Against the Grain

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Op Ed--I, Library

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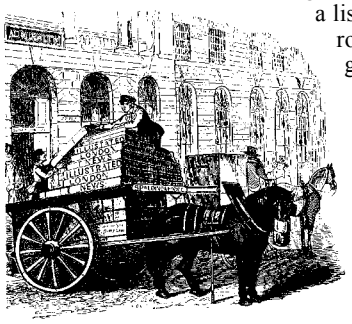
Certain conversations of mine have included a fantastical, Pollyanna-type rosy lens, in which I hum along about how wonderful it would be if we had a national, U.S. government funded, digital library. A digital library that offered all of its democratic citizens access to quality information, including national site licenses to such library products as **Britannica**, **EBSCO**, **SpringerLink**, **Gale Virtual Reference Librar**y, **Nature Publishing**, **ProQuest**, as well as library popular media products including those offered by **Overdrive**, **Hoopla**, **Freegal**. Surely in a defiingly democratic nation, in which one of its founding fathers claimed, "Information is the currency of democracy," (**Thomas Jefferson**) such a universal library of digital information is not a punctured fantasy?



I was reading recently about **IBM's** newest work with its Jeopardy champion, *Watson*. *Watson* is now being further engineered as a cloud-based service that ingests masses of data and information, and upon a (spoken or typed) natural-language query, locates relevant patterns in the data and offers an intelligent reply. The example of this service that most quickly struck me was *Watson's* early ingestion of the 23 million articles in **PubMed**. If *Watson* was a personal service, one could ask *Watson*, "I've just run through a patch of poison ivy. Should I be applying calamine lotion or aloe vera? What would you suggest?" Or with the **Center for Disease Control** site, travel advisory sites, and **PubMed** all ingested, how about, "I am traveling to Chile. What documents and inoculation will I need in advance?"

I can't help but imagine *Watson* (and here is where the government dollars come in) as a nationally available service that has ingested high-quality library databases, alongside the free Web. If *Watson's* databank included **Ancestry**, and the **DPLA**, one might ask, "Who was my great-great-great grandfather on my mother's side?" And then, "Please show me any images or documents related to this man." With the **GVRL** and science databases included one might ask, "Explain to me the chemistry of fireworks." Or, let's say *Watson* includes **Google Books** or **Overdrive**, we could then ask of *Watson*, "Read me *Oliver Twist*."

I've seen some footprints heading in that direction. While the difficulty of communicating with *SIRI* is made into a joke on late night comedy shows, sometimes s/he comes through. The other day my first-grader asked *SIRI* who had won the **Patriots** game the (late) night before. *SIRI* responded beautifully, accurately, and offered the time and place of the next game, followed by offering a list of the players on the roster for this upcoming game. My little one was delighted, not only to know who won the game but also the related content that *SIRI* thought might be of interest. Ads for **Amazon's** new voice-recognition cylinder, *Echo*, suggest a similar capability, with the family in the *Echo* advert asking of *Echo*, "How tall is Mount Everest?" "Mount Everest's height is 29,020 feet, 8,848 meters," *Echo* replies. Unmentioned is where *Echo* extracts this information ("the cloud" we are told in this same video).

Japan believes. In February 2015, **Softbank**, a major Japanese telecommunications company, announced its implementation of *Watson*. When a customer calls **Softbank**, guess who will answer the phone? *Watson* will become the company's call center, ingesting both the Japanese language and an unfathomable myriad of data to address possible customer queries. The same company has said it will employ *Watson* internally inside its little social, human-companion robot, "*Pepper*." This will … "give *Pepper* a larger knowledge base to work with and could make the robot more applicable to specific industries." (Dignan, 2015). Ahem. Such as the knowledge industry, perhaps? If my household robot has to handle the entire Internet, and scrumptious high-quality library databases, wherefore the physical library and librarians? Do people want this? *Pepper's* first offering, a run of 1,000 companion robots, offered exclusively to Japanese customers in late June 2015, sold out in less than a minute.

I once watched a physicist on the **Colbert** show explain to **Steven** that science was close to being able to read the thoughts of God. Are we perhaps even closer to achieving robots that can read the thoughts of humans? Or at least, their machine learning algorithms can. Will *Watson* predict our information needs, answering them before we even know we have them, such as *SIRI's* suggestion to my son that he might like to see the upcoming **Patriots** roster? Fingers crossed.

What happens after *Watson*? Perhaps **Asimov** was correct when he wrote "But you see, you just can't differentiate between a robot and the very best of humans." Truly, I don't know what tasks and activities humans will assign value to, after the robot revolution. Me? I'm looking forward to some time at home, enjoying a cup of "Tea, Earl Gray, Hot," alongside my delightful new friends *Jibo*, *Pepper*, and *Watson*.

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