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books

Burning the Books

A History of Knowledge Under Attack

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Introduction

IN BERLIN, ON 10 May 1933, a bonfire was held on Unter den Linden, the capital's most important thoroughfare. It was a site of great symbolic resonance: opposite the university and adjacent to St Hedwig's Cathedral, the Berlin State Opera House, the Royal Palace and Karl Friedrich Schinkel's beautiful war memorial. Watched by a cheering crowd of almost forty thousand a group of students ceremonially marched up to the bonfire carrying the bust of a Jewish intellectual, Magnus Hirschfeld (founder of the groundbreaking Institute of Sexual Sciences). Chanting the 'Feuersprüche', a series of fire incantations, they threw the bust on top of thousands of volumes from the institute's library, which had joined books by Jewish and other 'un-German' writers (gays and communists prominent among them) that had been seized from bookshops and libraries. Around the fire stood rows of young men in Nazi uniforms giving the Heil Hitler salute. The students were keen to curry favour with the new government and this book-burning was a carefully planned publicity stunt.¹ In Berlin, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's new minister of propaganda, gave a rousing speech that was widely reported around the world:

No to decadence and moral corruption! Yes to decency and morality in family and state! . . . The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character. It is to this end that we want to educate you . . . You do well to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past. This is a strong, great and symbolic deed.

Similar scenes went on in ninety other locations across the country that night. Although many libraries and archives in Germany were left untouched, the bonfires were a clear warning sign of the attack on knowledge about to be unleashed by the Nazi regime.



Knowledge is still under attack. Organised bodies of knowledge are being attacked today, as they have been attacked throughout history. Over time society has entrusted the preservation of knowledge to libraries and archives, but today these institutions are facing multiple threats. They are targets for individuals, groups, and even states motivated to deny the truth and eradicate the past. At the same time, libraries and archives are experiencing declining levels of funding. This continued decline in resources has combined with the growth of technology companies, which have effectively privatised the storage and transmission of knowledge in digital form, taking some of the functions of publicly funded libraries and archives into the commercial realm. These companies are driven by very different motives from the institutions that have traditionally made knowledge available for society. When companies like Google have digitised billions of pages of books and made them available online, and when free online storage is provided by firms like Flickr, what is the point of libraries?

Just at the time that public funding is under extreme pressure we find that democratic institutions, the rule of law and open society are also under threat. The truth itself is under attack. This is, of course, no new thing. George Orwell pointed this out in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and his words ring disconcertingly true today as we think about the role that libraries and archives must play in defence of open societies: 'There was truth, and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad.'² Libraries and archives have become central to the support of democracy, the rule of law and open society as they are bodies that exist to 'cling to the truth'.

The notion that there could exist 'alternative facts' was famously suggested by Kellyanne Conway, US Counselor to the President, in January 2017. She was responding to criticism of Trump's assertion that the crowd that had attended his inauguration ceremony was larger than the crowd at Barack Obama's five years before, when images and data showed the opposite to have been the case.³ It was a timely reminder that the preservation of information continues to be a key tool in the defence of open societies. Defending the truth against the rise of 'alternative facts' means capturing those truths, and the statements that deny them,

so that we have reference points that societies can trust and rely on.

Libraries are crucial for the healthy functioning of society. While I have worked in libraries for more than thirty-five years, I have been a user of them far longer, and have seen the value they bring. This book has been motivated by my own sense of anger at recent failures across the globe – both deliberate and accidental – to ensure that society can rely on libraries and archives to preserve knowledge. The repeated attacks on them over the centuries need to be examined as a worrying trend in human history and the astonishing efforts made by people to protect the knowledge they hold should be celebrated.

The revelation that landing cards documenting the arrival into the UK of the ‘Windrush generation’ had been deliberately destroyed by the Home Office in 2010 shows the importance of archives. The government had also begun to pursue a ‘hostile environment’ policy on immigration, which required the Windrush migrants to prove their continued residence here or be deported.⁴ Yet they had been guaranteed citizenship under the British Nationality Act 1948 and had come in good faith to the UK, which faced severe labour shortages after the Second World War. By spring 2018, the Home Office had admitted to the wrongful deportation of at least eighty-three of these citizens, eleven of whom had since died, prompting a public outcry.

I was struck by the absurdity of a policy, instigated and aggressively promulgated by a government department (under the leadership of Theresa May, who had become prime minister by the time the situation came to light) that had destroyed the main evidence that would have enabled many of the people to prove their citizenship.⁵ Although the decision to destroy the records was made before the implementation of the policy and was probably not malicious, the Home Office’s motivation to persist with the hostile treatment may have been. I wrote an op-ed in the *Financial Times*⁶ pointing out that the preservation of knowledge of this kind was vital for an open, healthy society, as indeed it has been since the beginning of our civilisations.

For as long as humans have gathered together in organised communities, with a need to communicate with one another,

knowledge has been created and information recorded. In the earliest communities, this took the form, as far as we know, of oral information, and the only permanent record that survives is in the form of images: paintings made on the walls of caves, or the scratches of symbols on stones. We know nothing of the motivation behind these marks; anthropologists and archaeologists can only make educated guesses.

By the Bronze Age, communities were becoming better organised and more sophisticated. As groups of nomads settled, and began to establish fixed communities, involved in farming and early industry, they also began to develop hierarchies of organisation, with governing families, tribal chiefs and others who led the rest of the community.

These communities, from around 3,000 BCE onwards, began to keep written records. From these earliest archives, and in the documents found in them, we know a surprising amount of detail about how those societies operated.⁷ In other documents people began to record their thoughts, ideas, observations and stories. These were preserved in the earliest libraries. This process of organising knowledge soon required the development of specialised skills, which included the recording of knowledge and techniques for copying. Over time these tasks resulted in the creation of professional roles – loosely similar to those of the librarian or archivist. ‘Librarian’ comes from the Latin word *librarius*, from *liber* meaning ‘book’. The term ‘archivist’ is from the Latin *archivum*, which refers to both written records and the place where they are kept. The origins of this word derive from the Greek *archeia* meaning ‘public records’. Libraries and archives were not created or run with the same motivation as those in the modern world, and it is dangerous to draw analogies between these ancient collections and those of today. Even so, these civilisations created bodies of knowledge and developed skills to organise them, many of which we recognise today, such as catalogues and metadata.⁸

The roles of librarian and archivist were often combined with others, such as priest or administrator, becoming more distinct and visible in ancient Greece and Rome, where libraries were more publicly available, and the belief that access to knowledge is an essential element of a healthy society began to take hold.⁹ A list of

the names of the men who held the post of head librarian of the Great Library of Alexandria during the third and second centuries BCE survives – many of these figures were also recognised as the leading scholars of their time, such as Apollonius of Rhodes (whose epic poem about Jason and the Golden Fleece inspired the *Aeneid*) and Aristophanes of Byzantium (inventor of one of the earliest forms of punctuation).¹⁰

Storehouses of knowledge have been at the heart of the development of societies from their inception. Although the technologies of creating knowledge, and the techniques for preservation have altered radically, their core functions have changed surprisingly little. Firstly, libraries and archives collect, organise and preserve knowledge. Through gift, transfer and purchase they have accumulated tablets, scrolls, books, journals, manuscripts, photographs and many other methods of documenting civilisation. Today these formats are expanded through digital media, from word-processing files, to emails, web pages and social media. In antiquity and the medieval period the work of organising libraries had sacred connotations: the archives of the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia were often kept in temples, and King Philippe Auguste (also known as Philip II) of France established the ‘Trésor des Chartes’ (the treasury of charters). This was at first a ‘mobile’ collection, but by 1254 came to be stored in a purpose-built suite of rooms at the holy site of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.¹¹

Through developing and publishing their catalogues, providing reading rooms, sponsoring scholarship, by publishing books, staging exhibitions, and more recently through digitisation, libraries and archives have been part of the broader history of disseminating ideas. The creation of national libraries from the eighteenth century and public libraries from the nineteenth century onwards massively expanded the role that these institutions played in transforming society.

At the heart of this is the idea of preservation. Knowledge can be vulnerable, fragile and unstable. Papyrus, paper and parchment are highly combustible. Water can just as easily damage them, as can mould created through high humidity. Books and documents can be stolen, defaced and tampered with. The existence of digital files can be even more fleeting, owing to technological obsolescence,

the impermanence of magnetic storage media, and the vulnerability of all knowledge placed online. As anyone who has encountered a broken web link has discovered, there can be no access without preservation.

Archives are different from libraries. Libraries are accumulations of knowledge, built up one book at a time, often with great strategic purpose, while archives document directly the actions and decision-making processes of institutions and administrations, even of governments. Libraries often hold some of this material as well – the printed *Journal of the House of Commons*, for example – but archives are by their nature full of material, often mundane in its character, not intended to be read by a mass audience. But where libraries deal with ideas, ambitions, discoveries and imaginings, archives detail the routine but vital stuff of everyday life: land ownership, imports and exports, the minutes of committees and taxes. Lists are often an important feature: whether they are lists of citizens recorded in a census, or lists of immigrants arriving on a boat, archives are at the heart of history, recording the implementation of the ideas and thoughts that may be captured in a book.

The flip side of this, of course, is that the significance of books and archival material is recognised not only by those who wish to protect knowledge, but also by those who wish to destroy it. Throughout history, libraries and archives have been subject to attack. At times librarians and archivists have risked and lost their lives for the preservation of knowledge.

I want to explore a number of key episodes from history to highlight different motivations for the destruction of the storehouses of knowledge, and the responses developed by the profession to resist it. The individual cases that I focus on (and I could have chosen dozens of others) tell us something about the period in which the events took place and are fascinating in their own right.

The motivations of states that continue to erase history will be considered in the context of archives. As knowledge is increasingly created in digital form, the challenges that this reality poses for the preservation of knowledge and for the health of open societies will be examined. The book will end with some suggestions for how libraries and archives could be better supported in their current political and financial contexts, and as a Coda I will suggest five

functions that these institutions have for society, to highlight their value, for the benefit of those in positions of power.

Libraries and archives themselves destroy knowledge daily. Duplicate books are routinely disposed of when only one copy is needed. Smaller libraries are often subsumed into a bigger unit, a process that usually results in the knowledge being maintained by the bigger library but sometimes, by accident or design, unique materials are lost. Archives are designed around a process called appraisal, a system of disposal and retention. Not everything can or should be kept. Although this can sometimes seem outrageous and incomprehensible to historians, the idea that every document should be kept is economically unsustainable. Much of what is destroyed in such processes is information that is already held elsewhere.

The processes of selection, acquisition and cataloguing, as well as of disposal and retention, are never neutral acts. They are done by human beings, working in their social and temporal contexts. The books and journals that sit on library shelves today, or are made available through our digital libraries, or the documents and ledgers that are in our archives, are there because of human agency. The past behaviour of humans involved in the creation of collections was, therefore, subject to bias, prejudice and personality. Most libraries and archives have great omissions in their collections, 'silences' that have often severely limited how the historical record treats, for example, people of colour, or women. Anyone using those collections today must be aware of those contexts. Readers of this book are similarly encouraged to bear these historical contexts in mind and to remember that in the past people did things differently.

In examining the history of libraries and the way their collections have evolved over time we are, in many ways, telling the story of the survival of knowledge itself. Every individual book that exists now in these institutions, all the collections that together build up into larger bodies of knowledge, are survivors.

Until the advent of digital information, libraries and archives had well-developed strategies for preserving their collections: paper. The institutions shared the responsibility with their readers. All new users of the Bodleian, for example, are still required to formally swear