



The Electronic
Erosion of
Democracy

by

James H.

Billington

Librarian of

Congress

Inaugural

C. Walter and

Gerda B.

Mortenson

Distinguished

Lecture

University of

Illinois Library

at Urbana-

Champaign

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The C. Walter and Gerda B.

Mortenson Distinguished Professorship for International Library Programs was established through a gift to the University of Illinois Library from Mr. and Mrs. Mortenson in 1986. The program's goal is to create international cooperative efforts among libraries, further international exchanges of library materials, extend the Library faculty's involvement in international programs, and promote scholarly research and teaching.

The inaugural C. Walter and Gerda

B. Mortenson Distinguished Lecture, held on the evening of September 10, 1990, was everything such a gala event should be: the early fall weather was fine, and the large audience attracted to the Foellinger Auditorium by the prospect of hearing Librarian of Congress James H. Billington was treated to a lively and erudite talk. The speech was controversial, causing a buzz of animated discussion for days and weeks afterward. Who could hope for more on the campus of a great university?

The Mortenson Professorship is pleased to publish Mr. Billington's lecture, followed by a summary of the question-and-answer session. Those who were present at the lecture may revisit the issues raised, first-time readers may form their own opinions, and all will, I hope, find it stimulating and look forward eagerly to the next Mortenson Distinguished Lecture.

Marianna Tax Choldin

C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson
Distinguished Professor for
International Library Programs

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James H. Billington

Librarian of Congress

Libraries are the place in which the legacy of yesterday is brought together today to create new possibilities for tomorrow. Libraries contain the systems of communication of the human family. They provide people in the present the opportunity to communicate with others whom they are not able to see or talk to, with all those who have gone before.

I want to speak about the deeper issues that beset those remarkable institutions as they exist today—and to begin with some historical perspective.

Societies are defined in part by their forms of communications. In the second millennium B.C. the Koreans invented an alphabet which became the foundation of an independent Korean culture, enabling it to survive continuously through wars and foreign occupation down to the present. The Koreans created a public culture which was less aesthetic and elitist than the Mandarin Chinese culture against which they had, to some extent, revolted. Korean manuscripts are the oldest we have in the Library of Congress.

The introduction by the Greeks of the first alphabet with vowels was an important step, making sounds into signs, words into things. A word was no longer just an event, but a vehicle for abstract and analytic thought. The phonetic alphabet activated the left hemisphere of the brain, creating philosophic speculation of a kind that permanently changed the landscape of human possibility. And of course, at the dawn of the modern age, the printed book really made democracy possible.

It was the rejection of the book in Russian culture which doomed democracy there. There was not even a vernacular Bible in Russian until the early nineteenth century, and then it was produced by foreigners. Catherine the Great, the most liberal, pro-book person ever to rule Russia until that time, nevertheless burned the books that stood on either side of Voltaire's work in her stacks when purging her library of contaminants after the French Revolution struck.

An exaggerated fear of the book in Russia led in turn to exaggerated expectations of almost magical deliverance by a single book—what the Russian sectarians called “a deep book.” Since dissenters hoped to reject the system that rejected books, they looked for the book that would provide the banner for revolt. Such votive worshiping of a single book—right down to *Das Kapital*—has gotten the Russians into considerable trouble. Fear of the magic power of “the book” has persisted even in modern times. The term *glamour girl*, you may be aware, comes from the term *grammar girl* in Highland Scottish. The fear that there was some sort of terrible, special charm in any female possessed of book knowledge was reflected in that term, which has come to acquire a slightly different meaning in our age.

Western man, coming out of the Dark Ages, went through four successive stages in sharing values and communicating information and knowledge. First came the manuscript culture based on liturgical language, transmitted

by hand copying and oral lecturing. This culture was built around the classroom and catechism of the medieval college, and represented the universal Christendom that gave coherence to Western European civilization up to the fifteenth century.

Second came the printed book and the book culture. This involved not liturgical, but vernacular language; the culture was transmitted not so much by the medieval college as by schools and academies under local princes, facilitating the consolidation of secular power territorially defined. Its culminating institutional creation in the early nineteenth century was a new type of state university, beginning in Germany, that was built around the library and the laboratory rather than the catechism and the classroom.

The third culture of communication was the journalistic, mass culture that arose in the mid-nineteenth century and was based on the periodic press more than the book. It arose out of high-speed printing, commercial advertising, and high-acid paper, all of which appeared at about the same time. This culture helped consolidate the new possibilities opened by the Industrial Revolution for reaching a timely mass audience. Its characteristic institution was not the medieval college or the modern research university but the public school system and the daily newspaper.

The fourth and latest culture to which we are now trying to adjust is the electronic culture, based on the audiovisual media and instantaneous data transmission. This culture transcends the national and linguistic barriers which had previously been strengthened by the cultures of print. The computer is the badge of the elite electronic culture, while television provides an electronic culture for the masses. Television tends to favor image, incantation, and emotion over cumulative and sequential thought, disaggregated bits or “bytes” of information over synthetic and coherent knowledge.

The problem that we face in America today is that the principal mass public medium for communication—television—is not in sync with the principal mass public institutions for training the mind—the school system.

Television works against the school system. This was not the case in earlier days. There was, to be sure, a tension between mass journalism and the elite book culture, but both were print-based, both required mental effort, and both were ultimately based on the same value system.

In the age of the new electronic culture, the main institution for training the best minds—the universities—are no longer transmitting values that provide coherence and discipline for the broader society. This was not the case in the preceding period when mass journalism built on and reinforced the values of the preceding book culture. The key journals which brought mass journalism to middle-class America in a new way, during the 1920s and 1930s—like *Time* magazine and its younger sister, *Life*—projected the Presbyterian values of Henry Luce, their founder, who tried in a certain secular fashion to transpose those into his magazines. His co-founder, Briton Hadden, added a classical sense of drama and the inverted sentences of Virgilian prose. One remembers Wolcott Gibbs asking, “Where it will end, knows God.” Yet, *Time*'s values were based on classical and Christian models, and so the break with tradition was not as sharp then as what the electronic culture has produced now.

There are some calls now for the library of tomorrow to adapt itself totally to the new electronic culture—rejecting all previous library tradition and making the library into a service rather than a place. Its contents are essentially online. It is disembodied in all but a small and vestigial sense from any physical location.

A model for the future might be something like the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries statewide system, which allows anyone in the state who

has a computer and a modem access to listings of more than 350,000 articles from more than 7,000 periodicals held by the major research libraries in Colorado. The issues come to a central location, are processed online overnight for word searches of article titles the next day, and are otherwise organized for electronic retrieval. In this model for the library of tomorrow, its mission becomes one of simply creating data banks and providing fair access to them.

I doubt, however, that the computer and television will ever completely supplant the book and journalistic cultures that preceded it—for at least three reasons.

The first reason is historical. One communications technology rarely directly supplants another. One can observe, for example, the comeback of radio, which was supposed to be completely outmoded by television. The second reason is institutional. Higher education in America is so profoundly conservative and so committed to the culture of print that it is unlikely to adapt totally to the new electronic culture. The third reason is moral. The survival of our kind of democracy requires the kind of active mind that the print culture produces and that the television spectator habit does not.

The controlling element in the electronic culture is television, not the computer. And this represents a threat of passivity that can block the effective functioning of an active citizenry that our democracy requires.

Both our educational and political institutions and traditions are imperiled over the long run.

The real question for the future, however, may be not whether book culture will continue to flourish, but whether the values that underlie print culture will be retained. Will the university-educated elite provide the broader society with a full variety of opinion and accessibility to intelligible,

relevant information? These needs have been historically provided by libraries and by general interest journals, both of which are, I think, in a measure of trouble in our society today. I consider it by no means certain that either of these "institutions of access" will prevail in America.

The Library of Congress has had twelve national forums around the country in connection with our recent extensive reorganization. This has taken me into meetings with about 10,000 people from the library and information community around the country. One picks up alarming statistics this way about library closings. I was told in California, for instance, that 40 percent of school libraries in the state have been closed in the last decade, when more than 90 percent of the schools in California have acquired VCRs. The few general purpose magazines that once sought to convey cultural news in language intelligible to the lay public no longer convey the kind of substance that the back sections of *Time* and *Newsweek* used to convey. Now, it is all "life-style" and "people." No one seems able to arrest the general trend in both education and publishing toward specialized market niches, rather than articulating common values or even a minimal, common, linguistic culture. "Narrowcasting" has replaced broadcasting in the radio and cable television markets.

There is a marked aversion in the worlds of both the media and higher education toward the only historically proven source of values that command broad allegiance in the population as a whole—namely, religion. The antireligious bias that has been allowed to embed itself in our major intellectual institutions is one of the most profound and neglected phenomena in the higher educational scene. There was an interesting poll a few years ago of leaders of the television industry, which showed that 93 percent of the people in television had a religious upbringing but that the same percentage (not necessarily the same people) professed no current active alle-

giance to any religion. There is clearly a profound gap between the values of those who control communications and the values of the American people as a whole. Compared to citizens in other advanced industrial democracies, Americans have sustained a higher percentage of professed religious belief.

So, there is a disconnectedness between, on the one hand, the intellectually sophisticated people who control our communications but are indifferent or hostile to our religious heritage and, on the other hand, the increasing number of ordinary people who are alienated from intellectual training but increasingly intense in their religious affirmations. This kind of polarization has serious implications. Shared values, in some sense, define societies and cultures that endure. They create a context in which coherent communication can occur. If shared values are not affirmed from within, they will, history tells us, eventually be imposed from without.

A conflict between an intellectual elite, fortified with computers and not concerned with moral issues, and ordinary people, fixated on moral issues but not concerned with the life of the mind, will not facilitate the survival of our democracy. Suppose we wound up with an electronic elite, driven by process and analysis, unified by networking, dehydrated of emotion as well as conviction, overcompensating itself in the medium of television that it creates for the masses with an emotional bumper car of violence, sex, and sheer manic activity that derails every train of serious thought. Television has already become a norm setter, replacing the educational system as well as the church. Its effect is not understood by many, not accountable to any.

This new anticulture of electronic norm setting has accelerated an alarming trend in America to replace moral values with aesthetic ones, particularly in politics. We now see politics as a "power game" and focus on the choreography of the game rather than on the substance of policy—let alone politics

as a moral art, as the founding fathers saw it. "Bread and circuses" is the electronic media recipe for the masses—a projection of fundamentally pagan and antidemocratic values.

Some people believe that all this can be made compatible with democracy and that those who are not able to deal with the new electronic media will nevertheless get data stamps along, presumably, with their food stamps. The thought does not cheer me greatly.

For, whatever its other virtues, the computer does tend, in the short run, to heighten inequality. Books tend to lower inequality, to create a certain equality of opportunity once one gets to the threshold of literacy. But the computer, because of the bulk, the expense, the problem that access poses, provides certain advantages, at least initially, to those with more education, access, and wealth.

The electronic culture of blips and bytes increasingly represents (if you listen to the commercials, which are technically the best thing on television) a soundscape of reversion to animal forms of communication. Man loses his reasonableness based on the articulate use of language. Man, when he drifts into incantation, reverts back to pack behavior. When he uses the gift of language, he moves forward to law and rationality rather than backward into irrational allegiance to arbitrary authority.

The electronic elite culture in the long run could favor the disciplined, Confucian-based social structures of East Asia, which are already proving superior in many areas of production. These societies could be more compatible in the long run with a leadership role in a purely electronic culture than would our kind of democracy, which grew so intimately out of the print culture of the Western world. Indeed, by itself, the mindless advance of an unexamined, uncontrolled electronic culture could point toward a more authoritarian America.

But global trends may make the American experience, messy and confusing as it is, more relevant to world developments than people realize. The literate book culture, which has been so central to past American experience, may be increasingly relevant to the future of a world which is in many ways increasingly imitative of American models. Consider the remarkable changes occurring in Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe. Perhaps there has been an underestimating of the extent to which the broader and more pluralistic experience of this country may be relevant to a pluralistic and multicultural world. Ours is a world in which evolution is replacing revolution as the preferred pattern for change and the source of legitimacy—evolution toward democracy, not revolution leading back to dictatorship.

Democracy grew out of the book culture. Books foster freedom with dignity. Books convince rather than coerce. Books are affordable, portable, varied, and create the possibility of one's own library as well as a broader community mix in a public library. In a democracy, an idea is to be pursued through many books, rather than simply through one or two that are idolized as the containers of all wisdom.

It is remarkable that the Congress of the United States should have been so intimately linked with the book culture from the beginning. The first meeting of the Continental Congress in 1774 occurred in Philadelphia in a library building and began by debating borrowing privileges. When they built a new capital in Washington, they created a Library of Congress built around Jefferson's own library and the principle of universality. Jefferson told them that there was no subject on which a legislator of this republic might not have need to be properly informed—justifying even then, for a small, agrarian America, the universal collection of knowledge.

Libraries and books were really the basis for liberal learning in Western tradition. Books gave a certain coherence: they were selective and integrative at the same time. Libraries provided a variety of coherences. Both an overall pluralism and intensely individual trains of thought were preserved in the classic library. This was particularly true as the great public library systems came into being in America in the late nineteenth century and helped transpose democracy from its relatively homogeneous East Coast base to an entire multiethnic and multicultural continent.

One of the major roles of those early public libraries was that of offering second-chance possibilities. Land-grant universities and colleges were simultaneously being set up around libraries, on the German university model. That coming together of land-grant universities with the public library system really meant that America was providing opportunities around the country for everyone to enter the productive mainstream. The public library systems in this country, as Carnegie and others envisioned, really served to provide an alternative learning environment at a time when, compared with now, it was not as easy for people to attend universities.

Incidentally, the Library of Congress is trying to shift some of those values of the older book culture into the new electronic culture through a project called "American Memory." This will replicate electronically for other libraries some of the best unique manuscript and audiovisual materials on American history from the Library of Congress collections.

The Library of Congress owns the largest collection of American documentary photographs, movies, sheet music, posters, political cartoons, maps, almanacs, and a variety of other extraordinary things, including the papers of a majority of presidents of the United States. A fair amount of it will be available in disk form for the use of the libraries throughout the country,

inexpensively and in such a way that it will represent both a permanent addition to libraries and a usable vehicle for teaching purposes. One will be able to interact with this material, providing the electronic equivalent of browsing and of making choices. It is for the active mind, not for couch potatoes.

But instantaneous and technological uniformity in electronic media does not really unify people. This is one of the great illusions of our technological determinists. One of the unique features of the print culture was that it gave vernacular cultures—local ethnic religious groups—a chance to define their own identity and to express themselves through language.

Interestingly, in this increasingly electronic age, there is a resurgence of two things that many of our social scientists repeatedly seem to think are vanishing.

First of all, there is a resurgence of ethnic and national identities. Every individual culture wants to express itself, to be itself. That expression occurs in the vernacular art and culture, particularly in the literature, the poetry, the language, the tales of ethnic groups. These expressions cannot be quantified for data banks; they speak not of what is numerical and uniform about all people but about things that are verbal and distinctive about individual people.

There is also a return of the sacred, something the electronic elite culture is constantly missing. In the last decade, there were four great unexpected changes in the world which had one common ingredient—an unexpected resurgence of religion in the modern world. There were the rise of Solidarity in Poland—a most profoundly prophetic phenomenon in the communist world—and the rise of Khomeini in Iran, harbinger of the Islamic fundamentalist movement. There have also been the rise of the new religious right in this country, totally unanticipated by the news media, and

a rise of a new kind of left in Latin America, based also on religion and liberation theology.

So whether it is left or right, one religious community or another, we repeatedly find a resurgence of the sacred along with a rediscovery of national and ethnic identities. Sometimes the two overlap. Everyone wants to be himself or herself—not simply an interchangeable part in a universe of electronic uniformities. For that reason as well, the American experience with its tradition of pluralism may be newly and uniquely relevant to the broader world.

The culture of the word suffers from overload and gives birth to a desire to simplify. The Library of Congress receives 31,000 items a day. The responsibility of our selection officers is very great because we can keep only 6,000 or 7,000 of these things. Ours is a particularly heavy responsibility because the Library of Congress is, in many cases, humanity's repository of last resort. If an item is thrown out, it is often denied to future generations. One generation can never be sure what the next will need. If the Library of Congress had not collected obscure ephemera from émigrés ranting on the fringes of Paris in the early seventies, America would not have had the best collection of Khomeini's material anywhere outside of Iran. Today's ephemera may be tomorrow's manifesto.

The eternal question that the humanists faced when they were first producing books is still valid even with the tremendous proliferation of information: How is information converted into knowledge? Democracy has to be knowledge-based. Librarians are human mediators of knowledge and information. They can, moreover, impart to scholar and statesman alike the human quality of wisdom, which tends to grow up among those that live with books. Wisdom is a quality in people who live around books, because

books are inherently humanizing in ways that the new technologies have not yet proven themselves to be.

Librarians are dream keepers as well as gatekeepers. Books are the guardians of memory, of the anguish, as well as the aspirations and achievements, of those who have gone before. The founder of Hasidic Judaism has said that "exile is caused by forgetfulness and the beginning of redemption is memory." If one seeks deep, individual human reactions, witnesses from the past are better than talking heads in the present. In developing ideas through dialogue with other living people, there are always games going on—politics, psychodrama, showmanship, who can talk the fastest. But alone with a book, the only limit is one's imagination. One is not bound by someone else's picture on a television screen.

Every book is both the product of human beings with whom one has something in common and the expression of some other unique person writing in unrepeatably circumstances. Unlike the teacher who explains, or the librarian who labels, the book itself gives no answers. It only gives rise to questions. It beckons us to both mastery and mystery. It challenges the reader both to master enough of the material to understand the created object and, at the same time, to sense something of the mystery of the writer who created it—and ultimately of creation itself.

Reading is a form of re-creation that literally involves recreation. If indeed the secret of redemption is memory, libraries are the playing tables on which one finds fragments of the secret: parts of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle.

Each piece acquires more beauty and suggests more order as it is fitted in with others. Over a lifetime, each person to some degree seeks to master the art of fitting those pieces together. There is an interaction with the books themselves which teases out thoughts from silence and slows time down to face mystery.

Libraries are a link in the human chain that connects what happened yesterday with what might take place tomorrow. Everyone needs living connections with past experience and achievement the way mountain climbers need a lifeline. The golden link is memory, which, as the rabbi stated, keeps us from exile and points to redemption.

Of course, the ultimate aim of humanistic exploration is attaining the mastery of self needed to enhance the mystery of creation. If those who preserve and transmit the past are to act as guides for others, they must learn to steer by the stars and not just by conventional maps. Truth is the North Star, the guide to all explorations. The pursuit of truth is the highest form of the pursuit of happiness, and it may be the surest way to protect us from the pursuit of each other in a time of growing physical and economic limits, where the horizons of freedom can still remain infinite.

Libraries are the base camps for the pursuit of truth and for new discovery in the information age.

In a time of rapidly changing technologies, this adventure of learning must be continuous to prepare us for perhaps two or three generations of change in every person's lifetime. Libraries are in a uniquely favorable position to help modify the current pattern of all learning and no work during school and college, followed by all work and no learning during career development, and finally a long retirement during which there tends to be neither work nor learning.

The adventures of the mind that lie ahead will be not all that different from the adventures of discovery launched by Columbus. Columbus did not find exactly what he was looking for; he was an Italian sailing for Spain in search of Asia. But because he was willing to take some risks, he found something even more important. The United States of America, which slowly emerged to the north of where he landed, was like ancient Israel,

founded on a covenant to fulfill justice in time rather than on a compulsion to extend power in space. It was the Pilgrims' alternative to older, more absolute empires. By limiting rather than expanding central power, by proclaiming rights before rules, and by harnessing power to a complex constitution rather than a simple ideology, the founders of this country produced an innovation so stunning that no one has yet fully understood it or fully developed all of its potential.

So we must go on discovering America. Being an American is not a patent of privilege but an invitation to continued adventure. It involves spiritual aspiration as well as material achievement—it is the search for Faulkner's bear, Melville's whale, and Citizen Kane's Rosebud. Pluralism is becoming the code word for cultural self-segregation. It is the dream that a peaceful diversity at home may help secure a peaceful pluralism for all the earth.

Whether or not librarians are always able to help people understand other people, other parts of the world, other parts of the past, they will ennoble their lives and their profession by the effort.

When the Jesuit order left China in the early eighteenth century after the most scholarly and most nearly politically successful effort in history to build a bridge between that most ancient of Eastern cultures and the Christian West, it left behind as its last legacy to that effort a haunting epitaph:

<i>Abi viator</i>	Go away now voyager
<i>congratulari mortuis</i>	congratulate the dead
<i>condole viues</i>	console the living
<i>ora pro omnibus</i>	pray for everyone
<i>mirari e</i>	wonder and
<i>tace.</i>	be silent.

adventurers than spectators, easier for dream keepers than image makers.

So, may the adventure of learning and discovery which began for all of you here in library school continue through your lives and your institutions.

May knowledge slowly ripen into wisdom, secure in the knowledge that a better life will come in America, not just from more data and a modem but from a better understanding of one another that comes from books. May your appreciation grow of the values of “the book,” which favor active minds over spectator passivity, putting things together rather than just taking them apart. Whatever the confusion of our own minds and the profusion of our information, things can still come together in a book—just as the left and right halves of the brain come together in one human mind, and the hemispheres—East and West, North and South—in a single planet. ■

Remarks

After his main presentation, Mr.

Billington responded to topics brought forth by members of the audience. An edited version of his remarks appears here.

What are the prospects for democracy in Third World cultures that seem to have skipped the book culture and moved directly to the electronic age?

My general impression is that democracy eventually does best where a book culture does have roots, for example, in Eastern Europe. Democracy does not fare so well where illiteracy is widespread. It seems unlikely that a people will jump directly into the electronic age without literacy—you can't really skip that stage. We have also seen that technical literacy with political control, as in Cuba or the Stalinist Soviet Union, does not promote democracy.

Could you comment on the erosion of democracy attributed to the “sound bites” on television, and what can be done to address this?

There is no quick fix, but I believe that something can be done. Because political discourse and discussion are important to democracy, we must seek new television formats that accommodate these needs. Force the debates to be three hours long, and make the candidates talk! We can better judge the candidates’ characters if we see them under this kind of stress. We should also enforce a sequential pattern to how such debates unfold.

I suggest that the oral tradition of speeches and so forth is historically closer to egalitarian forms of democracy.

Yes, the oral element is important to democracy. But I am mindful that the oral element is a direct outgrowth of book culture, that great speakers in the American tradition are a direct product of book culture, and that some of this oral tradition has survived in radio culture.

Is there an element of democratic elitism in your thesis? Must we choose between M.I.T. hackers and Harvard bookies?

Despite the growing availability of computers, books remain more accessible, and I remain on the side of books. But I am excited by the extent to which a high-tech world could replicate many of the values of the book world. I should mention that the Library of Congress is not snobbish or hostile toward applications of technology. The “American Memory”

project I mentioned earlier, the browsing capabilities of hypertext technology—these are examples of how the two worlds can be made to benefit each other. Intelligent scientists realize now the importance of maintaining relations not only with laboratories, but also with libraries.

Most of us are willing to give up our own beliefs to win the admiration of others. Even some of our greatest leaders—Jefferson, Lincoln, Reagan—have submerged their private views in order to get elected. What is your opinion about this tension?

Our public culture currently values the good things of life and the beautiful people—instead of valuing beauty in things and goodness in people. This reversal reflects the fact that our heritage includes the Greco-classical ideal of beauty as well as the Judeo-Christian ideal of good. There is nothing wrong with aesthetic values. But I suggest that societies are in danger when we judge public and political matters on aesthetic rather than moral criteria. This is not to say that our leaders should be moralistic or self-righteous. The shared values of a society are what define it, and if you are interested in beautiful people you will end up with showmen rather than people who view matters of public policy as moral choices, which is ultimately what they are.

Could you comment on the idea of entering the Library of Congress collection into computers so that it can be stored in an area the size of one room? Is this possible, and if so should local libraries include a large portion of the Library of Congress collection?

It would be a mistake to discard the artifactual collection of books, at the Library of Congress or elsewhere. We need a new conceptualization of libraries that distinguishes between static and dynamically stored information. This is important in part because some kinds of stored data are being revised constantly. The idea of storing whole libraries electronically is fine, but this is terribly expensive, and we must determine priorities. There are also technical problems with scanning and digitizing the information in existing texts.

You are making a case against commercial television as an amusement system. I suggest that there are uses of television, such as public television, that produce quality products.

Yes, but there is not enough high-quality material. I have my doubts about television as a method of extensive public instruction, just as I do about the large-lecture system. The educational impact of those television series that have been so highly praised I think has been wildly overestimated. While we must find creative ways to use the television medium, its inherent passiveness tends to magnify rather than enrich the worst features of large-scale, mass absorption of education. And it doesn't really deliver as much as it promises. Public television is really an extension of upscale entertainment—while it can be instructive, it mostly is not. If we are really con-

cerned about the productive dynamics and creative potential of society, then we have to be more worried than reassured by what television is producing.

Book culture historically has been available only to a very small portion of society. The electronic media, especially in this country, have played an important role in making democracy more populist. I cite such issues as Watergate and the Iran-contra affair that wouldn't have reached mass audiences without the electronic media. I suggest that the electronic media provide a very important service, and that you shouldn't downplay their role in modern democracy.

We must distinguish between things I would call important and corrective. Corrective actions undertaken by the electronic media, such as publicizing violations of laws or proprieties that affect public culture and society, really have been based on investigative print journalism. Typically the electronic media have focused more on issues with high emotional content and have thrown little light on legal or policy implications. The print media have produced more solidly corrective and wholesome parts of the critical part of the democratic culture; television has tended to exaggerate the private peccadilloes, areas that formerly were left in private and, in my view, probably for the most part were better left in private.

We use electronic means to provide access to library collections and believe we are enhancing access to materials. Could you describe your thoughts on that, and also describe the role of the Library of Congress in these types of services?

Certainly service is part of the equation, and the Library of Congress is doing quite a lot in this area. For instance, the Library of Congress will offer online to all fifty state libraries later this year its full automated bibliographic records. We are also trying to get more of our collections disseminated as well. This is very expensive and difficult, but I believe it is important for democracy that we make this effort. In the past, the Library of Congress has helped get cataloging records shared across the nation. Other efforts include programs to place books in prisons and Indian reservations, overseas, and elsewhere. We want to do more, and this is a major objective of mine.

People working in libraries think that today one of the most intense forces working against democracy is censorship, and not just in the overt sense of banned books and so forth but censorship due to the high price of materials that keep them from people who might need the information. What is the Library of Congress doing to fight censorship, and what should it be doing?

The Library of Congress resists, as any library does, any attempt to delimit or artificially circumscribe either what is in the library or who has access to it. Certainly among the great national libraries of the world we are the most open, accessible, and inexpensive, and we will do everything we can to maintain that. But I will tell you that the public subsidy for the Library of

Congress and for libraries in general is not as strong as it is for other national institutions. Fewer employees and an essentially flat budget are problems we share with all libraries. But we have an enormous resource in the dedication and quality of our staff, and among our aims is to improve access around the country to the people who know so much about our collections, administer them, and can perform so many important functions for the educational and creative needs of the country.

Regarding the threat of censorship related to expense, we must all resist in every way we can. If the Library of Congress is ever forced to charge marginal fees, they will not be for the traditional public services we render but for special tasks, and their purpose will be not to replace the general public subsidy but to render still more open, free, and diversified services. Without that, we are not faithful to the kind of society we are talking about.

I'd like to make a final point that the book culture does not automatically promote democracy. President Jefferson noted that we must renew democracy every twenty years: it must be re-earned, refought. These battles of censorship and limitations of the range of human possibilities have to be fought in a different way by each generation, either against frontal censorship or against limitation in terms of access. I don't know how much of all this we can do, but we will continue to try. My predecessor Archibald MacLeish had a wonderful definition of libraries: he called them the sentinels of democracy. We have a lot of watch posts, and I wish you well and hope we can be supportive of the good things you are all trying to do. ■

The inaugural Mortenson

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The C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson Professorship

Graduate School of Library and Information Science

College of Agriculture

College of Commerce and Business Administration

College of Communications

College of Engineering

College of Fine and Applied Arts

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Center for African Studies

Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies

Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies

Champaign Public Library and Information Center

International Programs and Studies

Parkland College Library

Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security

Program in South and West Asian Studies

Russian and East European Center

University Library

Urbana Free Library

George A. Miller Committee