

## The Internet and Society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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1. Main point: Vital the Library has its own, confident view of these questions. Play a leading role not following the herd.

Library needs to be a place for the most sophisticated thinking about these issues in the world. That in itself may require the development of thinking and capability the Library currently lacks.

2. To get near an answer the question have to pick our way through various viewpoints on the Net and it's possible impact on society.
3. One view is that it is all overblown.

The net is just a tool to do what we've always done but more quickly and reaching a larger audience. eBay is just based on flea markets, but with the scale of the Internet applied to it. Amazon is mainly just a different way get goods.

Bill Gates once took this position. It was prevalent around the time of the collapse of the dot.com boom. Some academics then suggested the web would be a bit like CB radio.

Were the BL to take this view, pretend it's not really happening, would be disaster.

Don't hear so much of this view these days. Tends to be agreement that web will be significant: question is how significant, on what, in what timescale.

4. A more sophisticated variant of this view is that Net might have a big impact on society but it will take a lot longer to work through than the web-optimists argue.

Technical change always does. Big gains from technological innovation in terms of productivity or social change come when technology has become dull, integrated into daily life. Still not at that stage, say compared with electricity. Good exponent of this view David Egerton in his book *The Shock of the Old*.

That might be comforting – still got time to get used to it.

But it might be discomfoting – the changes we've seen so far – the complete upheaval in the music industry, the decline in US newspapers, the disappearance of many magazines, the quick creation of new media giants like Google – these might just be the tip of an iceberg.

But there is a serious point in this which the Library needs to take heed of: timing matters. Easy to get ahead and behind the curve. Different sectors of the media industries might change at different rates. Different parts of the population will change at different rates.

5. Then there are people who say the web will be big, it will have a rapid impact and it will be mainly bad – with a capital B. Three ingredients to this view, closely inter-twined.

First, the web will uproot authority of experts, professionals and institutions which sort truth and falsehood, knowledge and supposition. Instead licensing a cacophonous, mass, amateurism. Here this view echoed by professions such as journalists and librarians. Moving from filter and then publish, to a publish and then filter world. Much more crap than used to be.

Second, people say our dependence on the web and computers is eroding our ability for independent thought. Google is making us stupid. Screens making us dependent on stimulation.

Third, it's eroding our sense of privacy and identity. Young people living out lives in public, online, unable to form a stable sense of identity, as we once did.

If the Library were to take this view it would stand out against the Internet as a centre of deep scepticism. A place for refuseniks and proudly so.

My own view much of this alarmism over done. Not that not important points but they are qualifiers rather than the main story.

6. Then there are people who say the Net is already big, and will get bigger fast, an it will be mainly Good. They differ, however, over why and how it will be good.

So there are some, especially US libertarians and others who see the Internet creating more diversity, choice, faster, frictionless markets and even an abundance of free stuff, some copied, much created, from which we can choose. A kind of capitalist cornucopia: the Long Tail.

There is an equally large group, also largely from the US, who on the contrary see in the Internet the possibility of community and collaboration, commons based production, peer to peer which will establish new non market and non hierarchical forms of organisation. Benkler, open source, Wikipedia – We Think. A kind of communitarian utopia.

Some, me included, think the real measure of the Internet is whether it gives us as a society radically different options for how we might organise ourselves, get things that matter done – ways that are likely to be more collaborative, lower barriers to entry, more participative. Innovation and knowledge sharing at scale, involving both professionals and amateurs. All

this social networking is all very well but will it help us tackle big social challenges of care or environment etc in new ways?

Others say this is high minded nonsense: the internet is flirting, gossip, porn, buying, selling. It's more like a teeming bazaar with all the human motivations in play.

If the Library took any mix of these views then you'd have to be planning a fundamental transformation in the business model, mission, skills of the organisation over the next ten years and beyond.

7. Finally, there is a small group, who say the Net is big and it has largely been good, so far. But the trouble is that it could easily become bad in future.

The task is to save the Internet from itself, as it grows and produces more of its own pollution and effluent – spam, malware, surveillance, invasions of privacy, trivia.

Danger is that if there is too much chaos, abuse then the Net will get clogged up and so eventually people will turn back to corporations or governments to sort it out.

Space of extraordinarily loose, ramshackle regulation and self-governance. If mess it up then could lead to the restoration of traditional forms of control.

This period – with all its examples of self-organisation - no more than a passing moment.

The Internet has already had several incarnations – e-commerce, the Information Superhighway. Could have more to come. It is not yet fixed.

Internet built on an ethic of mutual self help and the tool of the PC, which can reprogrammable. If the PC is replaced with tethered devices – like the Apple iPhone, which does not allow that, then innovation will pass from the edge of the system to corporations at its heart.

If Net neutrality which allows equal access to the commons is replaced with a pay for what you use system, then big consequences. Not everyone will have the same access.

Internet created by a peculiar mixture of the academic, the hippy, the geek and the peasant – post industrial, anti industrial and pre industrial. Particular time and place. But what will the Net be like when China is largest web society?

One of the most amazing things about The Internet is that we call it The Internet – it is a singular shared space we all go to. But was not always like that likes of CompuServe AOL and others tried to create their own walled off areas. Possible could be many Internets in future, managed spaces/commons. In future might not talk of The Internet.

8. What should be the Library's view? I'd recommend you start somewhere between these last two positions. The idea that its full of huge possibility to spread, share, create knowledge in new ways, but with a dollop of caution about its fragility, the need for effective self regulation. And a nod to warnings of what might be lost if get it wrong. Optimism but informed, critical, thoughtful.

Look at what people are doing not at the technology.

Three main things...

First, want meaningful opportunities to participate, contributors, at least to be offered the option to do so, more of the time. Add their bit even if the core of what they are adding to has been created by someone else. I Can culture. British Library serving research community but idea of the researcher being democratised – ProAm pastimes.

Second, they want to find economically viable ways to share, easily. Think and work laterally.

Third, they want organisationally viable ways to collaborate, not abstract but ways to get things done – share videos, play games, create software, campaign, find friends.

When these three come together create new ways to organise ourselves more open, collaborative, less top down which present a challenge to established institutions.

Real significance = creating new and more public, open ways to share and develop knowledge.

If the Library to really lead this debate – in Britain and more widely – then it needs its own sophisticated view. That's the big point.

9. Second, big question is how you frame the challenge. The kind of innovation you get all depends on how you frame the challenge.

If you frame the challenge in terms of the Library and its services then will get incremental innovation, using web in context of existing business model.

If you move up a level and see the web as a challenge to the established business models of publishing – of which library is an important part – then might get some more systemic innovation – issues of copyright, paying for writing.

Actually have to start from needs of society and to start from that. How society produces and makes available, information and knowledge, in a way that will maximise the benefits and generate yet more knowledge, better decisions and innovation.

Library's strategy needs to derive from a broader argument about what society will need to make the most of the Net and so what the Library can do.

Question not what impact will the web have on the Library but what impact on British society and how can the Library best serve society to make the most of it.

More effective, more imaginative, more relevant.

Australia 2020 – Web 2020 – 1,000 people at the Library over a weekend, debating every aspect of what we want from the web.

10. Third big point think about scale in a new way.

Think pebbles not boulders.

From the boulder business, to the pebble business.

Media by and large used to be only a boulder business.

Future still quite a lot of boulders but fewer. Rising tide of pebbles.

Collecting pebbles, aligning them, aggregating them, navigating them.

Still a boulder but increasingly in the pebble business.

11. Fourth, that kind of approach requires a different culture, outlook, set of values.

Grown up with organisations that do things For or To people – deliver, treat, teach, broadcast. Used to living in a To and For world.

Web ethic is much more about doing things With people – working with, with as an organisational ethic, providing people with tools they can work with. Much ore about combination and negotiation.

Simple design philosophy: Think With

12. Truth is that society is moving in your direction.

We are all becoming librarians, creating, storing, retrieving, recommending material. Society of mass librarianship.

Odd but Library has to think it's leading a mass movement, not just serving a clientele.

Vast experiment underway, with no one in charge.

Key questions for the library:

How best to serve society in a new phase where will be producing, accessing, organising information and knowledge in new ways – far more open, collaborative, dynamic, diverse.

How help society make the most of this capacity – building our collective capacity for self-regulation and self-organisation and thus avoiding the danger of corporate control or government over regulation, which will inhibit sharing of ideas, and so scope for innovation.

Leading a community rather than providing a service.

13. Fifth and final point about ambition.

TBL : Danger is not that we ask too much of Net but too little, we turn it into just another piece of kit when it could be so much more significant than that, a new platform for how we could organise ourselves.

BL should be right at the heart of helping society realise that opportunity.