

Museums

America’s ‘national library’ is lacking in leadership, yet another report finds

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By **Peggy McGlone** March 31 Follow <https://twitter.com/PeggyMcGlone>



Visitors tour the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress's Thomas Jefferson Building. (Alex Wong/Getty Images)

The federal government’s watchdog agency released a critical report Tuesday on the Library of Congress’s long-standing failures to manage the complex computer systems that are vital to its mission.

The result of a year-long investigation by the Government Accountability Office, [the report](#) reveals a work environment lacking central oversight and faults Librarian of Congress James H. Billington for ignoring repeated calls to hire a chief information officer, as required by law.

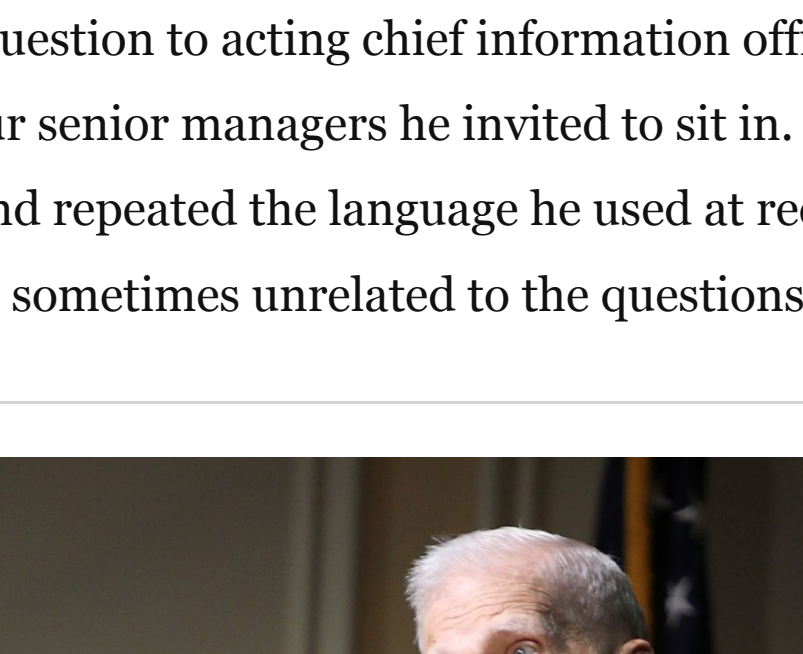
Digital technology is crucial to the library’s evolving operations, and yet it is not a priority of management, the GAO investigators found. These findings repeat the conclusions of previous reports dating back 20 years. Taken together, the reports reveal library mismanagement costing taxpayers tens of millions of dollars, and outdated and inefficient systems in the U.S. Copyright Office. And despite the library’s reputation as an early Internet pioneer, various reports have found that it hasn’t kept up with the rapidly evolving digital times.

“The library does not have the leadership needed to address these IT management weaknesses,” the GAO report said. Among its 31 proposed remedies, the report instructs Billington to “expediently hire” a chief information officer and create policies to track costs, improve security and respond to customer complaints.

The nation’s oldest federal cultural institution, the Library of Congress is regarded by many as the national library. In reality, it is a \$630 million global operation with 3,200 employees who are responsible for providing Congress with research and legal advice, and running the Copyright Office, a major player in the world’s digital economy.

Its leader is a Russia scholar appointed by Ronald Reagan who doesn’t use e-mail and rarely a cellphone, and who critics say has done nothing to fix the library’s ongoing problems. At 85, Billington is the oldest of the 13 executives who have led the agency since its founding in 1800.

Appointed by the president but overseen by Congress, the Librarian of Congress is the rare executive who doesn’t exit with the outgoing administration. Only two of Billington’s 12 predecessors were replaced by incoming presidents, the last by President Abraham Lincoln in 1861. Two have died in office.



“There’s nobody running the ship,” said retired inspector general Karl Schornagel, who worked with Billington for almost 13 years until retiring in 2014. “There’s a lot of individual parties doing their own thing.”

In an interview Monday, Billington bristled at the suggestion that the library’s technological problems have harmed its reputation as a global leader. “We’re still taking the lead,” he said, “Everybody else didn’t take the lead.”

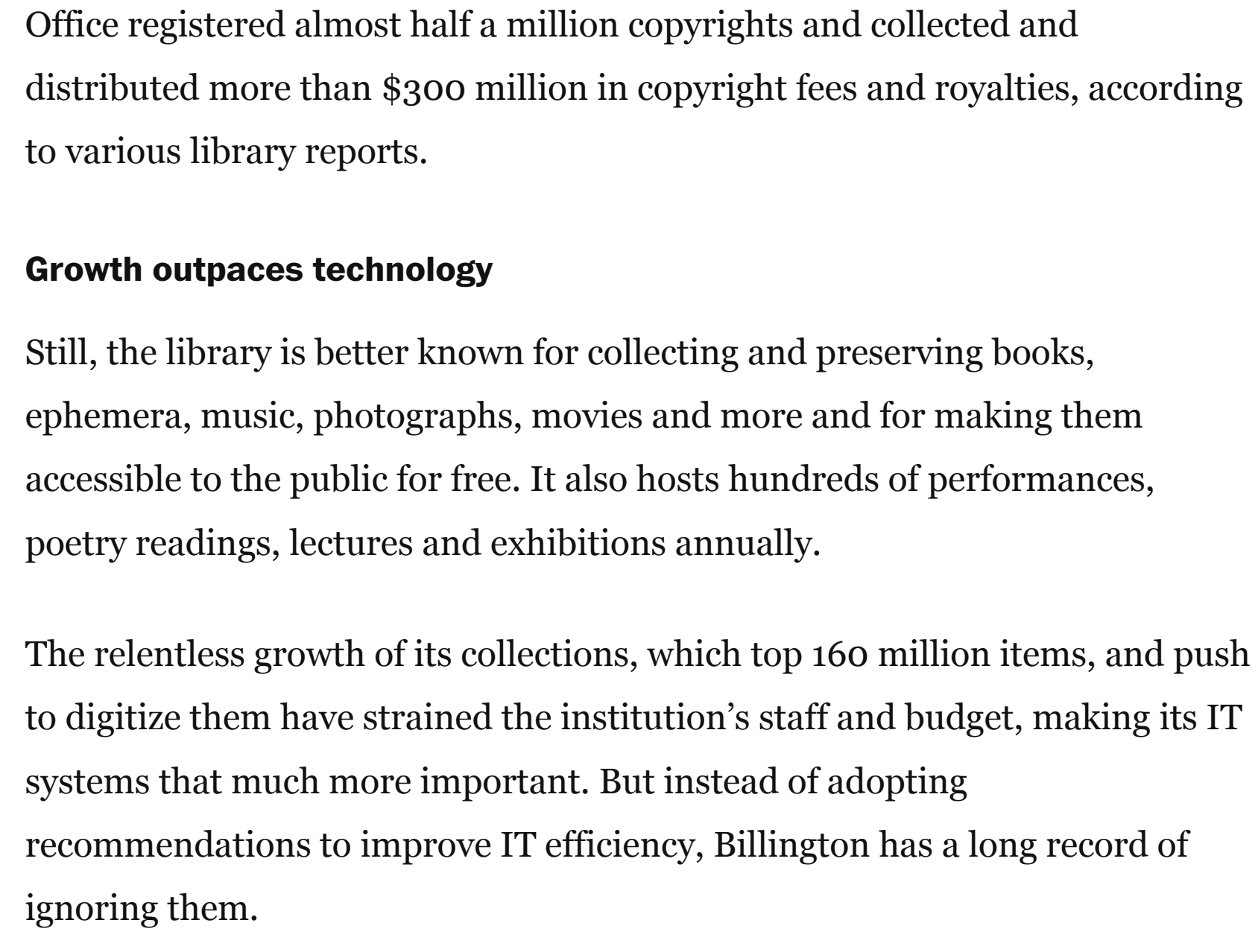
On Tuesday, he let his spokeswoman field questions about the new report.

“The Library appreciates the work of the GAO and believes the report ultimately will be helpful. Several recommendations are already underway, such as developing a new IT strategic plan, finalizing an enterprise architecture plan and updating regulations and governance regarding IT,” Gayle Osterberg said. “The Library is tackling these issues with an eye toward providing the best possible service to Congress and the American people.”

‘It used to be the king’

Others disagree. “It used to be the king of all libraries,” said Suzanne Thorin, dean emerita of Syracuse University and Billington’s onetime chief of staff. “Maybe it’s benign neglect, but I don’t see it at the center anymore.”

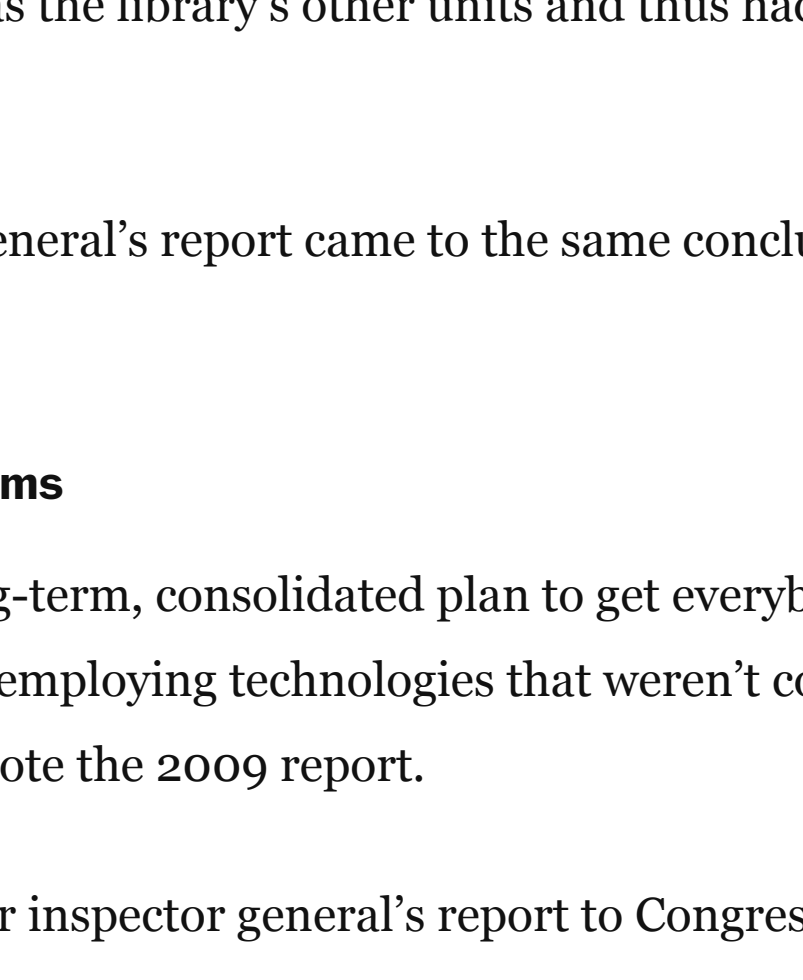
Billington failed to explain the technological challenges facing the library, challenges that he pledged Congress he would address. “Old professors never die, they just talk for 50 minutes,” he said during the interview Monday, before deferring a question to acting chief information officer Elizabeth Scheffler, one of four senior managers he invited to sit in. Billington looked to them for answers and repeated the language he used at recent budget hearings, responses sometimes unrelated to the questions he was asked.



Librarian of Congress James H. Billington addresses a 2013 event celebrating astronomer Carl Sagan at the Library of Congress. (Paul Morigi/Getty Images)

Billington has often said he won’t retire from the \$179,700 position he has held since 1987, a fact he repeated this week. “I don’t think about retirement,” he said. “There’s something to be said for the experience of both sustaining an awesome institution and at the same time working to make sure you leave it properly.”

While he has often refused Congress’s advice, Billington remains popular on Capitol Hill. Rep. John B. Larson (D-Conn.) called him a “national treasure” last fall, while Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), who questioned his management during a budget hearing, praised him for his passion and loyalty.



Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (Fla.), the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee’s legislative branch subcommittee, said that she is focused on “fixing these ongoing problems” and that she and her colleagues have been “vocal in criticizing the library’s lack of progress addressing information technology deficiencies, including filling the position of chief information officer.” But her frustration doesn’t extend to Billington himself, whom she called “a visionary who leads the Library of Congress so admirably, balancing his multifaceted and important role with distinction.”

The library’s first priority is Congress. In 2013, its Congressional Research Service answered almost 636,000 research requests from Congress, and its law library prepared 376 legal research reports. The same year, the Copyright Office registered almost half a million copyrights and collected and distributed more than \$300 million in copyright fees and royalties, according to various library reports.

Growth outpaces technology

Still, the library is better known for collecting and preserving books, ephemera, music, photographs, movies and more and for making them accessible to the public for free. It also hosts hundreds of performances, poetry readings, lectures and exhibitions annually.

The relentless growth of its collections, which top 160 million items, and push to digitize them have strained the institution’s staff and budget, making its IT systems that much more important. But instead of adopting recommendations to improve IT efficiency, Billington has a long record of ignoring them.

For example, the National Academy of Sciences reviewed the library’s digital strategy in 2000 and issued a [284-page report](#) that unequivocally directed the librarian to hire a chief information officer to manage a coordinated IT system for the entire agency. Such coordination would improve efficiency and reduce costs.

“The fact that the question of appointing a CIO has remained in the air for several years . . . is itself a sign of weakness,” its authors wrote. “None of the top three [managers] have background in information technology,” the report found. “[They] do not have the technical depth to meet the current challenges.”



Billington created the Office of Strategic Initiatives and appointed a director who would be the agency’s de facto CIO. But that individual was on the same management level as the library’s other units and thus had no authority over them.

A 2009 inspector general’s report came to the same conclusion nine years later.

Incompatible systems

“They needed a long-term, consolidated plan to get everybody on board so people wouldn’t be employing technologies that weren’t compatible,” said Schornagel, who wrote the 2009 report.

Last month, another inspector general’s report to Congress found the lack of centralized management “increases the risk of cost and schedule overruns.”

The GAO report is the most damning. Investigators noted that the library could not confidently estimate how much its spends annually on IT costs, although the GAO offered a guess of \$120 million, about one-fifth of the library’s total budget.

“They don’t know what they spend, they don’t know what they have,” said Joel C. Willemssen, the report’s author. “The fact they have had five acting CIOs in less than three years, that’s a big concern.”

GAO investigators found the library’s master list of personal computers numbered 18,000 when it actually had fewer than 6,500. The number of systems used by the various units was listed at 30 but another was tallied at 46. “After we raised the discrepancy . . . [the library] provided us with a revised list of 70 systems,” the GAO said.

Its investigators also found that the library services unit bought 82 24-inch computer monitors in 2013 and 2014, even though the IT office had 100 it purchased in 2010 that were still unused. “Of particular concern is that Library Services purchased all of these monitors after the Library’s IG issued a report noting this surplus of monitors,” the GAO wrote.

There have also been calls for reforming the collection policies, as the number of items that need storage outpace any chance of cataloguing them or making them accessible. Library officials estimate that a million books are stored improperly on the floor and an additional 2.5 million need to be relocated. A storage unit for 1.6 million books will open in 2017 after an eight-year delay; it won’t solve the overcrowding.

‘A manager he’s not’

Billington’s 27-year tenure is the fourth-longest in the library’s 215-year history. He appointed a new leadership team in January, including his 10th second-in-command, Deputy Librarian David Mao.

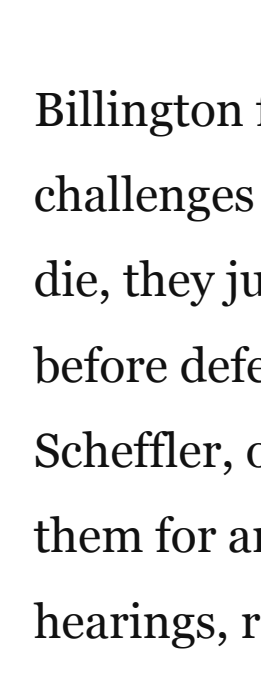
“I’m a great admirer of his, but a manager he’s not,” Thorin said. “Jim is very jealous of his authority. The new team will end up like the old teams. They don’t have authority to make changes.”

Employees who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of losing their jobs said the constant management shake-up is evidence of Billington’s difficult management style. Given to frustrated outbursts and grudges, they say, he promotes fear, loses focus and can’t delegate. Dozens of senior executives have come and gone during his tenure; few have been outsiders, and only a couple were hired from organized searches.

Billington explained the turnover as evidence that he’s “been very wise in picking the top people in a new way to sustain a changing library in changing times.”

Critics say the same logic should apply to the top job. He enjoyed many early successes, including the American Memory project, a pre-Internet effort that digitized items for CD-ROM and the THOMAS system that made congressional information available online, but has failed to keep the library on the cutting edge. In 1990, he created the James Madison Council, an advisory group comprised of business leaders who have raised tens of millions of dollars for library programs.

“He has done some wonderful things,” Thorin said. “Why doesn’t he just do a victory lap?”

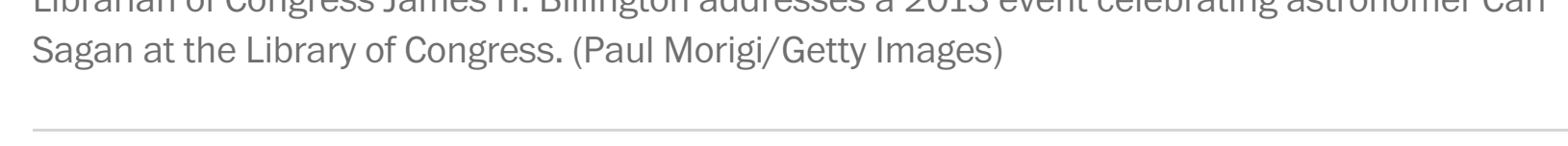


Peggy McGlone joined the Washington Post in 2014 as its local arts reporter. Prior to that, she covered the arts for The Star-Ledger in New Jersey for more than a decade.

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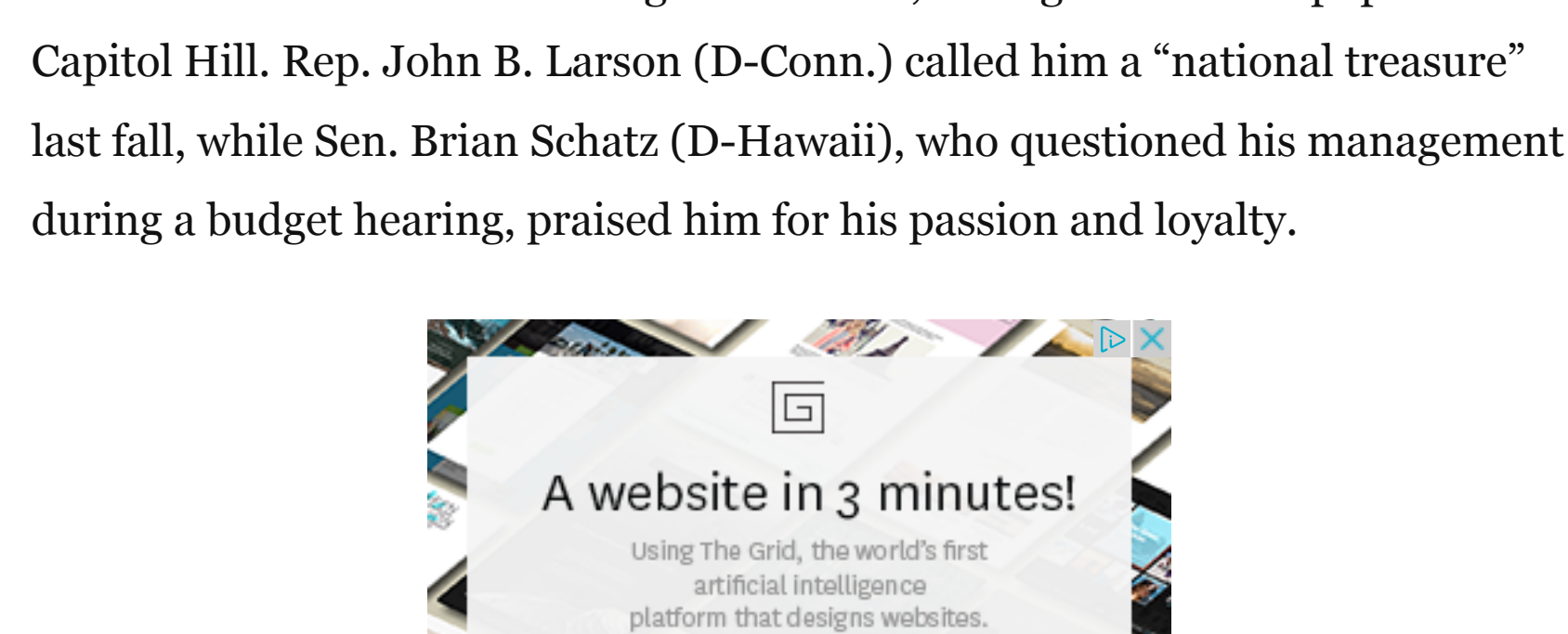
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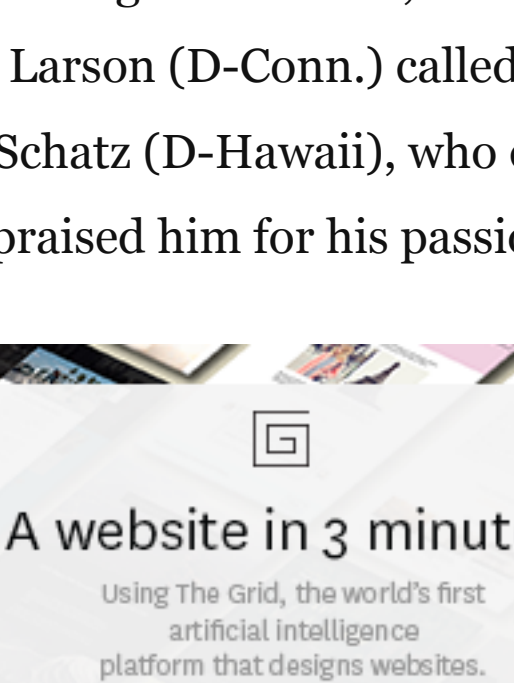
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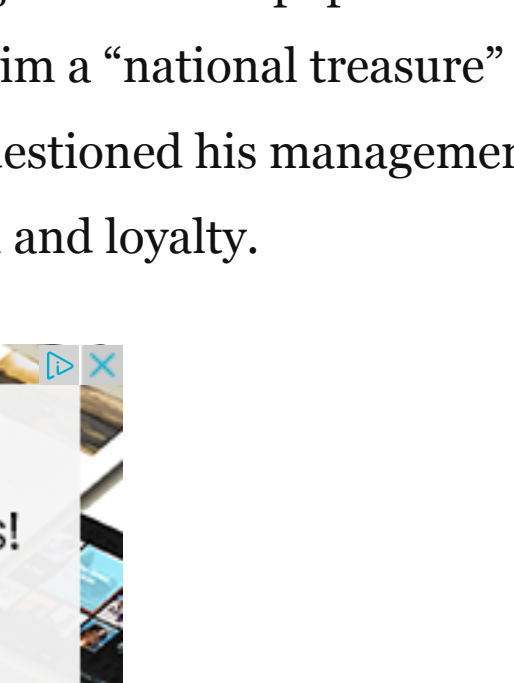
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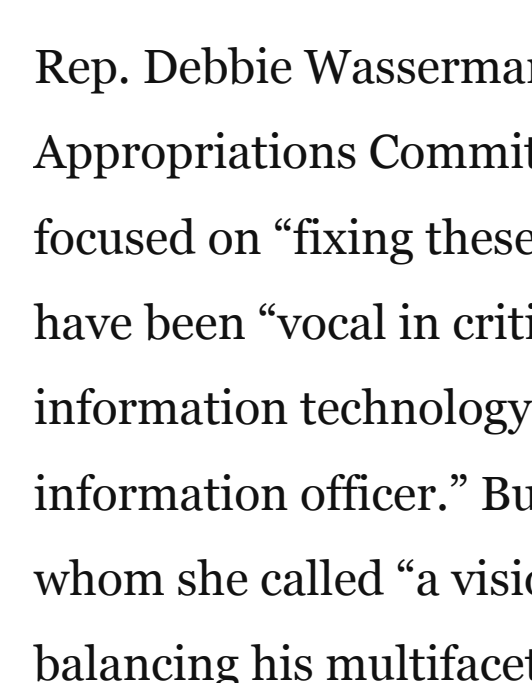
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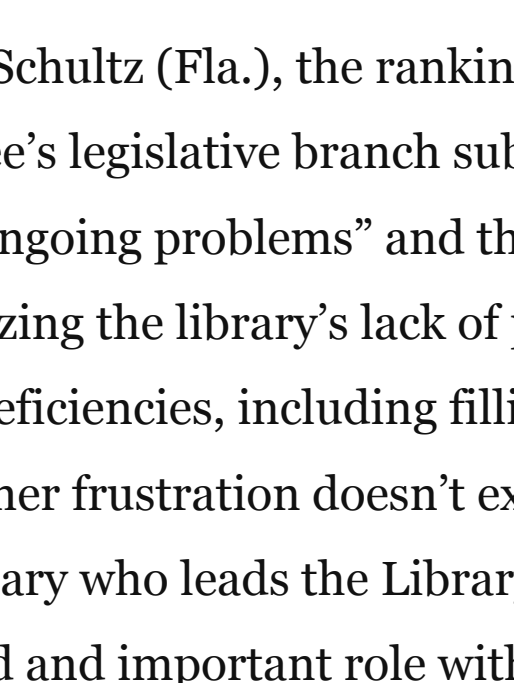
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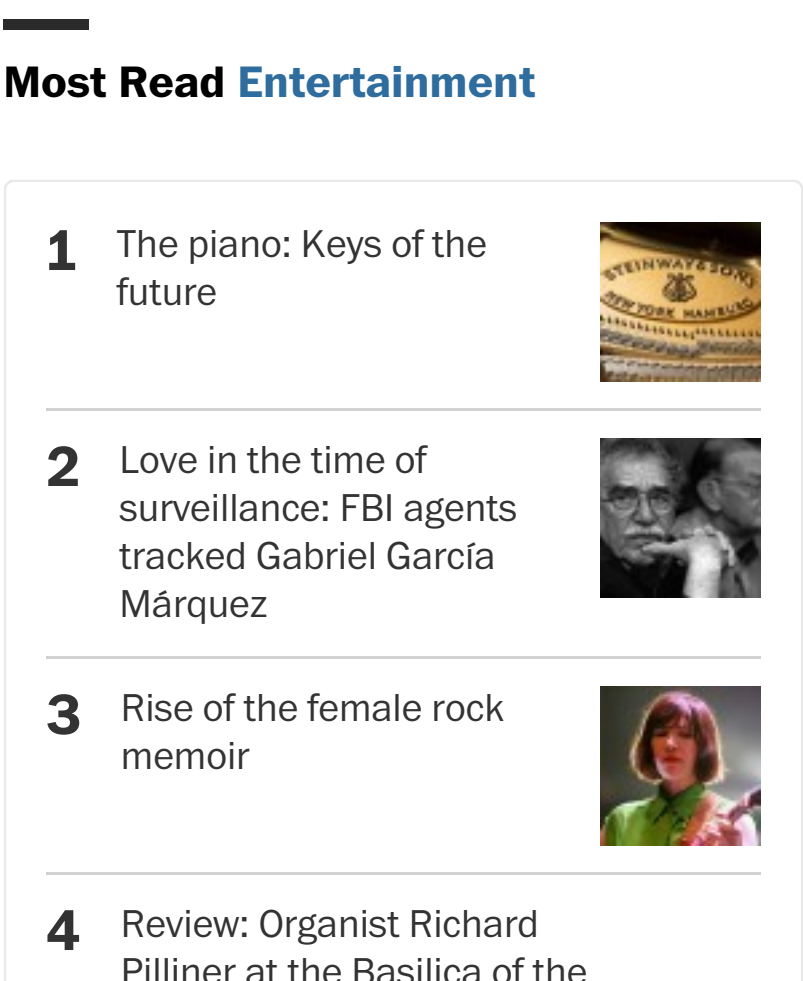
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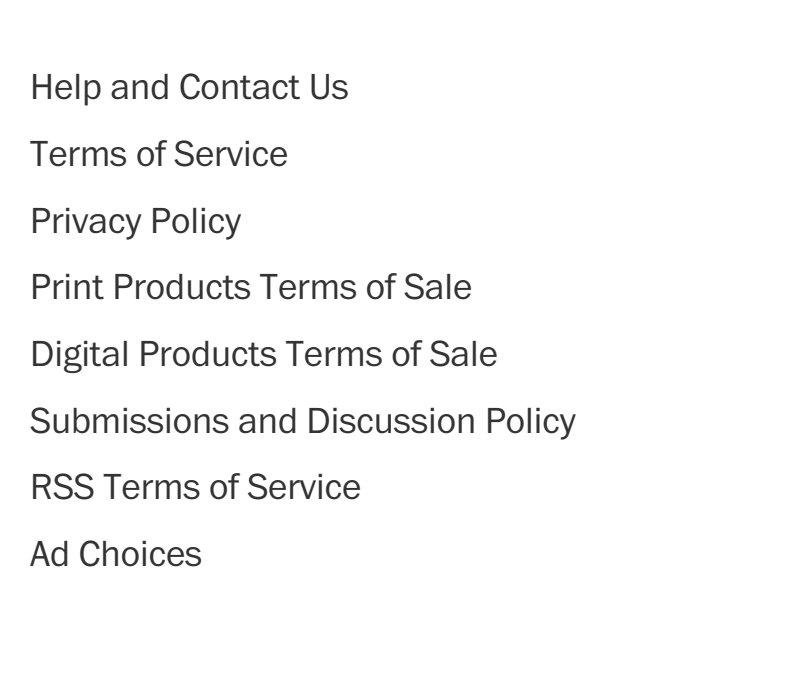
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