

---

# The Prince's Dream

Detailed notes for a talk given to the Society of College, National and University Libraries at the British Library on Thursday 8 December 2011

Michael Gorman,  
University Librarian Emeritus,  
California State University  
michaelg@csufresno.edu

---

## INTRODUCTION

I was initially reluctant to attempt a talk on the future of academic libraries, not least because there is a vast literature (to misuse a much misused word) on the topic already. At first reluctant, I rapidly became dispirited when I started to survey these dismal tracts. It was evident that the vast majority of the papers concentrated on one, two or three of money, technology and organisation/management. (A minority were just incomprehensible.) I know that we may speak with the tongues of men and angels but, if we have not money, we (in the words of the Scottish philosopher) are all doomed, doomed. If we are, then there is little point in me or anyone else doing anything except, perhaps, cultivating our own gardens. As for technology and organisation/management, these are tools to be used toward ends, they are not ends in themselves. That said, I would like to talk about those ends and the values and beliefs we need to realise them.

## VALUES

Libraries and all not-for-profit endeavours have to have an animating principle to take the place of the bottom line that dominates the private sector. In my view, values (that is, fundamental beliefs or, preferably, convictions) can be that animating principle – the reasons why we do what we do and that justify our working lives and the institutions we serve. Values are, in essence, built on enduring, shared beliefs.

### The meaning of values

A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state

of existence. A value system is an enduring organisation of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.<sup>1</sup>

Note the implicit rejection of 'opposite and converse' values. In other words, to adopt a value is to reject its antitheses.

Nine values (eight of which I advanced in *Our enduring values*<sup>2</sup>): stewardship; service; intellectual freedom; rationalism; literacy and learning; equity of access; privacy; democracy; the greater good.

- The values which libraries must make central to their activities in service of the greater good of individuals and society are SERVICE and STEWARDSHIP, while keeping THE GREATER GOOD in mind.
- Service to individuals, service to communities, and service to humankind (including service to posterity)
  - For university libraries the individuals are students, teachers and researchers (each of which has different needs).
  - Service to humankind in cooperating with other libraries to work toward a national and global system.
- Librarians are stewards of the human record, ensuring that a maximum number of people have access to a maximum amount of recorded knowledge and information, and preserving the human record.
- We should also be stewards of our profession
  - by creating and maintaining strong professional organisation
  - by reforming and strengthening library education – that is, an education that equips its graduates to work in the libraries of today and tomorrow (see 'Core competences', American Library Association<sup>3</sup>).

## A CULTURE CLASH

Academic libraries and the institutions they serve are facing a clash of cultures. I am not referring to the arts vs science clash of F. R. Leavis and C. P. Snow or the clash of civilisations of culture warriors like Samuel Huntington, but to the clash between the culture of learning and the collectivist culture of 'information', of 'the wisdom of the crowds,' 'the hive mind,' cooperative learning, the equality of value of all opinion, and the primacy of information. The culture of learning can be

stated, quite correctly, to be traditional, individualistic, elitist, labour-intensive, expensive and structured. The culture of 'information' can claim to be democratic, modern, technology-based and economical. At one extreme, the former can stand accused of being conservative, in both the narrow and wide definitions of that word. At the other, the latter can lead to the creation of the 'library services' that are very popular in the US today called variously 'information commons' and 'learning commons'. These are based, essentially, on the idea that, if you take an infinite number of students and match them with an infinite number of computers in a place in which the only people with expertise are computer technicians, eventually the students will know all the works of Shakespeare and will have mastered quantum mechanics. In the academy, it has led to the fashionable notion that teaching staff and students should learn together rather than the latter learn from the former. Speaking for myself, I would be reluctant to spend upwards of £9000 a year in fees in order to spend time in classrooms and laboratories with people who do not know any more than I do about the subject in hand.

#### HOW HUMANS LEARN

The ineluctable fact is that human beings learn in only three ways. The oldest form of learning is *from experience and by doing*, a kind of learning that does not necessarily need the academy, though it is employed there. A later form is *learning from people who know more about a subject than you do* – teachers, scholars, wise women, etc. The most recent form is *learning from the records of others*, living and dead, local and distant, that are contained in the totality of the human record. The academy is founded on the idea of those latter two forms of learning, and the academic library primarily on the last, though assistance in the use of the human record and what we used to call 'library instruction' are indisputably valuable forms of teaching.

#### THE DUTY OF LIBRARIES

In these times of confusion of purpose and existential wondering, it is worth reminding ourselves what libraries and librarians are about. In essence, librarianship is the field of those professionals

- who assemble and give access to selected sub-sets of the human record (library collections—tangible and intangible)
- who organise 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 are responsible are integrated in order to allow universal access to the whole human record
- who are dedicated to the preservation and onward transmission of the human record.

We do these things for current users and for future generations.

#### WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE HUMAN RECORD IN THIS 'AGE OF INFORMATION'?

Writing was invented at least eight millennia ago and post-dated the making of images. 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 records of the thoughts, ideas, stories and discoveries of the dead and the 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 (and certainly not because of romantic rubbish about the 'smell of old book,' etc.), but because it has proved 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, etc., and latterly created digitally) 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 emphasised that, ultimately, the texts that are more important than 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 globalisation of the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Long before we lived, as we do now, under the shadow of post-moral, transnational companies and people all over the world felt the effects of modern globalisation, there were

European, Arab and Asian communities of scholars and learners united in a common language (Latin, Arabic, Chinese) 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 those communities was to learning and to the search for truth, not the narrowness of feudal or proto-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 HUMAN RECORD AS PART OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

‘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>4</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 website 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 preser-

vation, 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>5</sup>

This general statement about the fragility of the documentary human record is then particularised 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>6</sup>

We face many issues and problems in thinking about the preservation of digital documents and resources – especially those that were created and exist only 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 value, transient value, or no value at all
- the fact that the millions of digital documents and resources are uncatalogued and even unlisted and, therefore, difficult to identify and retrieve in any satisfactory manner
- the vast sums that would be needed to create and maintain digital archives (where will the Google archive be in 10, 20, 50, 100 years?)
- 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 (not commercial) of the kind that I outline below.

## PRESERVATION AND ONWARD TRANSMISSION

Because the word 'heritage' means something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor, the term 'cultural heritage' contains within it a clear implication – that of onward transmission.

- The human record consists of the documentary components (texts, recorded sound, music, still and moving images, etc.) of the cultural heritage of humankind. (Cultural heritage encompasses everything from languages to building to cuisines to musical heritage and so on.) Libraries support
  - the other components by documenting, e.g. languages, architecture, cuisines, music, art, and by preserving those records
  - by being, in their collections and structures, a significant part of cultural heritage
  - by recognising that they are cultural institutions playing their part in the preservation and onward transmission of our cultural heritage.

## TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT

Modern librarianship has been dominated by digital technology and scientific management, neither of which is marginal but each of which is a tool to an end rather than an end in itself. In recognising this, we should take account of two things:

- Scientific management is especially seductive in times of austerity.
- Too many librarians see digital technology as (a) an end in itself and (b) apocalyptically transformative.

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 theorise 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 as 1950. He wrote

They [communication machines] have even shown the existence of a tremendous possibility of replacing human behaviour, 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 aggrandising 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.<sup>7</sup>

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>8</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.

The scientific management or business approach to libraries is largely based on unexamined assumptions. Just as the unexamined life is not worth living,<sup>9</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 book on library services published in 2001 and 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>10</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, increasingly 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 characterise 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 characterise them as such has two negative consequences. The first and more obvious is that the concentration on information ignores the role the library has a 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 for ever. Here we can see clearly that the twin concentrations on 'information' and digitised 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.

#### **'RESEARCH'**

One manifestation of this reductive understanding is the cheapening of 'research'. 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>11</sup> Today it 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.

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 commoditised information on the one hand 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-realisation 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 digitisation 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'. Here, to illuminate the deemphasising of reading, is a recent quotation from a librarian at Columbia that, I think, speaks for itself:

[She] ... also advised librarians to think about concepts such as how to 'not read' – how to know what's in a book without actually having to read every word. In the humanities, for instance, traditional close reading gives in-depth knowledge of a few books; now digital humanists and others have developed 'distant reading' techniques that depend on mining large groups of texts to find connections and patterns without reading individual works.<sup>12</sup>

#### **THE WAY AHEAD**

Once we recognise management and technology as tools and recognise our special role in relationship to the human record, the correct (and humanistic) path is evident. That path involves

- recognising the strength of digital technology as a tool, improving the library and cultural applications of that tool, and applying it to greater ends
- working closely with, and, in some cases, integrating with allied cultural institutions and associations (archives, museums, art collections, professional bodies, cultural preservation and heritage organisations)
- evolving common practices leading to interchangeability with those institutions
- working toward a unification of cultural institutions based on common practices, codes of practice, common values
- practical collaboration/integration.

Libraries, archives, museums, art galleries and other institutions based on the human record and cultural heritage are all concerned with the artefacts and digital resources for which they are responsible (there is considerable overlap and no fixed borders between these areas). They organise, make available, provide assistance in the use of and preserve those artefacts and digital resources.

- buildings – see the European ‘culture houses’
- collaborative/integrated collection development between libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions
- integration of cataloguing standards and policies – leading to integrated / interactive catalogues
- collaborative preservation/storage/digitisation schemes
- collaborative exhibits/publications/PR-outreach for collective promotion of cultural institutions
- integrated/interactive web presences
- collaboration/integration of professional education – e.g. joint library/museology degrees

Sir Anthony Panizzi, the Prince of Librarians,<sup>13</sup> was the creator of the modern national library. His dream, in the early part of the 19th century, was that of a unified place, of which the library was a vital part, in which all human knowledge could be studied and new knowledge be created. We now have the technological tools and the moral imperative to create such a ‘place’ on a national and global scale. We just need the will and the creative vision to realise the dream.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Milton Rokeach (late sociologist), *The nature of human values* New York: Free Press (1973).
- 2 Gorman, Michael. *Our enduring values*. Chicago: ALA (2000).
- 3 American Library Association, ‘Core competences of librarianship’ at <<http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/final-corecompstat09.pdf>>
- 4 UNESCO. Culture section of website: <[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=2185&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2185&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)>
- 5 UNESCO. Culture section of website: The different types of cultural heritage: <[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL\\_ID=1907&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL_ID=1907&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)>
- 6 UNESCO. *Op. cit.*
- 7 Norbert Wiener, *The human use of human beings*, Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin (1950).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 16
- 9 Socrates
- 10 Peter Herson and John R. Whitman, *Delivering satisfaction and service quality*, Chicago: ALA (2001), p .ix
- 11 Webster’s *Third new international dictionary of the English language*, Springfield, Mass: Merriam Webster (1976L)
- 12 Barbara Rockenback, quoted in Jennifer Howard, ‘New forms of reading and publishing take center stage at Ithaka Conference’, *Chronicle of higher education*, (21 September 2011) <http://chronicle.com/article/New-Forms-of-Reading-and/129104/>
- 13 Edward Miller, *Prince of librarians: the life and times of Sir Anthony Panizzi of the British Museum*, London: Deutsch (1967).