

Session 2: Digitization: Why, How and For Whom?

LISBET RAUSING, Imperial College; “Do Libraries Dream of Electric Sheep?”

For the first time, we can build a “a new Alexandria,” an electronic, public-domain library containing humanity's collected output of source-critical, referenced, peer-reviewed data, as well as the cultural heritage of our world civilizations, and many of the world's most significant archives and specialist collections. This talk analyses why we are not doing so.

The answer is not technological or financial. We live in the age of electronic reproduction, where the marginal cost of replicas are approaching zero. The technological future is certain--magically created, at dazzling speed, by scholars, entrepreneurs and amateurs.

Building New Alexandria is instead a question of will, and especially, the will of knowledge intermediaries-state-builders and gate-keepers, the academics, librarians, civil servants, politicians and charity leaders. Do we have the imagination, energy and generosity to build legal, organisational and financial structures to protect, preserve, and order, but also share and disseminate, the learning and cultures of the world?

This problem have many facets: this talk addresses three challenges facing national libraries and university libraries: the cult of the artefact, the problem of abundance, and the question of the audience.

The cult of the artefact is a story of our historical origins, and how, in an era of electronic abundance, we operate within an increasingly imaginary economy of scarcity.

The problem of abundance is the profound and arguable unanswerable question of what the library is when the totality of experience is also that which can be remembered.

And the question of the audience is our failure to mentally encompass all people of the earth--indeed, even educated Westerners – as members of our republic of learning.

Thus, with the ironic exception of those natural sciences too specialist to be grasped by the public, our gate-keeper mentality means that exceedingly few academic monographs, journals, databases, and research tools are in the public domain, even though the public has ultimately paid for them, through research grants, tax breaks, and donations.

The opportunity costs for society are self-evident. But what are the opportunity costs for scholars? If we hide away and lock up our knowledge, do we not risk our own irrelevance? Today we bar even MPs, journalists, business leaders, lawyers, authors, entrepreneurs, and civil servants. What does that tell these, our former students? How will it affect how these decision-makers think about, say, federal research grants, or top up fees?