

# GIVE ME DOCUMENTS OR GIVE ME DEATH

*A MILLENNIAL MEDITATION ON:  
DOCUMENTS AND LIBRARIES*

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## INTRODUCTION

Who can doubt that these are exciting times, pregnant with possibility? Current technological developments, such as the World Wide Web, seem to promise new and more engaging ways of learning, access to great storehouses of knowledge, and breakthroughs in science and scholarship. Yet at the same time, it is hard not to notice the undercurrent of anxiety that accompanies the current excitement. Many are confused about the changes now underway, unclear about how broad or deep they will be, and how exactly they will affect us. What will happen to the library, to the book, to publishing as we now know it, to education? These can seem like big abstract questions, but they have a highly personal component. For what is also being asked is, what does all this mean for me—for my livelihood, my family, my children, for my sense of order, well-being, and meaning?

What is happening, I believe, is that current technological and institutional changes are challenging our sense of order—our sense of living in a carefully regulated, secure, and ultimately meaningful universe. When this sense of order is challenged, we become anxious. Why? The answer seems obvious enough. When our world becomes unstable, we worry about losing our jobs, our professional standing, our income, and all the physical, psychological, and social comforts that come with these. While this is clear enough, there may also be a deeper source for the current anxiety—an existential source—which underlies all the very real concerns about livelihood and status: namely, the fear of death. On the face of it, death hardly seems like a fitting subject for a workshop sponsored by the Graduate School of Library and Information Science. What does death have to do with digital libraries? A great deal, as I hope to show, for documents

are intimately and essentially concerned with making order in the world, and order-making is a response to the fact of death.

### THE ANXIETY OF ORDER

As a starting point, the problem of order and disorder will be considered. Documents and libraries, of course, have a great deal to do with order. Libraries are concerned with bringing order to documents and collections of documents. Cataloging, conservation and preservation, reference services, and so on are all about keeping written materials orderly and allowing them to be found and used in an orderly manner. Without such carefully worked out practices, we would have disorder—a lack of order. The current state of the Web—the transience of the materials on it, the difficulty of finding anything, and of knowing what you've got once you've found it—has provided many people, technologists not the least of them, with an important lesson. Many of us have used libraries without ever understanding the extent of the invisible work that was being done day by day to ensure that books stayed on shelves and in proper states of repair. If the current state of the Web has taught us anything, it is how crucial is the ever ongoing invisible work of order-making (Levy, 1995).

Roger Chartier (1994) provides a useful historical perspective on these practices when he observes that a tremendous amount of work was required, after the invention of the printing press, to “set the world of the written word in order”:

[H]ow did people in Western Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century attempt to master the enormously increased number of texts that first the manuscript book and then print put into circulation? Inventorying titles, categorizing works, and attributing texts were all operations that made it possible to set the world of the written word in order. Our own age is the direct heir of this immense effort motivated by anxiety. (p. vii)

Implicitly, Chartier seems to be suggesting that we are now on the verge of another “immense effort motivated by anxiety.” But why anxiety?

Anxiety, it seems to me, is always associated with order. There is, in effect, an anxiety of order. It is an obvious enough truism that human beings crave order: we want or need to control our environment. On a purely biological level, we need to guarantee a steady supply of food and water, protection from the elements, and so on. For social well-being, we need to keep our emotions within acceptable limits, and we need to work out orderly “civilized” practices with one another. This is fundamentally an issue of survival. Without enough of just the right stuff, we will die. Social ostracism, although not necessarily biologically fatal, is surely also a form of death—a social or symbolic death. If order-making is at base an

attempt to stay alive, to stave off death, then it makes sense that there would be anxiety associated with it, if only unconsciously.

Order-making, of course, only goes so far as a survival strategy. The truth is that no matter how well we order things, no matter how much successful control we exert, we will still ultimately die. It is left to each of us to come to terms with this ultimate existential fact. The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker has suggested that all human culture is essentially a response to the fact of death. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Becker (1973) suggests that human culture is the attempt to create something larger and enduring—something we can be part of and through which we can live on—in the hope of achieving a kind of greatness or immortality. It is a system, he says:

in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a sky-scraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. (p. 4)

If, as Becker suggests, culture is our collective attempt to deny and to transcend death, then it makes sense that all cultural order-making practices would have—if only at an unconscious level—a degree of anxiety associated with them. It makes sense that we would become anxious when the carefully worked out and maintained cultural order breaks down, or when it becomes transparent enough to allow us to see what lies just beyond it. These breakdowns would act as a reminder that disarray and disorder—and, ultimately, death—are never really that far from us.

A few years ago, I was shocked when I walked into the Saks Fifth Avenue in the Stanford Shopping Center. Instead of finding the brightly lit glittery store with aisles full of expensive merchandise beautifully displayed—the shop I'd been in many times before—I found a dingy run-down excuse for a store. Paint was peeling off the walls, display counters were nicked and tattered, and the merchandise was in disarray; it had a slightly used air about it. I walked outside, just to make sure I had found the right building, but also to clear my head from the shock and confusion. As I re-entered the building, I noticed a sign I hadn't seen when I entered the store the first time. It explained that Saks was closing and the building was being used as a "seconds" store for Saks merchandise. What I had obviously encountered was a store in decline. Through their elaborate and highly tuned order (lighting, display, music, and so on), fancy department stores like Saks try to suggest a timeless and perfect order, an effortless happiness, which can be ours if we will only buy the right things. We are never meant to see the huge amount of work that is required to

maintain the illusion. What I had seen was the inevitable decline that occurs when the invisible ever-ongoing work of maintaining the order is withheld. And what I experienced was not just the shock of the unexpected but a confrontation with the chaos that lies just behind the carefully maintained façade. It was a reminder that all our structures, ultimately, are transient and impermanent.

Libraries are like this too. A huge amount of work has gone into the development of their various order-making systems—cataloging and reference services, preservation, and so on. For most of our lifetime, they have been symbols of rationality and order. But now, as I noted earlier, it is becoming increasingly clear how much invisible work has been required to maintain that illusion. And it is clear that we don't yet know how to adapt this invisible work to handle the new materials and the new technologies. Of course it isn't just libraries that are part of the cultural ordering system. So too are the construction industry, the garbage collection industry, the fashion industry, the media. Indeed, if Becker is right, all of human social and cultural life is part of this ordering system. Still, there is something special about libraries which makes disruption to them an even greater source of anxiety. Libraries are keepers of documents, and documents have a crucial role to play in establishing and maintaining order.

### DOCUMENTS AND ORDER

By documents, I mean written forms, broadly construed. The category of documents includes textual materials on paper (job applications and newspapers, cash register receipts and books, shopping lists and magazines), graphical forms of all kinds (maps and photographs, drawings and diagrams), and "written" forms realized in other media (digital spreadsheets and Web pages, audiotapes and videotapes). What all these have in common is that, in one fashion or another, they fix or stabilize communication—they hold it fixed or make it repeatable so that the same words (or sounds or images) can be seen by people separated in space and time. This ability to hold communication fixed provides one of the central building blocks out of which all our major cultural institutions are constructed and maintained. Science, law and government, religion, education, and the arts all rely on the stabilizing power of documents to help maintain their own stability. Thus, in the form of books and journal articles, documents are carriers of scientific knowledge. As sacred scripture, they are the central artifacts around which religious traditions have been organized. As written statutes, charters, and contracts, they play a crucial role in constructing and regulating lawful behavior. As works of literature, paintings, and drawings, they are the tangible products of artistic practice. As textbooks and student notes, they are crucial instruments around which learning practices are organized.

These institutions are themselves central players in the construction of an ongoing meaningful daily order. Science and religion, in quite different ways, seek to identify and explain the underlying orderliness of the universe. Law and government provide a regulatory framework. Education has a "civilizing" function. The arts are means by which we represent (and some would say, construct) a meaningful universe. By supporting these institutions, documents thereby play a crucial role in supporting the ongoing order.

But it is a mistake to think that documents are somehow "naturally" stable or orderly. Just as a Saks Fifth Avenue will decay and disappear without constant maintenance, the same will happen to individual documents or collections unless they are constantly tended. And so we have a secondary set of institutions—including libraries, archives, publishers, copyright, and the courts—which work to stabilize documents so they can in turn support and stabilize science, education, and so on.

Until quite recently, these order-making practices—both the use of documents to stabilize institutions and the use of institutions to stabilize documents—were based on paper, print, and the various genres of documents which have arisen from these technologies. But now, the emergence of digital technologies and digital document forms has introduced great uncertainty into most, if not all, of these institutions. Many questions cannot yet be answered. How must current institutional practices be modified to accommodate these new forms? How will we stabilize and preserve them? It seems that the whole order-making system, our cover for death, is reeling. The cracks are showing like the deteriorating walls and counters in Saks Fifth Avenue. Is it any wonder we are anxious?

What I've just suggested, then, is that documents and institutions are mutually stabilizing. The same can be said about documents and selves or documents and individuals. Sherry Turkle (1984) has suggested that computers are "second selves"—devices onto which we project aspects of our persona or inner being. Documents can be understood in this way, too. They too are second selves which work to stabilize us as we work to stabilize them. To see this, it is useful to notice that documents are essentially talking things. They are bits of the material world—clay, stone, animal skin, plant fiber, sand—that we've imbued with the ability to speak. One of the earliest characterizations of documents comes from Genesis, the first book of the Judeo-Christian Bible and, curiously, it is a description of human beings, not of written forms: "God formed Adam from the dust of the earth, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living soul." The parallel between this mythic event and the creation of actual documents is strikingly close. For indeed, what we do when we make documents is to take the dust of the earth and breathe our breath, our voice, into it.

Framing documents in this way sets up a strong parallel between documents and people. Each in their own way are talking things. This is hardly an accidental parallel. Documents are exactly those things we create to speak for us—on our behalf and in our absence. And in speaking for us, they take on work, they do jobs for us. They are surrogate selves. Each genre—each kind of document—is the encapsulation of some part of ourselves, some manner of operating or being in the world. This is obviously the case for a love letter, a personal journal entry, or an office memo, but it is equally true for a bank statement, a road sign, or a restaurant menu (although in these latter cases the self being represented may be an institutional or organizational self). We have in effect constructed documents in our own image, and they resemble us, not only functionally, insofar as they speak and work for us, but structurally too. Documents, like human beings, have a material component and a symbolic component—in effect, a body and a soul. For millennia, human beings have hoped and believed that some part of themselves was immortal, that this part (call it the soul) lived on and transcended the death of the body. But at the same time, people have used documents as a way to transcend death—as a way to transfer some part of themselves into another body. Indeed, since ancient times, the written word has been seen as a way to cheat death. The hope has been—for certain authors at least, the so-called Immortals—that one could live on through one's works, that one could transcend the limits of bodily existence. The hope has been to live on through these surrogates, these second selves, much as we might hope to live on through our children.

Paper documents are fairly reassuring as second selves. They are whole, they have clear boundaries and healthy bodies and, under the right conditions, they can last for hundreds of years. It is not so with digital documents—at least as they exist today, they are pieced together from hyperlinked fragments; they seem to be abandoning their bodies (becoming virtual); and they are highly transient or impermanent. Breaking into pieces, giving up one's body, and being impermanent—what does this suggest if not death and dying? It hardly seems surprising that second selves displaying such properties would be a cause for anxiety.

### KNOWLEDGE AND LIBRARIES

As another way to examine the anxiety of the times, I next want to consider how libraries participate in the quest for knowledge. The library has long symbolized the quest for knowledge. Practically speaking, libraries have been storehouses or treasure chests for the preservation of human knowledge. But beyond this, they have held out, at least in imagination, the hope of collecting all knowledge in one place and thus creating a universal library. In his story, "The Library of Babel," collected in *Laby-*

*rinths*, Jorge Luis Borges (1964) plays on this theme, imagining a universe which is a library: "The universe (which others call the library) is composed of an indefinite, and perhaps infinite, number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings." In an essay entitled "Libraries without Walls" collected in his book, *The Order of Books*, Chartier (1994) begins by quoting from this same story: "When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness." He then goes on to say:

The dream of a library (in a variety of configurations) that would bring together all accumulated knowledge and all the books ever written can be found throughout the history of Western civilization. It underlay the constitution of great princely, ecclesiastical, and private "libraries"; it justified a tenacious search for rare books, lost editions, and texts that had disappeared; it commanded architectural projects to construct edifices capable of welcoming the world's memory. (p. 62)

And in the epilogue to his book, he suggests that the dream of a universal library may finally be within our grasp:

As the twentieth century wanes, our dream is to be able to surmount the contradiction that long haunted Western Europeans' relationship with the book. . . . The opposition long held to be insurmountable between the closed world of any finite collection, no matter what its size, and the infinite universe of all texts ever written is thus theoretically annihilated: now the catalogue of all catalogues ideally listing the totality of written production can be realized in a universal access to texts available for consultation at the reader's location. (pp. 89-90)

Whether or not a true universal library will ever be possible, it is clear that the longing for it is real enough. We long to know more, to acquire more knowledge about ourselves and the world, to store it, cross-reference it, and use it to our best advantage. Indeed, as far as we can tell, we are the only beings capable of knowing in these ways. But to know—to be capable of thinking and knowing—is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing in virtue of the experiences and the power it makes available to us—the joy of learning and discovery; the pleasures and insights of art; the control of our world and ourselves which science and technology afford. But it is also a curse insofar as it permits us to know one very specific existential fact—the fact of our impermanence, our mortality. Our condition, says Becker, is an existential paradox:

The essence of man is his paradoxical nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic. . . . We might call this existential paradox the condition of individuality within finitude. Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself

imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew. (p. 26)

But we are mortal gods. And just as our capacity to know permits us—indeed forces us—to recognize our limited existence, it also gives us the capacity to respond to it. What is the striving to know more if not a response to the ultimate existential fact, an attempt to know our fate, and perhaps to change it? Isn't science ultimately concerned with trying to fathom the nature of the universe into which we've so mysteriously emerged? And isn't it also concerned—through medicine and genetic engineering—with helping us to extend our lives and perhaps (who knows?) to reverse the death sentence which comes with our animal nature?

What I have been suggesting, then, is that the quest for knowledge, if followed back to its existential roots, ultimately leads us to the question of human existence and the fact of death. Anxiety therefore underlies knowing and the quest for knowledge, just as it underlies our order-making activities. Whether we think of libraries as collections of documents or storehouses of knowledge, we come to the same conclusion: libraries and death are intimately related.

### CONCLUSION

The point of these reflections has not been to suggest practical next steps in the design of technology or in the rethinking of institutional practices. Rather, my concern has been to locate the changes now taking place in a larger landscape—one might even say in a cosmic landscape. What could be bigger than questions of life and death? It is important for us to realize, as we pursue our powerful technologically dominated agenda, that we are not simply managing bits and bytes. Nor are we simply creating new institutional possibilities (as important as this may be). Instead, we are actually touching the soft and vulnerable core of who we humans are, how we know ourselves, and what we take ourselves to be. We must proceed with great care.

But ultimately, why talk about a subject as discomfiting, as potentially depressing, as death? Surely not to spoil the party. To talk about death is also and inevitably to make reference to life, whether implicitly or explicitly. Surely the most authentic response to the human condition—to the mystery of our existence, to the fact of our mortality—is to live more fully. What this might mean is left to each of us to discover. At a workshop whose topic is "successes and failures of digital libraries," I have simply wanted to propose a criterion—perhaps the ultimate existential criterion—by which to judge success and failure. I have simply wanted to raise this

question: To what extent and in what ways can the current technological developments help us to live richer, fuller, and more meaningful lives?

In the early 1980s, after finishing graduate work in computer science, I went to London to study calligraphy. Until the invention of the printing press, and for some period afterward, calligraphy—writing with the broad edged pen—was the craft by which all manuscripts and books were produced. But as the printing press came to dominate book production, calligraphy gradually fell into disuse and, by the beginning of this century, the craft had essentially been lost. It was recovered in the early part of the century, thanks to the efforts of one man, an Englishman named Edward Johnston, who spent years pouring over manuscripts in the British Museum, gradually rediscovering how the technology of the broad-edged pen actually worked. I mention this only to introduce the quote with which I want to close. “Our aim must be,” said Johnston, “to make letters live, so that we may have more life.” If we hold this as our highest objective, then I am sure our technological efforts will be successful, and we will come to know “extravagant happiness.”

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