The Big Issues

Public libraries, learning, technology and social inclusion

What are the key challenges facing Australia's public library services?

Learning and literacy; the digital economy and digital citizenship; social inclusion and community partnerships; health and ageing.

Why Libraries Will Still Matter: Serving Citizens in a Connected World.

Look at technology trends, digital citizenship and libraries.

1155-1300 (45 min talk, 15 min questions)

[British Library]

[SLV]

Public libraries are a triumph of the enlightenment, and the great institutions at state and national level are vital elements in creating, nurturing, sustaining and transmitting cultures, especially in a time of great change when culture wars are upon us and many would challenge the liberal enlightenment values of rationality, tolerance, equality and social justice that I have dedicated my life to promoting as a writer, journalist and practitioner.

[Diderot]

I want these values to persist as we move further into the 21st century, and I believe that libraries both large and small will play a vital role in this, as active agents of change, not simply passive repositories.

[Carnegie and an old Carnegie Library]

These libraries are perhaps the greatest achievement of the first flowering of literacy, clearly reflecting a belief in society that once everyone is taught to read then the benefits that can come from being widely-read should not be limited to those able to afford books. Building a public library is an act of redistribution of intellectual capital that matters as much as the redistribution of wealth or the provision of social housing and public health services to the overall vitality of a society.

[Mobile phone at a concert]

But in this digital age of internet access, MP3 players, smartphones, social networks and cloud computing the skills necessary to be an effective and informed citizen go beyond the ability to read a book.

Media literacy, underpinned by ICT skills, requires an appreciation of the shift from the one-way communication typified by the newspaper page or the television screen to a richer, more open and collaborative pubishing model.

[Library stack]

[learning centre]

Access to culture can no longer be provided purely through a collection of books, even if they remain the vital heart of any library, and the old institutions must change if they are offer support in the age of the network.

[inside a dog]

Libraries have always been more than their books, right from the days of the great library of Alexandria, and libraries have already shown their ability to adapt and change as the societies they serve evolve, taking advantage of new technologies as they become available.

The Hybrid World

[bits and atoms: ASCII code]

But something different is happening now, and the challenge is far greater than any of your institutions have faced since they were founded. It is the emergence of a new world in which bits are becoming as important as atoms. I flew 10,000 miles to be with you today because atoms matter, but I came to give you the message that bits now matter just as much.

[Second Life]

Note that we are not, whatever others might say, building a digital world. We never will live in a digital world whatever the IT prophets may claim. There is no sign that we are abandoning the physical or that our spirits are subliming from our organic bodies into cyberspace.

[Servers: wikimedia]

And even if such a fantastic vision was possible - and the philosopher in me insists that it is not - the digitised memories and behaviours would have to be stored somewhere, and some machine built of atoms would have to do the processing.

[Ebook reader: Kindle]

It is the same in the library. Atoms remain central, the physical continues to matter, and every digitised book requires a physical medium to store the bits that represent it. It will always be so.

The mis-named 'digital world' is really a *hybrid* world, one where analogue and digital coexist, where the physical and the virtual intersect and can reinforce or cancel each other out, coherent or incoherent waves in a five-space that encompasses space-time and a new, digital dimension.

While I am seeking clarity in naming, I am not denying the significance of the change itself. The move from purely analogue representation of data for most purposes to one in which most of the information we deal with, most of the time, was either created, manipulated or distributed as bits and relied on networks and computers for its existence or availability is, as writer Glyn Moody puts it, not just a once in a generation shift - it is a once in a civilisation shift.

[Primitive society: early human migrations]

It is no wonder that we feel dislocated by what is happening or that we are uncertain about the future. The last time we tried to change the world on this scale we invented agriculture, and the emergence of writing was really just the first step on the journey we are now completing.

Too Fast To Comprehend

The enormity of the change that is taking place around us is compounded by the speed with which new systems are emerging and new expectations are rising.

[Printing press from SLV]

[illuminated book]

[printed book]

[old classroom]

It took over four centuries from the widespread availability of printed books in European society for literacy to be accepted as a vital skill and for most people to be taught to read as a matter of course. Public libraries emerged during that process, flourishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as both cause and result of the waves of social reform taking place.

[EDSAC]

[ARPANET]

[Mac]

[Google 11th Doodle]

The computing revolution has happened far more quickly. The first computers were built in the late 1940's; the Internet can trace its heritage back only forty years to the ARPANET; the Web is only two decades old; and Google recently celebrated its 11th birthday.

Today public libraries are being forced to support the digitally-literate, and offer paths to digital literacy, over timescales that are astonishing short and which have challenged their organisational flexibility and forced every library - and librarian - to question the role and function of the institution and their ability to offer what the new world needs.

[SLV: Library]

The surprising thing is how well most have managed it, how adaptive the great institutions have been and how completely digital technologies have been integrated into daily practice in both public-facing and back-office operations.

However we cannot rest now, since the digital revolution is still taking place and the final shape of the networked world – and the place libraries will have in it – is far from clear.

A Role for Libraries

What, then, do libraries do? And what could they do? The multiple overlapping roles libraries already play both reinforces and complicates any assessment of their role in the network age, but it seems to me that libraries can be all of these things:

[memory: the stacks]

> A library is a memory, a place where the past is held and through which it is made available for inspection.

> [catalogue]

> A library is a repository of structured knowledge, both the knowledge enclosed in the holdings and the catalogue and associated taxonomies that offer access to the holdings and define their own epistemology. Of course these days that will be a computer-based catalogue...

> [XML]

> [objects]

> A library is a physical store of analogue artefacts, held and preserved and made available for inspection and study. Soon those artefacts will also include the books, because today…

> [servers: Flickr]

> Today libraries are increasingly repositories of the digital, either the natively digital or the digitised, and of the servers and disk drives and tapes that constitute the warp to the weft of the bits themselves in the tapestry of the digital.

What is really changing is not what libraries do - or can do - but the environment within which these things are done and in particular the forms of literacy which we expect libraries to support.

A New Form of Literacy

[Brain]

Education is a form of brain surgery, carried out with words and pictures instead of saws and scalpels. It is a process of rewiring the brains of children to make them able to thrive and be useful in the wider society as they reach adulthood, and it's futile to deny it.

[Emma Zorn Reading]

Teaching someone to read imposes radical changes in neuroanatomy and brain function - a literate person thinks differently from an illiterate one. Read Maryanne Wolf's wonderful book 'Proust and the Squid' and wonder and what we do to our children from a young age.

[Proust and the Squid]

> *We were never born to read. Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago. And with this invention, we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which altered the intellectual evolution of our species...*
>
> *Our ancestors' invention could come about only because of the human brain's extraordinary ability to make new connections among its existing structures, a process made possible by the brain's ability to be shaped by experience. This plasticity at the heart of the brain's design forms the basis for much of who we are, and who we might become.*

Some people are concerned that our screen-based culture is changing the way our brains work - people like Baroness Susan Greenfield, and Wolf herself asks:

> *will unguided information lead to an illusion of knowledge, and thus curtail the more difficult, time-consuming, critical thought processes that lead to knowledge itself? Will the split-second immediacy of information gained from a search engine and the sheer volume of what is available derail the slower, more deliberative processes that deepen our understanding of complex concepts, of another's inner thought processes, and of our own consciousness?*

[XO kids]

Perhaps things will not be this bad. In the computer age a new form of literacy emerges - not just doing the old stuff using new technology - and we may need to think differently in order to acquire that form of literacy. The technologies can help us achieve our goals, but they should not define the goal.

And if that is what we want then libraries have a key role to play in managing the transition to this new form of literacy and to ensuring that old ways of thinking and dealing with information are not lost but become an integral part of the new, that those who have screen-based literacy have page-based literacy too.

Not Only For the Underclass

[Factory workers]

The world may have changed, but libraries retain their important role in promoting social cohesion, and part of this derives from their accessibility, their openness as institutions all need their services, bridging the digital divide within communities and the wider society.

[Kibera[

[Prosecco and laptops]

Most of the attention and funding is rightly focused on the digitally deprived, those who do not have access to the internet from home or work and who are in need of support, advice and assistance getting and staying online, but social cohesion cuts both ways, and libraries also have a role in bringing those who can afford to buy the tools and services needed to go online into the wider society, to take the digitally affluent who can easily feel separate from their communities and encourage them to think of themselves as connected to others.

Where Libraries are Going

So libraries have a lot to deal with and all of you who work in libraries have a great burden on your shoulders, as guardians of the values of the past, guides to the hybrid future and mentors in the development of a new form of literacy.

There are also more pressing issues.

[book scanner from Internet Archive]

[Google revises settlement proposal]

Google has just filed a revised proposal for its settlement with the Authors Guild of America and the Association of American Publishers, one which attempts to deal with the objections raised before the original settlement even got to court.

Despite being an agreement in US courts between a US Corporation and two US bodies representing interest groups the settlement covers books published in the US, UK, Canada and Australia - and given the recent fuss over the restrictions on imports and the arguments going on about whose special interests should be given priority that is sure to cause some debate.

It also seems that British, Australian, and Canadian rightsholders are joining the case as named plaintiffs and will also be represented on the Board of the Book Rights Registry - though no details of who that covers.

But whatever the detail of the Google settlement, and whether or not it is approved or thrown out, the real issue is about digitisation of printed books and its importance. As Google's Sergey Brin notes, 'even if our cultural heritage stays intact in the world's foremost libraries, it is effectively lost if no one can access it easily'. Of course his goal is that Google should be the one to provide that access, in ways that will benefit Google, but the need is a real one.

It may be that we are the only generation that will realise its true importance, that our children will not feel the driving need to have digital copies of every book ever written - from the scrolls to the hand-illuminated manuscripts through to the last books printed without the aid of computers.

Curating the Digital

[BBC Redux]

Libraries also have to face the challenge of curating the digital in all its many manifestations, of providing structured access to texts, images, audio, video and even archived websites that is as efficient and effective as the old paper catalogues were for finding relevant books.

This is a major technological challenge, as I know from my work with the Archive Development group at the BBC and my conversations with staff at the British Library. Whether material is natively digital or has been digitised there must be agreement on and awareness of file formats and standards for catalogue data and metadata in all its many forms, even before discussions on access provisions, rights and their enforcement and reuse are begun.

On Friday I was lucky enough to be shown around this wonderful library - the institution and the building - by Andrew Hiskens. We admired the architecture and the historical exhibitions, and of course I had to see Ned Kelly's armour and the pages of the Jerilderie Letter but it was the books that really enchanted me, as so often in the past.

[library]

[library]

[Boethius]

[Caxton]

[Carey laptop far]

[Carey laptop closeup]

A volume from the Medici library, an edition of Boethius, an Audubon - they are all there in this marvellous collection. Next to the illuminated manuscript sits one of Caxton's printed volumes, but

elsewhere in the exhibition there is the clearest indication of the changed world that I've seen for a long time - the iBook G4 laptop on which Peter Carey wrote 'The True History of the Kelly Gang'.

The resonance of this laptop, sitting under glass beside a marked up manuscript and editions of the book itself, was remarkable. A few weeks ago in the British Library in London I'd seen TS Eliot's typewriter from his office at Faber & Faber, part of the wonderful exhibition 'In a Bloomsbury Square', and it had made a big impact on me.

[typewriter or flickr]

But there is a difference. The typewriter has no memory of the poems and letters written on it, while the laptop can be persuaded to recall the book it was used to create, and certainly has a better memory of earlier drafts and outlines than even the writer.

Building a Future

Eliot's typewriter and Carey's laptop exist on the two sides of a gulf as wide as that between the Medici Lives of the Caesars and Caxton's printed volume. The world has changed more than we could have believed possible, and is about to change even more.

The philosopher George Santayana wrote 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,' a view that I am sure every librarian shares. But it is not enough to remember the past - we need also to shape the future.

The architect and visionary R Buckminster Fuller once said that 'we are called to be the architects of the future, not its victims,' and I'd like to endorse that.

In the end, those who don't invent a future for themselves must live in someone else's - so now is the time to decide what future we want libraries to have and go out and build it.