

CONFERENCE

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SESSION 1

THE VALUE OF INFORMATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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THE VALUE OF INFORMATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

National development takes place in a variety of arenas—economic, cultural, educational, health services, etc. Education is an important part of each of these areas of national development. Information (widely defined—I shall return to the question of definition later) is an essential component of the education and training that are vital to all aspects of societal progress. I think that libraries play a key role in the organization and use of information and, hence, in national development. Given this belief, I would like to begin by placing libraries and the broad range of cultural institutions of which they are a part in the wider context of socio-political thought.

Broadly speaking, there are two dominant concepts in modern Western thought—that which is based on individualism, economic Darwinism, and the profit motive and that which is based on subsuming individual interests to the advancement of society. These could be summed up as the individualistic and the altruistic strains of thought and they are both present in each of us as they are in society as a whole. Individual human beings behave in accordance with whichever balance between gratifying their own desires and doing good for others that they have managed to achieve. Both concepts embrace the centrality of individual liberty of thought and action, but the first sees that liberty as being best if it is essentially untrammelled, the second as being constrained at the point at which individual liberty has a negative impact on the rights of others.

In the words of the 1789 *Declaration of rights* in France: "Liberty consists of being able to do anything that does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that guarantee other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights." The individualistic tendency is not interested in society as such, the second believes not only in liberty but also in the other tenets first enunciated by the French revolutionaries—equality and the brotherhood of men and women. I strongly believe that libraries are best understood as being infused with the ideals and goals of the concept of the greater good and as being an important part of a range of cultural and educational institutions that are vital to societal progress. These aims and that mission underlie all our efforts on behalf of individuals and communities.

The economic and cultural health of a society (that is, a nation or a community) is based, in great part, on two related factors. The first is education (in its broadest sense) and the second is the intellectual empowerment of its citizens. That empowerment ensures that they are capable of an autonomous life of the mind and, therefore, able to make wise choices in all spheres of life—commercial, political, social, etc.—so that they can contribute to the greater good of society while living happy, fulfilled lives. Discussions of education are often confined to formal education in schools and colleges but the diffuse nature of society and its ever-changing challenges and opportunities mean that everyone, at all ages, needs to be engaged in a variety of formal and informal educational experiences. Terms such as “life-long learning” and “continuing education” are increasingly common as we come to realize that learning is something that should take place in all aspects of our lives. In order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new reality of continuous education, we need to ensure that our citizens possess the essential foundations of education—literacy (reading and writing), visual literacy, numeracy, and information competence.

There are only three ways in which people learn. The first is learning through experience and observation. Humans have been learning in that way since the dawn of humanity. The second is learning from people who know more than you do. Humans have been learning in that fashion since, after the invention of human speech, the first wise woman gathered a band of early humans around her and passed on the wisdom of the elders. The third way, and the one that is most relevant to our topic, is learning through interaction with 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 ten millennia ago. With that invention, as Thomas Carlyle wrote, “the age of miracles began.” For the first time, the records of the experience of others (the first way of learning) and the records of the wisdom and understanding of others (the second way of learning) was able to outlive the people who had learned from experience and the people who had accumulated wisdom and knowledge. In other words, with writing and images, humans were able to transcend space and time and were able to learn from those long dead.

Before I go on to explain the crucial role that libraries and librarians play in the third way of learning, I would like to discuss the meaning of the word “information.” This definition is crucial to any discussion of our “age of information” and, indeed, to the topic of this conference—the value of information for national development. Mortimer Adler used to write of what he called the “four goods of the mind.” These were, in ascending order of importance

- Information
- Knowledge
- Understanding
- Wisdom

In this taxonomy, “information”—facts, figures, and short texts capable of being used out of context (the stuff of reference books)—is seen as providing the essential building blocks from which knowledge is created. That knowledge is then imparted to others—either by teaching (the second way of learning) or by interaction with recorded knowledge as part of the human record (the third way of learning)—and, we hope, the knowledge thus imparted leads to understanding and, eventually, to wisdom. Therefore, I would propose that “information” as used in the context we are discussing is taken to mean both the narrow definition of facts and contextless texts as one aspect and recorded knowledge in all its forms as the other. If that definition is accepted, we can see that our task is to devise structures that bring all our people the data and recorded knowledge they want and need, and that a healthy society needs them to have.

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of recorded knowledge. The documents in all formats that make up the human record are our collective memory. Education and societal and individual progress depend, to a very great extent, on the preservation and onward transmission of that recorded knowledge. It seems to me that, in the last 500 years and more or less by accident, we found a way of ensuring the preservation of recorded knowledge. That way is, of course, making multiple copies of texts printed on paper and ensuring that they are held in libraries throughout the world. Before the introduction of print into Western societies in the 15th

century, texts existed in one copy or very few copies and we know that there are many such texts that have been lost forever. That situation is, surprisingly, similar to the problem of the preservation of electronic documents that faces us all today. It is well known that many electronic documents and resources—and there are billions now in existence—are vanishing from the human record and will not be available to future generations. The printed text allowed us to conquer space, in that many copies were available in many places, and also to conquer time, in that a text printed in, say, the 17th century and held in libraries today is available to us and will be available to future generations. Electronic texts conquer space—a text created in Jamaica can be read in Australia seconds after it is created—but many of them are failing to conquer time. This is, I believe, one of the great challenges of the coming years—how can we identify electronic texts of enduring value and how can we ensure that those texts are preserved so that future generations know what we know? These questions are particularly important when we consider the global effort to preserve the cultural heritage of all nations and communities. I will return to this topic later.

I have said before that literacy—the ability to interact with complex texts productively—and visual literacy—the ability to interpret images—are essential to education and the health of society. Though almost everyone agrees that literacy is important to children, there are those who argue that sustained reading of complex texts is not a necessary part of mature life in an “information age.” This is a dangerous delusion. I am not arguing that print on paper is inherently superior to electronic texts and am in favour of “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. The plain fact is that an illiterate in front of a computer is no better off than an illiterate holding a book.

Literacy is more than a tool of learning; it is 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”ⁱ

This quotation is a graphic illustration of the extent and results of the tendency (in this case in Italy, but in all Western countries) away from a culture rooted in reading and learning—a development that can affect us all and may take us to a post-modern world of a-literacy and illiteracy and the belief that transient “information” is more important than enduring knowledge. It is 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; the impulse to revolt against canons; 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 15th

century or the industrial revolutions of the 19th century. 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 as essential components of societal and individual progress. To repeat, the ability to interact productively with the human record is a vital part of a healthy society and individual fulfillment.

Information literacy is another important component of education and societal progress. It is the name we give to the set of skills a person needs to acquire in order to learn and to grow as an individual through productive interaction with the human record in all formats.

A person who is information literate has the skill to:

- formulate correct and concise searches to gain access to information and recorded knowledge in library collections and resources
- use those resources productively and integrate them into the learning process
- do research
- choose wisely between possible resources
- apply critical thinking in evaluating resources and their relationships with other resources

Information literacy is one of three indispensable and linked skill sets that empower people to learn—the others being literacy and numeracy. As such, it should be recognized as an essential part of formal curricula and an important task for libraries and librarians.

Libraries have always been teaching institutions, but today their teaching role is of unprecedented importance. The multiplicity of sources of information and recorded knowledge due to the technological revolution has led to a demand for levels of information literacy that will enable us all to learn productively. It is imperative that all people acquire good information and knowledge seeking and critical thinking skills and can use those skills to find the information and recorded knowledge they need and to evaluate what they find. In an age of “information overload,” such skills are central to productive learning experiences. The library is the natural locus for learning the skills that make our citizens information literate and it is imperative that libraries are funded and staffed sufficiently to carry out that mission.

I think that the profession of librarianship is best understood as that field that is responsible for organizing and preserving the human record. 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 (print, etc.) and intangible (electronic));
- who organize and list those sub-sets so that they can be retrieved;
- who give help in the use of the human record;
- who teach information literacy;
- who work to ensure that the records of the sub-sets of the human record for which they responsible are integrated (in union catalogues and other systems) 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.

More, the destiny of libraries 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 and, more importantly, their ideals and mission have a lot in common with those that animate libraries.

“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.ⁱⁱ

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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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.^{iv}

The task is both challenging and inspiring—it is nothing less than working actively to ensure the maximum access to the human record for all people; to ensure that we preserve all of our cultural heritage (especially, for libraries, that part of our heritage that comes to us in the form of recorded knowledge in all formats); and to organize complex systems that ensure both local delivery of recorded knowledge and information and national and global access to the heritage of all cultures. In doing this, libraries and the networks of cultural institutions of which they are a natural part should take advantage of modern technology (computers as tools and digitization as a strategy for both transmission and preservation of the human record). I also believe that libraries should adopt good management practices, within a humanistic context and a culture of learning.

What our nations and the world needs are cooperative bi-lateral and multi-lateral structures and agreements (including the framing and adoption of shared standards, policies, and procedures) between libraries and, beyond libraries, the wide range of other cultural institutions. 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.

In addition to the importance of such structures for national economic and cultural progress, the wider question of the future of a civilization based on learning is at stake. Libraries must work with each other and collectively 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. We have no alternative if we wish to play our role in ensuring the education and individual empowerment that are essential to economic development, cultural development, and the health of society.

Thank you.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ. Jones, Tobias. *The Illusionist: review of "The sack of Rome" by Alexander Stille*. *The nation*, October 2, 2006, p.30.

ⁱⁱ. UNESCO. *Culture*.

http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL_ID=2185&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

ⁱⁱⁱ. UNESCO. Culture Section. The different types of cultural heritage.

http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL_ID=1907&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

^{iv}. UNESCO. *Op. cit.*