Towards universal access to all knowledge—Internet Archive

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Abstract: Advances in computing and communications mean that we can cost-effectively store every book, sound recording, movie, software package, and public Web page ever created, and provide access to these collections via the Internet to students and adults all over the world. By mostly using existing institutions and funding sources, we can build this as well as compensate authors within the current worldwide library budget. We should take advantage of our new technologies and our open societies to make a Universal Library again, and go the next step and make all knowledge easily available to every man, woman and child around the world.

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INTRODUCTION

The Library of Alexandria was founded with the goal of obtaining a copy of every published work in the world to become the center for scholarship in 288 BC. It was based on a technical advance, or rather, a change in the medium of recording to papyrus from clay tablets.

Technological advances, for the first time since the loss of the Library of Alexandria, may allow us to collect all published knowledge in a similar way. But now we can take the original goal another step further to make all the published works of humankind accessible to everyone, no matter where they are in the world.

Thomas Jefferson's statement that "All that is necessary for a student is access to a library"[1] may be an exaggeration, but access to information is a key ingredient to education and an open society.

While difficult to prove, it seems safe to say that the creation and dissemination of knowledge is important for building societies that grow and prosper. Many in the library community agree that universal access to all knowledge could stand as one of the greatest achievements of humankind, up in the pantheon of the Library of Alexandria or landing a man on the moon.

CAN WE?

This is essentially a question of technical and financial feasibility. To assess that, it is necessary to estimate how much published information there is in variety of different media: text, audio, software, moving images, and the Web. From this, we can estimate how difficult the digitization and storage challenges would be if we were to attempt a comprehensive collection. The really good news is that storage on this scale is not only currently available, but affordable, and the price keeps dropping.

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[1] Jefferson was comparing the process of apprenticeship to the value of a good library. See Thomas Jefferson to John Garland Jefferson, June 11, 1790. http://memory.loc.gov/master/mss/mtj/mtj1/012/0500/0540.jpg

MAY WE?

Will we allow ourselves to re-invent our concept of libraries to expand and to use the new technologies? This is fundamentally a societal and policy issue. These issues are reflected in our governments' spending priorities, and in law.

WILL WE?

We have the ingredients to do something great: the storage technology, the communications technology, and most importantly the political will to live in an open society. Indeed, universal access to all knowledge is within our grasp. But to make it happen, we must take some deliberate steps:

(1) We need to bring the idea of Universal Access to All Knowledge to the foreground with a series of meetings of stakeholders culminating in a plan.

(2) We need to create the implementations of the inexpensive digitization techniques in use elsewhere by encouraging existing vendors or creating new vendors that will deliver quality work for similar prices.

(3) We must build archives that would serve as technology partners and trusted digital repositories for the world-wide libraries and archives involved in this transformation.

Let us take advantage of our new technologies and our open societies to make a Universal Library again, and go the next step and make all knowledge easily available to every man, woman and child around the world.

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