REBECCA LOSSIN

AGAINST THE

UNIVERSAL LIBRARY

I N 2004, I DECIDED to become a librarian. I did so because I love reading and I needed to make a living in a fashion that would not, or so I hoped, leave me feeling alienated and depressed. In particular, I love reading books. Often long and dedicated to a single idea, argument or story, books are also incredibly durable. They can survive coffee spills, the interior of my over-stuffed handbag, and if my niece pulls them off the table, I am not faced with a small financial crisis. The best thing about a printed book, however, is what it does not do. I cannot use it to watch television or check my email. My mother will never call me on it. My boss will never use it to interrupt me. In an age of constant media distractions, having a single object dedicated to a single activity—reading—is increasingly important. If nothing else, books that cannot be searched by keyword remind us that good ideas are not always efficiently come by—that learning takes time.

Upon entering a Master's programme in Library Science at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, I was disappointed to discover that I was becoming not a 'librarian' but an 'information professional'. The difference is very simple. The Latin word for book is *liber*. 'Librarian' has the word 'book' embedded in it. 'Information professional' does not. There is no way of knowing how much is in a name but, from what I observed during my studies, information professionals, true to their elastic and un-bookish titles, were fans of just about anything that was not a book. They thought putting video games in the young adult section was a great idea. They talked constantly about 're-branding' the library via Facebook—which still, unfortunately, has the word 'book' in it. They even found a way to rename books: as budding information professionals, we were

encouraged to use the unsexy—if still suggestive—term 'information package' instead. This name-change was a product of the rise of digitization. Books were being removed from the professional vocabulary because they were being removed from the shelves. Terms such as 'information package' imply that form is irrelevant to content—that a medium is not a message but a set of ultimately interchangeable superficial traits. We can read in this insistently generic term, however, a quiet admission that the word 'book' means something particular and that even information professionals were not entirely comfortable with the idea of replacing something so solidly bound to its content. Packaging, on the other hand, is superficial, disposable and infinitely replaceable.

This language is both symptomatic and generative. It reflects radical shifts in professional practice as well as creating an intellectual armature that can be used to rationalize and promote what is being named. In part, this process of rationalization is repressive—an active refusal to address significant problems presented by new electronic regimes. As such, it is the new form of an old coping mechanism. Part of a librarian's job is preservation, which is inherently morbid. Even under the best possible circumstances, it involves a certain amount of destruction: the very idea is born of a preoccupation with loss and the practice of preservation, consequently, is akin to a form of embalming or mummification.

I began to suspect that, on some level, my colleagues recognized that something particular is lost when an electronic copy replaces a physical book. The book, as Febvre and Martin point out, 'is a relative newcomer in Western society. It began its career in the mid-15th century, and its future is no longer certain, threatened as it is by new inventions based on different principles.'[1] Yet instead of talking about this threat honestly, my colleagues dreamt up euphemisms like 'digital migration'—as if books were flying north to the Internet rather than being destroyed and replaced by digital copies. They adopted an advertiser's devotion to satisfying the desires of adolescents for new media. Or they fixated on particular tropes of increased access, such as the needs of hypothetical single mothers, unable to take the time to visit a library. These fantasies of saving space, cutting costs and keeping everything online tended toward the evacuation of the idea of the library as a place to hold

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[1] Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800*, London and New York 2010, p. 10.

physical objects. Librarians, in other words, were beginning to conceive of the library as something other than a library. They were anticipating its disappearance.

Defoliation

Under the pressure of the digital zeitgeist, the relationship between librarians and books was becoming pathological. Like an individual actively ignoring a traumatic loss, the profession developed its own classically Freudian tics: for example, the paper allergy. There are a lot of nasty things in archives—dust mites, mould, air that hasn't circulated properly in several decades, plus known skin irritants such as newspaper ink—and so it is particularly telling that archivists develop their allergies to *paper*: a material that has, historically, been the subject of obsessive replacement campaigns. Lay analysis has its pitfalls, but it is appropriate here: something repressed was clearly returning. What other reason would we have to talk about paper allergies and worry about acting like Joseph Goebbels?[2] Why would we be so reluctant to admit the obvious differences between a book and its electronic copy? Or for that matter between a book and a video game? If book digitization were truly benign, none of this would be required, but it is not. It is unavoidably destructive—even tomecidal. The invention of the printed book generated global epistemic shifts. The digital age, too, requires more than hardware upgrades and reformatting. It necessitates a whole process of re-education.[3]

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[2] I was explicitly warned by my indexing and abstracting textbook not to act like Goebbels: 'Joseph Goebbels was a very effective information professional. He did his horrible work quite well; but it was certainly biased, prejudiced with personal agendas and vendettas. We hope most of us are not like that; still, since we are human, the censor elements can be there.' Donald Cleveland and Ana Cleveland, *Introduction to Indexing and Abstracting*, Greenwood, CO 2001, p. 5.

[3] Pessimism like mine tends to provoke a particular knee-jerk response: against any perceived jeremiad about technological advancement comes the parry that moral panics and unproductive nostalgia are perennial—Plato's fears about the technology of writing may be invoked; or the fact that in the Middle Ages all reading was done out loud and silent reading viewed with suspicion. We are reminded that society over-reacted to comic books, aphorisms existed long before Twitter, and Facebook is a just a new form of publication. It is worth emphasizing, therefore, that e-books—and digitization practices more broadly—have ushered in an era of deep structural change that cannot be compared to a popular broadening of collection policies or the addition of VHS tapes to circulating materials.

Librarians may abhor censorship, but we do destroy books. In the late 1990s, the new, tech-savvy San Francisco Library threw out 250,000 titles. Mass deaccession is not motivated by an ideological programme that requires the destruction of certain ideas. While librarians, as a professional class, do not hate Jews, or Cubist painters, or communists, history suggests that we do hate paper. And, like all such belief systems, our aversion to paper has an institutional origin that can be traced. Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* offers a history of the so-called preservation programmes that have resulted in the loss of many historic newspaper collections, giving us some insight into the real cause of our collective paper allergy.[4]

The first technology widely employed to replace paper was microfilm. Like many innovations, its origins were military. During the mid 20th century, many of the higher-ups at the Library of Congress had defence and intelligence backgrounds. In 1941, they began microfilming historic newspaper collections. Newspapers are stored in big, bound volumes. According to Library of Congress practice at the time, the ideal method for microfilming was to shear off the binding so that the pages could be laid flat and photographed individually. This was done with a machine that was referred to as a guillotine. Once disbound, newspapers can no longer be stored and must be thrown out. For Baker, this was the practical beginning of 'destroying to preserve'. Microfilm was not a perfect technology. Many newspaper runs are missing pages, other pages are unreadable; depending on the type of film used and how they are stored, microfilm copies can deteriorate much faster than paper. The first microfilming projects used nitrate film stock, which is notorious for spontaneously combusting in storage. Microfilming was actually much more expensive than renting some climate-controlled off-site storage.[5] In order for these projects to make financial sense, something else had to be going on. We librarians needed a crisis—or at least a clearly defined enemy. Which is where the active promotion of paper-hatred comes in.

The belief that books printed between 1870 and 1950 could eventually crumble into bits because of their acidity—widely referred to as paper's 'inherent vice'—has some truth to it. Yet the paper crisis that has

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[4] Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, New York 2001.
[5] Baker, *Double Fold,* p. 26.

unfortunately become central to how many libraries plan their collections was definitely manufactured. In 1957, the Library of Congress commissioned a ten-year research programme into the deterioration of paper headed by William James Barrow. His background was in textile manufacturing, not book conservation, and he harboured some odd, baseless assumptions, including the belief that, for a book, three days in an oven heated to 212°F was equivalent to twenty-five years in a normal environment. Barrow subjected 500 books printed between 1900 and 1949 to a course of rigorous abuse, including his version of the 'double-fold test': cutting books into test strips, clamping those strips into a mechanized paper-folding device, and using their ability to withstand the oscillations of the machine to plot the life expectancy of the books from whose pages they had been torn.[6] Barrow concluded that 97 per cent of the books he tested had a life expectancy of less than fifty years and thus, he wrote, 'it seems probable that most library books printed in the first half of the 20th century will be in an unusable condition in the next century'.[7] Barrow's predictions were wrong. Millions of library books printed between 1900 and 1949 are still perfectly readable—though perhaps not those that were cut into test strips, baked in ovens or discarded after they were microfilmed.

Not only did paper-hysteria serve as justification for replacing large, often unique historic newspaper collections with microfilm, it also led to other bizarre, expensive and dangerous paper de-acidification experiments. Shortly after he completed his double-fold experiments, Barrow died, and his book-abusing lab was taken over by Robert DuPuis. DuPuis had been director of research at Philip Morris during the 1950s. His internal memos were later used as proof of the tobacco industry's cover-up—as evidence of their foreknowledge that smoking is indeed very bad for one's health. If DuPuis held a grudge against the paper that preserved those damning statements, his aggression was given full vent in 1970, when he began looking for a way to de-acidify paper books using a chemical called morpholine. DuPuis used treatment chambers to gas books with morpholine through a process called 'vapour phase deacidification'.[8]

At roughly the same time, the Library of Congress started experimenting with Diethyl Zinc (DEZ) as another way to de-acidify paper. Diethyl Zinc

[6] Baker, *Double Fold,* pp. 141–2.

[7] Barrow, *Deterioration of Book Stock, Causes and Remedies,* quoted in Baker, p. 142.

[8] Baker, *Double Fold,* pp. 144–5.

is pyrophoric, meaning that it combusts when it comes into contact with air. It is used as an ingredient in rocket fuel, and was a key component of the 'fuel air bombs' dropped on Vietnam. Books that were treated with DEZ ended up with stains on the covers and pages, they smelled odd and the bindings were weakened. Nevertheless, in 1980 the Library of Congress's Council on Library Resources announced that the process had been proven safe and effective, and could now be put into commercial use. In 1982, the Library was given permission to use a retrofitted space simulation chamber at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center.[9] A small explosion blew off the door of the treatment chamber. In spite of this mishap, a second treatment centre was built—and there was another, even larger explosion. Finally, in 1986, not knowing how much DEZ was left in the piping, the facility was demolished with shaped explosives.[10]

These episodes are extreme, but not exceptional. They are the logical conclusion of a set of techno-fetishistic practices that have shaped the culture of libraries over time, and whose legacy the current generation of preservationists must either contend with or repeat. In 1996, the same Council on Library and Information Resources that had declared DEZ treatments successful just over a decade earlier, published a report entitled *Preserving Digital Information* that still provides the foundational intellectual framework of, and practical guidelines for, digital preservation practices (one of the co-chairs of the task force that produced the report, John Garrett, was even an affiliate of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center).[11] While Barrow's numbers may not have stood the test of time, his research has survived; cited, summarized and otherwise repeated over decades in newsletters, books, bulletins and conference papers, until its technically framed anti-book implications were accepted as professional common sense. A 2010 article in *Library Quarterly*, for example, remarks upon 'the success that the preservation field has had in mitigating the problems associated with the acidic paper production', attributing this victory to 'decades of creative materials-science research

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[9] That the Library of Congress commissioned the gassing of books in collaboration with NASA is a coincidence too poetic to pass over, given that NASA was staffed, in part, by former Nazis: the head of Hitler's rocket programme, Wernher von Braun, helped establish NASA in 1958 and worked there through the 1970s. American intelligence agents recruited him through a secret mission called Operation Paperclip.
[10] Baker, *Double Fold*, pp. 120–2.
[11] Paul Conway, 'Preservation in the Age of Google: Digitization, Digital Preservation and Dilemmas', *Library Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2010, p. 66.

backed by multiple preservation strategies, including preservation reformatting [and] large-scale paper deacidification'.[12] There is no citation attached to this claim.

Kindling

The solitary reader is an even more recent historical phenomenon than the printed book. That figure is easily criticized for the set of dubious political implications it carries with it: the celebration of privacy, individualism and other distinctly bourgeois ideals. Yet, for all the problems that may be associated with this—with my—most romantic version of the monadic, liberal reading subject, the attempts to contain, control and destroy that very same reading subject speak volumes of its political importance. Pierre Bourdieu's rather optimistic remarks about the epistemological purpose of any historical reflection on reading might be invoked here. In conversation with Roger Chartier, he argued that

> By historicizing our relation to reading we can free ourselves of the unconscious presuppositions that history imposes on us. Contrary to what is commonly thought, rather than relativizing history, this is a means of relativizing one's own practice, and therefore of escaping relativism altogether.

As such, Bourdieu continued, if reading 'is the product of the conditions in which I have been produced as a reader, then becoming aware of that is perhaps the only chance of escaping the effects of those conditions'.[13] By excavating, historicizing and analysing the experience of the contemporary e-book reader, the political implications of digitized reading practices come sharply into view.

You can read a book on a Kindle and the story will be the same. Yet the Kindle quickly and tellingly evolved from a dedicated reading device into something much closer to an iPad. Indeed, as if the verb 'kindle' was not suggestive enough, Amazon chose to call its newer version of the device the 'Kindle Fire'. The real purpose of that device is hammered home by the following review, posted on the technology website c-net: 'The Kindle Fire is a 7-inch tablet that links seamlessly with

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[12] Conway, 'Preservation in the Age of Google', p. 72.

[13] Pierre Bourdieu with Roger Chartier, in 'Reading Literature/Culture: A Translation of "Reading as a Cultural Practice"', trans. Todd Reeser and Steven Spalding, *Style*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2002, p. 665.

Amazon's impressive collection of digital music, video, magazine and book services in one easy-to-use package. It boasts a great web browser, and its curated Android app store includes most of the big must-have apps (such as Netflix, Pandora and Hulu).' This, manifestly, is not a device whose primary purpose is reading. The function of the book, in this context, is to confer authority on other media—and to sell Kindles and iPads. While it is still possible to read a novel on these devices, one of the most salient features of the internet is to disrupt linear reading. The networked device interrupts the reader with links that lure them away to other texts, filling the margins with endless detours and distractions, and, ultimately, foreshortens the reader's horizon of expectation by habitually displaying snippets, previews and other pieces of abbreviated text. This sanitized, administrative process of disarticulation replaces and even, to a certain extent, replicates some of the functions of the theatrical *auto-da-fé*.

The destruction of physical texts is not an end in itself, but a means of curtailing the possibility of reading—and by extension of thought—that occurs beyond the gaze and outside the worldview of a totalitarian apparatus. Tomecide has, historically, been a central means of this assault. Alongside the more obvious objectives of erasing the historical past and preventing the spread of dangerous ideas, Leo Lowenthal suggests that book burning is aimed at the liquidation of the subject.[14] In *The Tempest*, the burning of Prospero's library is presented not as incidental but as essential to Prospero's murder: 'First to possess his books; for without them/He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not/One spirit to command . . . / Burn but his books!' Executioners during the Ancien Régime were often charged with public book burnings. The execution by burning of one Protestant book dealer in France during the Counter-Reformation occurred alongside a separate 'gallows on which the Bible and the New Testament were hanged and afterwards burned'. The sacking of the Baghdad library in 1258 produced the adage that 'the streets ran red with blood and the river black with ink.'[15] The 'organized and prolonged terrorism against the life of the intellect' that tomecide constitutes cannot, in other words, be neatly separated from forms of violence aimed at the human subject. Book burning simultaneously erases the physical, textual object and, over time, its intellectual residue. If and when this preventative measure fails, it is the bodies of dissident readers and thinkers

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[14] Leo Lowenthal, 'Caliban's Legacy', *Cultural Critique*, no. 8, Winter 1987–88, p. 5.
[15] Lowenthal, 'Caliban's Legacy', p. 6.

that become subject to this violence. In other words, the destruction of books is in a very real sense the destruction of personhood.

The e-book, fireproof though it may be, extends the potential of this terror. As books unbind themselves and information is transmitted disembodied from place to place, the embodied experience of consuming this information becomes increasingly accessible. The dissolution of boundaries between texts, often cited as the great benefit of networked reading, translates into the erosion of the perimeters that mark a bounded, private self. The reader becomes the site of data mining and, arguably, subject to all of the attendant wreckage that such an extractive metaphor might imply. As part of the project of liberating information, e-books facilitate the colonization of the mental interior. The more successful the surveillance and control of this mental landscape becomes, the less necessary it becomes to ban or burn the books that shape its features.

If books continue to live on in digital space, it is a protean life: chapters can be extracted at will, articles removed from their editorial context, passages located by keyword, paragraphs cut and pasted, sentences abstracted and repeated—everything is subjected to the model of frictionless flows created and demanded by capital itself. Even if we bracket surveillance and surplus for a moment, the most anodyne description of the 'digital humanities' relies heavily on this language of extraction and expansion, and indicates how little room is left for private reading of long-form text: 'The technological environment in which Google thrives is enabling a new digital humanities scholarship—intensely collaborative, interdisciplinary and enabled by computing tools for finding new meaning through data mining, creative visualizations and other ways of pushing the boundaries of existing documentation.'[16]

We can debate the relative merits of dispersed and networked reading— and, indeed of the scholarship generated by practitioners of the digital humanities. However, there is something unequivocally disturbing about the fact that electronic reading has become itself productive. Amazon, for example, can now track and archive a reader's notes. Everything that the reader underlines on their Kindle is now automatically catalogued—their thoughts while reading transformed into proprietary material. Two things are happening here. The first, at this point widely acknowledged, is that

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[16] Conway, 'Preservation in the Age of Google', p. 63.

the reader is providing a sales gimmick to a company free of charge.[17] The second is, arguably, an ideological project in which the reader is enlisted (usually unwittingly) in a collective editorial project, in service of the technological imperative to produce textual material amenable to its form—that is, to shorten it. Those 'most underlined' passages effectively abridge the text as they are made available to other readers. Thus e-reading enlists you, as a reader, in the general project of abridgement occurring online—a sort of bowdlerization by popular consensus.

Futures

Libraries, in their attempt to 'future-proof' themselves—to borrow a phrase from a 2008 *Library Journal* forum—are following suit and importing both commercial practices and logics into nominally alternative spaces. Electronic books are not owned but leased, and as this applies not just to individuals with Kindles but also to libraries, it raises issues of patron privacy and data-collection. By relinquishing ownership in this way, libraries no longer have full control over access to or preservation of large portions of their collections. E-books might save space as well as meeting patrons' desires for electronic delivery systems, but they also constitute the thin end of a privatizing wedge. The importation of new ownership structures, by way of leased electronic books, into public and university libraries distinguishes the trend towards digitization from older debates about what genres of books a library ought to provide. This newest adjustment is not comparable to the decision to, say, acquire more popular literature: it is not a question of content but of the very structures of collection building, access and control.

Justifications for the digitally expanded library that go beyond the functional or budgetary to include some sort of social vision almost all evince an obsession with a technological—even ahistorical—future and, in addition, an ideal of 'service' conceived in terms of blinkered populism.

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[17] While books have not escaped commodity status and a market in ideas is certainly not new, reading itself could not, until recently, be tracked and monetized in real time. In 'On the Fetish-Character of Music', Adorno suggested that every pleasure-provoking cultural production that manages to emancipate itself from exchange value takes on subversive features. The inverse of Adorno's assertion—that any cultural product burdened with an exchange value cannot be subversive—adds significant weight to this kindling of books: Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, Berkeley, CA 2002.

There is an odd linguistic resonance between the prophets of fascism and the proponents of digital preservation and access. For Leo Lowenthal, book-burning by authoritarian and totalitarian societies was a 'mad attempt to found anew the history of the world, to devise a new creation myth, the genealogy of a new history of salvation, which disowns, destroys and erases all that precedes a new arbitrary calendar'.[18] The logic of contemporary 'universal libraries' such as Google Books appears antithetical to such an ideological agenda. But mapped onto the digitization of all the world's information is the ideology of the information age, which figures itself as a radical break from the past—a paradigm shift of unseen proportions and the very stuff of a future social organization that is horizontal, open, flexible and democratic. The internet and the set of metaphors and practices that have grown up within and around it—the very conviction that this environment is absolutely new—contain a similar urge 'to found anew the history of the world', and offer 'a new history of salvation'.

Temporality thus understood is an odd fit for institutions charged by definition with preserving the past. If you glance through *Library Journal*, however, this is precisely what you will find: instructions on how to 'future-proof' the library or build the 'library of the future'. That cultural institutions would think about their long-term relevance and survival is not surprising. It would be disconcerting if libraries openly accepted their eventual obsolescence and prepared for some near date when they would finally be shuttered in favour of efficient, proprietary alternatives. But what is implied by a phrase like 'future-proofing' if not the irrelevance, or at least impending destruction, of libraries as they currently exist? Defending the library against the future reveals a deeply pessimistic worldview. It presumes a future necessarily hostile to libraries.

The notion of the 'library of the future' discloses something partially hidden by utopian dreams of the 'universal library'. It is a fantasy fully produced within a technological imaginary; freed from the residual demands of something as historically anchored as a universal library or materially nostalgic as a 'books project'. It therefore reflects the material realities of advanced capitalist production—an endless process of superannuation. The future that the library inhabits is one in which 'information packages' are continually being tossed onto the digital pyre. Planned obsolescence, folded into daily practice through technological

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[18] Lowenthal, 'Caliban's Legacy', p. 9.

innovations, has become the organizing principle of library science. It isn't just paper that needs to be replaced, but the library itself.

'Future-proofing' entails the active participation of librarians in the construction of this hostile future—one where technological savvy outranks subject-knowledge and interactive mapping projects have diverted funding and attention away from the preservation of, say, the New York Public Library's famous Schwartzman Building as a place of quiet study. Or, as one article in *Library Journal* cheering the transformation of libraries into 'a big set of APIs (application programming interfaces)' puts it, pressing the Schwartzman's courtyard 'into service' and making its 'historical holdings into something new, useful and a little bit quirky'.[19] That a major professional publication like *Library Journal* would be so crassly ahistorical and flatfootedly instrumentalist reflects the techno-fetishism taking hold of the library sciences. The new professional ethos demands a set of skills and interests that have nothing to do with historical holdings or research: future-proof libraries must be staffed by people 'adept at change' who are 'computer/social networking experts'.[20] In self-reinforcing fashion, the demands of technological change attract techno-enthusiasts; and with techno-enthusiasts in charge, technological change becomes the agenda. Barrow's paper-hysteria and the doctrine of 'destroying to preserve' are here taken to their extremes, with the—now widespread—belief that, in order for libraries to survive, they must engage in acts of creative self-destruction and 'dismantle systematically the barriers to change that discourage innovation' by closely following 'the wildly successful experiments happening in the private sector'. The New York Public Library's tech-labs have some sense of what this future might look like and are working to create a 'library as data clearing house' where digitized collections can be turned into data and 'sliced and diced with all of today's tools'.[21]

Publics

The rhetoric used in defence of such technological change is not merely that of disaster preparedness or self-preservation. Such justifications

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[19] Meredith Schwartz, 'Dicing Data at NYPL labs: Transforming the Library into a Big Set of APIs', *Library Journal*, vol. 137, no. 14, 2012, p. 22.
[20] 'Future-Proof Your Library: LJ's Movers & Shakers Strategize about How to Secure a Vital Future', *Library Journal*, vol. 133, no. 13, 2008, p. 30.
[21] Schwartz, 'Dicing Data at NYPL Labs', p. 23.

almost always invoke the library's populist mandate as well. An editorial published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2011 is typical and illuminating. Its author, David Rothman—co-founder of a non-profit digital library initiative—suggests that the problem with notions of the national digital library thus far has been their narrow focus on the humanities and scholarship, when that digital library could be expanded to include 'content and services for the non-elite', including 'business and vocational materials, so that it can help jobless Americans upgrade their skills'.[22] Rothman finds Robert Darnton's suggestion that the internet could create a new Republic of Letters 'smacks a bit of intellectual snobbery'. He claims that 'a digital library would support a culture of reading, as libraries always have', but 'American consumers need to be treated as more than just passive consumers of content' selected by experts. What 'non-elites' need is a system that provides 'multi-media job training' and interfaces that link 'to social networks and other websites too, so that it is truly blended with the Internet'. He adds parenthetically that 'culture' is important as well: 'beyond its intrinsic value', it is practical 'in business activities such as marketing and web design'. At the end of the day, high culture is a 'condiment', not 'the full diet of American library users'; patrons are consumers, and reading is for snobs.

The particular form of user-oriented thinking demonstrated in Rothman's article—the anti-intellectualism generated by the categories of 'elites' and 'everyone else'—is pervasive in library science and it has definite practical results. While still in training, I was told by the woman charged with indexing and preserving dissertations for the Modern Language Association database that the word 'hermeneutics' was not a reasonable choice for a subject heading because 'no one knows what that word even means'. The example we had in front of us was a dissertation called 'The Hermeneutics of Food in the Travel Writing of Lewis and Clark'. The word 'hermeneutics' appeared multiple times in the abstract. It is safe to assume that it also appears in other dissertations. When I pointed this out, the instructor explained that this was the problem with abstracts written by PhD students, who use 'fanciful' language to impress their professors instead of straightforward abstracts written by professionals like her. 'The Hermeneutics of Food' ended up with the subject headings 'food' and 'travel'.

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[22] David Rothman, 'It's Time for a National Digital Library System: But It Can't Serve Only Elites', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 2011.

As full-text searching becomes the norm, quibbles over indexing with keywords may become less crucial. However, controlled vocabularies and major subject headings remain important as the quantity of searchable text increases, precisely because they allow users to look for texts where 'hermeneutics' (for example) is an important concept, rather than a word mentioned once in the last paragraph. While hermeneutics is (now) included as a subject term in the MLA thesaurus (the controlled vocabulary used by the databases' indexers), my instructor's way of thinking is both pervasive and misguided. Dissertations are precisely the type of thing that a democratized, inclusive digital library is promising us—texts otherwise anchored to the repository of an institution that is not open to the general public. It is worth asking, therefore, who is going to go looking for something like 'The Hermeneutics of Food' with the search terms 'food' and 'travel'? An 'everyman' approach to taxonomy and indexing would not and does not produce collections where job-training materials and scholarly articles exist side-by-side, but digital environments where multi-syllabic words are punished by effective exile from search results. Thus, in the name of democratizing knowledge, knowledge is in fact further rarified, compartmentalized and hived off. This is perhaps to be expected from a workforce that is increasingly populated by people who are invested in turning research libraries into 'labs' for the production of cool interactive maps and cross-referencing gadgets. There is less and less professional space for people interested in the curation and conservation of bodies of knowledge—whole bodies, not bodies that can be 'sliced and diced' in true laboratory fashion.

Some will argue that libraries are service-oriented institutions and that to emphasize the provision of books is to misunderstand their ever-changing civic role. However, as a public (and possibly historic) building that contains an increasing amount of privately licensed software and temporarily leased reading materials, the 'future-proof' library is quickly becoming something other than a library—a public brick-and-mortar portal into the private sector.

Bibliographia universalis

As a librarian, my confrontation with the myth of the universal library has been intimate and uncomfortable. It arrived in the form of digitization, the ubiquitous internet and digital reading, all of which are now part of normal life and enthusiastically embraced by my profession

to the detriment of physical collections. The universal library is perhaps the most effective piece of propaganda ever produced in the service of the information age, or what Jodi Dean has more pointedly dubbed 'communicative capitalism'. Humanistic and generous in intent, projects such as Google Books continue to represent the socially salutary effects of networked life. As the unalloyed techno-boosterism of the mid-1990s fades, the universal library maintains its symbolic political importance as a relatively concretized vision of latent informational utopia—a mask behind which unremunerated labour can be captured for profit and privacy steadily eroded. Or, at the very least, it is a compelling external-ity of this value-creating infrastructure—a sort of consolation prize for hours spent creating virtual real estate for Facebook. If universally acces-sible information results in increased surveillance capacities for private corporations and government agencies, it also makes access to the com-plete works of Karl Marx much more convenient and this, we naturally assume, is a good thing. But the universal library—even if it could be divorced from its obfuscating functions—is a dangerous idea.

Arguments against digitization can seem sentimental because we have so fully internalized the logic of technological progress that any argument against it seems out of step. For Marcuse, this is precisely how techno-logical rationality works: 'Today, the apparatus to which the individual is to adjust and adapt himself is so rational that individual protest and liberation appear not only as hopeless, but irrational.'[23] Yet mine is not a sentimental argument. (The sensuous qualities of books—what Walter Benjamin identified as an object's 'aura'—are secondary concerns.) But it is an irrational one. Or, more accurately, it is an anti-rational one. What is at issue here is the blindly enthusiastic participation of librarians in a culture-wide rationalization of all forms of textual information: the assimilation of novels, monographs, poetry, correspondence, journals and essays to a single, if superficially decentralized, apparatus that is structurally hostile to formal deviation.

Digitization, and the digitization of books in particular, is not benign. In both its utopian and pragmatic forms, digitization conceals a destruc-tive impulse that not only eliminates books but threatens the very freedom of discourse it purports to promote; erodes the educational

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[23] Herbert Marcuse, 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology', in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York 1978, p. 145.

experience of those it claims to support; and monetizes, thus com-modifies, intellectual life in the name of free access. And all of this dramatically alters the writing it contains, if it doesn't practically erase it. Digitization projects conducted by educational and cultural institu-tions conceive of themselves in mundane terms: the need to cut costs, save space, expand access and keep up with consumer demands. If the daily practice is pragmatic, even prosaic, the mythology of the universal library continues to structure and orient the activities of those charged with preserving and protecting the artifacts of intellectual and cultural life. Total digitization remains the infinitely receding horizon towards which librarians and educators are faithfully marching. And they are announcing their intentions along the way. One of the first experiments in digital reading devices was named 'The Last Book'.