

[Yes! Let's close the libraries!](#) [1]

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I'm not going to do my reputation as a b'stard neoliberal here any good (hmm, well, it might increase it perhaps) but CityUnslicker makes [an interesting point](#) [3]: why shouldn't we be closing the libraries?

We can happily wander back to Adam Smith and point out that general literacy is a public good, that such a public good can be usefully bolstered by some tax funding, sure. But we also need to consider technology: most specifically whether the tax funded provision of dead tree printed books is the best way of advancing that public good.

And there's a strong argument, one gaining strength every passing month let alone year, that it isn't. For the written word is going digital.

The whole concept of a library (and before that, of public lectures at a university) is based upon the concept that books are an expensive thing. That they are too expensive for the average person to purchase and own and thus that there should be some method of borrowing them for a short time. It is rapidly becoming true that this is no longer so. Certainly the canon of western literature is now available for free online: and there's any number of very cheap newer books available as well.

At which point the concept of a library as a physical space in any one town rather loses its function. It's possible to think of all sorts of alternatives: from simply saying the entire idea is past it to some form of online library where government does the (much lower of course) funding of maintaining a stock of titles for lending to the impecunious.

And this highlights one of the problems with government provision of things. We've seen over recent years how public libraries have added all sorts of things to become more "relevant", CDs, videos, internet access and so on. All as the book part of it falls away. Out in that red in tooth and claw market part of the economy suppliers who become technologically irrelevant go bust and disappear. As computer games are increasingly downloaded then expensive retail stores supplying the physical box go bust. Indeed, some 10% of retail space in the country is empty as some 10% of retail sales take place over the internet: something of a clue there really.

So I present the idea, perhaps we actually should be closing the libraries? Not just as some austerity measure but as part of that culling which we have to do as technology changes. In a digital world why would we want to subsidise the distribution of physical books? And given that the public sector does not have that market driven bankruptcy to do the winnowing of old technologies, perhaps this is something that we have to do more aggressively through direct action in that public sector?

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