

The Enclosure of the Commons: Privatization of Knowledge and the Public Library in an Age of Democratic Fragility

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ABSTRACT: The defunding and censorship of public libraries represent not merely a culture-war phenomenon but a phase in the ongoing privatization of public goods and the knowledge commons in America. This paper emphasizes historical context, economic data, and policy analysis to illustrate this argument. It posits that libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage institutions face a unified threat, necessitating a coalition framework to defend public knowledge. The metaphor of enclosure serves as a new lens through which to organize responses to these threats, emphasizing the vital role these institutions play in safeguarding access to information for all citizens. Through this collaborative approach, we can confront the systemic forces that seek to privatize and commodify knowledge, ensuring that the public commons remains accessible and equitable.

Keywords: knowledge commons, enclosure of the commons, library funding, book banning, intellectual freedom, neoliberalism, cultural heritage institutions, media consolidation



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The Documented Crisis

The current crisis facing public libraries is evident through alarming statistics and events that reflect a broader cultural and political struggle. In the 2023–24 school year, PEN America recorded more than 10,000 instances of book bans in public schools, nearly tripling the number from the previous year (PEN America, 2024). The American Library Association separately documented 2,452 unique titles challenged across all libraries in 2024 — down from the 2023 record but far above the pre-2021 average of 273 titles per year (American Library Association, 2024). This surge reflects a documented pattern of coordination: a Washington Post analysis found that the majority of challenges in over 100 districts were filed by just 11 individuals, many affiliated with organized national campaigns (Natanson, 2023).

In March 2025, Executive Order 14238 aimed to eliminate the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), prompting legal action from the ALA and AFSCME. A federal judge struck down the order in November 2025, but the FY2027 budget still proposes elimination, indicating ongoing threats to public libraries (American Library Association, 2026; EveryLibrary Institute, 2026).

The attacks have not been limited to public libraries. In 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth ordered the removal of 381 books from the Nimitz Library at the United States Naval Academy — the first recorded college campus book ban documented by PEN America (PEN America, 2025). That same year, Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, was dismissed by President Trump, marking the first time a president had removed a sitting Librarian of Congress (American Library Association, 2026). These events signal that the coordinated campaign against public knowledge does not recognize institutional boundaries — a point the coalition framework of this paper addresses directly.

Job satisfaction among library workers has declined from 70% to 56% over the past decade (Library Journal, 2022), with 18% of public libraries losing staff in the past year (Public Library Association, 2024). Furthermore, EveryLibrary tracked 73 library ballot measures in 2024 and, among the 67 communities with reported results, recorded a 76% win rate, down from a 90% ten-year average (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024a).

Privatization

The contemporary crisis in public libraries can be understood through the historical lens of the enclosure movement, which fundamentally altered the landscape of communal access to resources. In medieval England, common land was available for all to use—people grazed their livestock, foraged for mushrooms, and hunted freely. These shared spaces represented not only a means of sustenance but also a sense of community and belonging. However, as powerful landowners sought to maximize their profits, they began to enclose these commons, converting them into private property. This transformation did not happen spontaneously; it was a calculated strategy that many times involved force. Wealthy landowners had the manpower and authority to physically seize areas that were once open to all, pushing ordinary people out and forcing them to pay for what was previously accessible without charge.

Today, we see a parallel phenomenon unfolding in the realm of public knowledge. The systematic privatization of libraries reflects the same logic that drove the enclosure movement. As libraries face unprecedented book bans and funding cuts, they are being transformed from community resources into commodities, where access to information becomes contingent on one's financial means. A book that once sat on the public library shelf, accessible to anyone, is now removed and must be purchased privately, converting a shared resource into a market transaction. This shift is not merely an unfortunate byproduct of misguided policies; it is the very economic logic underpinning the coordinated efforts to defund and censor libraries.

The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 makes the policy position explicit. In the Foreword to the Mandate for Leadership, Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts writes that "educators and public librarians who purvey" what he labels pornography "should be classed as registered sex offenders" — a definition his framing extends to LGBTQ-themed library materials (Roberts, 2023). Heritage budget blueprints for FY2020, FY2022, and FY2023 have consistently proposed eliminating IMLS, stating that Congress "should have no role in ensuring that libraries are strong and available to everyone" (EveryLibrary Institute, 2024b). Moms for Liberty, founded in 2021, has coordinated book challenges across districts in documented alignment with Heritage Foundation policy positions. The strategic transfer of wealth from the public commons to private interests is evident as libraries, once bastions of free access to knowledge, are increasingly viewed as liabilities rather than assets.

This enclosure of knowledge parallels the broader trend of media consolidation, where a handful of corporations control the majority of information available to the public. In 1983, 50 corporations owned roughly 90% of American media; today, a handful of conglomerates dominate the landscape (Bagdikian, 2004), a concentration that has only continued to accelerate (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2026). Amazon alone now controls more than 50% of US print book sales and between 50% and 80% of US book distribution (WordsRated, 2023). This consolidation further limits the diversity of voices and perspectives available, mirroring the way the enclosure movement restricted access to the land and resources that once belonged to everyone.

As libraries face these challenges, they stand as the last free places where individuals can access knowledge without financial barriers. The fight to preserve these institutions is not just about protecting books; it is about defending the very principle of equitable access to information. In an age where concentrated private ownership threatens to dictate what knowledge is available and to whom, the defense of public libraries becomes a fight against the encroachment of privatization that seeks to enclose the commons of knowledge. Just as the town square has been transformed into a mall, libraries risk being quietly closed, erasing the vital spaces where communities come together to learn and grow.

These challenges are compounded by the fact that the digital landscape is increasingly dominated by a few tech giants, further restricting access to information. Algorithms dictate what we see and read, often prioritizing engagement over diverse viewpoints. This is yet another layer of enclosure that further marginalizes underrepresented voices and restricts the availability of crucial resources.

The Economic Strategy

The economic context of library closures reveals who is most harmed by this trend. Cumulative median wage growth since 1979 has been only 29%, equating to less than 0.6% per year (Economic Policy Institute, 2025). Real wages have the same purchasing power as in 1978, indicating a stagnation that disproportionately affects lower-income individuals (Pew Research Center, 2018). This wage stagnation has created an environment where the financial barriers to accessing information are more pronounced, making public libraries an even more crucial resource for those who cannot afford to pay for books or online subscriptions.

Union membership has plummeted from 20.1% in 1983 to 9.9% in 2024, with private sector membership dropping from 16.8% to 5.9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). The decline in union strength has directly impacted job security and benefits for library workers. As public libraries face budget cuts and staff reductions, the erosion of union protections further compromises the ability of libraries to serve their communities effectively.

Comprehensive analysis of tax and wealth data confirms that productivity gains since the late 1970s have accrued almost entirely to the wealthiest Americans, with little corresponding growth in wages for typical workers (Saez & Zucman, 2019).

In a system characterized by wage suppression and concentrated knowledge ownership, public libraries serve as critical equity mechanisms. They ensure access to knowledge regardless of wealth. The decline in library attendance may reflect the replacement of free public space with paid alternatives, rather than a decline in the need for what libraries provide (Abrams, 2022). This underscores the importance of reframing the conversation around library usage; the issue is not that people no longer want to use libraries, but rather that they have fewer opportunities to do so.

These economic factors reveal the essential role public libraries play in fostering equitable access to knowledge, particularly for marginalized communities. The ability to access information freely is a cornerstone of democratic engagement, and when that access is restricted, the implications for society as a whole are profound. Libraries are not just repositories of books; they are vital community hubs that empower individuals with the knowledge they need to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Coalition as Counter-Enclosure

“America’s libraries are the fruits of a great democracy. They exist because we believe that memory and truth are important. They exist because we believe that information and knowledge are not the exclusive domain of a certain type or class of person, but rather the province of all who seek to learn” (Martin, as quoted in Bush, 2002). Martin was then Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services — the agency whose elimination is now proposed in the FY2027 federal budget. First Lady Laura Bush quoted him in her opening remarks at the White House Conference on School Libraries in 2002.

Libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage institutions collectively form the backbone of public knowledge infrastructure. The coordinated efforts to privatize knowledge necessitate a unified response. These institutions do not share an institutional identity but rather a critical function as non-market infrastructure for public knowledge. The threat posed by Project 2025 emphasizes the need for a cohesive defense strategy.

The enclosure framework provides accessible language for advocacy, allowing for shared legal strategies and funding efforts across different institutions. The enclosure of public knowledge can be articulated simply: “They are converting public knowledge into a private transaction.” This message resonates with policymakers and the public alike, making it easier to mobilize support for library initiatives.

South Milwaukee is a useful case precisely because nothing dramatic happened there. Wisconsin’s levy limits tie a city’s annual tax increase to the value of net new construction, which in a built-out community is close to nothing. So the library was not defunded by anyone who set out to defund it. It was starved by a formula, year over year, until it was open fewer hours than any library in Milwaukee County and received less local money per resident (City of South Milwaukee, 2026). On April 7, 2026, residents were asked to approve a \$425,000 levy increase — about \$60 a year on a median home — to restore what had been cut. They approved it, 3,261 to 1,949. Weekly hours go from 44 back to 54 (Hanley, 2026). The vote reads in both directions. People will tax themselves to keep the commons open when someone puts the question to them plainly. They should not have to be asked.

Additionally, historical precedents can serve as inspiration for coalition-building efforts. The Library Services Act of 1956 — sponsored in the House by Representative Carl Elliott of Alabama, advanced in the Senate by Lister Hill, and signed into law by President Eisenhower — was a landmark piece of legislation that responded to the documented failure of rural knowledge access — the same gap the packhorse librarians of Kentucky (the WPA riders who carried books by mule into Appalachian hollows in the 1930s) had tried to bridge a generation earlier. The coalition that passed it included rural educators, public health advocates, agricultural extension workers, and librarians. It did not require institutional sameness; it required shared commitment to access.

In today’s climate, similar coalitions can emerge to advocate for libraries and cultural institutions. By framing the narrative around shared values—equitable access to information, community empowerment, and the preservation of public knowledge—these institutions can forge alliances that transcend their individual missions. This collaborative approach is essential for countering the forces of privatization that threaten to dismantle the public commons.

Conclusion

The coalition framework established through this analysis offers a vital pathway for organizing against the threats to public knowledge. As libraries face unprecedented challenges, the cost of inaction is profound. The mother who takes the bus from the first job to the second job, whose child used the library after school not only because it was a safe place to go, but also a place to learn, is not a policy abstraction. She and her family are the people the commons were built to

serve. As Thomas Jefferson stated, ‘If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was and never will be’ (Jefferson, 1816).

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