

# Public Libraries Threatened By GATS?

## Under the Radar

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**A**t university, reading became something I did because I had to, and libraries held unpleasant associations with exams, expensive photocopies and books in which the most crucial chapter has been ripped out in a perverse application of the first-come, first serve principle. On my release I rediscovered the public library. Ever since, I've thought someone should write it an ode.

Even in prose, the wonders of this institution are easy to extol. Being public, public libraries have: (1) eclectic collections that range from trashy to academically dense to literary wonders; (2) an atmosphere that is neither stiflingly studious nor commercial and flashy; (3) community services like ESL classes, poetry workshops and public fora; (4) a healthy mingling of ages, races, backgrounds and income levels; (5) nice, clean washrooms, comfy chairs, and wide tables; (6) computers where you don't have to pay to use the internet; (7) access to reference material, novels, videos and music ^ no commitment, no money down. Satisfaction isn't guaranteed, but learning what you don't like is also part of the pleasure of the hunt.

Now that I've reminded you of the joys of the public library (if you've been hiding from the library since your fines hit \$500 dollars or the dog ate your copy of Ulysses, I hope this will inspire you to take a fake name and get a new card ASAP), it's time for the heart-clenching conflict.

Canadian federal bureaucrats have been in Geneva, negotiating the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), another step in the free trade shenanigans promoted by the World Trade Organization. GATS is designed to broaden the definition of who can come into a country and provide services by treating foreign service providers on an equal basis with local providers, including those that are publicly funded. The government has been careful to officially exclude areas like health and education ^ political hot buttons, thanks be to the Council of Canadians and similar civil society NGOs! ^ but that doesn't mean we're out of danger.

More insidious than the numerous things that are in the process of being defined as tradable services, subject to WTO regulations on competition, are all the things that are not specifically mentioned. These fuzzy areas will be subject, in coming years, to intense legal scrutiny and political pressure for them to be treated like the other goods and services in the WTO roster.

Library services are not specifically designated under GATS. Still, libraries perform a number of services that might open them to charges of unfair

competition, paving the way for destruction of government subsidies and other public service goodies that keep our public assets special, accessible and above the concerns of market trends. In GATS negotiations excluding libraries, the definition of a library used is a 20-year old United Nations definition that doesn't adequately take account of the range of services libraries provide.

In fact, libraries often compete with private institutions like universities or commercial enterprises. Services libraries provide that are also provided by private operators include computer services, data processing and research. The fear is that through a GATS-authorized complaint process and trade tribunal, the public nature of public libraries could be endangered if, for example, public (tax) and government support for libraries is declared an unfair competitive advantage in the provision of these GATS-regulated services.

Services like lending videos, CDs and DVDs competes with Blockbuster and other video chains. Their free internet services, subsidized by the government, compete with private internet cafes. The document storage, retrieval and cataloguing services they provide, the internet-based training, the on-line databases and digitizing and publicizing that libraries offer again could be considered to be in competition with a number of existing or future foreign firms selling the same services.

In one of those forums I extolled above, the Toronto Public Library recently gathered a cabal of experts to discuss this subject. None of them was particularly alarmist, instead emphasizing that we really don't know what to expect, but all advised caution and keeping a sharp eye on what's going on in Geneva.

"The devil is in the details," says John Burrett of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Disturbingly, the federal government, whose Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade is negotiating Canada's role in GATS, may not be sufficiently wary of those details. Libraries aren't on their radar screen at all. They should be.

Already UPS has used NAFTA, GATS' antecedent, to sue Canada Post for taking advantage of public infrastructure to compete. One of the advantages that has UPS in a huff is the special rate that Canada Post is able to offer to libraries to mail books. We've seen plenty of other cases in which local and national rules against toxic chemicals are overruled by free trade agreements. Let's not let that happen to our sweet temples of the book.