

New Libraries: Reading Rooms à la Carte The Pforzheimer Lecture, University of Texas at Austin—12 February 1998

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Some of the issues facing libraries, especially for large libraries like the British Library are discussed. The future role of library buildings, books and original manuscripts are considered in the context of the Internet and the digital age. The “electronic library” will be a co-operative resource shared among librarians, publishers and users to supply simple, flexible and practical solutions.

The relationship between the Harry Ransom Center and the British Library is a very close one. Tom Staley is a close friend of ours, and both sets of colleagues pay frequent visits to one another. Our collecting interests are very close to one another, and taken together our holdings of English literary manuscripts are without parallel. As a resource for scholars it is vital that we work together and do our best to offer what should be an almost seamless ability to gain access to the great literary treasures in our care. One way of achieving this has been through exhibitions. We were very pleased to lend to your 1996 exhibit on theater, called “Shouting in the Evening.” The British Library loaned some of its Rattigan, Pinter, and Tynan material.

My talk is called “New Libraries: Reading Rooms à la Carte.” You might think that this title is so broad as to let me talk about almost anything relating to libraries. I will confess that this was pretty much my intention! But what I do want to talk about, in a fairly discursive way, if you will forgive this, are some of the issues facing libraries, especially very large libraries like the one I run in Britain, as we face what is literally an information revolution. I want to talk about why we need library buildings despite the Internet, why we need original manuscripts despite digitization; but also how it is that the new technologies now available to libraries can be so rewarding and useful, providing we exploit them and they don’t exploit us. While I will spend quite a bit of time discussing events and issues at the British Library, I am absolutely confident that those events and issues have meaning for all libraries in the developed world.

The British Library is undergoing a period of change. The nature of this change, and its extent, and the way this is affecting both staff and library users can be quite dramatic. Let me give an example.

On a Saturday afternoon in October 1997, we closed the famous Round Reading Room in the building we have been sharing for so many years with the British Museum. It was a very emotional occasion. The Round Reading Room, after all, has been regarded as one of the great shrines of scholarship and learning. It was opened in 1857, with a champagne party, and since then a host of writers now regarded as great people have worked there—Marx, Lenin, Dickens, Shaw, Thackeray, Wilde, Eliot . . . I could go on and on.

The closing event saw a number of people in tears—staff as well as readers. We had about four hundred people crowded together under the massive dome, but when I called for a few moments' silence, so that we could recall for ourselves the great works of imagination and scholarship which had been produced there, the silence that followed was profound. While libraries are popularly associated with silence, we who work in them know them better as bustling, buzzing spaces. But the silence that Saturday afternoon in central London, in the famous Round Reading Room of the British Library, was real, and very moving. And afterwards we had a really good party, with readers and staff all enjoying themselves, despite the sadness of the occasion.

We closed that reading room because we were moving to a new building quite close nearby, at St. Pancras. The first reading room there opened in November 1997 and has been regarded so far as a great success. We take considerable assurance that the new building represents a vote of confidence by the British government in the notion of libraries as buildings. It is the biggest public building to be constructed in Britain this century and the most expensive, at £511m., ever.

The messages about new library buildings, with reading rooms and storage space, are fundamental ones. The United Kingdom is not alone in opening a new capital city library. France and Germany have also just done so, and so recently did Malaysia. Denmark is about to. Governments, no matter how much we complain that they underfund us, obviously believe in libraries and are willing to make capital investments in them.

All right, so there may be substantial elements of national pride and monumentalism involved, but there is nothing necessarily wrong with those, and let us not complain *too* indiscriminately about underfunding. In Britain, at any rate, *all* public bodies are having their government support cut, and libraries are by no means being singled out.

Shortage of money, alas, is very much a part of the environment within which we work, and while there are steps we can take to improve our

financial position, by being more entrepreneurial and ensuring that our costs are kept to a minimum, there is an extent to which we have to accept that the government tap is flowing less freely.

The other big message from the new building projects is that libraries still need reading rooms. But I will come back to that. All I wanted to say at this stage was that when we closed the Round Reading Room, the British Library's period of real change, of truly ushering in the future, had begun. The expression "end of an era" is an overused one, but it applied accurately to that event, with its thirty seconds of silence, that November afternoon.

To understand the future, we have to understand the present. It is worth considering the nature of the environment within which we are operating. In addition, that is, to the shortage of money.

One of the most obvious of all the pervasive changes affecting us and the way we work is globalization. We operate in a social system made up of political, economic, cultural, and other variables, but which encompasses more of the world than ever before. There are examples of globalization at many levels. One is the "global brand." Coca Cola is the classic example and another one is Nike, the sportswear manufacturer, whose logo is identifiable everywhere.

There are also global personalities. Again, there is an obvious one, and she is Diana, Princess of Wales. The global nature of the emotion and news coverage immediately following her death was unprecedented. No other figure had ever before been the subject of such instant international attention. Her funeral was watched on television by over one billion people.

The English language is now global in its "reach." We are very fortunate to have been born, as I would guess virtually all of us here this evening have been born, native-English speakers. English is the lingua franca of international librarianship, and I for one find that it is possible to travel in most countries of the world and get by in English.

Globalization is an aspect of, but is also fed by, the second major wave of change which I wish to emphasize, the information revolution. I will not even bother to quote the statistics about the growth of the Internet, because you all know about its staggering expansion. In Britain 28% of households have personal computers. In Japan the figure is over 36%. I find it astonishing to think that Thomas Watson, one of the founders of IBM, said in 1943, "I think there is a world market for about five computers." Communication across this great network of hardware gets easier and easier. We must not leave out the mass media from this information deluge, and it is, again, an illustration of globalization that there is now a clockwork radio on the market, for use in isolated areas without access to batteries, let alone direct sources of electrical power.

The information revolution, then, may be taken to mean the twin phenomena of the widening range of techniques for producing, storing, and communicating information, and the widening of access to the equipment necessary to create it and gain access to it.

The amount of information being produced is now almost frightening in scale. Electronic publishing and the production of information by electronic means are growing very rapidly. By the end of the century, we can expect that there will be well over a thousand research-oriented, priced, electronic journals available on the Web, and more through standard negotiated site licensing schemes.

And on top of all that, more books are being published than ever before. In 1986 in Britain, the number of new book titles published exceeded one hundred thousand for the first time. At the British Library we take in eight thousand new items, including more than just books, every day. Our collection of printed books alone grows by more than eight miles every year. One anecdotal measure of the quantity of information being produced is that the amount of knowledge and information being created in the world at present doubles every five years. A second piece of anecdotal evidence is that of all the scientists who have ever worked in the world, half of them are said to be alive and working today.

This means prodigious output. How does society keep up with the change in information technology and the fact that so much information is being made available on a global scale? The first part of the answer to that question is along the lines that society has not, in fact, kept pace with the information revolution and that the technical revolution has happened more quickly than the intellectual revolution which might be expected to accompany it. There is still enormous suspicion of computers and digital information. There is a group of die-hard British Library readers who hate anything electronic. They told me not so long ago that the British Library should be solely about books and that we should be "making a stand against computers." Now this may strike us as ridiculous and as Luddite, but such attitudes are real and have to be taken account of when we offer library services. At the very least we have to justify to our readers why we need to make huge investments in information technology when they accuse us—often with justification—of not spending enough money on buying books. New information technology may be here to stay, but new technologies have never completely driven out old technologies. The railway and the motorcar have not led to the extinction of the horse. In England today more horses are apparently being ridden now than at any time in history. The difference is that they tend to be ridden now by people having fun. Similarly, the last time I was sailing off the south coast of England I counted over 250 sailing boats around me!

Technological development therefore means not just new ways of doing things, but new choices. We choose how to do things, as well as whether to do them at all. This may be at the very simple level of whether to write a note using a pencil or a fountain pen, or whether to do so on a personal computer. The message can be sent by traditional mail or by e-mail. We continue to use some equipment which is cumbersome and inflexible, where much more appropriate alternatives exist. Why do we still use Roman numerals which are so cumbersome—all those Xs and Ms and Cs and no zero?

The exercise of choice is not necessarily welcomed, or even recognized as such. It is often said—in despair—that children watch too much television. This could be described as a sort of moral panic about the exercise of technological choice. I assume that we want children to acquire information in order to refine skills like reading and calculation, so that they are broadly educated in subjects like history and geography, and achieve a critical faculty as well as an appreciation of the finer products of Western civilization. But who is to argue that these cannot be achieved from watching television rather than just reading books? The achievement of these educational goals can increasingly be assisted by the very wide variety of multimedia products being published for home or school PCs. What children have at their disposal is a wider choice of media through which they can receive information, education, and entertainment.

Libraries have to cater to expectations among users that they can access our collections in an increasing number of ways. Our readers want to exercise choice in how they “visit” us, whatever the term “visit” means. And they have learned about these choices very rapidly.

An example to bear in mind is printing, which took just fifty years to infiltrate the entire west. Gutenberg invented printing with movable type in the mid-1450s. By 1500 the number of printed books in existence was perhaps ten times greater than the number of manuscripts. The handwritten manuscript had become as good as obsolete by the end of the fifteenth century.

The real impact was in written knowledge being made available to many more people. Ordinary people could afford texts which previously only a nobleman could acquire. One estimate is that an illuminated manuscript of the Bible cost the equivalent of three years’ rent from a fair-sized estate. Even with the advent of printing, the church attempted in several countries to control access to the Bible through insisting that it be published exclusively in Latin, which only the highly educated, meaning only the rich and powerful, could read. The senior management of the Church in England recognized the combination of the English language and printing as a force which would erode their position of power.

Translating the Bible into English was in effect punishable by death. In 1536 William Tyndale was burnt at the stake not only for daring to translate the New Testament into English but also for having it printed. Tyndale described his mission to a fellow scholar. In modern English this would have read “before too many years are out, I will enable a ploughboy to know more of the Scriptures than you.” His objective was to widen access to a key text.

This lively sense of the potency of information has not faded. Bill Gates says that the World Wide Web’s most striking and exciting attribute is its ability to get basic information into peoples’ hands, no matter where they might be. Several people have remarked on the significance of the availability of information for democracy and accountability. Access to the Web, either for posting or reading information, is very difficult to control. Some East Asian governments are trying to exercise control, but at least one of them has given up, admitting—hardly surprisingly—that what amounts to censorship for every item on the Web is impossible.

What does all this say about libraries and librarians? We must first examine the basic mission of libraries, which in my view is to acquire, catalogue, and store information, and to make it available where and when it is required. I do not believe that the information revolution will change this mission. New ways of doing things allow us to carry out this mission in new ways, more quickly, and on a much larger scale. Those new techniques let us make information available much more readily, wherever it is required, beyond the confines of a particular library building. But the basic mission itself does not change.

The technological revolution is not making running libraries less expensive. I am sure we all now laugh when we recall the promises which were made in the 1970s that computerization would cut costs, especially by requiring fewer staff. As it happens, I think we do require fewer people than we would have needed had new information technology not been available. The fact that we use more people now is partly a function of the huge increase in the volume of information which libraries have to deal with. Cataloguing today is quicker and more straightforward. But we need more people because there is so much more to catalogue.

And there has certainly been no substantial migration away from the book. Not only are books continuing to be produced as print on paper, many of us, national libraries in particular, have substantial historical collections which still need preservation in suitable book stacks. New information technology has not done away with the need to store collections safely. There is no way in which I could be persuaded to digitize Magna Carta, or the first folios of William Shakespeare’s plays, and then throw away the originals. As far as long-term preservation of digital

materials is concerned, there are substantial fears about the longevity of, say, CD-ROMs. And as information is carried and stored on continually changing new formats, are we to go on transferring information from one carrier to another, or become museums of information hardware, to be sure of being able to read information stored on obsolete equipment? Another irony, again, is that possibly the only absolutely certain way of ensuring the long-term preservation of digital material is to download all of it onto paper and store it all somewhere in a vast underground bunker. Say what you will about old technology. High-quality print on high quality-paper, if properly cared for, will last just about forever.

So we still need our reading rooms as well! This is in spite of our all being told that library reading rooms are becoming obsolete and that soon there will be no need for researchers to visit the library for information, because so much is available down the line. I was told many times that the British Library's new building would be out of date before it was complete, because information is now available digitally. As I have said, though, storing books continues to be one of our tasks, and so is making them available in reading rooms. There will always be a primary mission for libraries in providing original sources to readers in reading rooms. For some kinds of research, a surrogate will just not do. Copyright law does not allow us to digitize all texts without permission, in any case.

The study of original manuscripts can be essential to a real understanding of the process of literary creativity. We need to see what words and passages James Joyce discarded, and how he replaced them, to understand his thinking behind *Ulysses*. We need to see that Charlotte Bronte deleted the description "soft whispered" and replaced it with "low spoken," which carried more resonantly through the sentence.

The understanding of what was going on in writers' minds can be taken forward in quite ingenious ways. Virginia Woolf wrote two similar letters, sending one to her sister Vanessa and the other to Leonard. Both are in the British Library. They give slightly differing accounts of her state of mind, but our knowledge of Virginia Woolf's ultimate torment was taken forward by Pantheon Fisher, a researcher from Louisiana, who established the order in which the letters had been sent by looking carefully at the way the letter paper had been folded for putting into the two envelopes, which incidentally we also still have.

But as far as textual analysis of succeeding drafts is concerned, the word processor is destroying the possibility for this. Some writers acknowledge this. We were given, eight years ago, the archive of Edward Upward, who was a close friend of Christopher Underwood and W. H. Auden, and who is still, in his nineties, an active short story writer. He has the lovely habit of sending us his drafts, which he produces on a word

processor, with the instruction that we should “destroy all earlier drafts,” which, of course, we do not, and he is aware that we do not.

Original manuscripts can be great icons, of course, in their own right. Philip Larkin described manuscripts as having “two kinds of value—the magical—and the meaningful.” Who can look without emotion at a manuscript in Jane Austen’s hand? In the British Library we have the draft, in the Duke of Wellington’s own hand, of the official dispatch he wrote to the government in London describing the Battle of Waterloo. It dwells, by necessity, on the great loss of life among the British soldiers, and is marked with stains from Wellington’s tears as he wrote this.

Not long ago, Harold Pinter gave the library a substantial number of his manuscripts. While he was considering this move, my colleague Sally Brown showed him something of our holdings. Pinter can be a silent, brooding, emotionless person. But when Sally produced Wilfred Owen’s working draft of the sonnet “Anthem for Doomed Youth” he shed tears, saying “this is one of the most moving moments of my life.” He told us that when he was a boy he used to ride his bicycle daily past the British Museum. He had no idea that in due course his manuscripts would rest alongside those of Owen and D. H. Lawrence.

Such manuscripts are a large part of our national and intellectual heritage. It is a key responsibility for libraries to care for them properly and make them available for scholarship. New technology can do little to displace the reading rooms in which literary manuscripts are consulted.

In London, we have given quite a lot of thought to the ways in which the British Library’s new reading rooms might be used, and we commissioned a piece of research to give us a better understanding of the impact of new technology on them. The outcome of this research was the unequivocal advice that Reading Room use will continue to grow. For one thing, putting an on-line catalogue of holdings on the World Wide Web is exactly equivalent to advertising them. Many more people have access to the British Library’s catalogues—at present sixteen thousand searches are made daily on the Web version—and so will want to turn up at the library to consult items they have discovered in the catalogue. Similarly, on-line catalogue searching is so efficient that researchers identify many more items which they will wish to inspect at first hand. Even when a full text is available on the Internet, the result can be the opposite of what was expected.

Let me give an example. One of my favorite British Library products is known as “The Electronic *Beowulf*.” For those of you who do not know *Beowulf*, it is a 1,000-year-old manuscript, an understanding of which is essential for any knowledge of the way in which the English language has spread and developed. This manuscript has been in the care of the British Library and its predecessors for many centuries, but it was unfortunately

badly damaged by fire 250 years ago. However, the manuscript has recently been digitally scanned. Two goals have been achieved. It is now possible to read substantial pieces of the manuscript which were damaged by fire. It is also possible to decipher passages in which the scribe changed his mind, deleting some words and substituting others. Most exciting of all, *Beowulf* is now on the World Wide Web. Scholars all over the world now have access to *Beowulf* in an edition which is, in many ways, superior to the original, because more of it can be read. In addition, the original need not be damaged by too much handling. What has surprised us, though, is that since *Beowulf* was mounted on the World Wide Web, we have had more requests than ever to see the original in our Reading Room!

To cope with all of this, what kind of “librarian” will we need to train for the future? Indeed, what will the library of the future resemble?

No library can now possibly collect comprehensively. It is already essential for libraries to share their collections. Libraries are giving less emphasis to acquiring information, and more to knowing in which other library a required piece of information may be found. This means that a collection may not necessarily be regarded as being under one single roof. In the future, a librarian will not necessarily be someone who acquires publications and cares for a collection, but a person who helps a researcher to identify where a particular piece of information is located and arranges access to it. In any case libraries even now are no longer judged solely by the quality or size of their collections. We are now judged on how good we are at arranging access to other libraries’ collections, or how good we are at maintaining our catalogues by using records created elsewhere.

The electronic library is well on its way, and the key to the success of the electronic library will be co-operative resource sharing among librarians, publishers, and users to develop simple, flexible, and practical solutions. I have no doubt that traditional and electronic media will continue to sit side by side with one another and that users, in consultation with librarians, will decide which is the more appropriate for a particular purpose.

For any of this to come about, we need to develop a different kind of relationship with the publishers of information, or with whoever holds the rights to the copying or transmission of that information. I believe that there is every sign that librarians and publishers have come a long way to understanding one another’s view. Even over the last couple of years, strides have been made toward working together, which in previous years would have been unthinkable.

One of the British Library’s most comprehensive agreements has been made with Elsevier Science, which now lets us make royalty-paid copies

of journal articles which can then be transmitted to remote users by paper, fax, or controlled electronic document delivery methods. The agreement also allows the library to use bibliographic header and abstract information in its current awareness databases, and, for a small number of titles, the library has a prototype electronic storage system. All of this is intended to benefit remote users. Discussions with another publisher, Chapman & Hall, are aimed at allowing electronic access to their journals to readers in British Library Reading Rooms.

These issues are closely related to the need to ensure comprehensive availability, in the long term, of electronic publications. Only a few countries—the United States is one of them—have passed legislation requiring publishers to deposit electronic publications with their national library, as is required in virtually every country for print publications. We are making some progress with the promotion of new legislation in Britain, but one consequence of the recent election of a new government with an ambitious legislative program is that it is very difficult to secure time in Parliament for a new law to be passed.

As to the future, it is a brave person who is willing to predict exactly what this will look like. I can never forget that in 1927 Henry Warner, of Warner Brothers' film studio, said "Who the hell wants to hear movie actors talk?"

The future is definitely not going to be a bed of roses. There are massive new demands being made on us just as money is getting much tighter. While we are coming to better terms with new technology, new technology is not necessarily going to make life any easier. We certainly must not take the future for granted. For one thing, we have to beware of what I think is a natural conservatism among librarians which leads to a tendency to go on doing things just because we have always done them. What I worry more about, though, are the implications of the information revolution in making us more and more dependent on a vast edifice of hardware, software, machine readable records, search protocols, and so on.

There is a very real way in which this great new edifice not only has a life of its own—and takes huge sums of money to feed—but more importantly, gets between us and the knowledge we are supposed to be caring for. This is not a call against new technology. It is simply a reminder that technology is only a means to an end, and is not an end in itself. This may sound trite and obvious, but it is not always so obvious to nonlibrarians. We need to develop new library products and services when there is a genuine need or demand for them, and not just because the technology exists to make them possible.

I firmly believe that libraries are the most important institutions ever created. If the book is the most potent artifact ever invented by

humankind, then libraries represent and define humanity. Virtually every new invention, virtually every new thought, builds on existing knowledge. That is why librarianship is a key profession. We are the gatekeepers for scholarship, research, learning, and any sort of real understanding of what the world is about. If our libraries are not properly and responsibly run, then the world is in real trouble.