



# Revisiting enduring values<sup>1</sup>

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I wrote a book called *Our enduring values* in the late 1990s (Gorman 2000). It was translated into Italian as *I nostri valori* (Gorman 2002). Many things have changed in the fifteen plus years since that writing. I thought this would be a good time to revisit those values and to reaffirm them in a time of seeming perpetual and consequential change (Gorman 2015).

Let me begin with some definitions:

- **Values** are beliefs and ideals that are major, significant, lasting, and shared by the members of a group. Values define what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable for that group. They are the foundation of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and policies within that group and act as commonly-held bases for those attitudes and policies.
- **A value system** is set of those beliefs and ideals that has been adopted and/or has evolved within a group as a system to guide actions, behaviors, and preferences in all situations.
- **Ethics** are moral beliefs held by a group or community (what is good and bad or right or wrong) and a definition

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the author's *Our enduring values revisited*.



of the moral duties (to do or not do certain actions) that stem from those beliefs.

- **Principles:** starting points for reasoning or guides for thinking and action.

Values, ethics, principles, and morality are related, overlapping, and intertwined concepts. They are often circular in that they define each in terms of the others. In common with most of the rest of humanity, I am not qualified to pronounce on morality. My reluctance to deal with moral questions is one of reasons why I am more concerned here with values than with ethics, principles, or morality. In my opinion, the study of values is concentrated on what is valuable and desirable to do and to avoid more than it is with matters of morality and other abstractions. In other words, defining, agreeing on, and acting on values can be of more practical utility than dealing with abstract matters that belong in the realms of philosophy, theology, and aesthetics.

The values that I discuss in these books and that I have deduced from a study of library literature are: Stewardship; Service; Intellectual freedom; Rationalism; Literacy & learning; Equity of access; Privacy; Democracy; and, The common good.

Libraries, library services of all kinds, and librarianship are inextricably of the world and cannot exist without context. They are part of, and affected for good and ill, by the societies they serve, the communities in which they live, the countries in which they exist, and the wider world. Though libraries have undergone dramatic change (heavily influenced by technological change) in the last decades, those changes must be seen as influenced by the changes in society, politics, lifestyles, and every other aspect of human life. In 1999, I listed trends and changes that had made an impact on humanity in the previous quarter of a century. The following updated list contains many of those changes (the originals listed in italics):

- the globalization of trade
- the consequent flight of manufacturing to low-paid developing countries
- the change from industrialized to service economies in the developed world
- the economic, political, and military rise of China
- the creation of an interdependent world economy
- the explosive growth of social media
- the economic centrality of the online world
- the rise of global terrorism
- dramatic increases in cybercrime
- the “War on Terror” and its subsequent actual wars
- the transformation, for good and ill, of societies (politically and economically) in Eastern Europe and Asia
- advances in medicine that have increased life spans and led to the aging of populations
- the success of the women’s movement in developed countries
- the advent and sweeping power of global information-technology-based companies
- the shape-shifting of higher education
- the death of privacy?
- the financial collapse that led to the Great Recession
- the rise of fundamentalism across the world
- the current and future impact of anthropogenic climate change
- the ‘Arab Spring’

It is remarkable how many of those trends have endured and developed since 2000. It is also obvious that many of these changes are driven or, at least, influenced by technological innovation and that many of them are entwined with others. Globalization depends on communication technologies. The change from manufacturing to service industries in the developed world is technology driven. Terrorists have web sites that appeal to and develop would-be

terrorists. Cybercrime, cyber bullying, and the assault on privacy are some of the other monsters that result from technological change. We live in a world in which the blessings and afflictions of technology pervade our lives. It is important to maintain perspective and remember that crime, bullying, intrusions into private lives, terrorism, transnational companies, booms and busts and the other contradictions of capitalism, transnational communications, and all the rest existed long before computer networks were ever dreamed of. Closer to our concerns, the recurrent rows about 'filtering' and other forms of preventing access have come about because of the internet and the Web, but the desire to censor for religious, political, and moral reasons has been with us for centuries.

Fifteen years ago, I wrote that we live in a time of change and it is obvious that the times have been a-changing ever since and show no sign of ceasing to do so. That churning has meant that things and ideas that used to be certain are no longer (I can still remember the shock I experienced two years ago when my then seven year old grandson, on seeing a bottle of blue ink on my desk next to my fountain pen, asked me "What's that blue stuff?"). Given uncertainty and the indefinite prospect of more in the totality of our lives and in the world of libraries, it is important to find at least a few truly unchanging underpinnings for our profession that constitute an agreed framework for discussion and, I would hope, a pathway on which to proceed with hope and confidence.

Humankind intensifies the search for meaning when it is prosperous. That search intensifies in societies in which the basic physical needs—food, housing, education, health care—are widely available. Religion may be the opium of the poor but it seems to offer, even in the vaguest terms ("spirituality," etc.), not an escape from the rigors of life for the prosperous but an enhancement when one is well-off enough to come to the idea that material things are not enough. It can also be a consolation for those who fear change.

Outside and beyond religion, individuals and groups seek principles, ethics, values, and determining beliefs. The results of that search not only define them and give their various lives meaning, but also give them the means of overcoming the fear of change or even of preparing for the unknown changes to come. In libraries, a microcosm of the wider world, we are buoyed and even enhanced by technology while being challenged and threatened by it simultaneously. We are experiencing changes that most of us understand partially, if at all. We have undergone a series of seismically negative economic events; and we are buffeted and worn down by in-group verbiage, new demands for new services, febrile searches for the next shiny new technological innovation (the one that replaces the one we were so excited about six months ago), and, above all, that queasy, omnipresent, indefinable sense of the ground shifting under our feet in the world of libraries and in our whole lives. I do not claim that a clear grasp of our fundamental and enduring values is a panacea for all our ills, but I do believe they provide a foundation upon which productive and satisfying library lives can be built.

Values are, as I have stated, lasting and fundamental beliefs and ideals that can be the basis for positive action and for making work more fulfilling. In thinking about values and taking action based on values, however, we walk an intellectual tightrope that stretches between lives made dreary and unfulfilling by the absence of beliefs and ideals and the lives of those to whom values have become absolutes and ideals and beliefs have curdled into fanaticism. We must have beliefs and ideals but we should never seek to impose those beliefs and ideals on the unwilling. There is a vast difference between defending one's values and making others conform to those values. Take, for example, the question of intellectual freedom — the belief that all people should be free to read what they wish, write what they wish, and think what they wish. Librarians, of all people, should be unyielding defenders of that value against those who wish to restrict reading, expression, and thought. What of people who

sincerely believe, for religious, political, or other reasons, that some texts and some expressions of thought should be censored? In defending intellectual freedom, are we imposing our beliefs and stifling theirs? No, because no librarian would insist on someone reading a text that she or found offensive. It is the censors who insist on imposing their values, not the believers in intellectual freedom. The distinction lies right there—the point at which beliefs become rancid is when they are imposed on others, something common to fundamentalists of all stripes. Librarians should always seek to open avenues of thought and research and stand against those who wish to close them. In other words, values that open avenues and broaden enquiry should always have preference over beliefs that seek to shut off avenues and narrow enquiry.

Reading the literature of any place at any time will tell you that people, in each of those places and each of those times believed they were living in an era of unprecedented change. It may have been ever so, but the change we experience now is always more fraught than past change, for the simple reason that we know the results of past change but have no way of telling the outcomes of the changes we are experiencing, still less the changes that are forecast. However you look at it, change happens and more change is coming. There are two ways of dealing these inevitabilities. The first is to be passive and reflexive, allowing what happens to happen. The other is to plan for and, where possible, to control and guide change. However, planning can never be effective in the absence of intellectual and principled underpinning. Without that, planning dissolves into the kind of jargon-infested pretense that darkens the soul. Human beings need a rationale for their activities because it can raise work above drudgery and wage-slavery and lift human lives to a higher level. This is by no means to advocate the sanctification of unnecessary labor, but to advance the idea that service and other values have a power to validate useful work. I imagine that, in our hearts, we librarians and library workers know that the results of what we do are useful and good and that the cumulation of our good

and useful working lives is far greater than the sum of its parts. Despite this, in my experience of fifty and more years in libraries, there are now more of us who question what we do—the bases of our working lives—than ever before. Two words account for this phenomenon--change and uncertainty.

In every aspect of our lives, we live in an age of uncertainty. The prosperity of the 1990s and the end of the Cold War were succeeded by the low dishonest decade of the September 2001 attacks, hot wars, the “war on terror,” global financial chicanery that combined with debt bubbles to bring the post-WWII global financial system to its knees, the resulting Great Recession and its sour legacies (economic, political, and social), the uneasy feeling that governments know more about you than you like but not as much as Google and Amazon, and other ills too depressing to contemplate. Despite some significant social changes for the good, small wonder that many people are sick of change, yearn for certainties and imaginary past golden ages, and fear the changes yet to come.

The wider fears of society pervade our working lives. For at least three decades now, controversy has swirled around our profession and it is difficult for working librarians, library workers, and LIS students to deal with budget cuts and doing more with less on the one hand and gaseous futurology on the other. How are they to assess those various predictions, particularly those that say that libraries are obsolescent and librarianship is doomed to die? There has been, in those two decades and more, an ever-growing gap between those working in and served by libraries, on the one hand; and non-librarian academic theorists, “information scientists,” some LIS educators, and even some library leaders on the other.

In a discussion of the “right to forget” on National Public Radio on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014 one of the contributors likened it to “going into a library and telling them to pulp books.” Whatever one thinks of the practicality and morality of individuals whitewashing their digital history, the analogy with library bibliocide is both inaccurate and

misleading. It is, alas, a manifestation of a widespread misunderstanding of the nature of libraries. I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard or read a lazy-minded commentator likening the internet to having “the content of many libraries at your fingertips.” Let us leave aside the demonstrable nonsense of “at your fingertips.” It is vital to remember that the library is not just its collections, important though they are. Those collections would be useless without two other essential components—a trained and value-imbued staff and a bibliographic architecture. The staff create and maintain the collections (tangible and virtual) and make those collections usable in the construction and maintenance of the bibliographic architecture and by providing help and instruction in their use. We must insist on the importance of our libraries necessarily having all three components—collections, librarians, and an organization and retrieval system.

*“At the moment, the most powerful marker, the feature that distinguishes our species most decisively from closely related species, appears to be symbolic language. ... [H]umans are the only creatures who can communicate using symbolic language: a system of arbitrary symbols that can be linked by formal grammars to create a nearly limitless variety of precise utterances. Symbolic language greatly enhanced the precision of human communication and the range of ideas that humans can exchange. This cumulative process of ‘collective learning’ explains the exceptional ability of humans to adapt to changing environments and changing circumstances. It also explains the unique dynamism of human history. In human history culture has overtaken natural selection as the primary motor of change.”*

The process of “collective learning”, described by Christian (2008, 8), depends on the existence of symbolic language. That symbolic language is the necessary prerequisite of the human record—the vast assemblage of textual, visual, and symbolic creations in all languages, from all periods of history, and found in all communication formats—from clay tablets to digital assemblages of



binary code. Interaction with the human record is how ideas and literary works conquer space and time; how we know what unknown ancestors and persons in far distant places knew and thought; and how we can exercise our ability to learn and to create new knowledge, new ideas, and new literature for our unknown descendants. Though many people now think that digital technology has created an entirely new way of learning, the fact is that there are only three ways in which human beings learn and that digital technology is but the latest manifestation of the third and most recent of those ways.

Humans learn:

- from experience (physical interaction with, and observation of, the world);
- from people who know more than they do (speech and hearing); and
- from interaction with the human record (written, symbolic, and visual records).

The third way of learning permits the first two ways to extend across space and time—the records of experience and knowledge allow those remote in time and distance to learn from the experience and knowledge of others. The human record is central to learning and its preservation and onward transmission are crucial to civilization and the perpetuation of culture. Thus, facilitating learning by fruitful and wide-ranging interaction with the human record is crucial and should be understood as the ultimate mission of all librarians.

The human record (all those texts, symbolic representations, and images in all formats that have accumulated over the millennia) is best understood when viewed in the larger context of cultural heritage. In 1972, the Unesco Convention on cultural heritage defined its subject in terms only of tangible human-made and natural objects (Unesco 1972). Thirty one years later, Unesco (2003) broadened the definition and agreed a Convention on what it called

“intangible cultural heritage”. That Convention recognized “the deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage”.

Intangible cultural heritage includes all aspects of culture that can be recorded but cannot be touched and cannot be interacted with without vehicles for those aspects of culture. These cultural vehicles are called "Human Treasures" by the UN and include Living Human Treasures—“persons who possess to a high degree the knowledge and skills required for performing or re-creating specific elements of the intangible cultural heritage”(Unesco 2014a). The centrality of intangible cultural heritage is expressed by Unesco (2014b) as:

*The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State, and is as important for developing States as for developed ones.*

A crucial point of these definitions of is that knowledge of cultural heritage and its preservation is dependent upon the heritage being recorded (textually and/or visually). The range of such recordings is almost limitless, they can include video-recordings of performances; sound recordings of music; texts of recipes; dictionaries of endangered languages; video and sound recordings of Living Human Treasures; photographs of costumes, buildings, artefacts, etc.; records of anthropological and sociological research; and on and on. The essential point of all recording and documentation is that, once made, they form part of the human record. As with all the human record, those records must be organized for retrieval, made widely available, and preserved for posterity. The aims of Unesco’s *Conventions* cannot be met without such recording, organization, dissemination, and preservation. The human record and the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of humankind overlap and interact dynamically. This process is easy to see when dealing with

intangible cultural heritage but operates even in the case of monuments, buildings. For example, historical photographs of architectural sites contribute greatly to the understanding of the cultural heritage of those sites and are an invaluable part of the transmission of that heritage.

I stress the importance of the human record and its interrelationship with the question of cultural heritage because it seems to me that librarians, libraries, and archives have a major role in the dissemination and preservation of both the human record and the cultural heritage of which it is a part. That also leads me to the belief that librarianship is properly seen as an essential part of an intellectual, cultural community centered on cultural heritage that includes archival work, museum and art curation, and all the other disciplines that contribute to learning and the use and preservation of the records of human culture in all its manifestations.

Individual parts of the human record have been referred to as “information” for decades now. The same word is what drives “information science” and, of course and ubiquitously, “information technology”. “Information” so used is all-embracing to the point at which it verges on the meaningless. The word “information” applied to statistics on peanut cultivation in the US; Canova’s *Venus Italica*; Eliot’s *The waste land*; a cute cat video; and, the score of Beethoven’s *Fifth symphony* is incoherent and, to put it mildly, unhelpful. If a normal understanding of the word is applied to the first of these and not the others, where does that leave the cult of information? I believe that this (mis)use of the word “information” points to a problem that goes far beyond the semantic—it points to muddled thinking and results in the fact that libraries and librarians have been seduced into accepting value systems that are antithetical to the true mission of our profession—namely, the value systems of information technology and of corporate management.

Let me try to clear the ground by reiterating three definitions proposed twenty years ago in a book co-written with Walt Crawford

(Crawford and Gorman 1965, 5), and adding a fourth to define the content of the various types of resource that constitute the human record as it is encountered and experienced in libraries:

*Data.* Facts and other raw material that can be processed into useful information.

*Information.* Data processed and rendered useful.

*Knowledge.* Information transformed into meaning and made manifest in texts, cartographic and other visual or audio-visual materials.

*Imaginative/Aesthetic creations.* Literary texts and graphic/visual/audio-visual, etc., creations in which the aesthetic transcends the utilitarian.

The first three are, in ascending order, the first steps on Mortimer Adler's "ladder of learning" which leads, again ascending, to understanding and wisdom (Adler 1986). The fourth may or may not draw on one or more of the preceding three. To illustrate, *data* on temperatures and other climatic phenomena can be aggregated and synthesized into *information* that, when collated, suggests the existence of significant climate change; and that and other information can be combined with learning and experience to generate scholarship resulting in recorded *knowledge* in the form of, say, a scholarly text on anthropogenic climate change. It should be noted that the degree and depth of human intervention and shaping increases steeply when moving from *data*, which can be gathered with little or no human intervention, to *information*, which increasingly can be generated by computers (using programs created by humans), to *recorded knowledge*, a product of the human mind. The latter is obviously also true of *imaginative/aesthetic creations*.

In all the current chatter and unthinking acceptance of statements about "information", "the information age", "post-modern societies", etc., we can see important fissures in modern thought. This clash of culture and values shows up in the contrast between:

- commoditized information on one side and recorded knowledge and imaginative/aesthetic creations on the other;
- the consumer and infotainment culture on one side and the culture of learning and reflection on the other;
- mind control, censorship, and conformity on the one hand and freedom of thought and enquiry on the other;
- profit-driven information technology and scientific management on the one side and humanism, unfettered creativity, and spirituality on the other.

In many ways, one side of the culture and values chasm is dominated by individualistic materialism, in which the driving forces are possessions, access to “information” and entertainment to make the individual physically comfortable in a society that, while preaching individualism, exacts the price of conformity for these desired things. The other side (the true domain of libraries) is dominated by self-realization through learning—a true individualism that, again paradoxically, is often expressed in service to society and a belief in the greater good.

The eminent library historian and educator Wayne Weigand has pointed out that the common misconception that libraries are part of the world of information is an inversion of reality. In particular, Professor Weigand (1997, 2005) argues the importance of the library as an institution and physical place central to the promotion of culture (in particular, through reading), social interaction, and for the building and exchange of social capital. The truth is that information is part, and not the most significant part, of the world of libraries. Further, libraries have and should have concerns that are far more complex and important than the storing and imparting of information. Once this idea of the library and its role is assimilated, one can see that library work and services go beyond any particular communication technology, though technology is clearly a central tool in achieving some of the library’s objectives. To put it simply,

libraries are concerned primarily with the resources that constitute the human record and only secondarily with the medium by means of which messages are transmitted. Then we can see the library clearly as part of the general context of the history of human cultural evolution and learning and in the context of the societal institutions that promote education, learning, social cohesion, and the higher aspirations of humankind.

Libraries and librarians took a wrong path in the period between the late 1960s and the late 1980s. The consequences for libraries, library education, and the future of librarianship have been both profound and malign. That wrong path taken was the embrace of, and domination by, two systems—scientific management and information technology—that are, ultimately, antithetical to the enduring values and mission of libraries. They are antithetical because the things their proponents and adherents value—speed, efficiency, the bottom line, information rather than knowledge—are not the primary aims of libraries and libraries, any more than they are the primary aims of a vast range of cultural institutions with which libraries should be aligned and whose values we share. There is an alternative to the wrong path—it lies with those cultural institutions and in seeing information technology and management as what they are—tools that can, if they are put in their place, be useful in furthering the aims of libraries. They can assume that useful role but their values should have never been allowed to be the main drivers of librarianship.

Much library literature today is concerned with the applications to library service of various technological innovations and services—social media (Facebook, tweeting, and so on), video-gaming, streaming media, 3-D printers, etc. Those concern me only when they affect the use and onward transmission of the human record and, in a wider context, only insofar as they improve library service. To illustrate; online, chat, and IM reference services may or may not represent an improvement in library service—the use of the human

record—but do not affect its content or onward transmission. Also, tweeting, Facebook, Instagram, and video-gaming may enrich and enliven the lives of many (including many library workers and users) but they scarcely add to the store of knowledge through which understanding and wisdom are gained. This is not to say that libraries are wrong in using social media, encouraging video-gaming, installing 3-D printers, or engaging with their communities in any way, technological or otherwise; just that they should not confuse these activities with the task of facilitating human interaction with the human record. Our central concerns are with *content*, not the *means of communicating that content*, and certainly not with modes of communication that are peripheral to, or have little or nothing to do with, the human record.

One important feature of this contest of values is the devaluation of reading and of the print culture of which it is a part. Though almost everyone agrees that literacy is important to children, the sub-text of discussions about communications technology and the future of libraries is that sustained reading of complex texts is not a necessary part of mature life in an “information age.” I am wedded to “the book” only because it is demonstrably the best format for both sustained reading and for the authenticity and preservation of the textual part of the scholarly human record. If another format were to be shown to be superior on both counts, I would embrace it. After all, it is the fixed, authentic text as created by its author that is of central importance, not the carrier of that text. My devotion to the text is transcendent, my devotion to the book utilitarian.

Though the human record includes many visual and symbolic records of art and civilization, its key element is the vast store of texts that have accumulated since the invention of writing some eight millennia ago. That store of texts has increased exponentially since the introduction of printing to the Western world five centuries ago. The Western printed codex (“the book”) is important not primarily because of its intrinsic value but because it has proven to

be, at least up to now, the most effective means of both disseminating and preserving the textual content of the human record. Texts have always been contained in other formats (handwritten on paper, vellum, or scrolls, scratched on papyrus and palm leaves, incised in stone or on clay, stamped on metal, as microform images, created digitally, etc.) but none of these methods can compare to the book in both dissemination and preservation — particularly when we are thinking about long complex texts. The longevity and potential for transmission to posterity of digital texts are both problematic and unproven for a variety of economic, technical, and social reasons. Despite the superiority of “the book” up to now, it must be emphasized that, ultimately, it is texts that are important not the carrier in which they are contained.

I believe strongly that libraries and librarians should form alliances with institutions and professionals that share our values and work with them in various ways that will enable libraries and those institutions to flourish and prosper. Our values are not those of the culture of materialism; of “information” and the technological cult of information; or, of the doctrines of cost-efficiency espoused by theorists of scientific management. Our future lies in working with the great range of cultural institutions that are concerned with the organization, preservation, onward transmission of the human record — that vast manifestation of cultural heritage in all its many recorded forms. The policies and procedures of all these bodies and institutions are similar to the policies and procedures of libraries in that they play a part in:

- working with elements of the human record and of our common cultural heritage
- furthering the use of the human record by fostering culture and learning and the creation of new contributions to the human record, and
- the preservation of all aspects of cultural heritage and the onward transmission of the human record.



The institutions, bodies, and groups with which libraries should ally themselves and form structures based on communities of interest include the following; archives, museums, and art galleries and institutes. The mutuality of tasks for alliances devoted to the preservation of the human record and advancing cultural heritage issues center on selection, cataloguing, access, and preservation — all undertaken by libraries, archives, museums and art galleries. However, other institutions, though less directly concerned, may have a role to play. These include learned societies, research institutes, and performing groups in all media.

I repeat that, in rejecting the dominance of the values of information technology and scientific management, I am not saying that libraries and the networks of cultural institutions of which I wish them to be a part should eschew taking advantage of information technology as a tool and digitization as a strategy, nor am I saying that good management practices should be rejected, as long as all are seen and employed in a humanistic context and a culture of learning. What I am saying is that the complex of cultural institutions should embrace a mission that concentrates on ensuring the survival of the human record and of the testaments to the past that make up our common cultural heritage.

What I call for are cooperative bi-lateral and multi-lateral structures and agreements (including the framing and adoption of shared standards, policies, and procedures) between libraries and the cultural institutions listed above. These structures and agreements would be aimed at pooling resources and harnessing energy and expertise to achieve common goals, especially the overarching goal of the organization, preservation, and onward transmission of the human record and the cultural heritage that it embodies. They would exist at all levels — international, regional (geographic and linguistic), national, province/state, and local.

No less than the future of a civilization based on learning is at stake. Libraries have a choice. We can continue to be inward-looking and

decline into insignificance by following the materialistic, mechanistic, and, ultimately, trivial paths of “information” and management, or we can work with the cultural institutions that are our natural allies to create expansive structures in which knowledge and learning can flourish and the preservation and onward transmission of cultural heritage is assured.

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper discusses the nature of values in general and the nature and utility of the values of librarianship. Delineates the changes that have occurred and are occurring in the wider world and the nature of change; also the importance of values in providing a framework for dealing with present and future change. Stresses the centrality of the human record to societal progress, the place of the human record in cultural heritage, and the central purpose of libraries in facilitating interaction with the human record and furthering the transmission of cultural heritage. Urges a turning away from the alien value systems of information technology, consumerism, materialism, and corporate management, and a consequent set of alliances between libraries and a wide range of cultural institutions and associations.

**KEYWORDS:** librarianship; human record; cultural heritage; information technology; cultural institutions.

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