

[Rewriting the book on libraries](#) [1]

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The Radio Four classes are up in arms about library closures. The authors among them naturally worry about a loss to their trade. As for the others ? well, I wonder how much of it is nostalgia for how libraries used to be. But none of that justifies taking money from already-stretched taxpayers to pay for middle-class entertainment. Most books borrowed ? look at the authors' lending right figures ? are popular fiction. It costs the library service about £3 to lend a book. Hey, for 50p you can buy secondhand books at a charity store, and help a good cause in the process.

Public libraries are a recent phenomenon. They grew fast in the 1920s and 1930s when an expanding state thought it should get involved. Before that, though, the public had plenty of access to books - either through philanthropic foundations like the Carnegie Libraries, or through subscription libraries (of which the London Library in St James's Square, London, was an early pioneer. Indeed, until well after the Second World War, private shops like Boots would lend books out to the public for a few pence.

As for that other staple of public libraries, reference, the technology is making their job redundant. 30m Britons access the internet every day. Some 73% of households have internet access - most of those who don't say it's not because they can't afford it but because they don't need it. And many more of us can access the internet at work. Who needs to go to the library to look something up any more?

Public libraries could be taken over by community and voluntary groups, who might actually run them more appropriately for local needs. And they might bring in some fresh ideas. See how bookshops have changed over the years, with their coffee bars and easy chairs? But public libraries look positively antique. Most of them belong in a museum. Their huge footprint simply crowds out private and voluntary alternatives. Private shops rent out CDs and DVDs - why do we need a state-funded body to do their job? And if public libraries weren't in the way, how many agencies might spring up to lend out books too?

Those who criticize the public library service are of course branded as mean-spirited philistines. But it's easy to be generous if you do it on someone else's money. I don't see why poor taxpayers should be forced, by threat of imprisonment, to pay for the entertainment of the middle classes. Let's get some balance into the morality of this debate.

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