

21

Good Reasons for Good Libraries

Libraries? Of course. There are certainly plenty of people visiting them! Why indeed? After all we have the internet and we can Google to gather all the information we need. We buy our children's books, and anyway kids would rather play on the computer. Yes, that's it: we need libraries for that reason alone. But that's not all.

21 Good Reasons for Good Libraries

1. Because they bring us together

The educated middle class goes to the theatre, schoolchildren go to school, footballers go to the sports field. Everyone goes to the library. Old and young, professors and salesgirls, high earners and people on benefits, Muslims and Christians. Anyone who goes to the library can feel that they are part of a society. People who go there are inquisitive and want to use their opportunities – whether it's the "social hotspot" in the local municipal library or the faculty library on the university campus. Libraries help to stop the social divide becoming even greater. At school or on an adult education course everyone can still learn English, word-processing or biochemistry, but at some point the final exam is done and the Spanish course is over. What next? Is it only the informed and successful ones who participate in progress? Not as long as libraries are around to make their knowledge, internet access and media competence available to everyone. That really does mean to everyone who wants it – even in prison or hospital. There's absolutely no pressure to buy or take advice. There are around 11 500 libraries in Germany. And 670 000 library visitors – every day.

2. So that our children read. All children.

The library is a place of horror. Everyone knows that. Spud Murphy's sitting in the library, she's got teeth like icicles, arms like robots, she holds her stamps as if they were Colts, and they say she's got gas-powered spud guns to shoot at children when they misbehave. In fact Spud Murphy is a streetwise librarian who knows all the tricks in the book, and she can teach even the most reluctant readers to enjoy books. Even boys! She's simply a proper librarian. They can do that. They've studied it. The thing is, reading isn't just what you learn at primary school: spelling, deciphering words, recognising sentences. Reading properly means: Understanding. Grasping. Developing creative thought. Loving books. Many children don't learn that at home anymore because there isn't anybody there who looks through picture books with them or reads aloud to them – reading aloud also means setting them an example. Many children don't see anyone reading at home these days, there's nobody who mustn't be disturbed because they're reading, nobody who later gives an animated account of what adventurous things they've come across in a book or newspaper. But they see people exactly like this even in the smallest of libraries.

Illustration by Tony Ross from: Eoin Colfer "The Legend of Spud Murphy"

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3. Because it has such fantastic four-poster beds

At least there are in Oskar's town library. He can snuggle up there and listen to stories, even though he's really already too old to do that. Oskar, a highly-strung eight year-old, likes coming here. There's a lot to discover: the computer game his friend already told him about, the latest edition of his favourite comic, and recently he actually even met the illustrator. He did his drawings here! In many towns and cities virtually every schoolchild has been to the municipal library or church libraries. In Hilden for instance the libraries have cooperation agreements with all 17 schools in the city, and the children are given their library card as soon as they start school. Twelve years later they can learn how to compile a proper bibliography for a dissertation in a library workshop. In Heidelberg, over-14s work as "reading ambassadors" in the municipal

library. Their reward is plenty of good experience with people and media. And the highly-enthusiastic teens use the library blog to recommend the fantastic novels, bands or websites they have recently discovered in the library to others.

4. Speed up your studies – in the library

What a good idea for making money – two students in Passau reserved seats in the university library reading room – of which there was a chronic shortage – and “rented” them out! They created a marketing concept for the private seating service, a flyer was printed – and a large number of potential customers called them right from the start. In fact the campaign was simply a gag to highlight the situation in the university library. Germany’s university libraries are completely overburdened. 90 per cent of all students and researchers use their libraries. Two million students at German universities need them on a daily basis to enable them to learn and work efficiently. Without them, research and teaching are inconceivable. The internet has changed nothing in this respect. However: the neurologist can see the results of her colleagues’ experiments from around the world on her own screen faster thanks to the library’s licence. The Business Management student can find online tutorials for his subject databases, but also the book for his term paper that’s arrived through the inter-library loan service – and the ticker for his share prices. The postgraduate who has to measure flies’ pupils by day can use the university library in the evening to compile her research bibliography from essay databases, library catalogues and annotated link directories. And of course there are books in printed and digital format in the university library as well. They are still an important study companion – not just for scholars of the arts and social sciences...

5. Libraries have plenty of migration background

Where do we come from, where are we heading? Questions like this are as concern for anyone, and in the library you can find all kinds of answers. Ayşe can borrow books and DVDs in Turkish here as well – and the latest CD by Muhabet, her favourite artist of the moment. She will also find bilingual media if she wants to improve her German a little. Or improve her Turkish a little. And she might even meet Philipp from her class there... Ayşe’s father has been here before too. Before he acquired German citizenship he searched for information on what the new nationality means to him, and what it’s all about when he becomes a voter next year for the state parliament elections. He was pleased to see that there’s also plenty of material about the country that is still his homeland. And that’s in two languages. Libraries take integration seriously. It’s not a buzzword here, it’s reality.

6. Please help yourself! Knowledge for everyone is democracy

The library’s knowledge, its book collections, databases, newspapers, DVDs and CDs is there for everyone. And anyone who doesn’t have internet access at home uses the library to look on the net for a job for life, a date for an evening or the source citation for their thesis. Anyone comes here, helps themselves free of charge, has access to all sorts of information. It’s absolute freedom of information on an everyday basis – and that makes diversity of opinion possible. It’s simply democracy. Libraries democratise access to knowledge. They are a foundation pillar in a libertarian, integrative, enlightened society.

7. Libraries are all-rounders

Libraries are supposed to supply the nation’s people with all the information they need. Large universal libraries, municipal libraries, community libraries, mobile libraries – they don’t have everything, obviously, but they have the contacts and the cooperation potential to get hold of everything. These libraries are generalists. Like department stores. Or supermarkets.

8. Libraries are specialists

But who would go looking for a real rarity in a department store? Let’s suppose you have a particular interest in neutrons. Then you can place your confidence in the Otto-Hahn Library at the Max-Planck-Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen. If you just want to have a look at the score for Handel’s opera “Apollo and Daphne”, to see how the baroque composer wrote it down, then you have to head for the Händel-Haus library in Halle. The Cathedral and Diocesan Library in Cologne has the original manuscripts

of St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as many other treasures. The German Crime Library in Bremen's municipal library has some thrilling material to offer. By contrast the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research library in Bremerhaven has an icy-cold collection. The state library in Eutin specialises in historical travel literature, "Anna Amalia" in Weimar is a library of classics, Goethe himself was involved in building up the collections for decades. In Berlin the "Topography of Terror" foundation has compiled a library with 12 000 titles covering the various themes of National Socialism. There are specialist libraries all over the country: libraries with special collection areas, particularly beautiful libraries, particularly old libraries.

9. Libraries are not commercial

Knowledge is still power, but information is frequently a commodity as well, it costs money. If you're looking for specific data and particular publications somewhere, you're sure to find someone who will sell it to you. It's even possible that you won't have to pay anything for it at first – but then it will be some link rate or other, or an obscure algorithm that decides whether you are allowed to see documents and in what order. Libraries are publicly funded. For this reason you can obtain up-to-date information without a commercial interest. From a store of knowledge that has not filled itself because somebody hopes to profit from its fullness. Quite the opposite – it's because this fullness is intended to enrich society.

10. But libraries are profitable

Not commercial, but profitable: libraries use management tools. People who work there became accustomed to maths and calculations, as well as concepts such as marketing, quality management and benchmarking, a long time ago. Librarians use their budgets efficiently, after all it shouldn't make any difference to the service provided. They are resourceful when it comes to cutting back where it can't be noticed. And yet sometimes there's barely enough money when the costs increase but not the budgets. A situation that needs a creative approach: with money, with the customers' interests, with the inter-library loan system and the cooperation opportunities with other libraries and cultural establishments. Despite this, libraries in the past have optimised their media collections and potential on a regular basis. The latest new publications – printed books, e-books, audio books, music and films – are always on the shelves earlier. Investment in database research, full-text search, online ordering, digital media and increasingly sophisticated internet portals make work more comfortable and effective. The "open access" principle makes it cheaper: librarians can find out where public-funded research results are available to use free of charge – a unique service. Investment in libraries means investment in people's minds. Not only that, but this investment pays dividends. Many international surveys have shown that every Euro invested brings returns of five times the value.

11. A great atmosphere at the library

Forget the gloomy school libraries of your youth, where the yellowing process had taken a firm hold in the shelves and the tattered Ovid editions. Today some of the libraries are real temples to design. For instance the Cottbus university library, or the Münster municipal library: generously-proportioned, light buildings, rooms furnished in a modern style with all the technical finesse and an atmosphere that allows thoughts to flow freely. Research and public libraries have not been dreary lending stations for a long time, they are places of learning – with perfect multimedia equipment, group rooms and peaceful places to work. They have a communicative, lively atmosphere, yet they are filled with tranquillity. And the good old reading room, where you can't help but say "shhh!" when someone coughs? Yes, that still exists too. In the German National Library in Leipzig for instance, in the "Anna Amalia" and in many traditional university libraries, they study as they did in Lichtenberg's times – but today they have heating and W-LAN. If Lichtenberg headed back to his university library in Göttingen – it would make his eyes pop. It's all new...!

12. There's plenty going on in the library

Why don't we just take a look: in the Herten municipal library a professor of education is discussing childhood tantrums with parents, a Hölderlin exhibition is running at the Württemberg State Library, in Rosenheim, Thomas Mann's favourite grandson talks about a childhood that wasn't easy in a different way. In Altentrepow, which has a population of 6000, Günter Hertl is reading, in Auerbach/Vogtland there's cabaret, a puppet show – Goethe's "Sorcerer's Apprentice" for children over four – in Bad Aibling. A death is happening in the Bad Windsheim library: a thriller reading. In Gingst it's time for fairy-tales, in Oldenburg it's picture-book cinema, and in Hamburg things are really taking off with the "Flying reading campaign":

actors bring children's books to life. And that's not all by a long way. In libraries you can cook pasta, do your own podcasts or come second-last in the Poetry Slam. Things are happening in libraries: communication, culture. And in smaller towns especially it's in the libraries that culture still happens at all.

13. The best thing in the library: the librarian!

The tiresome tax return again, Wolfgang Reimann really doesn't like doing it. So can you offset the double household allowance, or not? These things change all the time, and even an academic sometimes has problems without help. It's a good job the librarian knows where to find up-to-date guides and computer programmes on the subject. The only thing is – she can't find it because someone else has already borrowed it. Never mind, she will order it in for Wolfgang Reimann, and next time he's in town he can pick it up. Librarians are responsible for advising, purchasing, organising, researching, developing, communicating – their profession has changed a great deal. Technology and customer requirements have revolutionised libraries. Librarians are helping to shape the digital world now, they are guiding users through an increasingly complex variety of information potential: what a cool job! But they are equally concerned with promoting reading, developing educational media programmes or organising cultural events.

14. www.frag-die-bibliothek.de

Of course it depends what you're looking for. If your interest is in the biography of Jorge Luis Borges, the author (and librarian) who sorts imaginary books into a fantasy structure in his "Library of Babel", then Wikipedia can help you as a quick fix. But if you want to become acquainted with Borges' work in more detail, or if you're planning more comprehensive database research, then you would be better served by going to a library. But it's possible that you won't even need to use the underground or bus, you might be able to browse the electronic catalogue from home. Or you can do your research while you're on the bus... Google? Anyone who has ever had a complicated question knows: there are search engines that work like huge dragnets, hauling in possibly useful as well as irrelevant information. In the library on the other hand, accurate precision work is carried out at lightning speed.

15. Libraries? They're great

At least, that what readers say. How do we know that? Firstly: because they use the libraries – libraries count their users. Secondly: because they are asked on a regular basis. And then more than 75% of all customers say they rate their library's advice service in particular as "good" or "very good". They feel that they are well looked after, they find their way around better than users 15 years ago, and they like the atmosphere in the public library. One-third of all Germans use libraries. That's a lot. Less people go to the theatre or to football grounds...

16. Libraries have books – even printed ones

After all, young Japanese girls are now clicking their way through the latest bestsellers on their mobile phones as they travel on the underground. But reading a nice book – most people do want to read in the way that's still the most comfortable: a printed book. Classic book collections are here to stay. All users want to have books in the library – even when they come with their laptops. They just want the right format for every purpose: an e-book for quick reference and searching, an audio book to entertain, and the printed book for intensive study or browsing. After all we still listen to the radio and go to the cinema even though we have television and internet. And we still telephone – despite e-mail. We need books and we need libraries. Digital libraries as well. And free access to information and literature.

17. Libraries have surprises

The speechwriter of a minister in Schleswig-Holstein needed a clever closing statement for his boss's public appearance in Lübeck. The subject is performance, as a basic principle. Lübeck, well the obvious thing is to look through the works of a major bourgeois author, one of the city's sons. And Thomas Mann – well the obvious thing is to look in Japan. Pardon? No, it's true. A university library in Fukuoda offers a full-text search service for the works of Thomas Mann. The result: a few finds, then you have to look it up in the text yourself for copyright reasons. The speechwriter doesn't have the collected works in 13 volumes in his office, but he knows that the state parliament library can always help out in such situations. It has already sourced more complicated information for him. The Japanese web address:

> <http://corpus.en.kyushu-u.ac.jp/>

18. Libraries have a system

That's how they are. They are well-organised, after all you would never find anything otherwise. But libraries also *form* a system, a network that spreads across the whole country. The municipal library is a network with its branches in many city districts, which are responsible for basic provision. A large number of smaller libraries could not exist at all, wouldn't really make sense unless they were networked, linked with larger regional libraries, connected to an inter-library loan system, supported by the specialist offices of the federal states and the church library associations. Public libraries and university libraries work together, joining forces to fulfil the requirement to provide everyone with generally accessible knowledge. The school libraries are part of the system, the university libraries themselves are networked with each other, and in many senses function on a division of labour basis. After all not everyone can have everything. The university library at Göttingen sources specialist literature for lecturers and students from Clausthal-Zellerfeld, tracks down dissertations from Dresden and articles from magazines, for which the only subscriber in Germany is the German National Library of Economics in Kiel. National and state libraries have their specialised collection mandates, the National Library in Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig simply collects everything published in Germany and anything that comes onto the market in German language. It's obvious in a globalised world that the British Library in London or the Library of Congress in Washington are no further away than your own university library. The laboratory boss carries out research in the online catalogue, his library sources his findings via the international inter-library loan system, and a short time later he has the journal article on his desk or on screen. Libraries function as a system, as a team. In that sense they are like people: they need communication, interaction, relationships, they complement one another. And in this way they continue to develop.

19. Libraries help people to write

Ralf-Peter Martin, an ancient historian, author and journalist, has delved extremely deeply into the history of the Holy Roman Empire for his book "Die Varus-Schlacht" (The Battle of Varus). Martin writes from his home in Frankfurt, once a week he also goes to a monastery on the Rhine, but research comes before writing. Reading. In the library. Why? "Well, the first reason is because of the books. Of course an ancient historian has his own Livius at home, but a private individual doesn't even buy the 'neue Pauli', in twelve volumes. Let alone the 'Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde' (Encyclopaedia of Germanic Archaeology), 37 volumes – I go to the Roman-Germanic Commission library near Palmengarten." Large specialist encyclopaedias, source editions, reference volumes of scientific colloquia, documents, correspondence, all the specialist journals that contain scientific discussion, of which there are hundreds across the world just for Martin's current area of interest: Rome and the Germanic peoples. It would be impossible to buy all that for yourself! "And the collections are now so well indexed that working with libraries in general has become much more convenient. The university library reminds me by e-mail when a book is due back, and I can extend the loan for many of them online..."

20. Libraries salvage knowledge

Books age – the ravages of time eat away at many volumes, acids and bacteria erode the paper, making it yellow and brittle: our cultural heritage is crumbling, at least if it's stored on wood-based paper. Experts estimate that 60 million books in German libraries are threatened by decay and need to be deacidified. Even really old manuscripts are in danger. In the Carl von Ossietzky State and University Library in Hamburg for instance, original manuscripts by Lessing and Klopstock, Heine und Händel had to be saved urgently for future generations through restoration. The fact is, no electronic file can replace the fascination of an original document. Despite this, libraries are planning to digitalise their entire collections bit by bit – even if they are not in immediate danger and although it's very expensive to do so. Books need readers, and digitalisation makes it easier to make them accessible to readers, so that users are able to bring up sources, data and facts in full-text format on their own PCs. Google is currently working on developing a huge digital library – to achieve this in Germany the international search engine is cooperating with the Bavarian State Library. The EU Commission has established the Europeana European library – also as a digital project. Both of these will prove to be a huge benefit one day. And both are inconceivable without the collections of large libraries. And when everything has been digitalised? Then the task of preserving collective knowledge will continue: the thing is, even digital media has a limited lifespan. Anyone who has

wanted to print out an old dissertation from a floppy disk again knows that. Libraries are working intensively on keeping digital knowledge securely accessible for centuries.

21. Sorry everyone, but information has to be learnt

Grandma was a well-educated woman. She had the Großer Brockhaus encyclopaedia in the living room, that's where she looked everything up. She also did a degree, and she searched for literature in the wooden card index box in the State Library. But if Grandma came back there today, she would be amazed. There are more screens than books! And her grand-daughter has to find her way round there somehow – just like she does in the complex world of information in general. It's good that she's learning that early enough, while she's still at school. And then again at the university library. She's learning to develop searching strategies, to identify the right sources of information, to use databases – and then to acquire the information for herself. All this is almost a subject in its own right. It's called information skills. They learn some things that even Grandma already knew, and other things of which even Dad has no idea. But that's what you need in our society, after all it's already called that – information society. Who teaches people this? Librarians, of course.

What libraries need

- **A sufficiently wide choice of material.** The international standard for public libraries is at least 10 000 media units and two per resident in the library catchment area – this has not yet been achieved in Germany by a long way.
- **An interesting variety of material.** To achieve this, a public library has to update ten per cent of its material every year. A university library must offer its customers the latest specialist literature – online, digitally or printed. In both cases, customer demand depends on how up to date the library material is. Previous investment loses value if the collection as a whole ceases to be current.
- **Customer-friendly opening hours.** Students want to learn, children want to read, working people want to browse the shelves and families want to spend their free time together in the evenings and at weekends as well.
- **Well-trained specialised staff.** And they have to be kept up to date with further training and qualifications, so that they can show their customers how to find their way around literature and information.
- **Convenient location.** The library has to be located where its users are. In the city, at a road junction, in school, on campus. It has to be accessible for everyone who wants to use it – even in villages or suburbs.
- **Standards.** To make sure that the kind of library in your district or university isn't left to chance. That's the only way to ensure a reliable choice of material for library customers. And local authorities (for public libraries) and regional governments (for the research libraries) in turn are in a better position to evaluate what their establishments offer customers. Facilities and efficiency are measurable, comparable. There are target figures for this.
- **Partners.** The library is a key junction point for instance in the information network. Pre-schools, schools, adult education centres, universities and libraries have to work together in an organisational and structural sense – to encourage reading, to practise information skills, to further people's education all the time.
- **Politicians with an interest.** Libraries need friends and supporters in politics who understand that culture and education in this country form a network – and that they need this network themselves to put their political objectives into practice. That the library is a location factor.
- **Copyright laws that are sympathetic to the public and to scientific research,** which allow all members of the public to have their share of science, education and information.

- **Specialist offices in the federal states and funded by the private sector** that support cooperation and development for librarians and libraries at a regional level. To ensure that all libraries offer the same professional standards.
- **A national library development agency**, which promotes cooperation and synergies, supports innovative library work and networks with other educational and cultural institutions as well as with the commercial sector.
- **Security.** A library law – so that your library will not have to suffer the consequences in the next round of government cutbacks. As long as the library is a “voluntary service” provided by the council, its existence could be at risk at any point when it comes to disputes over public funding.

Credits

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