

IL, January 2018

The Cosmos of Libraries From Alexandria to the Internet

Raymond J. Uzwyszyn, PhD*

Director of Collections and Digital Services, Texas State University Libraries,
San Marcos, TX, US

ABSTRACT

This article presents a blueprint for marketing libraries for the 21st century. Through an inspirational overview, this research presents an episodic outline for a documentary series to promote libraries surveying various historical and technological areas, among them: Great US and European libraries, The Ancient Library of Alexandria, Asian, African and Latin American Libraries, classificatory systems, digital libraries, the changing nature of the book, library as learning commons and information as commodity. This article is oriented towards library stakeholders and public interested in the future of libraries.

Keywords: Libraries, History, Information Technology, the Scholarly Record, Emergent Technologies, Library Documentary series, Marketing Libraries.

* Division of Collections and Digital Services, Texas State University Libraries, San Marcos, TX, US.
Email: ruzwyszyn@txstate.edu

INTRODUCTION



One of the institutional pillars of a democratic society has always been the library. Recent facts, such as the possible [defunding](#) of the IMLS (Institute for Museum and Library Services) and many national libraries globally struggling, speak towards the necessity to better market this venerable institution. Libraries are key in the provision of information, education, literacy and enabling economic, health and social pathways for wider populations. They are places of reflection and inspiration and provide equal access to information and knowledge. Even with this illustrious history, these values seem to fall on deaf ears lately with regards to the public good. Libraries also hold a central place in our technocentric age as digital archives of knowledge, enablers of innovation and important community service providers. While institutions such as the [Gates](#), Carnegie and Mellon Foundations continue to promote the idea of libraries as critical assets for civil society, other important stakeholders have given short shrift to knowledge archives.

With these perspectives in mind, there is a necessity of marketing the larger 'idea of library' and its value to audiences externally, nationally and globally. The title 'Cosmos', from which this article takes its inspiration, is a nod towards the great PBS astronomy series done at the dawn of the 1980's. 'Cosmos' was a thirteen-part television series written by the late

astronomer, Carl Sagan, and collaborators Ann Druyan and Steven Soter. The documentary series was widely popular and the impact of the series was far-reaching, revitalizing an aging space program and inspiring our global village to look again to the stars and regain perspectives in a time of cold war and the threat of mutual self-destruction.



Carl Sagan's Cosmos

Cosmos is an instructive example for thinking about kindling the passion, wonder and inspiration for libraries globally. For a library series, we need to similarly market the history of knowledge and organization in a way that the average person can understand. Libraries possess inspirational topics ranging from the great library of Alexandria, to our great libraries, to demystifying our current knowledge-seeking tools for the general public in our new millennia.

There are many ways such a series could be oriented - US or global, topic-oriented, or a combination thereof depending on audience and funding sources. What is important is that a dialogue begin for the necessity of inspiring a wider public, to witness the treasures of our global libraries, both historically and in our current digital age. The following series outline puts forward an inspiration blueprint on how such a project might be shaped and to open wider discussions.

The Cosmos of Libraries – Series Episode Outline

Episode One: Introduction

Our library documentary would begin *in media res* with a journey through the history of human knowledge beginning with our own internet, but then travelling back in time. Historically, landmarks of such a knowledge journey would be explored. We would introduce the history of the [knowledge organizing tools](#) from 19th century classificatory schemes to the Renaissance, Gutenberg and Great Library of Alexandria and where the codification of knowledge begins. The Table of Contents and Scroll would be examined historically moving from this papyrus innovation to Google's scrolling list with its millions of items and mission to organize the world's information. How did we get here? What happened in between?

Episode Two: The Great US Libraries



US Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Great Reading Room

Beginning locally, the series would then tour some of the great libraries in the US: the [Library of Congress](#), Harvard's [Widener](#), the [New York Public](#) and Andrew Carnegie's decision to fund libraries for the public good in the 19th century. What were each of these libraries' purposes? How did they develop and what are a few of their treasures?

Episode Three: The Great Library of Alexandria



The Great Library of Alexandria: Information and the Scroll

After looking at these modern examples, we would now go back to the present day great library of Alexandria in modern day Egypt. Do traces of the past remain? What are the library's present objectives? How did this library function in the ancient world and what was its purpose with regards to empire and the state? Are there parallels for significance today?

Episode Four: The Great Libraries of Europe



Oxford University's Bodleian Library

From here we would travel to the great libraries of Europe: Oxford, The British Library and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. How did these great university and national libraries begin? What are some of their hidden treasures? Who were the high and low-born patrons? Apparently, Marx spent much of his time in London in the British Library and what about all of the scholars and students around Oxford? What roles did the original libraries play in Europe and how do they serve the patrons, students and general public today?

Episode Five: Libraries in Africa, Asia and South America



Ancient Manuscripts at Sankore Madrasah, Timbuktu, Mali

While our libraries in North America and Europe are well-known with longstanding histories, there are ‘other’ libraries and library traditions in Africa, Asia and South America. Except for disciplinary experts, these libraries and library systems are mostly unknown to the western world. This episode will explore these dark continents of libraries and treasures nodding to the Gates and other international foundations amazing work with libraries and information technologies in developing nations.

Episode Six: The Catalog: From Mesopotamian Tablets to Classificatory Systems



Cuneiform Tablet, Mesopotamia

From here, we will take a deeper dive into the vast realm of the organization of knowledge and history of the catalog. This episode overviews these classificatory schema and their history from the first tablet catalogs to the digitized Mesopotamian tablet library in Princeton looking at the codification of the catalog of human knowledge with Dewey, the Library of Congress, Ranganathan in India, and other heterodox organizational systems, such as Aby Warburg’s unique organization of the Courtauld Art Institute, London.

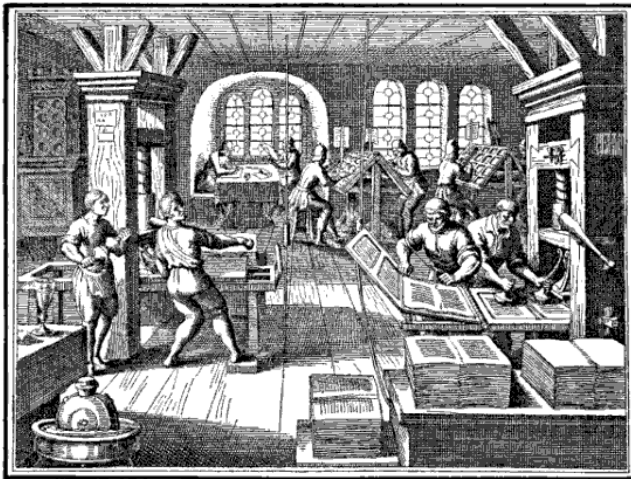
Episode Seven: Online and Digital Libraries



United Nations Digital Library: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>

The world today consists of literally thousands of online libraries. Episode seven examines online libraries from the first online libraries and development of the OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogs) to the profusion of creativity of digital libraries now comprising a spectrum of media - text, images, video, data and, increasingly, a combination of all media. This episode will also review new possibilities with linked data and realization of Tim Berners Lee's original vision of a semantic searchable web and other visionary thinkers: Ted Nelson's Project Xanadu, Vannevar Bush's Memex and the European Paul Otlet's world library project.

Episode Eight: The Changing Nature of the Book



The Gutenberg Press and Moveable Type: 1439

What would a history and introduction to the world of libraries be without a deferential bow to the history of the book? This episode will look at the first books beginning with Gutenberg (Incunabula, 1439) and moving to the mass production of print in the 19th and 20th century to our era of e-books. Is this the end of this love affair? The second part of this episode will examine complex possibilities and challenges of e-books, Kindle, iPad, Audible etc.

Episode Nine: Librarians: Stereotypes and Visionaries



The list of famous librarians is long and illustrious: Ben Franklin, Eratosthenes, Mao, Golda Meir, Duchamp, D'Engle, Laura Bush, Bataille, Borges, Proust, Grimm, Suetonius, Lao Tsu, Larkin and Hypatia. Librarians have always had a curious history, from astronomers to heterodox philosophers, to poets and writers, to quiet but firm feminists influencing government and public opinion. The stereotype of librarian is also firmly rooted in society from shooshing school marms to repressed secretaries. This episode will dispel, confirm and surprise in a humanizing portrayal of the profession.

Episode Ten: Library as Place



Architect Louis Kahn's Spiritual Masterpiece, Exeter Library

Libraries have always been places of learning, reflection and inspiration. What is the history of 'shhhh!' and where does it come from? Are libraries still quiet places? Let's look at libraries, quiet and noisy, from magisterial monastic origins to more current masterpieces of reflection and inspiration ranging from New York Public's great reading rooms to Louis Kahn's modernist library masterworks at Yale and Exeter in the quest for spirit in library design.

Episode Eleven: Library as Learning Commons



Mills Memorial Library Learning Commons, McMaster University

The current buzzword in libraries is ‘the learning commons’. Like it or not, books are being shipped out and technology *en masse* is being brought in. What does this current technological sea change for libraries herald? Does it signal the end of libraries? Has the internet taken over the role of the library? Will people now stop reading paper-based media and have the techno barbarians successfully stormed previous monastic gates? This episode will explore our new millennia redefinition of libraries.

Episode Twelve Information as Commodity



With the current profusion of information, information has become a commodity. Books, libraries, journals and collections are digitized, bundled, placed in a database and sold to researchers, universities and back to the public for anyone needing the information that libraries previously collected on paper. Should all information be free though? What is the libraries role in building democracy and civil society and democracy and future of information? This episode will examine information in the digital age from vendor databases to pirate digital archives and the current global trafficking in information.

Episode Thirteen: The Future of Libraries



This summary episode will reflect on the vast library journey we've been on to unpack some of the wonder and miracles of libraries and our human quest to organize information and knowledge. It will reflect on the future and look back at the past. Where have we truly been with libraries? Where are we going and how is knowledge organization continuing to enable our species?

Conclusion

Our world of libraries is vast. The goal in this article was to inspire and begin a dialogue towards the necessity to present our treasures. We need to market ourselves better for future communities worthy of our venerable, historic institution. The place of libraries in our global village must remain central. Libraries have been a staple of human civilization since the dawn of civilization and first cities. It is a time to review and reflect on this temple of the muses of scholars and poets, scientists and artists, sinners and saints for our wider society. We are the caretakers of a rich global cultural heritage with a role to play that involves the vast record of our human race. For this alone, we should be worthy stewards.

Copyright 2018 by Ray Uzwysyn.

About the Author

Ray Uzwyshyn, Ph.D. MBA MLIS

Ray Uzwyshyn is currently Director of Collections and Digital Services for Texas State University Libraries. He has previously acted as Director of Libraries for American Public University System and served as a grant reviewer for both the Gates Foundation Global Access to Technology and Libraries and Institution for Museums and Libraries (IMLS). His background and contact information is available here: [vita](#), [profile](#), email: ruzwyshyn@txstate.edu

FURTHER REFERENCES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee (2017). *Environmental Scan 2017*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- ACRL (2017). *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*. [Website]. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
- Flexspace (2017). Flexible Learning Environments Exchange. [Database]. <http://flexspace.org/>
- New Media Consortium (2017). Horizon Report: 2017 Library Edition. [Website]. New Media Consortium. <https://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2017-library-edition/>
- Uzwyshyn, R. (2006). Human Knowledge Seeking and Information Visualization: Exploring New Possibilities. Thompson ISI 2006 Samuel Lazerow Memorial Lecture. School of Information Studies TWU. [PPT File]. <http://rayuzwyshyn.net/LazerowPresentation.ppt>
- Uzwyshyn, R. (2011a). Chapter 7: Semi-Structured and Unstructured Information Systems: Information Visualization. In C.H. Davis and D. Shaw (Eds.). *Introduction to Information Science and Technology*. Medford: ITI, 95-109.
- Uzwyshyn, R., Smith, M., Coulter, P., Stevens, K. & Hyland, S. (2013). A Virtual Globally Dispersed Twenty-First Century Academic Library System. *Reference Librarian*, 54:3, 226-235.
- Uzwyshyn, R. (2016a). Back to the Future: From Book Warehouse to Library Learning Commons. *Informed Librarian*. [Online Serial]. October.
- Uzwyshyn, R. (2016b). Research Data Repositories: The What, When, Why and How. *Computers in Libraries*. 36:3, 18-21.
- Uzwyshyn, R. (2016c). *Transforming Academic Libraries for the New Millennia*. [Powerpoint File]. Presented for Campus Technology Annual Conference. <http://rayuzwyshyn.net/TXU2016/Presentations/TransformingAcademicLibrariesfortheNewMillennia.pptx>