

SEVENTH ANNUAL DISTINGUISHED LECTURE



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FROM BOOK CULTURE

TO INFOMANIA:

THE INTERNATIONAL

TRANSFORMATION

TALAT S. HALMAN

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UNIVERSITY

OF ILLINOIS

AT URBANA-

CHAMPAIGN

INTRODUCTION

It gives me great pleasure to present to you the seventh annual C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson Distinguished Lecture, delivered on October 17, 1996, by Talat S. Halman, professor in the Department of Middle East Studies at New York University.

In 1971 Talat Halman became the minister of culture in his native Turkey, the first person ever to hold this cabinet post. From 1980 to 1982 he served as ambassador for cultural affairs. He was also Turkey's deputy permanent representative at the United Nations. From 1991 to 1995 he was a member of the Executive Board of UNESCO, and for two years chaired its planning commission. He is the author of numerous books and articles in English and Turkish. Honors and awards include Columbia University's Thornton Wilder Prize and other literary prizes; a Rockefeller Fellowship in the Humanities; the UNESCO Medal; and the Knight Grand Cross, G.B.E., The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, conferred upon him by Queen Elizabeth II.

In "From Book Culture to Infomania: The International Transformation," Professor Halman discusses books and libraries in the ancient and modern worlds, and speculates on the changes technology will bring to the way we write, read, and use libraries in the future.

— Marianna Tax Choldin
Director, Mortenson Center for International Library Programs,
and Mortenson Distinguished Professor

FROM BOOK CULTURE TO INFOMANIA:
THE INTERNATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

“Burn, books, burn!”

Legend has it that when the city of Alexandria was captured in 646 A.D., the caliph ordered the burning of the Great Library and all the thousands of books in it. As the flames went up, he was holding one book—his Holy Book—in his hand, and shouting with pride and joy, “Burn, books, burn!”

Dramatic? Tragic? Yes, but absolutely false. Nothing like that happened in 646.

The truth is the Ptolemaic Library in Alexandria had been inadvertently burned in 48 B.C. by Julius Caesar, and the so-called “daughter library” was destroyed by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius in 389 A.D. There was no library in Alexandria in 646 when the caliph’s forces entered the city. Caliph Umar never ordered the burning, never looked at flames, and never shouted, “All truth is in one book; no others are necessary!”

Today, this historical lie, this imaginative slander, gives us a compelling new symbolism for the future of libraries. Now, 1350 years later, on the eve of the Third Millennium, we are in the process of destroying libraries, exterminating books, for another creative and scientific venture—and we are figuratively shouting, “All truth is in the Holy Computer! No books are necessary anymore!”



Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege for me to be your speaker this evening. I take pride in this as a book lover, as a library worshiper. What a great pleasure to come back to the University of Illinois where I had given two lectures about fifteen years ago.

This lecture is in the spirit of the high aspirations of the C. Walter and Gerda B. Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, which serves the eloquent purpose of “fostering international understanding, tolerance, and intellectual freedom.”

My lecture has, I think, resulted from the keynote speech I gave at the opening session of IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) in Istanbul in August 1995. IFLA was a great experience for all of us who attended the Congress, especially for my wife and myself. It was like being in Paradise, because it upheld the unshakable faith we all have that libraries do have a future and that books will live on.

I am from Turkey, a country proud of a history which possessed for different periods—some short, some very long—many places where the great ancient libraries stood: Babylonia, Alexandria, ancient Egypt, Jerusalem, Nineveh, Greece, Byzantium. Ottoman Turkish culture generated its own passion for books and created some wonderful libraries of its own. For centuries now, Turks have been in possession of Pergamum and Ephesus and so many other ancient sites where libraries stood in grandeur.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, great library people, eminent book lovers, I come from a culture nurtured by its great heritage of reading, but also, unfortunately, there have been periods in Turkish history when people were told: “Don’t read books. Reading might turn your brain into liquid.” This statement is still used, sometimes seriously, sometimes as a joke among students. When a student is an avid book-reader, some friends poke fun at him by saying, “Your brain will turn into water.” But Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey in the year 1923, said once: “Unless a nation develops an encompassing interest in reading, ignorance will spread, and the catastrophes born of ignorance will not subside.”

Among the Turks, as in many other nations, books have been revered as well as feared. Today, some Muslim fundamentalists in Turkey are telling their children and their Koran students, “If you have the Holy Book, you need no other book.” That was the mentality that delayed the introduction of the printing press for the publication of books in Turkish for as many as 280 years during the course of Ottoman history. Although the Ottomans allowed the non-Muslim minorities to publish books in their own languages—the Jews, for instance, started in the year 1493—the printing of Turkish books had to wait until 1726.

Today’s fundamentalists are making it difficult for some authors to write. Only three weeks ago, my own books were banned from being sent to the Frankfurt Book Fair. The ban came from the present Minister of Culture himself, who also banned three most prominent authors—Yashar Kemal, Aziz Nesin, and Orhan Pamuk. I feel very proud to have been included with them as the fourth. But it is very sad that the ministry I created twenty-five years ago now, as we are approaching the end of the twentieth century, bans my books along with the books of three great authors from being sent to the Frankfurt Book Fair.

All this is happening because of the tyranny that so-called fundamentalism is trying to spread in Turkey. But, the Prophet Muhammad declared, “To be busy, even for a moment with knowledge, with a book, with writings, is more beneficial than sixty years of worship,” which is one of the most eloquent and quintessential statements ever made about the value of books and of reading.



Now, however, we are witnesses to a different development in the world: Technology is beginning to threaten the existence of books as we know them—books we touch and love as great objects. Although some of you may have embraced this new technology wholeheartedly, most of you probably retain in your hearts a staunch faith in the proposition that the book will live on. I share your faith and optimism. I am too steeped in the glorious history of books and libraries to leave them in the graves of Alvin Toffler’s waves. I have a feeling that you have not altogether surrendered to compuphilia, that books are still alive for infomaniacs, and that they are still a treasure and a splendid pleasure.

The age of cyberspace is undoubtedly transforming the library into what I call a “cyberary.” In the twenty-first century A.D., cybernetics and internet and comparable inventions will give the world a revolutionary on-line which may be called “libernetics.” If Muhammad does not go to the library, the cyberary will come to Muhammad.

We now have sighing libraries, crying libraries, dying libraries. But please don’t worry. There can be no culture without books in some form or other—regardless of what the transformation of books will be. Book

culture is the essence and the dynamic core of all culture. That culture will prevail in the future, too, even though books and libraries will probably undergo massive change and take a drastic new shape.

Librarians used to be ultra-conservatives. Some of them are thought of as being arch-conservatives. Now they are turning into fervent revolutionaries. All they have to do is drop their books. After all, they have already discarded their card catalogues cataclysmically but not catastrophically. (This morning I was very happy to see in the University of Illinois Library that huge card catalogues are still kept intact—and actually used for books published prior to 1976.)

There is, however, cause for sadness. A sense of loss and nostalgia persists. In the future, there may be no place for books as we know them. Eventually they may become ancient artifacts, archaeological objects, museum pieces, *biblio* and *bibelot*. As I mentioned in my IFLA speech in Istanbul, “the three-dimensional book will be reduced to a single dimension or a flat image on a very unimaginative screen. We shall no longer be able ‘to turn a new leaf.’ Pages will have no nexus to a volume—and, alas, no more the sensuous joy of holding a book, touching it, caressing it, kissing it! The book as an aesthetic object, a thing of tactile beauty, as a loving and lovable creation, stands on the precipice of extinction. We shall no longer curl up in bed with a book, which was for many centuries the most innocent, the noblest of erotic experiences. Do we now, in the near future, take the entire national library to bed? How obscene!”



Centuries ago, the Ottoman Turks had a tradition (probably taken over from India) of writing on the frontispiece of a book a solemn prayer addressed to “Kebikee” (Lord of the Bugs). That prayer appealed to the Bug: “Ya, Kebikee! Oh, Kebikee!” in the hope that, out of their affection and respect for their Lord, the bugs might spare the books.

Is it possible for today’s computerites to repel their bugs by citing long prayers? Given the assaults against books launched by cyberspace, I can envision massive armies of giant bugs unleashing their fury at libraries.

If, however, books cease to exist, there will be cause for rejoicing in some ways. The trees, ah, those magnificent trees, will be saved and

spared! All over the face of the earth, forests will flourish. Never mind that each of us might become Forrest Gump, who is wise without having had anything to read. Also, moving will become much easier, don’t you think? New disks will help reduce slipped disks.

In a sense, learning or acquiring knowledge may come to appear unnecessary from now on, even senseless. Why strain our brains? All we need to do is possess the simple, manual, mechanical skill of pressing buttons and use the equipment that will give us all the information we need. Our minds do not have to be encumbered with facts and figures, with ideas or foreign languages. Why should an intellect serve as a reservoir when it has instant and constant access to a limitless datavoir? Why should we speak any languages other than computerese? Sophisticated translation machines will instantaneously and simultaneously translate any conversation or speech, any text or document into any language of our choice. The advantages of this type of super-efficiency are glorious and luxurious, especially for exact sciences. By lifting a finger, anyone will have access to the entire corpus of human knowledge as embodied by all archives, databanks, and libraries.

The last instance of a single person who had been able to read all scientific books in French was nearly a quarter of a millennium ago. Since then it has become increasingly difficult to read all the books even in a narrow field of specialization. In the next century, everything will be available to any of us—without the need to read or study. It is a privilege we shall begin to share with God. We are on our way to turning into little deities of omniscience. Thanks to the accessibility of total knowledge, we shall be liberated from knowledge itself to pursue in the enormous expanses of our leisure noncerebral pleasure.



What will become of poetry in the age of cyberspace? Will it be just a few words on a screen? Are we going to hear poetry? Or is it going to be all concrete poetry—only visual poetry rather than oral poetry, no longer based on euphony, no more the music of the language?

What will become of painting if cyberspace improves the facility and speed with which it takes creativity upon itself? Will paintings become

as good in reproduced form on the screen as they are in the original? Or perhaps even better? We might well be witnessing in the near future the end of art as we have known it for many centuries—because the computer is emerging as the ultimate artist.

What will happen to mythology? Is it going to be all science fiction? There might come a point where all universities, all museums and public performances of creative arts, and all libraries will be accessible on the PC—and that we will not have to go into a library or attend a university. Any library is likely to turn into an all-embracing library at our beck and call. Any university will offer itself to us like an escort service.

The all-seeing user will eventually be capable of looking at anything, anywhere in the world. We won't have to travel or even leave the confines of our rooms, because at any given moment we will push a button to watch the aborigines in Australia or visit an Eskimo igloo.

This might turn into the age of Roentgen—remember Roentgen who discovered x-ray, and won the first Nobel prize in physics in 1901? The world might now appear to us in its full visibility, with all its excitements and in all its trivialities, through our PC. Like God who is omniscient, we shall be able to see everything of our choice—unless some sophisticated equipment is developed for the privacy of those who want to be shielded from universal vision. But, for confirmed exhibitionists, it is going to be delightful to be watched all the time from all corners of the world.

There is that sort of omnivorous appetite in this new technology. We shall not become omnipotent, but, in addition to omniscience, we shall achieve a power close to omnipresence.

Cyberscience is at the moment still in its infancy. But when it develops far beyond our dreams and expectations in the next century or in the twenty-second century, we are going to witness a miraculous expansion of its capabilities. Everything will become megacopic—we are going to be panoptic. Each one of us will be transformed into a watchtower, keeping an eye on the rest of the world, scanning the entire universe. All life will become manifest destiny, transparent, a universal x-ray. Chances are we will evolve into universal persons, no more confined to our human bodies or limited to our small brains and our minor spiritual lives. We might be able to partake of everything that constitutes the universe. Sharing divine attributes, we shall probably become pagan gods in ourselves and in our societies—ubiquitous spectators and creators.

“No place affords,” Samuel Johnson observed, “a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.” When public libraries are gone, I venture to say we are going to be liberated. Are you looking forward to that prospect? We are going to be liberated—to be anything, to see everything, to transform ourselves into supernatural beings. But that might also incarcerate us, because we are going to be enslaved by the PC which will hold our intellects in its grip.



Is there life beyond cyberspace when the entire world is in it for us to see and to use? Is this going to create a new isolation for the human being? Is it possible that, because each individual will become self-sufficient, professionally and intellectually, urban concentrations may disappear—that we will no longer have crammed cities as we know them? We may turn into self-contained units of human existence, living in altogether separate small or large dwellings, not in the context of urban structures, but living out there in pastoral isolation, enjoying the beauties of nature.

Conceivably, travel will become superfluous when the best of culture and nature is visible to us on a screen large or small. Is this going to cause terrible alienation? Are we still going to speak our native languages? Or will “cyberish” or “internetese” be adequate? Or, are we going to rely on instant translation in case we have no proficiency in the new universal language—or in case we have no command of English, which seems to be vying to become the lingua franca?

Will this passive viewing without participation, simply sitting there, receiving messages and images and ideas and facts and figures satisfy our moral and ethical life? After all, there will be no involvement. The world will be going on, structured through this marvelous new invention. Creativity might become a sphere of activity that relates to technology and nothing else. At best, there will be some extraordinary minds that will transcend the limits of this technology regardless of how wide those limits might be. But it is also within the realm of possibility that the “creative” arts presented to us through this miraculous means will be unsurpassable.

These are all exciting prospects. Some of them have perplexing and perturbing aspects, too. The world has entered the cybernetic age. Hundreds

of millions of neophytes are steeped in its sybaritic pleasures. Many of them are delirious with all the acquisitive and creative possibilities of cyberspace- and many of them are spaced out. Like sybaritic joy, cyberitic life can be both delightful and frightful, innocent and sinful, constructive and destructive. The newest international mania is Manichaeism. We are confronted by a choice between the book and the ogre. The antipodes are becoming entrenched right now. And we, still as human beings, have the power to create out of cyberspace Paradise or Hell. That is the great ethical choice before us.



The library is, of course, the sum total of its books, therefore finite. But cyberspace is infinite, like space itself. The miraculous ship in it promises an unstoppable trip. The retrieval empire is not an evil empire in itself. It holds, at least in the short run, many exciting prospects and visions for the future.

Of those, I would like to cite seven visions which I have:

VISION 1: Cyberspace will equalize and democratize learning throughout the world.

VISION 2: Through enhanced communication, the developing world will at long last overcome mass illiteracy, combat disease, reduce child mortality, and spur economic and social development.

VISION 3: Science and technology and the creative arts will become, not a weapon of the wealthy, but the commonwealth of all humanity.

VISION 4: Nations will engender a stronger sense of a life of human dignity, fulfillment, and justice in a society freed through this new technology from political oppression and economic exploitation.

VISION 5: Rather than fall under the suzerainty of cyberspace homogeneity, national, indigenous, and local cultures and languages will enjoy regeneration.

VISION 6: Everywhere, cyberspace will promote prospects for the peoples' active participation in the governmental process.

VISION 7: International tolerance and the ideals of peace and progress will be fostered by cyberspace.

Are these seven visions, taken singly or together, "Utopian"? Are they fantasy? "Utopia" is a word derived from "ou topos" which means "no place." There is, however, a kindred word, "eu topos" which signifies "place where all is well."

We can, in my opinion, avoid the terrible consequences of the use or abuse of the prospects of cyberspace. Is this an escapist dream, a sort of idealism? Utopia is possible. The opposite of Utopia, if you spell it backwards, is "aipotu." We might be able to avoid "aipotu."

The great American poet Carl Sandburg said: "Nothing happens unless first a dream."

Right now, we are too close, in a sense, to the screens of our computers. We are suffering from myopia, but, I think, we can move from myopia to Utopia. The great French novelist Anatole France once wrote: "Without the Utopians of other times, we will still live in caves, miserable and naked. It was Utopians who traced the lines of the first city. Out of generous streams come beneficial realities. Utopia is the principle of all progress and the endeavor into a better future."

I am basically an optimist—but perhaps a "pessoptimist." A great friend of mine, who died in 1995, the Palestinian novelist, Emile Habibi, coined the term "pessoptimist." When things become so bad and pessimism is so grim, at that juncture, you can only be an optimist.



There is, I am confident, the possibility of a new life, a great life for the "revolutionary" book as well as for the "computerati." Nowadays we tend to think of the book as the nostalgic antithesis of reading on a screen. In the future, it will be possible to simulate any book, be it from an ancient Egyptian papyrus roll or the latest release. Flexibility is in our hands: If we want to, we will press a button and, using a special, sophisticated

print-out machine, we will produce (reproduce) any book, historic or brand new, be it in black and white or in color, with all its pictures, maps, graphics, and illustrations. That same machine will collate the pages and bind them for us. Perhaps it will even be a beautiful, exquisite binding if we so desire. Thus we shall acquire our information in the form of a personal, private book, which is a wonderful prospect. We shall also be able to create new books as syntheses, our own unique scrapbooks from all sorts of sources. We shall put together, in an instant, anthologies of the poems we love best—without having to purchase an anthology that constricts us and contains many poems we do not care for. Thanks to the new technology, we shall possess the power to create our own customized books, our own works, which will be palpable like the books we cherish nowadays.

Eventually the PCs will become so tiny that we shall be able to carry them in our pockets—and they will have a screen that will come out and open up to full view. This way, we shall be able to do our reading on the screen even if we are on a bus or train, and the book we read may physically be in a library in Moscow or somewhere in Indonesia or Argentina. We shall press a button and the book will unfold before us regardless of where in the world we are.

I even envision the prospect that someday books will become little pills for us to swallow without having to read. Books as a set of printed or written sheets of paper bound together may not survive. But books as an embodiment of a creative, scientific, or scholarly act will live on. Books will not die—and I fervently hope that our human intelligence and imagination will “book us passage” into Paradise in the future.



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