

---

# Putting Crises behind Us: A New Opportunity for Libraries

JOSEPH BELLETANTE

*Translated by Patricia Phillips-Batoma*

---

## ABSTRACT

Whether libraries are burned down or treasured, everyday culture is always the driving force behind such acts. It is easy to see symbols of a shared cultural environment in libraries; hence they can be seen as either institutional and exclusive, or as a symbol of diversity and democracy. Such duality is at the core of the identity of libraries, and it is exacerbated by today's economic, technological, and political contexts. Digital culture is pushing libraries toward multimediation, which implies the adoption of new multimedia tools, and the rethinking of the notion of mediation and our practice in libraries using those tools. Crises also provide a historic political opportunity for all libraries and particularly French *médiathèques*, but this calls for an ambitious response, beyond those discussed within the context of the future of libraries as great, good places. Such a response could consist in providing support to local individuals in a more global and assertive fashion using our existing social experience to help put the crises behind us. We can build coordinated action in partnership with related institutions in a way that better integrates users on the social and cultural levels, thus fostering a strong feeling of collective usefulness.

## INTRODUCTION

Access to knowledge and books is rarely perceived as controversial in today's world, unless these books and knowledge disturb the stability of political power in the state,<sup>1</sup> or contradict a narrative that legitimizes the power of one or more representatives of that power.<sup>2</sup> All around us, public libraries (*établissements de lecture publique*) symbolize cultural institutions that are normally inoffensive, discreet, removed from the noise of the world, and

sometimes subversive. They are naturally associated with progress and pluralism. With respect to their visibility and their voice, they are often less obtrusive than the event-driven world of museums and the natural involvement of theaters in the voice of the people and the media.

This inoffensive quality has been enhanced on the ground by the practices and the imagined worlds of visitors (*lecteurs* or *spectateurs*) and families who partake in the life of the libraries, and frequent places that they consider to be mostly pleasant and friendly, as well as by administrators and elected municipal officials whose attitudes to them generally vacillate between goodwill and self-interest. However, the inoffensiveness of libraries contradicts the engagement of librarians in their multifaceted responsibilities, which are increasingly more extensive. Librarians have a singular ability to argue about the identity issues at stake in their profession, and a keen awareness that theirs is a profession that is complex at every level. Their responsibilities are spread between preservation and innovation, while they also have to attend to the revitalization of services and the renewal of infrastructure. At this time of information overload, collective cultural references are dissolving while at the same time becoming more homogenized under the influence of the global media.

Nevertheless, a few political lightning bolts have recently burst, and continue to burst, the bubble of the presumed objectivity of public libraries (*lecture publique*) by reinserting libraries at the center of a process that is causing their image to evolve toward one that is more bothersome, critical, political, and also more successful. In some contexts, libraries are presented as powerful forces capable of coordinating on-the-ground efforts to resolve crises, and capable of inspiring the political world to utilize culture as a tool of governance by means of the cultural project—*le projet culturel*, a periodic cultural diagnosis and institutional plan of action that serves as a matrix to identify, communicate, and build concrete projects for actions carried out on a daily basis.

Sometimes, libraries become the prime targets of certain patrons who condemn the content of the books and films in library collections<sup>3</sup> or express outrage toward the library as an exclusive institution that they experience as a symptom, a symbol of alienation that needs to be opposed.<sup>4</sup> To them, library buildings are constant visual insults that need to be closed, and sometimes burned down.<sup>5</sup>

Based on my experience working as an administrator in libraries and museums, I will mainly examine French libraries, or *médiathèques*, to use the term associated with the cultural history of this institution, which first developed in France between 1975 and 1985 (Bertrand, 1992). I deal here with assertive or successful libraries—libraries that give offense, which are in the spotlight as they face intersecting questions capable of challenging their self-definition. These questions call for a real and forceful affirmation of the values that libraries embody: the development of digital culture

as a culture in and of itself, alongside the culture of the book. The questions also call for a response to the ideological and economic fallout from the crises that are invading our projects and discourse.

I will return later to the new types of support for readers that are required of public libraries in the light of the present challenges, before focusing on the central role of their diagnosis of everyday culture and their actions in defense of libraries. I will focus more broadly on the role of the cultural project in the transmission of an overall societal vision, affected by the cultural evolution of neighborhoods and cities, to stakeholders.

### THE KNOWN CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL CULTURE

The questions of the provision of multimedia platforms and that of providing connectivity appear to have been thoroughly addressed by institutions of public reading. These institutions have to evolve with the flow of technology that accompanies every new multimedia object, whether royalty-free or commercial. They have to do this, however, without being able to step back and gain insight into the experience of the readers who use these media, and in the absence of a true public, state, or collective voice on these topics.

Our digital and data society implies a new social contract, new ideas, and new ways of governing states and cities. Such ideas or proposals do not currently feature on the political agendas of international leaders; indeed, governments have failed to develop a clear policy, a civilization policy, and a comprehensible discourse on what appears on display screens, on questions of legal and illegal software, on the form and content of the internet, and on the range of devices that are connected to it to a greater or lesser extent and that add vastly to the available access points. Given that we are faced with a real questioning of how we communicate in society, the reaction of governments to digital culture and the impact of new media on the life and actions of people, groups, or institutions is quite inadequate.

The digital landscape is an extension of our relationships, therefore requiring the implementation of a structured social response that allows each of us to situate ourselves within it. This response is needed to counterbalance the magical and fun aspect of our technological conversion (Doueïhi, 2011); it is a response that encompasses a shared awareness that is capable of taking us beyond the productivity-driven trends and increasing automation that go along with this huge shift toward the reconfiguration of our existence (Stiegler, 2014).

Libraries have demonstrated that they are on top of this phenomenon by creating content online and extending their mediation competences to the digital domain. Nevertheless, the boundaries of the librarian's role as multimediator, both within the librarian's own institution and the outside world, have yet to be defined. This is necessary in order to counteract as much as possible the technological disconnect of individuals within

families in low-income urban areas, rural areas, schools, and other places removed from social life, such as retirement homes, remand centers, hospitals, and prisons.

Digital culture changes the way in which we deal with art (and books), and also their value. In digital culture, human contacts and relations come first, and art, texts, and images appear as pretexts for interaction and exchange with our friends and relatives and communication among various audiences rather than as the focal points whereby viewing and attention converge (Tisseron, 2012). Most of our cultural institutions are based on an older paradigm in which the artwork comes first. Currently, the two paradigms in fact coexist, but libraries will no doubt have more difficulty integrating this new balance between readers and works that is brought about by digital culture.

Thus we see in practice an inversion of our relationship to the creative work: a relationship that is less vertical, unique, and bounded; a shift away from the center, which literally calls into question the way that collections and spaces are organized in libraries, along with all the processes and arrangements for diffusion and the presentation of works. This change is also occurring in other cultural institutions, such as museums, theaters, conservatories, cinemas, art centers, and dance studios—all places devoted to the production and diffusion of living spectacles.

In this respect libraries could become emblematic of a restrained harmony between the real and the digital, where each draws inspiration from the other and both coexist in the service of the collective good and the integration of individuals into the common social fabric. Here, they would complete and mirror each other for mutual support rather than avoidance, and here the real naturally maintains its primacy while the digital is engaged with distance and imagination.

Faced with digital culture, libraries can grow, spread out, keep pace with the internet, and keep watch over books and book culture. However, first and foremost, it seems crucial that they should not lose sight of the other half of the equation—that is, the context and the resolution of crises. Although in France “crisis” is always spoken of in the singular, the plural is used here because of the number of fields and subjects affected by them, which involve an entire constellation of facts and disciplines. Libraries must carry out two revolutions at the same time: not only that of adapting to digital changes, but also that of responding to other requirements or changes in society, such as rising unemployment, the weakening of the middle class, and changes in society’s relationship to art and culture. The digital revolution should be integrated by libraries as global support for change in their actions to support the public in moving toward better social and economic inclusion.

### CRISES AND THE NEED FOR LIBRARIES

Turning to crises, we have political, social, and environmental crises, crises of ideas and institutions, and economic crises. There is a generalized state of tension in French society that has been exacerbated by the period of transition we are experiencing. This state is amplified by a media narrative that dwells on the anxiety-producing aspects of these crises rather than on resolving them; amplified also by the brutality at the international level of acts of war and the loss of social standing and unemployment, which we are all witnessing in a state of powerlessness that pushes us to reflect, question our culture, and try something new.

Crises bring back readers' and viewers' need for libraries, and not simply because libraries are free or because of their low membership fees. The library as refuge is changing its shape: once considered to be a "bubble," an insubstantial and artificial space synonymous with elitism and anachronism, the library now offers a moment of preservation, allowing a step back to gain perspective on our immediate environment, which has become difficult to look at, tolerate, and sustain.

The library experience allows everyone to choose between being connected or disconnected, being by oneself or with the outside world. The library can be an island, a place of escape, and a place of connection; a place with resources that provide technological integration and allow for the production of content. For both places—of escape or of connection—it seems that the best days are yet to come, whether they are separated or brought together under one roof and in the same space.

Readers and viewers also expect more of libraries during times of crisis. Their requests reflect a need for more social support, as well as a need for keener awareness of individual cultural backgrounds. It is as if the library is supposed to deal with people according to their individual passions, tastes, and needs, all the while ensuring better integration into the social and civic fabric for them and connecting them to the maximum number of partner associations and institutions. This "à la carte" library should also provide, if possible, cutting-edge technology and up-to-date cultural resources.

The memory that is embodied in our library buildings seems to be the aspect that is least called on within this shifting landscape, whereas this memory constitutes one of the main pillars of the preservation of these buildings. These buildings assist in the preservation of identities, texts, ideas, and faces of one or more localities and contribute to the transmission of a collective sense of belonging to local and regional histories, both here and elsewhere. In this respect the citizens themselves should also constitute a collection for libraries through the archiving of their trajectories and their presence, which would function as a set of shared traces offered for public consultation as factual evidence, as a collection of evidence for public consultation.

Today's world is providing libraries with an important opportunity to make a comeback by actively taking advantage of their acquired experience and the experiments they have conducted on ways to accommodate library patrons, enabling them to offer the public a service of caring support (*accompagnement*) that is as complete as possible and that strengthens connections and mutual assistance among individuals. This service is defined in the sections that follow.

### STRENGTHENED SOCIAL SUPPORT

The library can easily emerge as a complementary partner to the whole set of structures that are available to assist the unemployed, notably by providing an atmosphere that is symbolically free of administrative pressure, as well as by offering collections and computer-based tools to help the unemployed get orientated, develop their skills and knowledge, or gain some perspective on their situation during a period of self-doubt and personal change. It is entirely conceivable that registering as unemployed could set in motion a return-to-work process in which libraries would play a culturally supportive role by defining a customized pathway for an individual. Libraries would focus on a series of training sessions, activities, and documents designed to provide a counterweight to the harshness of the situation and the relatively stuffy atmosphere of public and private spaces traditionally devoted to this type of assistance.

Support from the library could also help us collectively to rethink the image we have as a society of being unemployed, which is experienced by individuals as a temporary or semipermanent exclusion from the social rhythm of a society. Instead, we could focus on the positive aspects of this period of reassessment (of taking charge of this situation that is so often detrimental to the unemployed individual) and on the concrete development of the individual, as well as on the benefits of practical solidarity between the various cultural institutions on the ground. This return-to-work effort should also be combined with an acute awareness of situations of impoverishment and citizens becoming disconnected—a social, academic, and economic disconnection. Public libraries' projects should implement concrete actions focused on collections, events, proposed values (hospitality, listening, and closeness) with close partners, and the provision of library spaces.

Many libraries have already moved toward reaching out to provide services specifically designed for vulnerable patrons in partnership with referral agencies. The goal is not to replace the work done by these agencies, improve on what they do well, or to cover for their shortcomings, but rather to think first and foremost of how culture and the library can be integrated in an official way with policies intended to provide vulnerable individuals with a better way of getting through these periods in life when they find themselves on the margins of the social system.

### CULTURAL SUPPORT FOCUSED ON COMMON CULTURE

These crises are forcing libraries to clearly identify and state that which constitutes *culture*, as opposed to *information*. Libraries also represent that which is in common within a city or country, and they adapt this representation to the contemporary world through their tools and the spaces they provide. Library policy can thus be envisioned as a continuous updating and prioritization of selected documents and books that may at any given time embody an image of common culture for the public using its collections.

The arrival of digital culture and the transfer of libraries' stored documents to the internet have freed them from their encyclopedic ambitions to allow for mainstream, as well as unique, voices to be heard and choices to be made, both onsite and remotely, occasionally with more or less force and legitimacy. These crises impel librarians to explain both the new digital collections and the holdings they have preserved, even if this means emphasizing what it is that makes their collections distinct from what is available on the internet. In addition, librarians have to make increasingly direct links to current events in order to provide perspectives on the immediate environment.

Once shared culture has been collected and examined, the library's mission can be organized around the integration of its patrons into this culture, but also, and here is what is really new, around both the individual and collective contributions of patrons. This integration can be understood as a set of means and tools made available to citizens, which gives them a sense of belonging to this culture. This culture is presented as a shared one in terms of participation, mediation, and co-construction. It is fitting, however, to clarify the notion of *contribution* as it is used here.

Many collective alternatives to capitalism, and to digital capitalism, as we know them today have emerged over the past few years, but they have been unable to take root at a political level in the longer term. This can be attributed to several factors. One is the absence of institutional spaces dedicated to accommodating collective reflection on the societal transition we are currently experiencing. One of the most promising avenues within the framework of a market economy that has become unmanageable is the implementation of a simple economy of contribution. This means that we abandon the relationship between producers and consumers in order to put in place an intergenerational system of shared knowledge, skills, and financing modeled after open-source software or, for example, Wikipedia, a system that involves new power relationships that are horizontal and open.

Libraries have their role to play in getting debates about such issues firmly established at the local level, in exchanges of ideas among individuals, and the reappropriation of these issues by anyone who wishes to become involved in them. The subjects range from control over personal information and data exchanged online to the governance of the internet,

including the economic, social, and technological development of our identities. These subjects are so vast that no permanent place nor forum for democratic exchange and reflection on them have really taken hold within our societies.

By proposing that libraries play an active role in the accommodation, production, validation, and support of citizens' initiatives, which are at the heart of a greater collective assumption of responsibility, our objective here is not to distract from or distort the role of libraries or to impose on them overly lofty ambitions that are out of their reach. Rather, we seek to take advantage of a paralyzing situation that stems from budgetary and ideological gridlock to focus on the progressive values of libraries, even if this is to the detriment of professional issues that are more cumbersome than productive, given the contexts of cultural programming, sponsoring, management, assessment, the media and formats of resources, and marketing.

Public services have been subjected to systematic attacks for decades, and this can be used to resituate them on the front lines of global cultural-crisis resolution and citizen empowerment, as long as the professions make this identity shift a priority. All cultural, educational, and communications associations and institutions would thus have a stake in setting up a shared discourse (perhaps coordinated by libraries). This would be an openly political process that is not politicized, to the extent that it would attempt to create a community to give rise to and develop answers and concepts that seem still to be missing from the landscape of our peaceful coexistence.

### THE CULTURAL PROJECT AS A MODEL FOR POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

Given the considerable decrease in budgetary means allocated to culture in France, notably between 2015 and 2017, cultural establishments are faced with three possible action strategies for countering both real threats to their activities and to those institutions, such as small local libraries and museums and those that have generated controversy and are most affected by these reductions, despite the urgent cultural needs mentioned above.

The first strategy consists of an intention to carry out the usual activities no matter what the cost, but nonetheless still adapting to the constraints and unpredictable events that result from the budgetary and administrative changes underway, even if this means adopting for this purpose the postures, tools, and language that derive from strategic management or the application of public policies within the field. This reshuffling thus allows a minimum number of cultural initiatives, spaces, and know-how to be preserved within a context of perpetual negotiation with the powers that be in order to preserve capital, means, and a symbolic legitimacy that is increasingly being diminished or questioned.

The second action strategy, by contrast, pushes for the implementation



of a defensive discourse used to denounce the throttling tactics set up to deal with financial losses, or to support political tactics to reform local or national life. It is a discourse of opposition and confrontation that is clearly recognizable, which therefore establishes a direct confrontation with state or municipal governments. It is aimed at preserving unique cultural identities and practices or the bringing of media attention to impediments experienced in the daily exercise of people's jobs.

Finally, a third alternative consists of refining successful tactics, abandoning in part the question of the constraints inherent in the system in favor of profound change in the matrixes—the DNA as it were—and the projects at the center of cultural groups and spaces. Along these lines, it is a matter of supporting, proposing, and providing concepts and dynamic, polymorphous, and collective responses to building cultural governance (Grenier, 2013). Such governance makes full use of spaces and expertise to speed up the pooling of resources and shift the time of transition toward one in which concrete and empowering postcapitalist political models can be implemented.

If these three actions (or reactions) can be fully deployed within a mechanism that combines vigilance, active defense, and an organized cultural offensive, one tool seems to be essential to the search for a new structuring of cultural offerings for citizens: the cultural projects of institutions. This tool, referred to earlier, serves as the nerve center and epistemological center for the identity of cultural spaces; it corresponds to a diagnosis of the field, and implies the transposition of a unique discourse into words and projects that are considered to give meaning to actions taken by the teams within the stakeholder institutions and serve as a response to the societal contexts we are navigating.

This tool can inspire the political establishment to learn how to rebuild that which it presently lacks: an overall clear and active vision of the contemporary world, of the directions and projects that are able to get citizens involved and are envisioned independently of the desire for media coverage or political careers. Cultural institutions are capable of offering to export their assessment abilities and pragmatic imagination to a mode of political governance that is currently in complete disarray and having difficulty in ridding itself of the model of long lists of proposals during elections—proposals that are seductive, but impossible to deliver in the longer term in a recessionary environment.

The structural absence of confidence among groups of people and their political representatives who are vested with public authority will only be resolved in the coming years if the political establishment is able to implement a credible cultural project capable of making sense of environmental upheavals and the disappearance of individual connections to institutions and traditional social roles.

Librarians are truly the experts when it comes to the cultural project, a collective act grounded in multiple points of view, which has given them

the backbone to proceed no matter what budget is proposed or what method of governance is being imposed by the municipal authorities. For this reason librarians seem to be the obvious choice to transmit this mode of governance to political institutions, which have themselves been bound up in a love/hate relationship with public opinion.

The public, for its part, has grown weary of waiting for the speedy establishment of collective existential points of reference on which a common future can be built. The cultural project can thus be recognized as a political act by the governing body, which will have the further positive impact of bringing the members of the professions, who have a stake in this and are having difficulty reaching agreement in their day-to-day work on the content of their objectives and the means necessary to achieve them, closer together.

### CONCLUSION: LIBRARIES AND FRIENDSHIP

In French libraries there is much talk of patrons who are “shut in”—that is, people who do not have access from where they are located, or from where they speak, to resources and services in public libraries. The term *shut-in libraries* now appears to be just as useful in describing what it is that is getting in the way (with respect to training, opinion, or tradition) of the political leap forward that is presently within our reach. I have just outlined this leap in relation to the concepts of complete social and cultural support, to the adaptation to digital culture in and of itself, and to the transmission of expertise from the cultural project to the political world.

To think about shut-in libraries is also to pay homage to the numerous initiatives of cultural institutions that have already begun to incorporate crises into the core of their projects (often successfully) and put forward everything that would make it possible for us to get ready for this journey. They are becoming home bases for a humanity that is gathering momentum to leap together into an unknown that can only be salutary.

In *Éloge de l'amitié, ombre de la trahison* (2003), Moroccan poet and author Tahar Ben Jelloun writes that “La bibliothèque est une chambre d'amis” (p. 121), which translates literally as “the library is a room for friends,” but more properly as “the library is a guest room.” Perhaps it is better to transform this statement into a question: Is the library a guest room? It is a question that we ourselves should try to answer by taking a look at ourselves as we really are, at once vulnerable and brave, wounded and triumphant, ready to gather together our forces by stepping over institutional and traditional divides. Indeed, what kinds of friends will we be today, right now, and tomorrow?

### NOTES

1. This was the case in Turkey when Twitter and YouTube were temporarily blocked throughout the country, ahead of the elections scheduled for March 30, 2014.
2. It is fitting to refer here to the revelations made by Edward Snowden on June 6, 2013,

- regarding the massive spying activity carried out by the U.S. National Security Agency. Regarding the links between power and narrative, see Belletante (2010).
3. In early 2014 France experienced a protest movement against certain children's books that thematized representations of boys and girls and the teaching of gender and sexuality in schools. Moreover, the "Challenged Books" procedure that exists in the United States is not practiced in Europe. This procedure allows readers to challenge the availability of certain books or documents for loan to patrons, and for the future status of these books and documents in the library's collections to be debated by librarians subsequently in meetings that are often public and allow for the participation of citizens.
  4. When the French political party National Front became prominent in 1996, mainly in the city of Orange in the south of France, it sought to remove from library collections certain books it deemed to have an overly "globalist" perspective or were responsible for "offenses to morality," and to add to those collections extreme right-wing works that formerly had been "ostracized," in the words of Jacques Bompard, who was then mayor of the city (Kibbee, 2004, n.p.).
  5. Between 1998 and 2013 sixty-nine libraries were burned down in France, with thirty-two of these incidents occurring during the November 2005 riots in the *banlieues* (suburbs). Merklen (2013) seeks to interpret this phenomenon as a manifestation of the urban marginalization of certain citizens who, through this action, directly target common public space.

## REFERENCES

- Belletante, J. (2010). Récit et légitimation: Les États-Unis en guerre contre le terrorisme (2001–2004) [Legitimizing a story: The United States in war against terrorism (2001–2004)]. *Études de Communication*, 34, 177–192.
- Ben Jelloun, T. (2003). *Éloge de l'amitié, ombre de la trahison* [Praise of friendship]. Paris: Éditions Points.
- Bertrand, A.-M. (1992). Le développement des bibliothèques municipales [Public libraries' development in France]. In M. Poulain (Ed.), *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises T.4 Les bibliothèques au XXème siècle: 1914–1990* [History of french libraries, vol. 4: Libraries in the twentieth century: 1914–1990]. Paris: Cercle de la Librairie.
- Doueihy, M. (2011). *La grande conversion numérique* [Digital cultures]. Paris: Points Essais.
- Grenier, C. (2013). *La fin des musées* [The end of museums]. Paris: Éditions du Regard.
- Kibbee, J. (2004). Aux armes citoyens! Les bibliothèques publiques françaises face à l'extrême-droite [To arms citizens! Public libraries in France against the extreme right]. *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, 6. Retrieved from <http://bbf.enssib.fr/consulter/bbf-2004-06-0010-002>
- Merklen, D. (2013). *Pourquoi brûle-t-on des bibliothèques?* [Why are we burning down libraries?]. Villeurbanne, France: Presses de l'ENSSIB.
- Stiegler, B. (2014). *Digital studies: Organologie des savoirs et technologies de la connaissance* [Digital studies: Organology of knowledge technologies]. Paris: FYP, Editions Collection du nouveau monde industriel.
- Tisseron, S. (2012). *Rêver, fantasmer, virtualiser, du virtuel psychique au virtuel numérique* [Dream, fantasize, virtualize, from psychic virtuality to digital virtuality]. Paris: Dunod.

---

Joseph Belletante, PhD, is the director and curator of Lyon's Museum of Printing and Graphic Communication in France. His research interests are the new media and visual studies, cultural practices, and discourse studies.

Patricia Phillips-Batoma is a French-to-English translator. She received her PhD in French literature from the Department of French at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and teaches translation in the Center for Translation Studies at UIUC.