

Editorial

After a series of special issues, we return to our usual format. Our debate is on the future of public libraries, an issue of real concern in the UK, and elsewhere, as governments seek ways to cut public spending. But is there something fundamentally different about taking money from public libraries and cutting the transport budget or the funding for roads? The closure of public libraries conjures up horror images of the burning of books, but are public libraries really part of society's intellectual infrastructure? Many people seem keener to defend the public library as an ideal than to use the public library in practice. They feel that society should help those unable to buy their own books and computers. They are also of the opinion that the public library should provide services for everyone, but what services? It is a long time since libraries simply lent books. One problem is that the more socially useful the library, the less clear the distinction between library and social centre. And the nearer to social centre the library becomes, the more its functions might be performed by amateur volunteers rather than professional librarians. Indeed, the more appropriate it might be to recruit the entrepreneurial skills of the private sector. Many of those who talk most publicly and frequently about public libraries are responsible for running them as administrators or librarians, or both. Your general editor invited a good few of the most strident to contribute to this *Prometheus* debate and found all uniformly reluctant to participate.

Philip Pullman provides our proposition paper. He has been outspoken about the closure of public libraries by his local authority in Oxfordshire. His views have not been welcomed by the Oxfordshire councilors responsible for public libraries. An author, they bravely suggest, might be expected to have his nose in the public library trough. They might also have reasoned that such an author as Philip Pullman might respond to the accusation. Pullman's defence is deliciously withering: anticipate with pleasure his thoughts on librarians making tea, and the worthiness of volunteers. These and similar observations have stirred and sometimes inspired the several respondents to his proposition paper.

Desmond Clarke is a publisher and, just like Philip Pullman, it could be argued, has fish to fry. After all, publishers sell books and libraries buy them. He thinks that closing libraries is the easy option for local authorities, demonstrating that they are making the required cuts. They actually have other options that would create both a better library service and also save money. Central government rather than local government must take the initiative, something the Coalition government in the UK has been reluctant to do. John Vincent is a campaigner seeking to influence governments in their approach to public libraries. He has written a good deal about public libraries and very much supports Pullman's stance and the general argument that public libraries have a value well beyond that attached to lending books.

Steve Davis is an academic, one who has conducted research on public libraries for the trade union, UNISON. He puts library closures very much in the context of public sector cuts in general. But he also sets the public library in historical context. It has been very special, the literacy it encouraged fundamental to the democratic system that is now hacking away at its roots. Society as a whole needs public libraries, not just the poor, and only the deserving poor at that. Davies sees the closure of public libraries as evidence of a mean-spirited age in which price matters and values do not.

It may be tempting to see Jim Lynch and Stuart Fitzgerald as the bad guys. They work for Library Systems & Services. LSSI is a company that runs libraries on behalf of local authorities in the US, and now in the UK. They point out that working as an agency for local government gives the best of both worlds: libraries can offer the public more services and local government saves money. They join with several of our respondents in noting that public libraries have not been well managed. One of these is Darren Taylor. His own small company, Eco Computer Systems, has responded to a social rather than a commercial opportunity in the London borough of Lewisham. The result seems to be not only more libraries than there would have been, but more libraries doing more. However, unless there are Darren Taylors everywhere, a local solution is unlikely to be a policy solution.

Shishir Saxena and Andrew McDougall are economists and consultants who have written *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries* for the State Library of Victoria, a report that attaches a monetary value to the public library. Two points of particular interest emerge from the survey they conducted: that people attach a much greater monetary value to libraries than they are able to pay, and that non-users of libraries would pay almost as much as users to maintain library services for communal rather than personal benefit.

Isobel Lawrence exploits her talents as a stand-up comic to offer a satire on one view of public libraries and their closure. Inspired by a piece by Ted McCelland on the struggle to keep public libraries open in Chicago, she puts *reductio ad absurdum* to good effect. Why should layabouts shelter from the rain at public expense? Why improve facilities for these layabouts? Indeed, why encourage potential troublemakers to read at all? Let the market determine who should read and who should not.

There are three research papers in this issue, each rather a lengthy read. Richard Hawkins and Charles Davis go right to the heart of this journal's concern and ask whether our understanding of innovation is missing a dimension. They draw our attention to experience goods, goods that cannot be evaluated until they have been consumed. There are now quite a few such goods and they pose something of a challenge for innovation theory. Goods of such uncertain value force the reappraisal of value that has often been no more than assumed. A framework is constructed to aid the use of the notion of experience goods in future innovation studies.

The paper by Robert Dalitz, Magnus Holmen and Don Scott-Kemmis also goes to the heart of this journal's interests. It explores how innovation systems interact. The context is Australian, but the lesson is universal. They examine the interaction among innovation systems, their interest being in how this influences innovation. Results vary with industry sector, but the ability of firms to exploit external systems, international connections, and a solid education infrastructure are always important for innovation. The last, in particular, has huge implications for policy.

Brian Wixted and Adam Holbrook explore the formal network, in this case the formal research network. They note that governments prefer to fund networks of researchers rather than individuals or separate groups. The European Commission actually insists on networks, though they are often more imagined than real. Why, they ask, the enthusiasm for these formal networks when there is precious little evidence they are effective? Could the attraction be that a large formal network makes government support more evident? Change in the focus and method of evaluating these research networks is required.

And we have some book reviews in this issue. Prevailing performance metrics provide academics with few incentives to write book reviews. They endanger this particular art form and thereby increase its value to readers, if not to authors. Our new book review editor, John Elliott, moves from the US to South Korea as this issue goes to press. We wish him well, and hope for many more book reviews.

Stuart Macdonald
General Editor