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NANCY SCHROM DYE

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READING AND THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES

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An Address

by

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at the  
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of the  
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## Introduction

It's a great pleasure for me to introduce tonight's featured speaker — Oberlin's President Nancy Schrom Dye.

President Dye understands libraries from a number of perspectives. First of all, she is an active library user. She's someone who takes advantage of library resources both in her teaching and her research. She appeared in our library not long after she arrived in Oberlin last year, and our staff was amazed to see her tracking down herself many of the materials that her students would use in her course on the history of women's health.

President Dye also knows libraries from an administrative perspective. As Dean of the Faculty at Vassar from 1988 to 1994 she was the senior administrator to whom the library reported. Through that responsibility she became very familiar with the issues confronting academic libraries, including the ways in which they are being affected by electronic information technologies. President Dye is especially knowledgeable of those technologies, since she also held oversight responsibility at Vassar for academic computing. She is thus in an excellent position to address the subject of her talk tonight.

Please join me in welcoming President Dye who will speak to us about "Reading and the Future of Libraries."

Ray English  
Director of Libraries

## READING AND THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES

I was very pleased by the Friends of the Library's invitation to speak at this year's annual dinner, and gladly accepted for two reasons: first, this dinner is being held in conjunction with the Harold Jantz Memorial Lecture, this year delivered brilliantly by Elizabeth Eisenstein, one of America's very finest historians; and second, speaking to you gives me an opportunity to talk about a matter that I think is of great concern to all friends of libraries.

My concerns can be summed up with one simple question: "What will academic libraries be like in the foreseeable future?" We are living through a time of enormous confusion in the public mind about the answer to this question. This confusion creates serious problems for colleges and universities, particularly as we try to maintain and build the kinds of library facilities and resources that our students and faculty will need in the future.

Why are we confused? All of you know the terms used to describe the academic library of the not-so-distant future. We speak all the time of "the electronic library," the "virtual library," and the "digital library." Whatever the characterization, the source of public confusion lies in our expectations about computing and related information and networking technologies that are rapidly changing not only our libraries, but also many other aspects of the academy and of the broader society, including aspects of daily life as fundamental as the ways in which we formulate and communicate our thoughts. Anyone who has read—or tried to read—a hypertext novel knows what I am talking about: traditional linear modes of thinking are being exploded by modes of discourse made possible by the new technologies.

Many people believe, sometimes quite fervently, that the electronic library will provide in electronic form virtually all of the information and all of the texts its users need. This electronic library is perhaps not even a library at all. It will have no printed books and it will not be located in a physical space, at least not in a physical space that serves the same functions as this building did for so many years of Oberlin's history, or that are now served so magnificently by our main library.

Until quite recently, most people seemed to be quite skeptical of this futuristic idea of the electronic library. In the early 1980s, for example, Russell Baker devoted a column to this idea. He poked fun by asking what students at a university with an electronic library would do in the spring. "I mean," he wrote, "you can't just haul a computer out on the campus and pluck it down under a budding elm and lie there with the thing on your chest while watching the birds at work, can you? You can do that with a book, and it's one of the better things about going to college."

But Baker's skepticism about electronic libraries is less prevalent today than it was when his column appeared. Discussion of the "information superhighway" and of the content that will presumably be delivered over it has become commonplace in the media. And one can find considerable support for the idea that libraries will soon be utterly digitized. There is considerable disagreement about the desirability of this development, and of late a considerable literature of protest has begun to emerge. I think most readily of Sven Birkerts' recent book, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, which laments, in rather Whitmanesque fashion, the "wholesale wiring of America." Birkerts envisions a grim new world, with

. . . ever more complex and efficient technological systems being interposed between the individual and the harsh constraints of nature. This electronic mesh is already changing absolutely the way we deal with information. In fact, it is changing our whole idea of what information is. . . .The medium shapes the message. If it can't be rendered digitally, it can't be much good. Software codes are a sorting hopper: they determine what flies through the circuits and what doesn't. . . .We will all . . . spend more and more of our time in the cybersphere producing, sending, receiving, and responding, and necessarily less time interacting in a hands-on way with the old material order.

What is interesting about such laments is that they do not challenge the inevitability and totality of the new information revolution, only the desirability of it. So it is little wonder that many well-informed people no longer question the ideas implied in the electronic library concept.

Take a feature article that appeared last January in *Newsweek*. The article's title was "Wiring the Ivory Tower" and it began like this:

When California State University administrators drew up plans for their newest campus, scheduled to open this fall at the old Fort Ord site in Monterey Bay, one building was conspicuously absent from their blueprints: the library. But as Barry Munitz, chancellor of the eleven-year-old campus system, sees it, why bother wasting all that money on bricks and mortar and expensive tomes when it could be better spent on technology for getting information via computer? "You simply don't have to build a traditional library these days," Munitz says.

Here is a major news magazine featuring an article on information technology in the academy that starts by describing plans to build a new university campus without a library. And the chancellor of the university system is evidently in support of that view!

Another example: Last year, *The New York Times* reported that the Library of Congress would soon announce plans to digitize its collections and make them accessible over the Internet, thereby creating a "national digital library." This article gave the impression that the most important collections of the Library of Congress would soon be online. A reader could hardly help but conclude, as some Oberlin College readers did, that if the riches of the Library of Congress were available via electronic networks, there would be little need to continue to build library collections anywhere.

In both instances the reality behind the news stories was quite different from the conclusions many readers drew from them. The new California campus described in *Newsweek* will have a "learning resource center" that contains books, journals and newspapers. It will rely heavily on interlibrary loan from other libraries and it will also take maximum advantage of electronic information resources. It won't be a "traditional library," as the Chancellor said, but it will be a library nonetheless. The emphasis of the Library of Congress digitization projects will be on materials not covered by copyright, primarily photographic and archival collections. The project will not make accessible the books and journals that make up the vast

majority of materials added to college and university library collections each year. It is not designed as a substitute for building local library collections.

My point in mentioning these examples is that I think they help explain some of the public perceptions of academic libraries that I encounter frequently as Oberlin's president. My favorite stories in this regard come from the legal profession. Many of the lawyers I know are firmly of the view that libraries will soon be fully electronic and that colleges just won't need new library buildings in the future. Their views go something like this: "What? You want money for a library? You've got to be kidding! It'll all be electronic. You won't even need books and journals, let alone a building." Lawyers probably have this view because they themselves have come to rely so heavily on electronic services such as Lexis/Nexis and WestLaw that provide most of the legal information they need in their day-to-day work. It could also be that the nature of the reading done by lawyers in the course of their daily work also helps explain why they think that electronic access to information is sufficient, and that's a point I'll return to in a moment. My primary point is that many intelligent, well-educated, and well-informed people have now accepted the view that the library of the foreseeable future will be electronic, and that sometime in the not-too-distant future the spaces we know as libraries will not exist.

These ideas stem from our direct experience of the power of electronic information technologies and a sense of how pervasive they are becoming in our lives. Think for a moment about how everything we read is produced. In today's world virtually everything that appears in printed form was first written or edited electronically. Books, journals, newspapers, the text of this speech—all of those things originate in or pass through an electronic form. Consider, too, the fact that documents in electronic form can be transmitted virtually instantaneously over national and international networks. It takes only seconds to receive the electronic version of a journal article that is physically located on a distant computer, with the article including footnotes, graphs, and color images at high resolution. A good example is Project Muse, an effort by The Johns Hopkins University to publish journals in electronic as well as print format. This service, which our library recently made available to Oberlin's faculty and students, provides immediate access from workstations on the campus to electronic versions of articles in journals published by The Johns Hopkins University Press. The electronic form of these articles is in all significant respects identical to the print version.



Articles that are downloaded and printed on laser printers are fully comparable to photocopies of the printed journal articles.

Given the prevalence of text in electronic form, and the speed and power with which it can be transmitted to any location that is appropriately equipped, it is not hard to see why the vision of the electronic library is so seductive. There are no technical barriers to capturing and storing and accessing virtually all library resources in electronic form.

You'll note that I said that there are no "technical barriers" that would prevent the electronic library from becoming the norm. But there are other serious problems. These include questions of copyright, the economics of publishing, the nature of scholarly communication, and the challenge of organizing and coordinating access to electronic resources that are not owned or controlled locally. I can't do justice to any of these complex issues, but I do want to touch on two matters briefly.

The first point I would emphasize is the fact that electronic media are not, by nature, archival. Information in electronic form is fragile, and the technologies for storing and accessing such information are going through extraordinarily rapid change. The very base on which the information resides can be wiped away when a new and more powerful version of the technology emerges, requiring the transfer of the information to new systems. This does not augur well in the foreseeable future for preserving information and making it readily available over time, which is an essential part of what libraries do.

Well-made books don't have that problem. I hope all of you have had a chance to look at the exhibit of incunabula on display in the library's special collections department. All of those volumes were printed more than five hundred years ago, and they are almost as readable today as they were when they were first produced. They illustrate beautifully the fact that much of the content of academic libraries is here not only for today, but for tomorrow and for the decades, even the centuries, ahead. As libraries convert information to digital form, they will be successful only to the extent that they also devise methods for maintaining access to that same information into the indefinite future.

But there is another more important reason to be cautious in adopting the vision of the all-electronic library. That reason relates

to the nature of reading, and especially to the kind of reading that is most central to a liberal arts education.

Much of the reading we do is sometimes called condensed or abbreviated reading. It is reading of brief duration, done primarily for purposes of gaining specific information. Bibliographic research and reference reading are two good examples. It is now very common to find and to read information of this kind in computerized form in our libraries. One need only think of bibliographic databases, which now provide enormously improved access to the scholarly literature of virtually all fields; the online systems that have replaced card catalogs; and electronic reference works, such as Lexis/Nexis, dictionaries and encyclopedias. Just recently, for example, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has become accessible via the Internet. Given its brief duration, this kind of reading is well suited to the computer screen.

Another kind of reading is what is sometimes called extensive or sustained reading: reading novels, books, and long journal articles. Reading of this kind is of longer duration and is not currently done very easily in front of a computer. Much of the reading that students and faculty do in a liberal arts college falls clearly into this category of extensive reading. Much of it involves active engagement with the ideas and information presented in a text. Reflection is an essential component of this kind of reading. We read extensively to learn about and imagine some new aspect of reality. To the extent that our critical assessment of what we have read leads us to believe that it is valid, we begin to think about the implications and associations that flow from the text, and we adjust our perceptions of reality accordingly. To the extent we think that what we have read is not valid, we engage in a similar process of thinking about why what we have read is not correct. It's through this kind of reading, critical thinking, and reflection that much of what constitutes a liberal arts education actually happens. Reading of this kind is best done now and, I would predict, for a good time into the future, from a printed text. In other words, extensive reading and those things we call books go very well together.

It's no accident that the development of extensive reading and the development of printing went hand in hand. As much of the scholarly work on the nature and history of reading that has been inspired by Elizabeth Eisenstein's work on the first communications revolution in the fifteenth century wrought by the printing press has argued, extensive reading was born in the wake of the emergence of

printing in the West. Think for a moment about what the western world was like before the invention of moveable type. Written materials existed only in manuscript form and in very limited copies. Reading was perforce limited to "intensive" reading of a very small number of texts. The invention of printing brought an enormous increase both in the number of people who read and in the quantity of written materials available.

It seems likely to me that the book will remain our preferred format for sustained, extensive reading in the foreseeable future. The robust character of book publishing certainly seems to support this view. Ironically, given our haste to declare the end of the book, more books are published every year than in the year before! I suspect, too, that the printed book will continue to be a major format in libraries for many years to come. This is not to say that electronic sources won't be central, that they will not continue to proliferate, or that libraries will not continue to go through truly revolutionary changes. Since electronic information technologies provide the option for accessing documents anywhere virtually on demand, it's likely that libraries will rely more and more on electronic forms of access, particularly for journal articles and reference materials. But our future libraries, rather than being entirely electronic, are much more likely to be an eclectic mix of media, including printed books and journals; electronic journals and reference sources; electronic books, journals, and newspapers; and multimedia materials. This emerging library environment will vastly increase the quantity of resources that are readily available for scholarly work. That's because the new electronic technologies will make easily available extraordinary resources that previously were inaccessible, or accessible only to the scholar who was willing to expend significant time and effort.

In turn, all of this suggests that the standards of excellence in libraries will continue to change dramatically. It used to be that we assessed a library's excellence in terms of the size of its holdings and the breadth and depth of its collections. Now we are much more likely to assess a library's excellence in terms of its ability to make information it does not hold in its collections immediately accessible to its users: in short, we ask how well is a library networked to other libraries and how quickly it can produce materials from far-distant locations to its users.

We are also beginning to assess a library's excellence far more in terms of the teaching skills of its librarians. Although future

libraries will be able to provide more resources for our use, they will be more complex and difficult for us to navigate than past libraries have been. The sheer quantity of information available also makes it essential that we learn new skills for identifying, selecting, and critically assessing the resources we encounter. This means that we need to work very hard to teach ourselves and our students the most effective ways of using the emerging library and information environments. That can be done only if we continue to build close ties between the library and the curriculum and if the use of the library is carefully integrated into courses in a thoughtful, well-planned way. These developments also mean a new, even more important role for librarians, who are in the best position to master and convey to us the skills needed to take best advantage of this new environment. As the electronic revolution continues, the teaching role of librarians will clearly become more important. Librarians, far from becoming extinct, as some futurists have predicted, will become more central to the educational process.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the library of the future, at least as far as we can envision it now, will reside in a physical space. The library will continue to require a building. Space will be needed both for expanding physical collections and for learning and using new technologies. But the library as a central humanistic institution has never been—and it won't be in the future—simply a place for storing books and journals or for providing the latest electronic equipment. It has been—and always will be—a place for reading, research, reflection, and, equally important, human interaction.