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Book Review: Defending Our Libraries

Cynthia JW. Svoboda

Bridgewater State University, csvoboda@bridgew.edu

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that instills fear every day in the lives of far too many Americans. Somerset contends that the media works to keep guns in the hands of many who should not have them and it works to convince American people that every day is a battle to survive—so they had better be armed. The author asks the reader to reconsider who the enemy really is in the midst of this gun battle.

Guns represent power, according to Somerset. He dismisses the consistent American attribution for gun violence to individual malady or a random incident or accident. He is particularly quick to point out that the information we are given about the relationship between gun violence and mental illness is shortsighted and intentional. For example, it has been well documented by social scientists that the majority of mass murderers are not mentally ill, but American society is convinced otherwise by gun activists and conservative media voices. Somerset argues that it is easier to accept the mental-health explanation than to publicly admit that Americans have, too often, a knee-jerk tendency to settle disputes using gun violence. If the American public continues to accept the idea that gun violence is the result of mental illness, the work of random individuals or the result of “terrible accidents,” cultural violence in American society will never be addressed properly and we can expect even more gun-related violence.

It is difficult to put this book down. Somerset writes as he talks and readily acknowledges this. At times, his analysis of American gun culture is emotional but only slightly does his tone take away from his remarkably powerful presentation of the perils of gun violence in the United States. He correctly names gun manufacturers as partners in crime with gun activists, and for obvious reasons. In corporate America, guns are big business. Somerset suggests that, not surprisingly, money is at the root of this gun evil and the most formidable obstacle to any significant advances in gun control. 

Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun is a cautionary tale, and one that presents both the arguments and the ammunition needed to remake American society from a greedy gun culture into one that puts its citizens first.

Kim MacInnis is Professor and Chairperson in the Department of Sociology.

Defending Our Libraries

**Cynthia J.W. Svoboda**


In this era of information explosion, many brick-and-mortar retail bookstores are being replaced with online ordering systems and downloadable resources. Some small, independent bookstores with unique characteristics or novel approaches geared toward specific clienteles, survive and continue to draw customers. However, many others have surrendered to online giants such as Amazon, Google, and Barnes & Noble, who offer a wide array of resources and often provide sales or incentives that are not possible for small independent bookstores to provide. What is more, these large competitors threaten the future of public libraries. Given the magnitude of change to the way information is delivered today, John Palfrey, educator, scholar, law professor, and technology adviser, wrote *BiblioTECH* to explain why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google.

Author of *Born Digital* (2008), *Intellectual Property Strategy* (2012) and other books, Palfrey is Head of School at Phillips Academy in Andover, and a director at both the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and the Data & Society Research Institute. He was formerly a professor at Harvard Law School and served as Vice Dean for Library and Information Resources. He was also the founding President of the Board of Directors of the Digital Public Library of America. Though not a librarian, Palfrey’s education and work experience qualify him as an expert on the subject of information technology.

Despite the similarity in names, Palfrey’s *BiblioTECH* is not an introduction to BiblioTECH, the first all-digital public library in the United States, which serves the City of San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas. However, the novelty and creativity in the design of this Texas digital library supports many of Palfrey’s basic principles. In *BiblioTECH*, Palfrey discusses public libraries in a broader perspective, maintains the importance of supporting libraries, and upholds the need for them to change with the times. The author
addresses his book to “All those who do not work in libraries and who should be taking a greater interest in the fate of these essential knowledge institutions on which we rely more than we seem to realize” (17). Though his main audience is not librarians nor those who work in libraries, they are the ones who are most likely to consume his book. Still, others who are interested in libraries as both institutions in our society and an important public service would do well to heed Palfrey’s message.

Palfrey begins BiblioTECH with a discussion of the inception of the first “free for all” library, the Boston Public Library. He then elaborates on how this novel idea of a public library quickly spread throughout the country. Over time, public libraries blossomed and their services expanded to provide other formats of information as well as spaces for community meetings. The concept of a public library as a place to obtain information has not changed much since the 1850s. Palfrey believes that holding on to this nostalgic image of public libraries may not be enough to sustain their presence in modern society. He argues that perhaps there is too much competition for libraries to thrive if their image remains simply one of storehouses for lending information. Their core mission of being “democratic institutions” and their use as “community centers” are still vital services that add credence to their existence, but are they enough?

In BiblioTECH, Palfrey writes that “Libraries are at risk because we have forgotten how essential they are” (7). He calls for a revolution that will reassess the position of libraries and demonstrate why libraries matter. He urges librarians to use innovation in the transition of libraries toward a more customer-centric service. The process of undertaking this endeavor, Palfrey argues, will require private philanthropy and government funding to help transition libraries away from being warehouses and toward being “platforms” that provide “effective access to information and knowledge … expert advice in navigating through the information environment, and connections to large networks” (92). To do this, he recommends obtaining input from library customers, collaboration and cooperation with other libraries and institutions, as well as digitization and preservation of resources.

Palfrey emphasizes the need for digitizing media yet continues to advocate for maintaining libraries as spaces to work, meet, collaborate, innovate, provide programs, and house special collections. At the same time, he reminds us that mobile access demands consideration, too. Palfrey argues that all these concerns are necessary for carrying on the tradition of libraries and moving them forward for the next generation. His suggestions and recommendations are hardly novel. In fact, many of his recommendations are already coming to fruition. However, his advocacy for public libraries and desire to secure their future are invigorating and worth consideration.

While Palfrey focuses his attention on public libraries, he also mentions other types of libraries and includes a chapter on applying his principles to education, specifically school libraries. As core curricula change and digital media become the norm, it is essential for school librarians to help the next generation sift through, assess, and apply knowledge in all its varied formats. Librarians can be leaders in these areas. They need to provide resources and literacy training even as they face shrinking budgets. Palfrey supports the use of digital libraries both in and out of the classroom, discusses online resources and services, and examines the relationship between school libraries and educational reform.

In the book’s final chapter, “Law: Why Copyright and Privacy Matter so Much,” Palfrey’s analysis is at its strongest. He uses his knowledge and expertise in this area to discuss privacy and copyright laws and their challenges to public interest. He champions the interests of librarians “To help make the case for a sensible, public-friendly copyright and privacy regime for the digital era” (205).

In BiblioTECH, John Palfrey reminds us that libraries are tried and true institutions, but if their value becomes overlooked and forgotten, they could disappear. That would be a major loss to our free and equitable society. He challenges librarians to use creativity; to keep abreast of new technologies and resources and to apply them appropriately; and to question legislation that poses obstacles to the free access of information. Doing that will help libraries keep their hallowed place in an ever-changing sea of information exchange.