

Reading privileges: Which card are we willing to give up?

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Which card would Americans relinquish first—their driver’s license, Social Security card, voter’s registration or public library card? All four documents link us to a larger political and social reality, and each symbolizes something about the privileges and obligations of citizenship.

Most Americans would likely say they can’t get along without a driver’s license. Besides getting them from place to place, the car is a symbol of freedom and mobility. And most Americans cling tightly to their Social Security cards. After all, they’ve paid into the system and will demand what they’re entitled to get back. Many will need Social Security to make it through their retirement years.

The millions of Americans who don’t vote might consider the voter’s registration card expendable. And the resources of a public library might be deemed expendable too.

But when something is about to be taken from us, we suddenly realize its value. That’s what happened in Salinas, California, when word leaked out that budget cuts were forcing the city to shut down its public libraries. Commenting on the crisis, writer Anne Lamott pointed out that Salinas is John Steinbeck country. How ironic to close down libraries in the community where Steinbeck was born and which provided the setting for many of his books, including *East of Eden* and much of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Once news of the impending closing got out, a group of writers and actors converged on Salinas for a 24-hour read-in. They raised enough money to save the library and its branches for another year. “A free public library is a revolutionary notion,” says Lamott, “and when people don’t have free access to books, then communities are like radios without batteries.”

Thankfully, many Americans do care about public libraries, and they see the connection between the health of a free society and the ability of all citizens—rich and poor—to have access to information. In an encouraging development, the House of Representatives, against the strong opposition of the Bush administration, has voted to remove from the Patriot Act a provision that permits federal authorities to examine the reading habits of bookstore and library patrons. (It's not clear, however, if that defense of intellectual freedom will prevail.) Another good sign, according to American historian David McCullough, is that as recently as 2000 there were still more public libraries in the U.S. than McDonald's restaurants.

Nevertheless, public libraries are under stress. Besides the threat of budget cuts, the culture-war conflicts pressure libraries to ban certain books. Libraries have also had to adjust to the digital age, incorporating Internet access into their range of services—and figure out how to do that without exposing children to inappropriate materials.

“Free public libraries are the ultimate gift of a free society to its people,” says McCullough. It is a gift of which the citizens are both the givers and the beneficiaries. As the folks of Salinas, California, discovered, it is not a gift we can take for granted.