

Mobile Privatization, the Future of Libraries, and the Lessons from King Midas

In 1444, the first modern-era public library in the West opened its doors in Florence, Italy, containing four hundred Greek and Roman manuscripts. Most of them came from the collection of humanist Niccolò Niccoli who left his books to the city so that they could be “brought to the common good, to the public service, to a place open to all.” The emergence of well-funded public libraries became one of the hallmarks of the Renaissance. The advantage of books was in the fact that one didn’t need to own them physically in order to appropriate the knowledge conveyed on their pages. This was an important lesson at the time when books, despite the fact that the new technology of print rapidly lowered their cost, were still too expensive for the emerging educated middling classes to purchase them in order to build their own collections.

Venetian chronicler Marin Sanudo, writing in 1493, argued that libraries added “special luster to well-founded cities.” Ben Franklin launched the analogous tradition of libraries in the New World in the 1730s. Consequently, even the smallest towns and villages in the United States today have their own public libraries. In the past three centuries, libraries became the centerpieces of most American college campuses, an alternative public square in their own right, designated for encounters of many types - from intellectual to casual interactions among strangers. Just think how many romantic relationships have their roots in the unexpected exchange of glimpses between two poor souls preparing for a math exam!

I recently heard that some of our partner universities from the New Comparative Group started handing out to their students electronic reading devices such as the Amazon Kindle, which can digitally compress millions of pages of books into one single portable gadget. This made me pause for a while and ask a question: What will be the future of libraries, those temples of learning that have dominated the landscape of our academic institutions and urban civic centers ever since the Renaissance?

Trying to answer this question, I had to admit that I myself had profited enormously from the relentless drive to turn everything we can put our hand on into electronic bytes. Writing my dissertation at a time when digitalization was rapidly advancing, I was able to read 500-year-old books in the collections of libraries in Italy, France, or Great Britain without leaving my own

cozy home-office. Every day I praise the enormous potential such digital collections undoubtedly play in the democratization of academic research, which is no longer automatically dominated by those who simply have better access to the sources of knowledge. At the same time, I often went to my university's library and its rare book collections. Only while holding in my own hands some of the books I previously consulted online was I able to better grasp the intrinsic messages which the words imprinted on their pages communicated to generations of people who lived their lives centuries ago, in places geographically so remote.

In the fifth century B.C.E. Socrates rambled about the new technology of writing which, he reportedly claimed, would make mankind stupid simply because people would no longer be forced to learn the epics like Iliad and Odyssey by heart, and consequently would stop exercising their memories. Yet no one would dispute the fact that knowledge bloomed in the ensuing era of the manuscript. Ironically, the very arguments raised by Socrates against writing survived only thanks to the fact that his own followers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon ignored the advice of their teacher. With the advent of book print in Venice, the local monk Filippo di Strata harnessed similar sentiments in his crusade against printers, depicting them as vulgar men who were debasing intellectual life and the high artistic quality of illuminated manuscripts by selling their mechanically produced books to the masses.

Aware of the historical precedents, I am reluctant to add my own voice to those who rail against the digital book. Indeed, history offers many clear examples pointing out that the new technology never completely wipes out the old one. Just as writing did not replace the oral tradition and storytelling, and television was not able to kill the cinema, so the printed book will coexist with the digital one for some decades to come.

What I am afraid of is that we will lose the library. I study public space and the way the evolving communication technologies enhanced or undermined its democratic potential in different periods of human history. Athenians had their Agora where they physically met every day to voice their common problems and deliberated upon potential solutions. Our own times have been labeled by the British communication scholar Raymond Williams as the era of *mobile privatization*, because of our propensity to enclose ourselves into private bubbles propelled by digital iGizmos, allowing us to move through space without the need to interact with other fellow human beings.

I see an increasing tension between our political system, which we proudly call deliberative democracy, and the fact that we deliberate less and less (yes indeed, I refuse to call the avalanche of political spin and angry rumble pushed upon us by most of the electronic media ‘deliberation’). One by one, we are losing the very physical spaces that fostered everyday personal encounters and by doing so allowed us to learn and to exercise our humanity. Libraries undoubtedly have played an important role in this process. Thus in our attempt to digitalize all we can put our hands on, we begin to resemble the Greek king Midas who turned everything he ever touched to gold - only to die of thirst and hunger.