governmental budgets are not limited to Israel; in the UK and the USA in particular, the debate over whether public libraries are obsolete is ongoing. The ease with which we can access online the information traditionally housed in libraries has led some to argue that "nobody… would dream of building and stocking conventional libraries the length and breadth of the land…it's not just a question of cash: it's a question of change" [Ref: Guardian]. Indeed, in light of the launch of Amazon's Kindle Unlimited E-book subscription service, offering readers access to 600,000 books one writer asks, "why wouldn't we simply junk the physical libraries and purchase an Amazon Kindle Unlimited subscription for the entire country?" [Ref: Forbes] This perspective isn't limited to those looking to balance the government's books. The British Council's director in Israel, Simon Kay, admitted that "as the years went by, libraries obviously became less and less relevant, as people accessed more and more information digitally… Libraries have always been a very expensive way of reaching a relatively few number of people." [Ref: Ha'aretz] However, others, like Jay Jordan of the Online Computer Library Center, counter that "libraries contain a very important treasure for humanity… Our challenge is to show that the library has value in our day as well" [Ref: Ha'aretz]. Moreover, those who oppose library closures argue that they provide something unique within communities that cannot be replaced by the proliferation of new technology: libraries in Israel form "a meeting place and cultural resource for Jews, Muslims and Christians alike… a dynamic space for intellectual and creative encounters" [Ref: Jerusalem Post].

The changing face of libraries

Libraries are "accessible, multi-generational, classless, community spaces providing free access to books, information and an increasing range of services" according to librarian Catherine McNally [Ref: Guardian]. In recent years many libraries have been transformed in an effort to revitalise and integrate them as an essential part of the community, and in 2015 Tel Aviv's Beit Ariela library opened Maketec, "a youth center for digital-making" offering young people the use of a 3D printer,

robots and tools for developing coding and programming skills, with the intention of "making the library a space that will draw [young people] in" [Ref: Ha'aretz]. Meanwhile, the new National Library of Israel building – scheduled for completion in 2019 – will "provide enhanced physical and virtual services as well as cultural and educational programming that foster engagement with its wide-ranging collections." [Ref: Jerusalem Post] Many proponents in favour of retaining existing library provision argue there is a strong economic case for doing so as they can, "assist job hunters, education for small business entrepreneurs, orientation for newly arrived immigrants" [Ref: Globe and Mail]. This lead author Janette Winterson to dub many modern libraries as, "a community centre with books" [Ref: Guardian]. For some, this multi-use development of libraries is too utilitarian a defence. Critics of the trend to move away from the core purpose of a library claim that, "we're coming up with all these other ways to try to keep these buildings open. Co-working spaces! Media labs. Art galleries? But it's impossible to see a world where we keep libraries open simply to pretend they still serve a purpose for which they no longer serve" [Ref: TechCrunch]. Perhaps, some argue, "the abandonment of the library's main purpose: books for readers" is why library attendance has suffered [Ref: Telegraph], and if "lending libraries are an institution whose time has past" why repurpose them for the sake of sentimentality? [Ref: Ha'aretz]

An abandonment of the values of culture?

In defence of continued public library provision in the 21st century, Rabbi Michael Melchior argues that "the state's abandonment of the public libraries is a sign of our general abandonment of the values of culture", as public libraries carry symbolic value as totems of Israel's wilful cultivation of her own heritage and culture [Ref: Ha'aretz]. Public libraries also provide a means for reducing inter-community stigma, a position articulated by social leader Abbass Abbass, who argues: "Build them because when we foster learning and access literature, we are also accessing culture. And when we access culture, we can begin to de-stigmatize the other." [Ref: Jerusalem Post] Public libraries, supporters say, are repositories of the "lives of others" which help generate an understanding of the world around us [Ref: BBC News]. And others suggest that in an age where we have a seemingly endless supply of information at our fingertips, an "information glut", libraries help us to find what's important, making a value judgement on the information housed in them as, "information has value, and the right information has enormous value" [Ref: Guardian]. Librarians, "have specialist knowledge and are trained to find reliable information and evaluate it - a skill as relevant in the digital age as it has always been" [Ref: BBC News]. In response to the idea that online services such as Google effectively replace the need for libraries and librarians, one American librarian argued that: "Everything you see on the library shelf has gone through a tremendous filtering process. Publishers don't just publish anything. Libraries don't carry just any old book" [Ref: New York Times]. So are public libraries as we know them past their sell by date? Have new technologies usurped their place, or do they remain repositories of the "world's cumulative knowledge and heritage" [Ref: WIPO] in a way that Google never can? What value do we place on curation and judgement about the world of knowledge before us, and how best can we be assured of accessing not just information, but good information?

ESSENTIAL READING

NOTES

[Libraries and Librarianship in Israel](#)
Snunith Shoham *Israel Free Loan Association (IFLA)* 1999

IN DEPTH

[What will become of the library?](#)
Michael Agresta *Slate* 22 April 2016

FOR

[The end of the library](#)
M.G Siegler *TechCrunch* 13 October 2013

[Liberal whingers are wrong: we should close our libraries](#)
John McTernan *Telegraph* 20 October 2011

[We writers are fighting for the wrong libraries](#)
Anthony Horowitz *The Times* 3 March 2011

[Make way for the new in the book world](#)
Peter Preston *Guardian* 6 February 2011

AGAINST

[A point of view: what happens when a library falls silent?](#)
A.L Kennedy *BBC News* 13 June 2014

[Do people need libraries in a digital age?](#)
Christopher Jon Farley *Wall Street Journal* 12 February 2014

[Why our future depends on libraries, reading, daydreaming](#)
Neil Gaiman *Guardian* 15 October 2013

[Saving libraries from extinction](#)
Jay Jordan *Ha'aretz* 8 May 2007

The library for Israel and the Jewish world

David Blumberg *Jerusalem Post* 23 October 2014

The secret recipe for Arab-Israeli peace? Build libraries!

Abbass Abbass & Kate Moran *Jerusalem Post* 23 October 2014

How to save libraries from e-predators

Claire Fox *TES* 23 June 2014

Why libraries matter

Chris Heller *Atlantic* 17 May 2014

Terry Deary: give poor people free e-readers

Hannah Furness *Telegraph* 15 November 2013

We must protect and reinvent our local libraries

Janette Winterson *Guardian* 23 November 2012

Guaranteeing access to knowledge: the role of libraries

Ben White *WIPO Magazine* August 2012

The business case for beautiful libraries

Lisa Rochon *The Globe and Mail* 12 February 2012

Will libraries become extinct

Erica Friedman *Forbes* 2 February 2012

As libraries close is that the end of the story?

Christopher Howse *Telegraph* 15 November 2011

Can libraries survive in a digital world?

BBC Click 12 March 2011

Ebooks and their ilk are no replacement for libraries

Catherine McNally *Guardian* 11 February 2011

Are libraries finished: five arguments for and against

BBC News 4 February 2011

When a search engine isn't enough, call a librarian

Jeffrey Selingo *New York Times* 5 February 2004

The difficulties of public libraries

Ha'aretz 13 July 2001

Histadrut

Wikipedia

Beit Ariela

Wikipedia

Libraries in crisis

Huffington Post

Are librarians still important?

Kate Rix *Scholastic*

ORGANISATIONS

Israel Free Loan Association

National Library of Israel

[Luring kids Into the library with cutting-edge technology](#)
Ha'aretz 28 May 2015

[Amazon unveils Kindle Unlimited subscription service](#)
Telegraph 18 July 2014

[Library closure plans scrutinised as Council cuts bite](#)
BBC News 18 January 2014

[Death of the library: shock fall in users](#)
Express 26 September 2013

[Paperless libraries switch to digital](#)
BBC News 22 May 2013

[New report charts the rise of the e-book](#)
Publishers Weekly 6 April 2012

[Writers stage a 'shhh' in against plans to close 450 libraries](#)
Guardian 6 February 2011

[England's library visitors continue to drop](#)
BBC News 24 August 2010

[New Bill ensures Government support for public libraries](#)
Ha'aretz 18 July 2007

AUDIO/VISUAL

[Why libraries matter](#)
Chris Heller *Atlantic* 17 May 2014

[Libraries in crisis](#)
Huffington Post

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ADVICE FOR
DEBATING MATTERS

FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING .....
In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....
Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD
Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN
Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC
Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debaitng Matters have have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, **www.debatingmatters.com**

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