

The future of the public library is under attack

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Imagine a place where you can sit, read, eat, write, learn or create -- all without having to pay \$6 for a latte or a flaky pastry, or without feeling guilty for camping out in a coffee shop for an afternoon. Wildly

It's your public library card.

Public libraries have long been considered a vital "third place" -- a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place* -- a space where people come to meet and congregate regardless of socioeconomic status. Since 1800 when the first public library opened in Niagara-on-the-Lake, pre-Confederation public libraries in Canada have attempted to elevate and educate the masses through access to books -- often as a complement to traditional education. In the last decade, there has been a marked push from libraries to prioritize the mental, spiritual and emotional well-being of their patrons. Instead of focusing on an outreach-based approach, Canadian public libraries are moving to a community-development model to give their most vulnerable patrons access to life-changing and life-saving services in what's being called **the third generation of public libraries**.

(<http://www.mtc.gov.on.ca/en/libraries/newmanreport.shtml>). Across Canada, libraries are at the frontlines for the homeless; they are the sites for social work amid mental health crises and the opioid epidemic, while others are decolonizing their spaces for marginalized patrons as Canada moves towards reconciliation.

This is the future of the public library -- but the institution itself is under attack.

In Ontario, many grant programs facilitate the start-up of outreach programs to help vulnerable patrons, such as the former Ontario Libraries Capacity Fund or federally, like through Employment and Social Development Canada.

In that province, municipal councils appoint public library boards, which in turn provide funding for libraries based on municipal tax dollars, whereas the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport manages the **Public Libraries Act** (<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90p44>). While some provinces have clearer commitments to funding libraries for now -- including programs and initiatives aimed at vulnerable and marginalized communities -- the forecast for Ontario's libraries under Premier Doug Ford does not look promising.

In a March 18, 2019, email to *rabble.ca*, media relations for Ontario's Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport said they were "unable to accommodate [the] request" to interview then-minister of tourism, culture and sport Michael Tibollo about the provincial government's future funding opportunities and for libraries.

did not offer insight on how the Progressive Conservatives would maintain this vision for the province's libraries.

Then, on April 11, 2019, the Ontario PCs tabled their first budget.

Though a library was featured on the cover of the 382-page document, there was no mention of public libraries or libraries of any kind within its pages. In contrast, the Ontario Liberals' 2018 budget promised to increase the public library operating grant **by \$51 million over three years** (<http://budget.ontario.ca/2018/budget2018-en.pdf>). The lack of details caused concern in the library community that service cuts would soon follow -- and they weren't wrong.

A day after the budget was unveiled, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport contacted the (<https://www.sols.org/blog/2019/04/16/sols-budget-cuts-in-2019-2020/>) Southern Ontario Library Service and Ontario Library Service -- North to inform them that both of their budgets had been reduced by 50 per cent. Both organizations are tasked to help public library boards with training, development and cooperation between libraries and through programs like inter-library loans -- a means of accessing books from another library's collection by shipping them to another library for free. Interlibrary loans have suffered the most because of the budget cuts, especially in small, northern and rural libraries. The library community is upset, bemoaning the sudden cuts.

In an August 12 emailed statement to rabble, a ministry official said that it "strongly believes in Ontario's libraries and appreciates everything that libraries do to enrich the lives of Ontarians."

The statement further said that as of June 1, 2019, a "solution was found to restore the interlibrary loan services" across Ontario.

In reality the beleaguered interlibrary loan service hasn't been fully reinstated in all Ontario public libraries.

SOLS and OLS-N released a joint statement in June that both organizations would provide **"partial reimbursement to libraries for delivery costs through Canada Post"** (https://www.sols.org/files/docs/about/SOLS_OLSN_Joint_Statement_FINAL.pdf) for interlibrary loan materials. This partial reimbursement means that some library systems still can't afford to take on any added costs **associated with interlibrary loan service. Others have reinstated the interlibrary loan program, but have restrictions**

Halting interlibrary loans means that an elderly person living in northern Ontario who reads large print books thanks to an interlibrary loan from a larger library system will no longer be able to do so. In rural communities, people who use mobility aids or low-income young families with no access to a vehicle are limited to their home branch's collection.

Ford spokesperson **Laryssa Waler said** (<https://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/news-story/9300792-government-defends-cuts-to-library-service/>) in *The St. Catharines Standard* that although "the concept is admirable, couriering books on demand by vans between different library boards all across southern and northern Ontario is actually slow, inefficient, environmentally unfriendly and expensive, especially now that digital resources are available."

The PCs' statements suggest that all printed materials are also available online, so interlibrary loans are redundant -- when this isn't true of all books. They incorrectly assume that all library users are also e-readers or have access to that technology in the first place and that all materials found in the library can also be found online, which is not true of rare books and other borrowable archival materials. This is amid public libraries across Canada lobbying major book publishers to **lower the cost of their ebooks and electronic audiobooks** (<https://econtentforlibraries.org/>), because the cost for a library to purchase an ebook is three to four times the price of the physical version.

While libraries in Ontario receive the majority of their funding through their municipality, they depend on programs, grants and services such as interlibrary loans to supplement their services. Although slashing interlibrary loan service is a **blow to small, rural and Indigenous public libraries** (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-funding-cuts-to-northern-southern-ontario-library-systems-hit-rural/#comments>) in Ontario, it wasn't all that surprising when tracking Ford's tempestuous history with libraries.

In 2011, Ford, a then-city councillor in Toronto, and his brother, then-mayor Rob Ford, both had strong opinions about libraries. Doug promised to close libraries "in a heartbeat" after a consultant's report suggested reducing service at some library branches or shutting them down completely -- such as one of the three libraries then-located in his Etobicoke North ward. (Ford also falsely stated that there were more libraries in Etobicoke than there were Tim Hortons franchises.)

One Toronto Public Library employee feared that Ford's provincial bill to reduce the size of Toronto's city council would affect public libraries -- meaning councillors might be unable to devote enough time to serving on the Toronto Public Library's board.

earlier in August that funding to its public library system would be suspended until late October. (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/public-library-funding-on-pause-1.5238361>).

But all libraries -- even ones within the same library system -- have their own unique set of challenges based on their community's needs. Some have a higher density of immigrants and newcomers to Canada or are in close proximity to homeless shelters. Others may be at the epicentre of an opioid overdose crisis.

For Ontario public libraries outside urban centres, the issues may be more hidden, like in Haliburton County. The region is speckled with lakes and it's a quaint cottaging destination in the summertime when it swells from a population of 18,062 to almost 45,000 people. For Haliburton County Public Library CEO Bessie Sullivan, there are three distinct challenges for her library system: vast geographical regions and limited transportation options, lack of broadband technology, and the poverty that is a reality for many of the county's year-round residents.

"We're fighting a very low tax base so that means a lack of resources," she says.

For libraries in rural areas across Canada like in Haliburton County -- this base funding comes from the municipality, so when there's a smaller amount to begin with, they're already at a disadvantage. Sullivan says her municipality is trying to do what it can to help those in the community who may face financial and social setbacks while trying to balance the cost of keeping the branches open.

"I've always thought that as a public service, our job was to find those gaps," she says.

But convincing politicians that they need to fund the library is another issue.

"We're arguing if we fill that gap, we're helping with economic development. We're giving you a workforce," Sullivan says.

She points to the popularity of return on investment in the library -- the idea that every dollar invested in the library gives back to patrons and community members in some way. The Toronto Public Library's first economic impact study was done in 2013, concluding that for every dollar that goes into the library, there is \$5.63 of economic impact in the community.

into a public library in many years, their belief is that since the emergence of ebooks, printed books are becoming obsolete, although new data suggests that **ebook sales have started to plateau** (<https://www.booknetcanada.ca/blog/2018/6/6/infographic-the-state-of-digital-publishing-in-canada-2017>). The library has been about more than just books -- and those who think otherwise likely have a lapsed library card and haven't visited any public library in decades.

Critics assume that the library's services are non-essential so it's easy to make budget cuts. The library doesn't douse flames, organize search-and-rescue teams or chase after criminals.

The library's purpose may be more subtle, but it is no less of a social necessity: it's a shelter, a respite, a classroom and even a counsellor's office. In a digital age where the validity of information is constantly questioned -- the public library remains one of the few places with the tools to distinguish between what is real and what is fake. It's an institution with its own troubling colonial roots, trying to do good where it was once complicit in erasing cultures. In its third generation, the library has returned to its Victorian roots -- promoting beneficial social change for its patrons -- and it's still a keeper of books and a meeting of minds worth protecting.

Next week: Part 2 of rabble's series: The Future of the Public Library.

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FURTHER READING

Following public reaction, Edmonton Public Library drops plan to cut pages' wages (<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/alberta-diary/2019/06/following-public-reaction-edmonton-public-library-drops-plan>)