



## LETTERS

edited by Jennifer Sills

## Libraries' Social Role in the Information Age

RECENTLY, *THE NEW YORK TIMES* ASKED WHETHER WE STILL NEED LIBRARIES (1). THE ANSWER IS yes, but the role of libraries in our society is changing. Traditionally, the library's goal has been to store the information generated by society. People would visit libraries for the purpose of accessing this information with the help of a librarian. With the advent of the Internet, the Web has assumed the traditional role of libraries, and search engines (such as Google) have assumed the role of the librarians. However, we believe that there are new opportunities for the libraries in the current information and knowledge society.

In the 1980s, Ray Oldenburg theorized that people spend most of their time at home and at the workplace, and much of their remaining time in spaces dedicated to the social life of the community, such as coffee shops, bookstores, bars, and hair salons, which are central to the vitality of a democracy (2). Libraries can also serve as social spaces.

To transition into this new role, libraries should begin to focus on the users rather than the collection of information. Libraries should have social spaces of learning, thinking, and reading, where people can share their experiences and knowledge. People could go to the library to check out books, use the Internet, read a book or a newspaper, or watch a documentary; as well as to learn how to open a bank account or start a business; discuss the problems of their neighborhood or country; take classes in poetry, theater, or film; or learn good eating and health habits—all while having a drink with other users. In this paradigm, the library will belong to the community.

People are already demanding these new services from libraries. In many countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, the public is losing interest in traditional public libraries of information, but pilot experiences with the new format of libraries are emerging and succeeding (3).

In Spain, the local authorities of the city of Granada decided to close a public library located in the popular district of Zaidin. The council did not predict the residents' outcry, because it did not understand that the library played a central role as a social place for the community. Local residents, both young and old, struggled for a year to reopen the library, taking



**Community.** Local residents protest the closing of a library in Granada.

their grievances to the streets, the media, social networks, and government authorities. They gained the support of prominent people in the Spanish cultural scene (such as the writer Antonio Muñoz Molina) as well as many of the residents of Granada. In January, they succeeded in reopening the library. Clearly, their library was more than a simple repository of information (4).

LibQUAL is a standard technique for assessing the quality of libraries according to users' satisfaction with

respect to three aspects: the physical space, the staff, and information control. In our quality assessment studies (5), we have observed that students are not concerned about the library's collection, but want development of the physical dimension of libraries and the creation of social spaces.

Libraries must adapt to stay relevant in today's society.

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2. R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Paragon House, New York, 1989).
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4. La Biblioteca de las Palomas Renace ([http://nocierebibliotecadelzaidin.blogspot.com.es/2013\\_01\\_01\\_archive.html](http://nocierebibliotecadelzaidin.blogspot.com.es/2013_01_01_archive.html)).
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## China's Food Security Soiled by Contamination

IN ADDITION TO THE RAPID REDUCTION OF arable land ("Losing arable land, China faces a stark choice: Adapt or go hungry," C. Larson, *News Focus*, 8 February, p. 644), soil contamination poses an often overlooked but no less critical threat to China's food security.

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