

*THE WRONG PATH AND THE RIGHT PATH*

*The role of libraries in access to, and preservation of, cultural heritage*

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*What is happening to the human record in this “age of information?”*

Writing was invented at least eight millennia ago. We have, in that period, amassed an almost uncountable store of texts (often accompanied by images) that constitutes the largest and most important part of the human record—that storehouse of the thoughts of the dead and living that transcends space and time. That store of texts has increased exponentially since the introduction of printing to the Western world five centuries ago. The Western printed codex (“the book”) is important not primarily because of its intrinsic value but because it has proven to be the most effective means of both disseminating *and* preserving the textual content of the human record. Texts have always been contained in other formats (hand-written on paper, vellum, or scrolls, scratched on papyrus and palm leaves, incised in stone or on clay, stamped on metal, as microform images, created digitally, etc.) but none of these methods can compare to the book in both dissemination and preservation—particularly when we are thinking about long complex texts. However, it must be emphasized that it is *texts* that are important not the carrier in which they are contained. We call believers in the great monotheistic religions “People of the Book,” but they would be more accurately called “People of the Text.”

The existence of these texts and, increasingly, other manifestations of the human record, led to a community of learning that transcended national boundaries centuries before the much-vaunted commercial globalization of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Long before we lived under the shadow of post-moral, transnational companies and people all over the world felt the effects of modern globalization; there was a global community of scholars and learners united in their search for truth and wisdom in the human record to which the great libraries of the world gave access. The chief allegiance of that community was to learning and the search for truth, not the narrowness of feudal or national entities. In many ways, that community of learning and research is still with us—aided, in many cases, by modern technological innovations that, paradoxically, are seen by some as threatening the culture of learning in which that community is rooted.

The backdrop to this paper is the intellectual struggle that is going on as computers dominate many aspects of our lives and, in the opinion of many, are transforming not only our physical lives for good or ill, but our mental lives as well. The most extreme version of this opinion can be found in the writings of those who theorize intense interactions between humans and machines to the point at which they fuse and become a single entity. The founder of “cybernetics,” Norbert Wiener warned about this line of thought as long ago 1950.<sup>i</sup> He wrote

*They [communication machines] have even shown the existence of a tremendous possibility of replacing human behavior, in many cases in which the human being is slow and ineffective ... To those of us who are engaged in constructive research and in invention, there is a serious moral risk of aggrandizing what we have accomplished. To the public, there is an equally serious moral risk of supposing that, in stating new potentials of fact, we scientists and engineers are thereby justifying and even urging their exploitation at any costs.*

Wiener goes on to protest against all inhuman uses of human beings, all systems in which humans are subjugated and reduced to the status of an automaton—“...effectors for a supposedly higher nervous system.”<sup>ii</sup> Though Wiener was concerned with communication theory and human-machine interaction, these comments and others in his book are an indictment of the anti-humanistic aspects of scientific management (of which more later).

In all the current chatter and unthinking acceptance of statements about “ages of information,” “post-modern societies,” etc. we can see the fissures in modern thought that have commoditized information on one side and recorded knowledge on the other; the consumer and infotainment culture on one side and the culture of learning and reflection on the other; mind control, censorship, and conformity on the one hand and freedom of thought and enquiry on the other; profit-driven information technology and scientific management on the one side and humanism, unfettered creativity, and spirituality on the other. In many ways, one side of the debate is dominated by

individualistic materialism, in which the driving forces are possessions, access to “information” and entertainment to make the individual physically comfortable in a society that, paradoxically, exacts the price of conformity for these desired things. The other side is dominated by self-realization through learning—a true individualism that, again paradoxically, is often expressed in service to society and a belief in the greater good.

One important feature of this contest of values is the devaluation of reading and of the print culture of which it is a part on the part of those who espouse the side of materialism. Though almost everyone agrees that literacy is important to children, the sub-text of discussions about the digitization of books, the “inevitable dominance” of e-books, etc., is that sustained reading of complex texts is not a necessary part of mature life in an “information age.” As I have said before, I am wedded to “the book” only because it is demonstrably the best format for both sustained reading and for the preservation of the textual part of the scholarly human record. If another format were to be shown to be superior on both counts, I would embrace it. After all, it is the fixed, authentic text as created by its author that is of central importance, not the carrier of that text. My devotion to the text is transcendent, my devotion to the book utilitarian.

Lest you might think that literacy is simply a tool of learning and not at the heart of a civilization and way of life, just consider these casually come-

upon words from a review of a book about the career of former Italian prime minister Berlusconi:

*The narrative traces the descent from the idealism and intelligence of a print-based culture into a world in which personality, celebrity, money, and media control are the driving forces*<sup>xiii</sup>

This quotation is a graphic illustration of the extent and results of the slide (in this case in Italy, but in all Western countries) away from a culture rooted in reading and learning—a development that has affected us all and situated us in a post-modern world of a-literacy and illiteracy, the exaltation of faith over reason and the visual over the textual, and belief that transient “information” is more important than enduring knowledge. It is comparatively easy to list the numerous developments in the last 30 years or so that have brought us to this point—the ubiquity of television and personal computers; the rise of an “infotainment” culture fuelled by technology; the abandoning of the teaching of reading, writing, grammar in favor of self-expression and *faux* literacies; the egalitarian impulse in revolt against canons; the anomie and alienation of lonely crowds; sound-bite political culture, etc. It is much harder to see whether these are passing phenomena or the entwined causes and symptoms of a massive change in our societies, priorities, ways of living, educational systems, public discourse, and values comparable to such

watersheds as the spread of printed texts in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or the industrial revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I think that none of this need be the case. I believe that there is a wide range of cultural and educational institutions (including libraries) that can unite to promote learning and literacy in the face of the slide into infotainment and vacuity. I propose here to describe the present state of, and challenges to, libraries; urge a turning away from two alien systems that dominate much contemporary library discourse and practice; to talk about the nature of cultural heritage and the role of digital documents in that heritage; and to propose a coming together of cultural institutions to take the right path to the future.,

*What is happening to libraries in this “information age”?*

The following words were written in the late 1940s:

*Out of this past has come what we may call the library faith. It is a fundamental belief, so generally accepted as to be often left unsaid, in the virtue of the printed word, the reading of which is good in itself, and upon the preservation of which so many basic values in our civilization rest.<sup>iv</sup>*

If one were to base one's understand of the role of libraries on articles appearing in contemporary professional journals, one would have to conclude that the library faith in reading and preoccupation with reading is a thing of the past in a library environment dominated by innovative uses of technology and the application of business management theories.

The eminent library historian and educator Wayne Weigand has pointed out that the common misconception that libraries are part of the world of information is upside down. In particular, Professor Weigand argues the importance of the library as an institution and physical place central to the promotion of culture (in particular, through reading), social interaction, and for the building and exchange of social capital.<sup>v</sup> The truth is that information is part of the world of libraries, not *vice versa*. Further, libraries have concerns that are more complex and important than the storing and imparting of information. Once one embraces this idea of the library and its role, one can see that library work and services go beyond any particular communication technology, though technology is clearly a central tool in achieving some of the library's objectives. To put it simply, libraries are concerned primarily with the messages that constitute the human record and only secondarily with the medium by means of which messages are transmitted. Once this concept is accepted, the library is clearly seen to be a part of the general context of the history of human cultural evolution and learning and in the context of the societal institutions that promote education, learning, social cohesion, and the higher aspirations of humankind.

### *The wrong path*

The following is recent news about a library in San Francisco, California:

*The San Francisco Maritime Museum's library, which has the largest and best collection of materials on ships and the sea on the Pacific Coast, will be closed to the public, except by appointment only, effective Oct. 1. That means people will have to make an appointment to look through the library's huge collection of maritime lore -- including 32,000 books, a collection on whaling, volumes of sea shanties and more than 900 oral history interviews. Now the library, which has been open five days a week since it was founded 47 years ago, will rely less on face-to-face contact with library users and researchers and more on the Internet. The decision was made by Kate Richardson, superintendent of the maritime park, who said the changes were necessary for financial reasons and because of changing times. "Every library in the world is facing moving the library to the 21st century," she said. Using the Internet, she said, "is how people do research today."<sup>vi</sup>*

Could there be a more concise expression of the cosmic misunderstanding of the role of libraries than this last statement? Let us leave aside the fact that closing a library and restricting its services is hardly “moving the library to the 21<sup>st</sup> century” and concentrate on the statement “using the internet is how people do research today.” There was a time when the word “research” meant “critical and exhaustive research or experimentation having as its aim the discovery of new facts” or interpretations.<sup>vii</sup> “Research” today often means little more than locating random snippets using a search engine. This mass delusion—that one can do serious research using the internet by way of search engines—adversely affects public policy and attitudes toward libraries and other cultural institutions.

Libraries and librarians took a wrong path in the period between the late 1960s and the late 1980s. The consequences for libraries, library education, and the future of librarianship have been both profound and malign. That wrong path taken was the embrace of, and domination by, two systems—scientific management and computer based information technology—that are, ultimately, antithetical to the enduring values and mission of libraries. I say they are antithetical because the things their proponents and adherents value—speed, efficiency, the bottom line, information rather than knowledge—are not the primary aims of libraries and libraries, any more than they are the primary aims of a vast range of cultural institutions with which libraries should be aligned and whose values we share. There is an alternative to the wrong path—it lies with those cultural institutions and in seeing computerization and management as what they are—tools that can, if they are put in their place, be useful in furthering the aims of libraries but should never be allowed to be the main drivers of librarianship.

I have proposed a definition of librarianship that is centered on the human record—that vast assemblage of messages and documents (textual, visual, sound, and symbolic) in all formats created by humans since the invention of written and visual communication millennia ago. Given that focus, librarianship is seen as the field of those professionals:

- who assemble and give access to selected sub-sets of the human record (library collections—tangible and intangible);
- who organize and list those sub-sets so that they can be retrieved;
- who give help and instruction in the use of the human record;
- who work to ensure that the records of the sub-sets of the human record for which they responsible are integrated in order to allow universal access to the whole human record; and
- who are dedicated to the preservation and onward transmission of the human record.

This wide definition stands in stark contrast to the narrow attitudes of those in this field whose thinking is dominated by materialism, management theory, and information technology—all attitudes and cultures that are inimical to the mission and goals of libraries.

The era of scientific management and the rise of information technology had their origins in the immediate post-World War II period (1945 onward) but both came into their own in the US in the late 1960s. An examination of the 1967-69 and 1970-71 volumes of *Library literature*<sup>viii</sup> reveals the first glimmerings of both in the world of libraries. Neither *scientific management* nor *information technology* were index terms in those volumes but articles on each are to be found under related topics. For example, a book and a conference paper on systems analysis in university libraries<sup>ix</sup> appeared under *College and university*

*libraries—administration* but were surrounded by many other papers, etc., on pre-scientific management topics and genres such as organization structures, personnel, and case studies. The same goes for a provocatively titled article on management theory and the public library that appeared in London in 1971.<sup>x</sup> Similarly, Henriette Avram's seminal report on the MARC pilot project<sup>xi</sup>--a milestone in library automation—can be found in the same volume as a host of other contributions indexed under such headings as *Computers; Information services, scientific and technical; Automation of library processes; and Information retrieval—technology*. The vast majority of these papers, etc., was concerned with pre-information technology topics such as scientific and technical data; automated language processing; automated cataloguing, acquisitions, and circulation systems; and the use of computers in national bibliographies. The first glimmerings of scientific management and information technology can be seen in a few entries in the *Library literature* of more than 35 years ago. However, the overwhelming impression is of both management ideas and computers and other technologies (the 1967-69 volume contains an entry under *Electric erasers*) being perceived as tools that would make the libraries of the period more effective in delivering service rather than either being perceived as revolutionary, as changing the nature of libraries and librarianship or, indeed, being the primary driving forces of libraries and librarianship.

The scientific management or business approach to libraries is largely based on unexamined assumptions. Just as the unexamined life is not worth living,<sup>xii</sup> so a major movement in librarianship that is driven by unexamined assumptions results in a hollowness and dissatisfaction all the more acute for being undefined. Here is a statement from a recent book giving the entire justification for the book based on layers of such unexamined assumptions:

*... libraries are not exactly in competition with each other for survival in a global marketplace. So what is driving this pervasive, if not perverse focus on the customer? The answer may be that libraries, too, are beginning to recognize that customers have choices for their information needs and that some of these choices are drawing customers away from the library in increasing numbers, and perhaps for good. The Internet and its almost unlimited potential, mindless convenience, and ultra-cheap (if not free) access, looms large as a competitive information resource.<sup>xiii</sup>*

I give this one example as a surrogate for countless texts on management of libraries in an “information age,” and as a useful illustration of an entire, increasing dominant, and seldom challenged way of thinking. It starts with the assumption that there is a parallel between libraries (and other non-profit enterprises) and commercial entities in a global marketplace, when the values and mission of the first could not be more different from those of the second. It goes on to characterize library users as “customers” (because of that false parallel) bent on satisfying their “information needs.” Libraries are not and have never been primarily about “information” and to characterize them as

such has two negative consequences. The first and the more obvious is that the concentration on information ignores the role the library as place at the heart of communities; as custodian of and gateway to the human record; as essential parts of the literacy movement; and as teaching institutions. The second is that the concentration on “information,” “customers” and the like makes the application of scientific management plausible. Thus, reductionism is allied with business jargon to shrink the historic roles of libraries to the status of a shop. This library “shop” is moreover one with a single commodity—information—and in competition with other shops offering the same commodity who may lure its “customers” away forever. Here we can see clearly that the twin concentrations on “information” and digitized records to the exclusion of wider realities such as learning, knowledge, and the vast amount of the human record that is not in digital form, and is unlikely to be so in any useful way, is a narrow exercise resulting in an abdication of the many other functions of the library.

### *Cultural heritage & the human record*

“Cultural heritage” is a widely used term that refers to all testaments to cultures past and present. It embraces all the works and thoughts made manifest of humans and human societies and groups. The following statements issued by the Cultural Section of UNESCO delineate the expansive and expanding definition of cultural heritage.

*Having at one time referred exclusively to the monumental remains of cultures, heritage as a concept has gradually come to include new categories such as the intangible, ethnographic, or industrial heritage. ... This is due to the fact that closer attention is now being paid to humankind, the dramatic arts, languages and traditional music, as well as to the informational, spiritual and philosophical systems upon which creations are based. The concept of heritage in our time accordingly is an open one, reflecting living culture every bit as much as that of the past.<sup>xiv</sup>*

All the human creations and ideas referred to in this paragraph are the fit subjects of the work of librarians in connection with professionals from other cultural institutions (see below). UNESCO's Cultural Section goes on to discuss the role of libraries in cultural heritage and the perils that menace that role.

*The documentary heritage deposited in libraries and archives constitutes a major part of the collective memory and reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. Yet that memory is fragile. A considerable proportion of the world's documentary heritage is disappearing due to "natural" causes: paper affected by acid and crumbling to dust, and leather, parchment, film and magnetic tape being attacked by light, heat, damp or dust. The first and most urgent need is to ensure the preservation, using the most appropriate means, of documentary heritage of world significance and to promote that of the documentary heritage of national and regional importance. It is just as important to make this heritage accessible to as many people as possible, using the most appropriate technology, whether inside or outside the countries of its location.<sup>xv</sup>*

This general statement about the fragility of the documentary human record is then particularized to cover digital documents.

*More and more of the entire world's cultural and educational resources are being*

*produced, distributed and accessed in digital form rather than on paper. Born-digital heritage available on-line, including electronic journals, World Wide Web pages or on-line databases, is now an integral part of the world's cultural heritage. However, digital information is subject to rapid technical obsolescence or decay. ... The need to safeguard this new form of indexed heritage calls for international consensus on its storage, preservation and dissemination. Such principles should seek to adapt and extend present measures, procedures, legal instruments and archival techniques.<sup>xvi</sup>*

- We face many issues and problems in thinking about the preservation of digital documents and resources—especially those that were created and only exist in digital form. The problems are immense and growing—they include rapid changes in technology resulting in obsolescence
- our inability to differentiate easily between the substantial minority of digital resources that are of enduring value and the majority of digital documents that are of local, transient, or no value at all
- the fact that the millions of digital documents and resources are uncatalogued and even unmapped and difficult to retrieve and identify in any satisfactory manner
- the vast sums that would be need to create and maintain digital archives
- the inherent mutability and fragility of the digital documents themselves.

No one agency and class of institution can possibly resolve these issues—it will take coherent and cooperative action by all cultural institutions of the kind that I outline below.

### ***Preservation and onward transmission***

The term “cultural heritage” contains within it a clear implication—that of onward transmission. The word “heritage” means something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor. In order for that generational transfer to take

place, the item of cultural heritage must be recorded and preserved. Something that has only transient existence—a dance, the singing of a bard, a religious ritual—cannot be transmitted (i.e., cannot form part of a heritage) if it is not described or recorded in some manner that ensures the accurate transmission of the event. Take the case of the, unfortunately, large number of languages that are in danger of extinction. After the last speaker of such a language is dead, we can only depend on texts, transcriptions, or recordings of speech in that language for it to remain part of the cultural patrimony of the world.

For these reasons, I am concerned, for the purposes of this paper and the thesis that I wish to propound, only with those aspects of the cultural heritage that are tangible or have been recorded. This definition embraces all kinds of text (printed, digital, and otherwise), sound-recordings, film and video recordings, still images (art works, photographs, prints, etc.), created three-dimensional objects (sculptures, etc.), multi-media works, and all other “documents” created, recorded, or treated as such by humans.<sup>xvii</sup> This definition purposely does not comprehend those aspects of cultural heritage that are not recorded or otherwise made tangible. In particular, an oral culture (its traditions, rituals, and a host of other intangible events) can only be studied, organized, preserved and made accessible if the parts of it are recorded in some form or another (tape-recordings, transcriptions, choreographies, film, etc.).

### *The right path*

I have mentioned the wrong path that I believe libraries have taken in the past decades and now would like to offer a right path that is available to us and will provide us with allies within a shared culture that will enable libraries to flourish and prosper. Our destiny does not lie with the culture of materialism, of information and the technology associated with the cult of information, or of the doctrines of cost-efficiency espoused by theorists of scientific management. It lies in working with the great range of cultural institutions that are concerned with the organization, preservation, onward transmission of the human record—that vast manifestation of cultural heritage in all its many recorded forms. The policies and procedures of all these bodies and institutions are similar to the policies and procedures of libraries in that they play a part in:

- working with elements of the human record and of our common cultural heritage
- furthering the use of the human record by fostering culture and learning and the creation of new contributions to the human record, and
- are dedicated to the preservation of all aspects of cultural heritage and the onward transmission of the human record.

The institutions, bodies, and groups with which libraries should ally themselves and form structures based on communities of interest include the following (examples are taken from the *Europa World of learning*<sup>xviii</sup>).

- **Archives.** These important institutions contain manuscript and printed texts, sound recordings, films & videorecordings, still images, artefacts, and realia. They can relate to events, persons, institutions, places, and any other subject and can consist of one form of communication (for example, the *National Photographic Archive* in Dublin, Ireland) or of many forms of material (for example the *City of Westminster Archives and Local History Centre* in London). In either event, many archival procedures and policies, though they may differ in detail from those of libraries, are based on the same general approach to such matters as selection, cataloguing, access, and preservation. Therefore, archives are a fruitful area, already characterized by cooperation with libraries, for the new orientation I propose.
- **Museums:** Museums are institutions “devoted to the procurement, care, and display of objects of lasting interest or value.”<sup>xix</sup> Those “objects” can be man made (artefacts of all kinds), documents, or found objects such as stones, gems, and fossils. Museums can be general (testifying to the history of entire civilizations); national; regional, and local or they can be devoted to a particular topic or person. Examples of

the vast range of museums include the *Troubridge Gorge Museum* in Shropshire, England, which documents the early history of the Industrial Revolution; the *National Archaeological Museum* in Sofia, Bulgaria; and, the *Museo della civiltà romana*, in Rome, which documents the history of that city. The chief overlap, in a practical sense, between museums and libraries are the collections each have of textual material. More broadly, each is concerned with selection, cataloguing, access, and preservation of the documents and objects with which they are concerned and with the interaction of their collections in presenting and preserving the cultural heritage of humankind.

- **Art galleries and institutes:** These institutions are, in a sense, specialized museums that concentrate on works of art (products of the fine arts—paintings, prints, sculptures, ceramics, etc.—in which the primary meaning is aesthetic rather than the conveying of knowledge) from all ages and all cultures. Examples include the *Wallace Collection* in London, which contains many *objet's d'art* as well as paintings from Western Europe; the *National Art Gallery* in Sofia, Bulgaria, which contains both modern Bulgarian art and icons and other ecclesiastical art; and the *Louisiana Museum of Modern Art* in Humlebæk, Denmark, which contains modern Danish and international art. The overlap with museums and libraries/archives in the broad context of cultural heritage

is obvious. Again, we can see the common activities of selection, cataloguing, access, and preservation, this time applied to art works, but existing on the same moral plane as other cultural institutions and with the same impulses and mission.

The core of any grand plan for alliances devoted to the preservation of the human record and advancing cultural heritage issues around the central tasks of selection, cataloguing, access, and preservation consists of libraries, archives, museums and art galleries. However, other institutions, though less directly concerned, may have a role to play.

- **Learned societies and Research institutes.** Though these associations and institutions are not primarily concerned with collecting documents and objects that contain or convey knowledge or aesthetic pleasure, they are concerned with studying aspects of the arts and sciences and, in many cases, with creating new knowledge that, when documented becomes part of the human record and our common cultural heritage. To take but a handful of the tens of thousands of learned societies, Britain's *Ancient Monuments Society*; the *Bulgarian Philologist's Society* in Sofia, Bulgaria; the *Japanese Institute of Landscape Architecture* in Tokyo; and the *Italian Institute of Human Palaeontology* in Rome all publish learned journals, maintain libraries, and facilitate the study of the particular branch of learning with which they are concerned. Because of these activities and

preoccupations, they are natural allies in seeking a unified approach to cultural heritage, as are the many research institutes such as the *British Textile Technology Group*; the *Institute for Thracian Studies* in Sofia, Bulgaria; and the Danish *National Institute of Social Research* in Copenhagen.

- **Performing groups.** Some aspects of cultural heritage are only fully realized through performance—dance, music, drama, etc. In order to be added to the human record, such performances must be recorded in some way, but performance is a necessary pre-condition of such recording. For that reason, performing groups and the institutions that make their work possible are important factors in the advancement of cultural heritage. These groups and bodies include opera houses, dance companies, orchestras, bands, performing arts centers, and their allied associations.

I repeat that, in rejecting the dominance of information technology and scientific management, I am not saying that libraries and the networks of cultural institutions of which I wish them to be a part should eschew taking advantage of computers as tools and digitization as a strategy, nor am I saying that good management practices should be rejected, as long as all are seen and employed in a humanistic context and a culture of learning. What I am saying is that the complex of cultural institutions should embrace a mission of

ensuring the survival of the human record and of the testaments to the past that make up our common cultural heritage.

What I call for are cooperative bi-lateral and multi-lateral structures and agreements (including the framing and adoption of shared standards, policies, and procedures) between libraries and the cultural institutions listed above. These structures and agreements would be aimed at pooling resources and harnessing energy and expertise to achieve common goals, especially the overarching goal of the organization, preservation, and onward transmission of the human record and the cultural heritage that it embodies. They would exist at all levels—international, regional (geographic and linguistic), national, province/state, and local.

No less than the future of a civilization based on learning is at stake. Libraries have a choice. We can continue to be inward-looking and decline into insignificance by following the materialistic, mechanistic path of “information” and management, or we can work with the cultural institutions that are our natural allies to create expansive structures in which knowledge and learning can flourish and the preservation and onward transmission of cultural heritage is assured.

Thank you.

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