



# The Unspeakable Truth | Ned Potter

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How close is the library to death? Reports vary. Some people think the reaper is hovering over the life-support machine, eager to pull the plug; others think that kind of image is a lot of melodramatic fuss about nothing. Two things I know for sure. One is, public-funding for libraries is being cut on both sides of the Atlantic - and as we sleep-walk towards a Conservative government in the UK we'll soon realise just how much worse things can be, particularly with regards to the arts, culture, and public spending. The other is, people who would otherwise require the services of a library have never had so many means and opportunities to bypass us entirely in reaching their information goals. So, we have issues!

Is it as simple as Change or Die? Thingology, the blog from LibraryThing, recently indicated in an article entitled [‘Why are you for killing libraries?’](#) that there might be a third way: impede technological progress to ensure that libraries remain relevant and needed. The e-book, it suggested, could kill us off for good – so how come we're so keen to embrace it? It is a provocative and thought-provoking point, and my two sentence summary above is in no way adequate – I'd wholly recommend reading the whole thing. It is a counter-intuitive but ultimately fairly logical suggestion that perhaps we should be trying to slow down the uptake of any technology which could ultimately render the library empty and obsolete.

I've read differing explanations of the origins of the word "library". From the Latin word 'Liber' meaning 'to peel' referring to the inner bark of a tree, on which manuscripts were written, or more simply to just mean 'book'. Or, also from the Latin, perhaps it originates from 'Liberio' meaning to free or liberate? I like that one more (although I fear it is less likely to be correct) as what we do is liberate information. We facilitate access to, pay for access to, point people towards access to, and generally 'free' information that they want. (Because, contrary to popular reports, information is not free. It is sometimes monetarily expensive, it is often locked behind complicated authentication procedures, and it is almost always buried deep within a massive heap of other information – too much data is just as prohibitive as too little.) The 'freer of the information' is a definition which stands the test of time a lot better than 'the keeper of the books' – we've been keepers of books for millennia, but we may not be for that much longer; we've been liberating information for ever too, and that will never change as long as our role survives. It is as agents of *Liberio* that we may be able to endure.

What we *cannot do* is obstruct progress to information liberation! We cannot try to slow down the impact of the e-book, or any other format which may have a negative impact on the library's usefulness. It's just not right to try and divert or derail progress for our own ends – indeed, we have no hope of doing so anyway - and even to try is to betray the Information Professional's equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath... We must embrace the e-book and everything it represents, even if doing so makes us complicit in our own demise.

Here is the unspeakable truth: if there comes a point when we are no longer required in our present form, we shouldn't fight that, **we should just leave**. We cannot deflect emerging trends to suit our own industry. It would be terrible for me and you and all our peers to lose our jobs (although whatever happens there will always be *some* cause for a good number of libraries to remain open, I'm sure) but that isn't a good enough reason to try and keep something alive if it effectively enters a vegetative state. I used to like the idea that we are 'the gatekeepers of

information' but that has an obstructive ring to it now; we really do need to be more akin to willing Sherpas. It is better to fade away than to betray our roles as the liberators of information by becoming jailers instead.

That's a stark pronouncement, but actually it isn't as bleak as all that. I don't think we are anywhere near the point where libraries are no longer needed yet, and that there's plenty we can do in the meantime to ensure we never get there. The first thing is to ensure everyone knows what we can **already** do for them, and the second thing is to adapt to what they **need** us to do for them.

Let's look at spreading the word first of all. We need to make sure everyone is making an **informed decision** as to whether or not to engage with libraries. This comes back to a whole host of related hobby-horses I've ridden elsewhere... The [Library Day in the Life Project](#), marketing the profession in general, [the Echolib debate](#) – they all relate in some way to the idea of preaching to the *potentially* converted, and telling them what we actually do so they know whether or not they need us. We'll never 'convert' those who are actively hostile (or if we do, it won't necessarily be a good use of our resources when there are better targets to work on) so we must concentrate our efforts on the currently indifferent.

We have to reach people who don't fall into our current marketing catchment area. If someone came up to me and asked me why libraries were so important these days, I could regale him or her with anything from the 30 second 'elevator sell' to a one-hour lecture on the value of what we do today – but sadly people don't come up and ask, so we have to go and find them, on their terms, and via the media they engage with already. In fact, I feel as though we need some kind of professional PR. Not individually, but collectively. Imagine a news item on the radio, perhaps about libraries closing due to lack of borrowing / footfall or some such – I've heard items just like that. But never have I heard the announcer say, "Here is a spokesman from the Coalition for the Promotion of Libraries [or whatever] who said: [insert 'passionate defence of the profession which might possibly encourage the radio listeners to think anew about whether we can offer them something', here]" – yet I can think of a hundred other industries that wouldn't dream of letting a negative news story go by without some official representation in the media, to rebuff or mitigate the stories effects. Or, indeed, to place more positive stories in the media in the first place. Lots of libraries do brilliant marketing on an individual or regional level (and learning from those success stories is important) but I'm not sure the profession per se, and the library per se, is so well represented; that needs to change. How do we go about doing this? I don't have the answers – I'm better at formulating questions, sadly. But I'd like to simulate debate and get the input of greater thinkers than me...

The second thing we can do to ensure we never get to the stage where we have to do the decent thing and fall on our collective sword is adapt, modify, revise and reinvent. There is plenty of historical precedent for organisations to find circumstances have overtaken them and they are no longer relevant in their current form. Some are able to adapt and become relevant in a new form; some are simply unable to continue existing at all due to a comprehensive shift in the technology / market-place / paradigm. My main point in this essay is to say we that we need to engage with the former idea, because it's not worth trying to force it if the latter happens. To take a very basic example of adapting, there is a company in the UK and Europe called *The Carphone Warehouse*. You can guess what it used to do, when it first started out – it sold phones for people to have in their cars. Mobile phones (and good taste) rendered car-phones obsolete pretty swiftly, but *The Carphone Warehouse* survives to this day and continues to thrive, by shifting their focus to mobile phones and all the associated paraphernalia. The lesson we can learn here is, they were not so tied to their previous identity that they couldn't adapt to the changes in the needs of their customers, and even though they stopped selling their eponymous product entirely they still had value in the marketplace.

A rather weightier example might be the oil industry. [Here's a quote from BP's website](#): "Since 'BP' petrol first went on sale in Britain in the 1920s, the brand has grown to become recognised worldwide for quality gasoline, transport fuels, chemicals and alternative sources of energy such as wind, solar and biofuels." I'm not sure I'd agree with that entirely... (I'm trying to avoid libel here.) But what is striking about that sentence is the fact that the second half of it may be all BP is known for in a hundred year's time. When the oil runs out, BP and all the other companies will have to focus their efforts entirely on things like wind-farms and solar energy. Say what you like about the irony (or perhaps carefully crafted and sinister strategy) that the destroyers of the environment are to become, with all their incalculable resources, its protector; the fact is the brand endures despite an almost total about-turn in their focus. They are adapting, they are fully accepting that their original purpose has a limited legacy (in certain senses of the word, anyway) and they are repositioning themselves accordingly. Major oil companies have a history of buying up

patents of potentially rival technologies (steam-powered cars, for example) in order to suppress them – do we really want to go down a similar route in libraries by disrupting technological progress? Of course not, let's skip straight to the part where we re-appropriate our resources to better engage with the current market-place.

Can libraries change? They can, in fact they are already doing it and have been for ages – the environments we work in are often unrecognisable from, say, twenty years ago. But can we cope with a Carphone Warehouse / BP style paradigm shift, where 'the book' as we've always known it is no longer our primary offering? It'll be a damn sight harder, but possibly *necessary* in the long term. And, like the phone company and the energy company, we'll be moving into a closely related area in which we already have expertise – essentially, in our case, marshalling and providing access to information online.

The unspeakable truth is that we should not try and outlive our usefulness. We certainly shouldn't try and prolong that usefulness by effectively sabotaging our users' ability to empower themselves. But the more palatable truth is that if we work hard on reinvention and increased public understanding, we'll never have to be put on the life-support machine in the first place.

It is never too late to adapt.