

"The selling of the public library: It's not just 'outsourcing,' it's privatization." Patricia Glass Schuman. *Library Journal*, 8/1/98, Vol. 123 Issue 13, p503.

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NOTE: Bold text below is mine.—Jeanne Wingate

There is a curious malaise in libraryland about the insidious encroachment of privatization in public libraries. Many view the recent events in Hawaii and Riverside, CA, as isolated cases resulting from "poor management." They fail to recognize that the decision to hand over operation of the Riverside County Library to a private company and the attempt to contract out collection development responsibility in Hawaii are not simple outsourcing incidents. These are, instead, attempts to privatize whole core services and even the management of our libraries. They are flash points, ominous harbingers.

As of July, Calabasas, CA, and Jersey City, NJ, had turned their libraries over to Library Systems and Services (LSSI), the same company that manages Riverside County libraries. Local officials in Atherton, CA, have been considering similar moves. While some librarians smugly excuse their complacency by saying that privatization threatens only badly run libraries, in reality the concept is being heavily marketed to local government officials. Robert E. Windrow, vice president of LSSI, recently sent a letter inviting a Broward County, FL, commissioner to stop by the company's booth at the 1998 Florida Association of Counties Annual Conference "to learn more about this exciting new approach for providing improved, cost-effective library services." That county's library was the LJ/Gale Research 1997 "Library of the Year."

Not business as usual

Clearly, America's public libraries have become targets for the privatizers. While it is perfectly understandable that a company would market its successes, it is harder to comprehend why librarians are not rising en masse to protest such privatization. Why are we viewing these appalling events as "business as usual"? Why are we talking about management "prerogatives" rather than public needs? Why are we mouthing business buzzwords (downsizing, cost-effectiveness) instead of analyzing who is outsourcing what to whom?

I'm not alarmed by library networks or consortia, nor by libraries that buy goods (e.g., photocopier machines) and services (e.g., maintenance). Certainly, almost any activity a library contracts for, or any service it buys

from another agency, can be classified as "outsourcing." **But the all-inclusive use of this term masks the encroachment of privatization. This threatens the library profession's core values--perhaps its very "soul" as a public service.**

Libraries exist because our society values the free flow of ideas and opinion. They are not about profit. They promote access, equity, and diversity. America's public libraries are the building blocks of democracy, valued for their comprehensiveness, currency, openness, and multiplicity of viewpoints. Their expert staff is trained not only in the mechanics of handling "things" like books but more importantly has been inculcated with the philosophy that all knowledge is valuable if it is of value to the seeker and that all opinions deserve to be heard.

Keeping the "public" in public libraries will not be easy. We live in a time when the very idea of government and the public sector is under attack. The assault that began in the 1980s with the Reagan administration's emphasis on "less government" and "maximum feasible reliance on the private sector" has continued into the 1990s, with budget balancing and "reinventing government" efforts.

Some say that outsourcing in libraries simply reflects private industry trends. This claim disguises the reality that the management of public assets is being turned over to private interests. There are public policy sea changes going on that will have long-term--perhaps irreversible--- effects on how, at what price, and for whom the knowledge base of this nation is maintained and accessed.

As a profession, we librarians have a choice: we can continue to talk at the level of the lowest common denominator of "outsourcing," or we can reframe the debate in terms of ideals and values that citizens and decision-makers will understand and support. It's foolhardy to bury our heads--and our brains--in the sand with statements like "libraries have always outsourced," or "outsourcing is a management tool," or "we need guidelines for better contracts." Even more dangerous are some of the assumptions being bandied about as if they were truisms.

ASSUMPTION # 1

The private sector can--and will--do it better and cheaper.

Perhaps. But for how long? At what price? At whose expense? There is very little hard data to back up this assumption. No doubt private companies can do some jobs cheaper and provide some services more efficiently. On the other hand, we should have learned something from defense and other government contract overruns. The private sector is not always cheaper, except sometimes at the start, when companies lowball their bids to clinch their first contracts.

The state of some of our federally contracted-out library and information services, well documented by the American Library Association (ALA) Washington Office's ongoing chronology "Less Access to Less Information by and About the U.S. Government," clearly shows that it is not always better to turn public information functions over to the private sector. Privatization often brings with it the appearance of change--at the ultimate expense of the public.

Once the federal government labeled its libraries as "commercial activities" in the mid-1980s, they were vulnerable to wholesale contracting out to the lowest bidder. Some are now run by companies whose major business is cleaning services. Not surprisingly, high staff turnover has resulted; this leads to a loss of institutional memory and disruption of service. Libraries on military installations--the closest federal equivalent to local public libraries--have been a particular target. Frequently, these libraries were closed, viewed as expendable "commercial activities." We are losing our federal libraries. Do we want to see this scenario replayed at the local and state levels?

Before we romanticize the abilities of the private sector, let's not forget the excellence of library managers. They have always done more with less. Good library managers focus on serving the needs of their users. It is this ethos of public service that distinguishes public sector "librarians" from private sector "information specialists."

When private sector superiority is assumed, only the successes, not the failures, are singled out. What about Chrysler? HMOs? Even IBM misjudged the marketplace. Can anyone point to our largest public libraries (e.g., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles) and say that their services miss the mark? Hardly!

Librarians are knowledge navigators, professionals ethically committed to the organization and dissemination of knowledge and the tools for empowerment. **America's libraries have a trust: they are both the first source and the ultimate repository of knowledge. Their core value is to deliver the materials and services that undergird the public's**

right to information. That is why public libraries are geared to choosing quality, equity, and effectiveness over "efficiency." That is why most of the collection of a good library is not in circulation; it is a resource for those whose interests extend beyond what is in vogue. It is this "inefficiency" that distinguishes libraries from bookstores.

Public libraries, by their very nature, are classic "market failures"-- as are highways, schools, police, firefighters, and national defense and security. They are not profitable activities that a free marketplace will support. Library services are not designed to generate a profit but rather to provide vital services to the public.

If we expect the public to rely on business interests to provide total library services, then we ignore realistic economic forces and the profit motive. **The primary motivation of a business providing contract services to libraries is not public service. It is, of course, staying in business and making a profit.**

It's hard to find profit in the essential, professional responsibilities and core competencies of librarians: developing and organizing broadly representative and useful collections; providing qualified, unbiased assistance; locating and using information; promoting free, equitable access to informational and recreational resources; and proselytizing in support of their community's needs, rights, and interests. But they are of immeasurable value to society.

Without attributing any base motives to private-sector enterprises, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy these responsibilities when these activities are measured in strict pecuniary terms. Even private-sector companies are learning this lesson about their libraries (see "Insourcing the Outsourced Library: The Sun Story," LJ 3/1/98, p. 46-48).

ASSUMPTION #2

Private sector accountability to the marketplace is more effective than government bureaucracy.

This assumption supports the move toward privatization of all kinds of public services, including schools, welfare, and other social service programs. It is absolutely false. The private sector and the public sector are subject to vastly different types of accountability and law. These differences become particularly alarming when not only services like maintenance and garbage

removal are privatized but when that trend includes more complex people-centered services involving the public's constitutional and statutory rights.

Public law is the foundation of government. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights hold government officials and employees accountable in very specific ways. Public law protects citizens' rights. Private business, by contrast, is largely subject to contract, tort, and property law. If entire libraries---or whole areas of library services--are privatized, this puts in jeopardy open government "sunshine laws," not to mention the First Amendment and other public law dealing with the freedom of information, confidentiality of circulation records, and the "right to know."

When contract law replaces public law, the accountability of libraries to their communities changes. Management by contract also changes the traditional relationship of the public to public employees. Accountability then relies on contract compliance monitoring instead of community input and evaluation. And, if something is not in the contract, there is a good chance that the public won't get it--no matter how great the need. This is particularly true when not only service delivery but service management is privatized.

A librarian employed by a corporation may have an ethical obligation to uphold free speech but may enjoy no legal protection when resisting censorship by his or her employer. Also, some private companies, anxious to renew their contracts, might be tempted to relax their commitment to intellectual freedom policies if it meant avoiding controversy and the possibility of nonrenewal. **The potential for conflicts of interest is high.** Imagine being forced to decide whether to provide badly needed---but expensive--services to homeless shelters when that will impact your employer's profit margin, your performance appraisal, and your raise.

Writing a "better contract" will not make privatization work. Even when private-sector companies hire professional librarians who do an excellent job, basic and fundamental differences between the public and private sectors remain. While most public agencies rely on appropriations or budget allocations to fund operations and services, private companies must earn money to fund their operations--then produce a profit.

Management accountability is very different depending on where a librarian is employed. Of course, corporate employees are concerned about customers and services, but in the end they are accountable to managers, owners, and stockholders. **Public employees may be held accountable to managers, boards, politicians, and other officials, but**

first and foremost they are legally accountable to the public they serve. It does make a difference who signs your paycheck.

ASSUMPTION #3

Libraries have always outsourced, and managers should be free to employ this very useful tool.

Privatization is not a mere management tool; it is a grave public policy shift. Certainly, librarians have traditionally purchased expertise (architectural, technological) and products (books, periodicals, processing) from the private sector. They have also banded together to form self-governed, nonprofit cooperatives, consortia, and networks to share resources and services.

Certainly, outsourcing can be a useful tactic when essential professional functions or responsibilities are clearly distinguished from secondary support activities. I readily concede that a wide variety of functions can be "outsourced" without abdicating professional responsibility or local control.

There are differences between simple outsourcing and actual privatizing. And those differences may depend on whether we are talking about total outsourcing, outsourcing some services, or replacing others with commercial ones.

What worries me are those services that, if privatized, might have the potential to violate the public trust. We must draw a line between the simple purchase of products and the privatization of intangible core activities like service, selection, policy setting, and management. Do we really want our libraries held hostage to the whimsy of the marketplace?

America's libraries were founded on the belief that an informed citizenry is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. We know that the privatization controversy is being intensified by a decline in government support of public services. We also know that **there are profound differences--in values and law--between government agencies like libraries and private companies. Privatization advocates must be challenged: if the core democratic values of libraries are glossed over in the name of efficiency, economy, and creative management, how will the public interest be protected?**

Reframing the debate

We cannot afford silence about the privatization and commercialization of America's premier democratic institution. Once

a public library is completely privatized, there is little chance of going back. Privatization is not caused by any single corporate entity. Rather, the privatization of public services like libraries is the culmination of a long campaign to dismantle government.

Fighting prevalent commercialization and privatization trends require us to discard simplistic assumptions and focus on our professional responsibilities and public accountabilities. The private sector is not always better.

Privatization means less public accountability and more attention to financial profit. This does not mean that the private sector has ill intent; it does mean that its vastly different goals and measures can have profound effects on library services when they are privatized.

Of course businesspeople will market privatization to public library decision-makers. They have already recruited prominent public librarians to their advisory boards and as employees. That is good business. **But the American public requires good public policy. As a profession it is our job to convince policymakers that the shared information in libraries is a critical resource, a public asset, essential for a humane and just society.**

Libraries are intrinsically bound to the ideals of democracy. Only democracies support freely available library services for all residents, regardless of age, sex, class, or income.

Library advocates can tell a compelling library story if we talk less about "customers," "management," and "outsourcing well." Instead, we should **articulate the inestimable benefits of publicly supported libraries as a public service, inherently governmental and community-based.**

Library advocates must also ask some hard questions: **Will the public's right to know and First Amendment law be impacted by privatization? How? Should confidential library records be turned over to private companies? What about affirmative action and diversity? How will workers' rights, benefits, obligations, and values be affected? What will happen to this nation's information infrastructure if private greed takes precedence over public need?**

We did not make a strong enough case for our federal libraries, so many of them were lost. We mostly ignored the Hawaii battle, which was won by determined local librarians. Now, in the cases of Riverside, Calabasas, and Jersey City, the silence is deafening. The danger is not only clear, it is very much present.

We cannot wait until the privatizers and their supporters come for more of our libraries. **We must reframe the debate between social goals and private interests to articulate a clear, passionate, and convincing case for America's premier democratic institutions---our libraries.** As a profession, we must speak out loudly and proudly--now!

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Patricia Glass Schuman.

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Patricia Glass Schuman, a librarian who has worked in public, school, and academic libraries, is President of Neal-Schuman Publishers and was 1991-92 president of the American Library Association (ALA). While she is a member of ALA's Outsourcing Task Force(OTF), this represents some of her personal input to the OTF and is not an official task force document.

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