

The Cosmos of Libraries

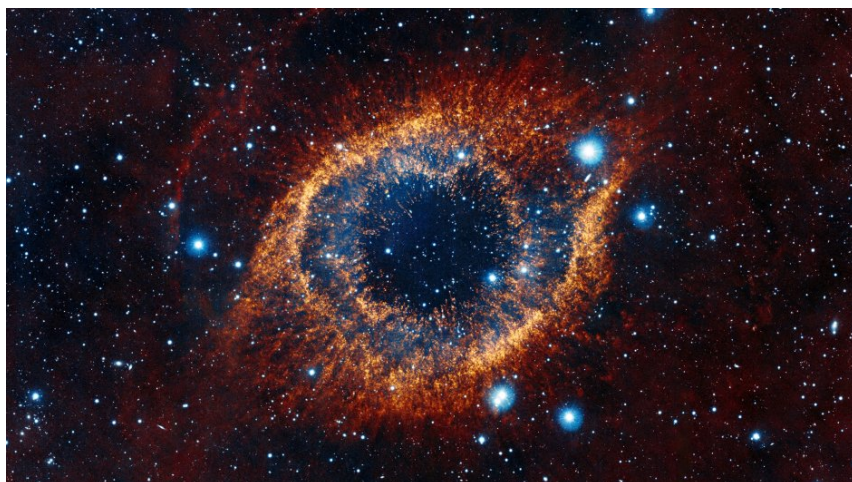
From Alexandria to the Internet: The Necessity of Marketing Libraries for the 21st Century



Ray Uzwyshyn, Ph.D. MBA MLIS

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 shortfalls of many libraries globally, speak now towards the necessity to better market our longstanding 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, inspiration, learning and advocates for human rights in equal access to information, learning and knowledge. Even with this longstanding illustrious history, these values seem to fall on deaf ears lately with regards to the public good and long respected values of a liberal humanist agenda. 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, many national governments 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 forum piece 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 subsequently broadcast in over 60 countries to over 500 million people. 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 our perspective on the earth in time of cold war and the threat of mutual self-destruction.



Carl Sagan's Cosmos

More than an astronomer or research Ph.D., Sagan was able to stir the public's passion for the importance of astronomy and science in our larger human quest. *Cosmos* is an instructive example for thinking about kindling the passion and wonder, inspiration for libraries globally and revitalizing the importance of our institution and discipline in these precarious times. For a library series, we need to similarly market the history of knowledge and organization in a way that the average person can understand, with inspirational topics ranging from the great library of Alexandria, to opening the fascinating worlds of libraries, to demystifying our current knowledge-seeking tools for the common person 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 a first volley to open discussion on such a project.

The Cosmos of Libraries – Series Episode Outline

Episode One: Introduction

Our library documentary would begin with a journey through the history of human knowledge beginning with our own internet, but then travelling back in time. From 19th century classificatory schemes to the Renaissance and Gutenberg and Great Library of Alexandria to where the codification of knowledge begins, we'd introduce the history of the [knowledge organizing tools](#). 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? Historically, landmarks of such a knowledge journey would be explored.

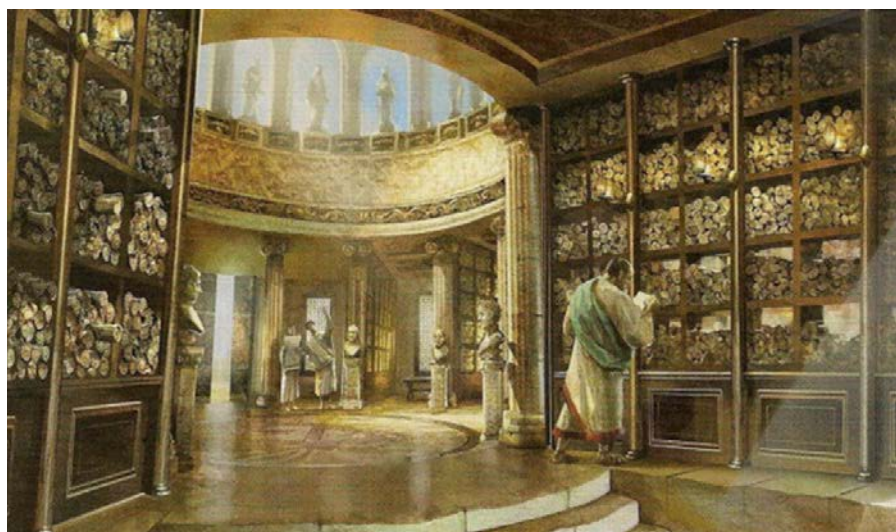
Episode Two: The Great US Libraries: Harvard, NYPL, The Library of Congress



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

From a global view, 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: Ancient and Modern History



The Great Library of Alexandria: Information and the Scroll

After looking at these modern examples in episode three, 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 and how did this library function in the ancient world? Are there parallels for significance today?

Episode Four: The Great Libraries of Europe: Oxford, The British Library, Bibliotheque Nationale



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 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 Lewis Carroll spent time as a librarian around Oxford. What roles did the original libraries play in Europe and how do they serve the patrons, student and professors 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 largely unknown to the western world. This episode will explore these dark continents of libraries and treasures nodding to the Gates Foundation's 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 the first tablet catalogs at the Mesopotamian tablet library in Princeton to the codification of the catalog 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.

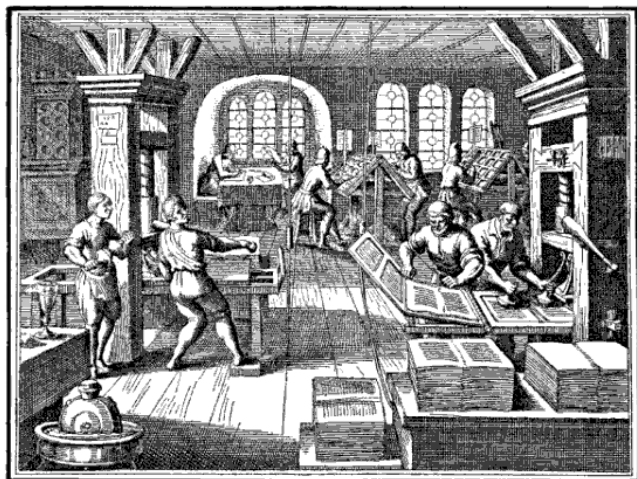
Episode Seven: Online and Digital Libraries: From Computer Beginnings to Linked Data



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 of the above. 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: from Gutenberg to E-Texts



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. Is this the end of this love affair? The second part of this episode will examine the complex possibilities and challenges of e-books and their many players: 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, Laura Bush, Proust, Jacob Grimm, Suetonius, Lao Tsu and Hypatia. Librarians have always had a curious history, from astronomers at the great library of Alexandria to heterodox philosophers such as George Bataille in France, to poets and writers such as Philip Larkin, Madeline D'Engle and Borges, to quiet but firm feminists influencing government and public opinion from Golda Meir to America's ALA. 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: A History of 'Shhhh!'



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 monastic origins to some masterpieces of reflection and inspiration ranging from New York Public's quiet reading rooms to Louis Kahn's modernist libraries at Yale and Exeter and the quest for spirit in library design.

Episode Eleven: Library as Learning Commons - Getting Rid of the Books and Bringing in the Computers



Mills Memorial Library Learning Commons, McMaster

The current buzzword in libraries is 'the learning commons'. Like it or not, books are being shipped out and all manner of technology is being brought in. What does this technological sea change 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 the monastic gates? This episode will explore this new millennia redefinition of libraries.

Episode Twelve Information as Commodity: The Democracy of Information



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 other centers needing the information that libraries previously collected on paper. Should all information be free though? What is the democracy and future of information? This episode will examine information in the digital age from vendor databases to pirate digital archives and the global illegal trafficking in information.

Episode Thirteen: The Future of Libraries



This summary episode will reflect on the vast journey we've been on to unpack some of the wonder and miracles of libraries and our human quest to organize information. 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. There are many more suggestions that could have been made. The goal in this article was to inspire and begin a dialogue towards the necessity to present our treasures outwardly. We need to market ourselves better for future communities worthy of our venerable and historic institution. The place of libraries in our global village must remain central. Libraries have been a staple of human civilization since the first cities. It is a time to reflect back to show off 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 an important role to play that involves the vast record of our human race. For this alone, we must be worthy stewards.

Copyright 2017 by Ray Uzwyshyn.

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 [vita](#), [profile](#) and contact information is available here: ruzwyshyn@txstate.edu