

# Opinion Want to defend democracy? Start with your public library.



By [Katrina vanden Heuvel](#)

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In “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,” the character Ron — channeling his friend Hermione — says to Harry Potter: “When in doubt, go to the library.” In the United States today, there is plenty to doubt.

Complex arguments are being whittled down to 280 characters. And of course, the president has made more than 5,000 false or misleading statements in about 600 days. Just last week, he falsely claimed that 3,000 Puerto Ricans “did not die in the two hurricanes.”

Lies have become too commonplace in the United States, so the American people need a place where they can go to get the truth. Ron is right. Go to your public library.

Public libraries provide information in an era of misinformation. They offer facts and nuance. They offer the opportunity for enlightenment. They offer every visitor the resources they need to find answers. The American Library Association reports that many public libraries are, for instance, “developing programs to help community members spot ‘fake news’ and evaluate information online.”

It’s not surprising, then, that in a time such as this, people are turning to their local library for information. Pew Research Center recently found that 87 percent of millennials say the library “helps them find information that is trustworthy and reliable.” Seventy-four percent of baby boomers say the same.

It's also not surprising that the Trump administration doesn't seem to like libraries. Earlier this year, the administration moved to cut funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services. In late August, the Senate, rebuffing the administration, approved a funding increase for the institute. As Sue Halpern, a scholar in residence at Middlebury College, explained in the Nation, the institute has been "crucial for sustaining libraries, especially those in struggling urban neighborhoods and rural areas."

In communities across the country, local libraries are struggling to stay open, and funding for local libraries is on the chopping block. Right now, in Mobile, Ala., a budget proposal is on the table that could lead to shorter hours or fewer programs within the library system there. If passed, the impact of such a cut would be significant. Scott Kinney, the director of the Mobile Public Library, stated, "We are probably the most widely used city and county resource."

Where communities have come together to defend this valuable resource, in places such as Fort Wayne, Ind., and Columbus, Miss., there has been some success. Boulder, Colo., is currently grappling with proposed budget cuts that would drop the Carnegie Library for Local History's hours from 25 to four each week. A coalition of local historians and researchers is pushing back, with activists peppering the library commission with emails and protesting at one of their meetings. Now, policymakers and staff in Boulder are working to rearrange the budget to keep the same library hours. "We heard loud and clear from community that Carnegie was too important to cut," Boulder Mayor Suzanne Jones said.

Public libraries are essential for communities. While the powers that be attack the humanities (and sometimes, it seems, humanity itself), libraries provide research materials and books that can foster awareness and understanding. They provide the underserved a chance to be served and a shared space for community members.

Teenagers head to the library after school to study. Seniors visit the library to socialize. And millions of Americans who may not have a quality Internet connection at home go to the library to get online. After all, almost every public library in the United States provides access to the Internet. Some libraries even provide career training and job preparation.

In his new book "Palaces for the People," recently reviewed by South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg, sociologist Eric Klinenberg describes libraries as "the textbook example of social infrastructure in action." They are also a textbook example of democracy in action: Public libraries strive to be places where everyone is welcome and offer resources that everyone can access. They bring people together.

That is true in Joplin, Mo. In 2011, a tornado destroyed up to a quarter of Joplin. The local library was spared. Still, when the town rebuilt, it decided to build a new library in a section that was among the worst hit. The new library is about 23,000 square feet larger than the old one and has indoor and outdoor spaces for the community to gather. It's a symbol of rebirth for Joplin. Its slogan? "At the center of it all."

Public libraries are at the center of our communities and our democracy. At the same time, they are, as Klinenberg wrote in an op-ed for the New York Times, "out of sync with the market logic that dominates our world." That's a good thing. With so much inequality and balkanization, public libraries are critical within the public sphere and, when fully supported, represent the best of government at work. They uphold the virtues of equality and community. If your library is under threat, it's worth defending.

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