

Fire in the Rain: Academic Librarians and the New Profession of ‘Rare Book Engineering’

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ABSTRACT

In the twelfth century, the prolific Southern Song Dynasty Chinese poet, Lu You, wrote a work called *A Portent [Longgua]*. In the poem, he describes the onset of a great storm, “And lightning shot red fire down on earth”. This presentation looks at a future of the written and printed word in terms of the lighting shock which could rain down upon the scholarly record – a disaster which could be precipitated by the very people charged with preserving that record: librarians of key centres of learning and research. Librarians may well be on the verge of repudiating a long-standing public trust in their roles as cautious conservationists. If they do so, they would be denying their professional heritage for short-term political and economic considerations in an era when their universities are buffeted by economic boom and bust storms.

Rarely used printed books and journals (traditionally the majority stock of any library) seem to have become a liability and a burden in this web-spun, e-raddled world. In response, it would seem that librarians are becoming active participants in the rush to achieve a ‘print→less’ heaven. For the first time in history on such a scale and in any period of war or peace, the next twenty years could witness a huge and deliberate global dispersal and even destruction of the printed word in university and research libraries. This *Fahrenheit 451* - equivalent event would be carefully planned not by ruthless emperors and despots riding rough-shod over the bodies of librarians to re-write historical records, but by...the librarians themselves. Given librarians’ innate professional ability for organized thoroughness, a series of small local projects, largely unremarked on in the wider world, would be very successfully executed, leading to global and possibly uncoordinated weeding. True, librarians have always weeded their collections for many reasons: because print versions were worn out (and easily replaced); because editions were out-of-date and misleading to readers; because the subject matter was no longer of relevance to teaching and research strategies, and so on.

This presentation explores wholly new challenges facing professional librarians. For example, since e-versions are so predominant and eminently cost-effective, lesser well-endowed libraries may no longer be interested in receiving discarded print copies from larger ones. Consequently, many more books traditionally considered of some ‘worth’ in some library somewhere would be given away, sold, or pulped (‘accidental conservationism’). This sustained dispersal or destruction of printed material from the protective walls of the academy will re-classify ‘ordinary’ works into titles of “relative” or even “absolute rarity” worldwide. Academic librarians will have created a new profession for themselves - ‘rare book engineers’ – by massively reducing the number of copies held in the world’s libraries and relying on private book collectors (if they still exist in 2030) to acquire any of the millions of discarded titles and preserve them for posterity.

Preface

Many fellow professionals have said during and after the first ‘Academic Librarian’ conference in The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2007 that it is about time that librarians stopped spending their fruitful years worrying about the future of the profession. We should just get on with the job. One response would be to say that just because we may be a little paranoid does not mean there are not threats to our very existence out there. Nor are we the only profession to worry about its future. ICT professionals worry about the de-mystification and democratization of computing. Journalists fret about the instant reporting and opportunistic photography by non-professionals on Twitter and Youtube. There is definitely still a need for us to look at where we are going every so often – and every two years for this Conference seems to be about the right interlude.

I have talked about matters relating to the present and future crises in the academic library profession twice before in conferences in Hong Kong (Storey 2007, 2009). I will strive not to repeat myself. Here, there will not be too much in the way of general futurology – by all means consult a kaleidoscope of books from *Future Shock* (Toffler, 1970) to *The Shock of the Old* (Edgerton, 2006) for guidance here. Rather, the topic concerns what has been happening in university libraries in the West for some time, and is about to happen in a very forceful way in Asia: the probable wholesale, wanton destruction of printed books and serials in the next two decades, not by natural disaster or vicious censor, but by those supposed guardians of the printed text - academic librarians.

In the twelfth century, the prolific Southern Song Dynasty Chinese poet, Lù Yóu (陸游), wrote a work called *A Portent* [龍挂 *Longgua*]¹. In the poem, he describes the onset of a great storm,

When the great wind in the sixth moon o'erwhelmed
The skies at Chengdu lifting houses whole,
Shaking the land with fearful din, black clouds
Of craggy shale were borne in the wind's midst:

¹ 成都六月天大風。發屋動地聲勢雄。
黑雲崔嵬行風中。凜如鬼神塞虛空。
霹靂迸火射地紅。上帝有命起伏龍。
龍尾不卷曳天東。壯哉雨點車軸同。
山摧江溢路不通。連根拔出千尺松。
未言為人作年豐。偉觀一洗芥蒂胸。

陸游著、錢仲聯校注：《劍南詩稿校注》。(上海：上海古籍出版社，1985，頁 604)。
Lù Yóu, (陸游 1125–1210), southern Song (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lu_You). “He was one of the most prolific poets of his time. His poetry is marked by two major themes: patriotism and the celebration of the quiet life in his retirement in the countryside” (<http://www.renditions.org/renditions/estore/golden.html>).

***A ghostly dankness covered the wide air;
And lightning shot red fire down on earth.***
The Lord of Heaven bade lurking dragons rise,
Which trailed their half-furled standards from the east.
***Great rain-drops clattered, large as axle-trees:
Mountains o'er-toppled: and the river floods***
All passage barred; and by their roots uprent
Were pine-trees furlongs tall. None knows as yet
If plenteous year be augured. Yet this sight
Stupendous cleansed the heart of vulgar cares.

(Translated by Turner 1989, 107; *bold italics added*)

In the sharp-edged, metrics-mad, business environment of the modern university, academic librarians are constantly asked to justify the escalating resources they demand, particularly for space and personnel – and are just as often denied any as a result. Our operations and services are constantly re-engineered and right-sized (read, ‘down-sized’). We stagger forward with our well thought-out strategic plans to organize, promote *and conserve* our collections thwarted or ignored. Truthfully, our headlong drive towards an e-future in our libraries is not wholly as a result of the advent of e-materials, nor wholly related to demands from our readers, but is primarily a result of an opportunistic response to the rainstorms of economic boom and bust by our university presidents. In this tempestuous climate, we will send books for burning, a true vision of “fire in the rain”, as a direct reaction to see-saw funding for space allocation from senior university managerial technocrats.

We are rightly dealing with new realities in the scholarly publishing world which have become evident over the last 20 years. Let us not dwell too much, then, on the relative merits and demerits of print versus electronic publication, nor the life and death of the printed book or codex in the face of the iPad and Kindle. Is print dead? I do not know (though personally, I *do* care). I will not rehearse the arguments laid out in books like *Double Fold* (Baker, 2001) and *Print is Dead* (Gomez, 2008), but the portents laid out in these books remain completely relevant to what is happening in university libraries now.

This presentation looks at a future of the written and printed word in terms of the lightning shock which could rain down upon the scholarly record – a disaster which could be precipitated by the very people charged with preserving that record: librarians of key centres of learning and research. Librarians may well be on the verge of repudiating a long-standing public trust in their roles as cautious conservationists. If they do so, they would be actively repudiating their professional heritage for short-term political and economic considerations.

Of course, we have always weeded stock. These realignments are a significant part of our job – it is what we should be doing. As Derek Law pointed out two years ago, it is perhaps overdue,

...we have no philosophy of future library content...Of course we have experimented with digitization and born-digital materials. But we have created ‘cabinets of curiosities’ without any underpinning ethic.

(Law 2008, 24)

Perversely though, while creating these ‘cabinets of curiosities’ in the digital world (how proud we are of what we have created with so little funding – the tidal wave of institutional repositories is a prime example), we are in danger of ending up with hybrid and disaggregated mongrels of physical libraries which are themselves curious cabinets of leftover textbooks and heritage collections stored discretely behind the flashing neon of the learning commons. Somewhere out there beyond our libraries’ walls, will be a mountain of printed materials ready and available for total destruction, or for the world’s rare book markets.

The Delusion of the Bibiothecarians

Do academic librarians actually have any real control in the strategic development of the University Library?

If academic librarians strive for quality assurance in their organization and services, and if one key element of quality assurance is that an end-product or service should have “fitness for purpose” (Stebbing 1993, 159) then the abiding question is, ‘fitness for whose purpose?’ Who defines this fitness and how? Since education, and particularly university education is now a global business with cut-throat competition for the best students and star professors and since it is propelled by the search for optimum resources (i.e. cash), then we librarians fool ourselves if we think that our customers, readers, or whatever we call our community of users define and drive this fitness for purpose. It is not our user community that drives this, it is our presidents, vice-chancellors and provosts. They fund us, and they know, or think they know what the Library should be. We may spend a great deal of time educating them on how the Library can evolve or even be revolutionized, but we meet with only a limited degree of success.

Yes, of course, when asked, our senior university managers exclaim that the Library is a good thing. It is a show-piece! It is the heart of the Academy! Do they believe this? Of course. Do they therefore regard the Library as their number one priority? Of course not. Let us not forget that nearly all these men and women, by definition, have been A+++ grade pupils and students since they were five or six years old. In their heart of hearts, they probably think (but would never be likely to admit) that they did not use or need the Library all that much as they aced most of the classes they ever took. So, if brilliant students get such grades without much help from the Library, why spend all that much money on it? Anyway, what’s so difficult about running the Library - surely it almost looks after itself? Their own libraries at home do. So, the Library is hardly ever a priority. From year to year, decade to decade, I have seen no evidence of senior university administrators changing their views completely unless their own libraries become so out-dated and under-resourced that they become an embarrassment in the public prints and global league tables.

When do senior administrators *need* the Library? Well, to give one slightly absurd but telling example. A senior university manager rang his librarian and asked for full and free library membership to an external donor - a not unreasonable and quite frequent request. What was the donor ‘giving’ to the university? The donor was

actually paying for the University's name to be posted against a minor planet through an astronomical global registration agency. The librarian would and could never say no, and yet one more person that the Library is not funded for is added to the growing user database.

In the meantime, the administrators are telling us we have no space and no funds to keep countless 'less-used' volumes on their campus. So we librarians are advised to get rid of them. The destruction of books and the dismantling of carefully constructed collections by university librarians ensue.

Biblioclasm: the Destruction of Books

The destruction of undesirable thoughts committed to the written word is of course is a recurrent theme throughout recorded history. Here are a few examples:

In imperial China, there are many examples of scholars and literati falling foul of the Emperor's wishes, either personally in their relations with the Court, or more indirectly through their published or unpublished writings. The 'unifier' of China, Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇 221–210 BCE) is vilified for his massive book burning of undesirable works. The Qianlong Emperor (乾隆 1736–1795CE) conducted a literary inquisition, and in typical Qing fashion, attempted to codify and set in concrete all 'acceptable' literary works into the huge *Sikù Quánsū* (四庫全書) – a complete compilation of the "Four Treasures" of literary pursuit. The inference being of course that works not included in the compendium were the product of dissident outcasts. Very strenuous efforts were made throughout the Qing Empire to find and burn unacceptable books. On August 31, 1774, the Qianlong Emperor demanded in an edict:

Now of the over ten thousand volumes submitted by the several provinces none has been singled out as offensive. How is it possible that among such a quantity of books bequeathed by former generations not one should contain a trace of sedition? ... It stands to reason therefore that among the rumors and gossip there must have been some defamatory of our dynasty. So it is that we must conduct at once a thorough investigation and destruction [of seditious books]; thus may subversive thought be put to an end, men's hearts rectified, and their morals improved; we should not let this matter drop.... Had there been any [such books] of a treasonable kind the commission had its orders to put them apart for destruction by fire.

(Translated by Goodrich 1966, 32)

The assiduousness with which local officials pursued the stipulations in the imperial edicts mirrors modern China's bureaucratic thoroughness in suppressing unwelcome thought.

In other parts of the world, there are so many examples of biblioclasm in the pages of Battles (2003) and in the Wikipedia article on book-burning, such as,

- The destruction of Egyptian alchemical and Christian texts by the Roman emperor Diocletian in 292CE and 303CE.
- The conflagration of the library at Alexandria, traditionally held to be in 640CE.
- Nalanda University Library of Buddhism in Bihar, India was set aflame by Muslim invaders in 1193.
- 12,000 copies of the Jewish Talmud in Paris were torched – initiated in 1242 by Pope Gregory IX.
- In the 1480s, Jewish and Arabic books were proscribed and burnt at the behest of Torquemada.
- In 1562, the Spanish Bishop of Yucatan burned a number of Mayan codices.
- Hundreds of thousands of volumes in Leuven University Library were torched by the German army in August 1914.
- In the 1930s and 1940s, there were repeated incidents of Nazi book-burnings. Richard Euringer (1891-1953), the Director of Essen libraries, listed 18,000 works not conducive to the utopian ideals of the Third Reich.
- In 2003, the Iraq National Library was destroyed in the American/British invasion; one of the oldest surviving copies of the Qur'an was lost.

What links all these examples? The destruction of the printed word over two or three millennia has nearly always been as a result of divine providence and accident, the ravages of war, or the warped decisions by dictators whose very hubris led them to believe they could destroy all unappetizing books which might be injurious or threatening to their position. With the exception of fanatical monks in mediaeval monastic libraries and crazed ideologues like Euringer, until the twenty-first century, no example of librarians actively and collectively seeking to destroy a good percentage of the printed record in countless libraries can be found. One deliberate act of vandalism was however perpetrated recently to make a political and cultural point:

Self-described bibliophiles Tom Wayne and Will Leathem, owners of the Kansas City bookstore Prospero's Books, decided in 2007 to burn their inventory of 50,000 titles after they could not sell or even give the books away. In a scene that really can't help but sound like it's from *Fahrenheit 451*, over Memorial Day weekend the two men dragged a few boxes of books to the sidewalk in front of their used bookstore, showered them with lighter fluid, and then set the whole thing ablaze.

But this was no Nazi bonfire. It was more like the Buddhists in Vietnam in the early 1960s who committed suicide by setting themselves on fire as political protest. Neither Wayne nor Leathem felt that books should be burned or destroyed – on the contrary, they're both ardent booklovers – but they did this to attract attention to the fact that books were, well, no longer receiving any attention.

(Gomez 2008, 180)

The Bibliotaphists: Librarians as Book-Buriers

In the massive weeding currently underway in university libraries, whole new categories of printed material will be discarded, well beyond Baker's descriptions of the loss of major wood-pulp newspaper runs. To give just three examples: Multiple

editions and reprints of classic fiction will disappear. Which library will keep a 1912 Nelson reprint of Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*? Old editions of economics books will go. Who will retain the 1971 third edition of Lipsey's *Introduction to Positive Economics*? Why keep old travel guides? Who will ever want the 1998 ninth edition of the *Insight Guide to Paris*? Yet there may be merit in each of these titles. For instance, hardcopy pictures of Paris in the late 1990s might be just as valuable in 2110 as pictures of the city in the 1890s are now. Once such books are gone from the open shelves, they are gone forever – unless libraries buy them back again as rare books twenty years later. Yes, of course there has been stern professional advice on what we should keep - see for example, Payne (2007), Schonfeld and Housewright (2009), and Yano, Shen and Chan (2008). The danger here is that physical copies of such titles could become some of the rarest of books, because there is no worldwide mechanism to have 'lots of copies to keep safe'; no single librarian or group of librarians to coordinate these withdrawals.

In removing half-dead books from open shelves to underscore our just-in-time rather than just-in-case strategy, we are entering the era of the 'dark archive'. What a splendid and seductive term this is! It conveys all the ambience of a cult video game or a really hip heavy metal band. What does it actually mean? It means 'single copy closed access joint storage facility', which does not sound very hip at all. Any title we cannot bury deep in our sunless, hidden book dungeons because we do not have the money to put multiple copies in there will be jettisoned. If the entombed last best copy is somehow destroyed in 30 years time, well, someone will have it somewhere, or we can rely on the digitized version. No problem.

Librarians: Accidental Conservationists?

What is the only up-side of this mass destruction? Well, if we pulp a few million volumes rather than commit them to the flames, we will at least spare the atmosphere of more carbon emissions. We will also add to the global recycling effort, and probably stave off the death of a few forests for one or two years. Yet, as Alderman has indicated, producing the e-alternative has an energy quotient too:

...A report by the US book industry study group last year found that producing the average book releases more than 4kg of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere - that's the equivalent of flying about 20 miles. Then there's the cost of warehousing and transport to consider and the waste and toxic chemicals produced by paper mills.

What about the electronic alternative? While the digital books themselves have a relatively low impact - recent figures suggest that transferring one produces around 0.1g of CO² - there are other factors to take into account. Charging the reader and turning virtual pages all have an energy cost, as does turning on your computer and downloading a file. Even so, the balance may still favour the hi-tech alternative....

The heaviest burden, though, will be in making the reader itself. If one were to buy an ebook reader, then keep it for 30 years, the impact would be small. But many electronic devices don't last that long, and with the constant advances in

processing power and functionality it's unlikely that we would want to keep a single ebook reader as long as we might keep a book.

Disposal of electronic items is extremely problematic. More than 6m electronic items are thrown away in the UK every year, and the cadmium from one discarded mobile phone is enough to pollute 600,000 litres of water.

(Alderman, 2009)

Notwithstanding this, we will continue to get rid of books – if not to fires and dumping grounds, then whence? Well, surely used book vendors would be the obvious answer.

Half-joking, I pointed out to Michael Lesk, that if a great many libraries follow his advice by scanning everything in sight and clearing their shelves once they do, the used-book market will collapse. Lesk replied evenly, “If you’ve ever tried taking a pile of used books to a local bookseller, you know that for practical purposes, most used books are already worthless. Certainly old scientific journals are worse than worthless. You will have to pay somebody to cart them away, in general.” (Online used-book sites, such as abebooks.com, Bibliofind, and Alibris, where millions of dollars worth of ex-library books and journals change hands, might contest that statement.) I asked Lesk whether he owned many books. He said he had several thousand of them – most of them printed on “crummy paper.”

(Baker 2001, 71f)

Bibliophilia and Rarity: “Important, Desirable and Hard to Get”

What makes books so special? With the arrival of new digitized formats, is there any reason why we should not throw these out from our libraries just like we have done with filmstrips, Betamax and VHS tapes, laser-discs and vinyl records? Of course we can all agree with Gomez’ view that the printed book is just a physical tool for communication – and it is its *cultural content* that is really important,

However, no matter how much we treasure the book, what’s really important is the culture of ideas and innovation that books represent. It’s this culture that’s at stake, not the publishing companies or the fate of bookstores, or even the book itself as a physical form. That’s all a sideshow to the main event. Whether or not the clay tablet evolves into the tablet PC, what should be at the heart of the conversation is a notion of literary culture and the idea that words can change the way we look at life.

(Gomez 2008, 199)

Notwithstanding this, given the sheer lifespan of the printed book over many centuries, and the attendant cultural and historical importance of this artifact produced in its trillions, this format surely needs to be conserved. But do we need to conserve, say, handbooks on the obsolete word processing software Multimate? If librarians refuse to save them, if book collectors and sellers have any power at all to intervene before

the books are destroyed, will they save such books once they leave a university library? It will of course depend on the books in question.

There are many definitions of what makes a book rare. The best is from John Carter, revered long after his death in 1975 as the doyen of the book collecting world,

Since collectors and dealers, and even custodians of rare books in institutional libraries, are hardly likely to depreciate the degree of rarity which tradition or their own experience attaches to a book they are describing, it is only by a long process of tacit withdrawal that it will be dethroned from an undeserved eminence. A good many books, therefore, will continue to be called rare even when a steady demand combined with persistent occurrence has proved that, for the time being at any rate, they are not so....

No matter how great his experience, 'every collector will find...that some books are commoner than might reasonably be expected and some decidedly rarer'. But he should at least do his best to make sure that such expectations as he has are reasonably based.

(Carter 1970: 169f)

It is interesting is it not, that the influence of librarians and their immediate removal of brand new pristine book titles from the open market is not mentioned here? It is true that librarians have always selected and withdrawn books for sale or for pulping. It is also true that circulating and public libraries in the West have over the last 150 years routinely been the primary customers for hardback fiction on first publication – especially for new authors. In our centuries of merry weeding, librarians have long been the unwitting and accidental producers of ex-library reading copies, the last resort of a collector desperate to have a copy of a book as near to its original state as possible. This is particularly true of modern first editions of fiction. Over the years, first editions of Joseph Conrad, Joseph Heller and many, many others, have then been withdrawn because they were unread or worn out. Some of these ex-library copies find themselves on the market. For the collector, the advantage is that an ex-library copy of a first edition is usually cheaper, it might even have a relatively well-preserved dust jacket² and, still and all, it is a surviving, usable, first iteration, reading copy. The down-side is that it will be covered in library ownership and withdrawn stamps, stained with deteriorating sellotape marks and have evidence of date-labels and other tell-tale library appendages. The overall result is that, in all cases, the remainder of first print runs are traditionally rendered scarce if not downright impossible to find.

So, let us look at Carter's considered definition of 'rarity',

The definition of 'a rare book' is a favourite parlour game among bibliophiles. Paul Angle's 'important, desirable and hard to get' has been often and deservedly quoted: Robert H. Taylor's impromptu, 'a book I want badly and can't find', is here quoted for the first time.

² The dust jacket is a mark of completeness in publication which is regarded as of great importance in the academic halls of the University of London Institute of English Studies and the UK Bibliographical Society.

http://ies.sas.ac.uk/cmpps/events/courses/LRBS/Outline%20of%20courses/course_outline%20MFE.htm
Academic librarians have been throwing these away upon acquisition for decades.

As rarity is an important factor in book-collecting, it is useful to distinguish between its various kinds and to attempt an appraisal of its different degrees. Among the former are:

- (1) *Absolute Rarity*. A property possessed by any book printed in a very small edition; of which therefore the total number of copies which could possibly survive is definitely known to be very small....
- (2) *Relative Rarity*. A property only indirectly connected with the number of copies printed. It is based on the number which survive, its practical index is the frequency of occurrence in the market, and its interest is the relation of this frequency to public demand.
- (3) *Temporary Rarity*. This is due either to an inadequate supply of copies in the market of a book only recently begun to be collected, or to a temporary shortage of copies of an established favourite.
- (4) *Localized Rarity*. This applies to books sought for outside the area of their original circulation or later popularity with collectors.

(Carter 2004, 181f)

N.A.L. Munby, erstwhile Librarian of King's College Cambridge, warned of the ravages of bibliomania on the individual man's (book collectors are usually male) soul,

I once visited a house in Blackheath after its owner had died. It was solid books. Shelves had been abandoned years before; in every room narrow lanes ran between books stacked from floor to ceiling, ninety per cent of them utterly inaccessible. In one of the bedrooms there was a narrow space two feet wide round the bed, and there the owner had died, almost entombed in print. This macabre glimpse of the ultimate excesses of bibliomania has always been a warning. I have no hankering after owning a really large private library, perhaps because, as a professional librarian, I have the custody of one.

(Munby 1977, 39)

Whether we are librarians or bibliomaniacs or both, we do need to keep our print collections in check. This is not a new challenge. Just as now, in the 1970s, Munby was ruminating on the steady-state library,

From time to time some heart-searching on the aims and achievements of our institutional collecting of manuscripts is salutary. Opportunity, funds, benefactions, pressure from one or other of the faculties or from a member of the staff with special enthusiasms – all these factors can play their part in determining how our collections of manuscripts expand. Their expansion on sound and scholarly lines, however, cannot be achieved without a good deal of thought from us all.

(Munby 1977, 81)

However, in response to the severe pressures noted above, the sheer scale of the current weeding exercise means we are all party to creating Carter's "*relative rarity*" in print materials – accidentally or, worse, deliberately engineering "the number which survive". And, as far as survival is concerned, the simplest definition of rarity is, "important, desirable and hard to get", and of course, all of these factors are relative. Who deems a book "important"? One person can "desire" a book intensely, to the

complete indifference of another. An Algerian book can be “hard to get” in Shanghai. Balancing such relative factors is what librarians have been doing professionally for 150 years – we call it collection building. We are about to dismantle and disperse historic print collections based upon countless fine judgments of this kind by our more conservationist-minded professional ancestors.

A Touch of Bibliomancy

It will be interesting to see if the novelist and humourist Terry Pratchett’s description of a university library will still hold true. In fact, it is not so much a true description of a library as a remote storage facility. We have travelled full-circle in a century, only to mount closed access services again,

By law and tradition the great Library of Unseen University is open to the public, although they aren’t allowed as far as the magical shelves. They don’t realize this, however, since the rules of time and space are twisted inside the Library and so hundreds of miles of shelving can easily be concealed inside a space roughly the thickness of paint.

People flock in, nevertheless, in search of answers to those questions only librarians are considered to be able to answer, such as ‘Is this the laundry?’ ‘How do you spell surreptitious?’ and, on a regular basis: ‘Do you have a book I remember reading once? It had a red cover and it turned out they were twins.’

And, strictly speaking, the Library *will* have it... somewhere. Somewhere it has every book ever written, that ever will be written and, notably, every book that it is possible to write. These are not on the public shelves lest untrained handling cause the collapse of everything that it is possible to imagine.

(Pratchett 2005: 225f)

True, our own individual libraries have never been able to own “every book that it is possible to write”, but for those we do not own, we have usually had access to more than one single last best copy in a 300 mile radius.

If we engineer rarity by massive weeding, what is left in the library for us, and more especially for our readers?

Librarians may well be on the verge of repudiating a long-standing public trust in their roles as cautious conservationists. If they do so, they would be denying their professional heritage for short-term political and economic considerations in an era when their universities are buffeted by uncertain economic rainstorms.

Rarely used printed books and journals (traditionally the majority stock of any library) seem to have become a liability and a burden in this web-spun, e-raddled world. In response, it would seem that librarians are becoming active participants in the rush to achieve a ‘print→less’ heaven. For the first time in history on such a scale and in any period of war or peace, the next twenty years could witness a huge and deliberate global dispersal and even destruction of the printed word in university and research

libraries. This *Fahrenheit 451* - equivalent event (Bradbury 1953) would be carefully planned not by ruthless emperors and despots riding rough-shod over the bodies of librarians to re-write historical records, but by...the librarians themselves. Given librarians' innate professional ability for organized thoroughness, a series of small local projects, largely unremarked on in the wider world, would be very successfully executed, leading to global and possibly uncoordinated weeding. True, librarians have always weeded their collections for many reasons: because print versions were worn out (and easily replaced); because editions were out-of-date and misleading to readers; because the subject matter was no longer of relevance to teaching and research strategies, and so on. Rarely have we discarded simply because books were little used. However, our choices on what to do with this ejected material are fast disappearing.

For example, since e-versions are so predominant and eminently cost-effective, lesser well-endowed libraries may no longer be interested in receiving discarded print copies from larger ones. Consequently, many more books traditionally considered of some 'worth' in some library somewhere would be given away, sold, or pulped ('accidental conservationism'). This sustained dispersal or destruction of printed material from the protective walls of the academy will re-classify 'ordinary' works into titles of "relative" or even "absolute rarity" worldwide. Academic librarians will have created a new profession for themselves - 'rare book engineers' - by massively reducing the number of copies held in the world's libraries and relying on private book collectors (if they still exist in 2030) to acquire any of the millions of discarded titles and preserve them for posterity.

So, as regards our professional future? Sure, stop worrying and get on with it. But please worry about this, and despite all pressures from the Marketplace and from the Management, hold the line and try your best to avoid creating the new profession of rare book engineering.

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