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Sent: Tuesday, 29 April 2008 5:15 PM
To: Information Futures Commission
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Subject: consultation paper

I respond to the consultation paper on the future of libraries.

I begin with a fundamental matter: vocabulary. The word information litters the pages. This is a word which is not known to me as an internationally recognised scholar (member of 3 international academies and one national, and one time personal chair holder here). I would be surprised if it were used by colleagues in science either. We talk of sources or data, of scholarship and learning-- words which appear with alarming rarity in this text. Information has unscientific associations: it is what is fed to you by organisations, for example, who have agendas to push or crimes to hide. It is the world of 1984 or Fahrenheit 451 or Soylent Green--apparently unknown to the authors of the document-- where there are no more books, no learning, only controlled information. It is exactly what we warn our students not to trust. Even if I wanted to know the current population of Australia, I would have to assess the possible sources, to choose one that was reliable. And the last place I would go would be the Wackypedia. To my amazement this is actually cited in the footnotes, despite what everyone knows about it. Someone is quoted as claiming that it rivals the Britannica! That person is out of his mind. Just this week we have had the spectacle of a VC revealed as using it, to universal derision. An eminent colleague in Canada told me recently that he had found that a young colleague had listed it among essay sources for his students. 'I think that warrants rejection of tenure', he said. 'I totally agree', I replied.

Buried in the 44 pages are a number of facts which are unassailable.

1. BOOKS.

--3,000 are published daily (p.5).

-- 60,000 are added to the Baillieu annually (p.19).

-- Their replacement by electronic forms has not eventuated (p.7).

(although I remember a University Librarian (!) more than 20 years ago going around saying that the books was finished!). Thus two of the greatest libraries in the world, the British Library in London and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris have recently been rebuilt essentially as temples to the book, with the main aim of bringing back under one roof their scattered collections.

--While libraries exist all round the world, there are multiple copies of books which are basically accessible free to anyone who can walk through the front door. We need those multiple copies. Some people who have not got a very firm hold on history or reality have suggested that as long as there is one copy of a book in the whole country it is accessible. What happens if that last copy is destroyed-- and how simple is a fire? Think of the great library at Alexandria--and the major depository of learning in the classical world was no more. We have only one quarter of the great history of the Roman Livy surviving, because at some time there was only one copy left--and then that went.

2. DIGITAL SOURCES.

-- One of the main myths about these is that they are free. This ranks as one of the great untruths of our age. The VC admits there is no guarantee that access will be free (p.1); that they are free is an illusion (p.5); 'dissemination mechanisms' have a substantial fixed cost' (p.12). This reminds one of the way that when investment in public transport is mooted, there is outrage at the cost, but when a new freeway is to be built, that is assumed to be free. The costs of digital infrastructure are enormous. One example of just delivery costs in the supposedly new free system is interlibrary loans. Each article received costs usually between \$15 and \$50!--often more. Worst and most dangerous of all, private companies have inserted themselves. And what is their aim? To make profits (p.12).

--What is another aim of such companies? As in every business, to destroy competition and obtain a monopoly. As companies devour each other, the nightmare of the future will be a single world wide monopoly on knowledge, with control over what is accessible and what is not, and how much can be charged for it. Knowledge is the last and most priceless commodity which awaits such control. The results will be far more disastrous than any monopoly we have seen so far.

--it is claimed that libraries could only be used by those 'who had been taught to use the skills of hierarchical and classified access' (p.5).

This is rubbish: anyone could learn to use a card catalogue in 5 minutes.

Rather it is digital material which requires time and skill (ibid).

Computer sites become ever more complicated, as one struggles to find and open the file one wants

and which ultimately the machine controls. (As a parallel, how many lectures have I seen where IT technicians (!) struggle to bring up a picture on the screen ?). Now one needs professional training in two skills: medicine or philosophy etc and IT. Burdens have decreased, not lessened.

--digital sources are easily tampered with (p.10) --there are severe limitations on convenience (ibid). Who could honestly compare the ease of opening a printed source with that of juggling with a computer. ? And a concrete example. Florence Library told me that a journal I wanted was on line. With a volume in my hand, it would take me an hour to go through it. I calculate, opening all the various files in turn, the same operation on line will take 5-10 hours. And yesterday the system was down--so I couldn't do anything.

--not by a long shot the least worry is the changing technology, so that whole systems of stored knowledge become inaccessible (ibid)

Faced with these limitations and dangers, who in conscience could think that digital sources are the answer.

There is a major confrontation between books and people for space.(p.18). My question is, why is the library the only option for all these other activities. Why should the library alone be targeted as the only 'free space' when amenities have to be considered ? The library is not free space at all: it is bulging with those 60,000 volumes we add each year. We in Australian universities are making dangerous decisions based on a fragile and ephemeral situation : the reliance on perpetual, even increasing, numbers of overseas students, on whom we rely for income, and the catering for their social needs--putting in peril our intellectual heritage, so that books can be considered secondary to lounges and coffee shops or student services centres. This is outrageous.

Even more outrageous, if that is possible, is the pandering to the Net Generation, and the suggestion that people about 15 years of age know 'things that matter' (p.6), in short that they will tell senior scholars what they may have for their research or not, as everything is reconfigured to suit their needs: taking up space and facilities in the library 'surfing the net' or worse, as one can observe any time one likes.

The reality: as an international scholar I know that the the inescapable fact is that we are at the end of the world still, even in the 21st century. Our resources are pitiful. We claim to have 3.5 million volumes. They are scattered all over the place. Great libraries such as the British or Harvard have 15 million. Not only that, when I go to the British, I quickly order half a dozen books and go to my desk to begin work. Within half an hour the books begin to arrive, and I am reading. I can do in a day what it takes me here weeks. I put in, say, 10 ILL loans: 3 will come in a few days, another couple in some weeks, the rest will not be here months later. I will have to wait until my next overseas trip, when I can go to a real library. In sum, to write a book here is ten times more difficult than to do it in London or a major American library.

There is a fundamental confusion in this whole document, a conscious 'blurring of the boundaries' (p.27). This is a major illusion (PC generated) of current society. You don't need any specialist training, everyone can do everything--only you wouldn't want a greengrocer to perform your brain operation or pilot your Boeing 747. Reality check: there is virtually nothing in common between an undergraduate student's work and that of an internationally recognised researcher--nothing but the most elementary commonality in method--and that only if the student is being taught to have nothing to do with information and everything to do with scholarship and learning. Provide facilities suitable for the undergraduates, who mostly will be with us for three to six years and then go off--but also provide the facilities for the scholars on whom the reputation of this university relies, who have often (as I have) devoted a lifetime to it. So what do we need ?

1. What scholars are provided with everywhere else (except the much touted Open University--which be definition, could not work on traditional libraries) : namely the preservation and expansion of all our resources, in simple conditions which allow us our own expert access. In the words of the Dean of Humanities at Chicago, where the brilliant new library was built in consultation with academic staff, 'We don't want to fill in 15 slips and wait days (lucky her) until the books are delivered: we want to borrow them now and start writing!' The best library here is the beautiful Law Library--and that is because academic staff played a large role in its planning. We want a research library which can hold at least 5 million books, browsable, with the simplest desk space where one can sit down to consult them. Our own research collection (the most precious books from the 150 years existence of the library) was in danger of brutal dispersal last year, when managerial decisions were made without the slightest consultation of academics, for whom it is their life blood. It was publicly admitted that the resulting furor caught the managers completely by surprise.

2. I have worked at splendid London research institutes (the Institute of Classical Studies, the Institute of African and Oriental Studies), and the American Academy (and various others) in Rome,

where in a collection of only 200,-300,000 volumes, almost everything that the specialist scholar wants is on hand, so that more time is not spent trying to find things than in using them. We need such specialised research libraries (open of course to serious students as well).

In conclusion it is a scandal that the oldest university in the city is now well behind its two main competitors founded more than a century later (!) in the provision of facilities for research. In comparison with libraries overseas, we are, as Sally Walker (now VC Deakin) admitted to me, about third- rate by American university standards. How's that for Growing Esteem ? The Melbourne mentality is brutally revealed by the rewriting of history (p.15). That cavalcade that rode up Swanston St laid the foundation stones for the Public Library and then the University (note the order, not the other way around).

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