

The End of History? Reflections on a Decade

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I am honored to have been asked to speak at this special anniversary meeting. It was only three years ago that I took part in my last ARL meeting, in Kansas City and Lawrence, and I welcome the chance once again to be among many good friends and colleagues.

I also recall listening, with great appreciation, at our 60th anniversary meeting to David Stam's witty and revealing *tour d'horizon*, aptly entitled *Plus ça change....* David's work is a very important contribution to understanding the character of this Association.

This talk is meant to be different from David's effort. It is not a history. As an aid to historians of the future, the ARL staff has done a very good job of recording for this meeting information about the many milestones of the last decade. However, I chose consciously not to try to take an historical perspective, because that is of course not possible. We are too close to the last decade. Many of the issues—and many of the people—are still with us.

Indeed, this talk is very much a reflection. It is not based on research, but on my recollections of participating in the Association, some reading of secondary sources, and some conversations with ARL staff and others who have represented member institutions. Unlike David, I did not delve into ARL's records, much as the chance to read other people's letters and memos would have been enticing.

I chose as my title that of the book by Francis Fukuyama, published at the beginning of the '90s, but I chose to add the question mark specifically to call attention to the attacks made by some during that decade about the value of studying the past, much less valuing it. Those of you who know me well will understand my rejection of that attitude.

We may recall now with bemusement some of the conventional wisdom of the '90s. A professor at Harvard's venerable business school is said to have trumpeted that, "You must ruthlessly trash outmoded obstructions to creativity: standard operating procedures, protocols, norms of behavior." The much-quoted Tom Peters thundered that, "Destruction is cool." Shades of the defenestration of manuscript books at the beginning of the 16th century.

At the outset of the '90s there was much promise of change in the world of information and libraries, even if we did not always recognize where it might take us. The people who were leading the revolution were sometimes, as David Brooks describes them, "endearing ignoramuses," but they also often worked harder and invested daringly, and so helped move us toward some of the gains we may now take for granted. The boom psychology of the '90s is still playing itself out, of course, but much that is associated with that boom reflects real accomplishment.

In looking at ARL during that halcyon era, I am happy to observe that we did not fall prey to the techno-geeks or wild-eyed enthusiasts. However, neither did we shutter the windows. We worked hard to understand change and—as David’s analysis of our traditions makes plain—also to make change, always with a mind to sustaining our shared mission and promoting common values as stewards of the great majority of North America’s research libraries.

There were so many ARL initiatives, so many ventures, so many new partnerships that it is almost dizzying to recall them. Still, David was—and still would be—right to observe that there was much continuity of purpose, if not always of method; there was sustained strategy, if not always the same tactics.

Teasing out which of those trends might warrant more reflection was a challenge. In the end, I chose on the basis of what I think might capture the interests of the next generation. I identified those issues that engaged ARL that could—I think, should—continue to shape a large part of the future agenda for the Association.

Some truth in packaging here to help explain my choices. I am not only a lapsed library director, but also a sometime student of library history. My principal area of interest is studying how leaders in our profession have effected change. My subject of primary interest is the life and career of Verner W. Clapp, a name sadly faded—until Nicholson Baker painted him as a villain in *Double Fold*.

So, I am driven in my look at the ‘90s to be alert to the stream of developments in Western librarianship from the 1930s through the 1960s—when Clapp flourished. I will try not to lapse into anecdotes about him, or Vannever Bush, Fremont Rider or William Dix, or John Cronin. Still, the ‘90s proved to be in so many ways the flowering of much of what these men—yep, all men—had dreamed about and worked for in the post-World War II era.

I have identified four trends that also have been driven by changes all around us—in the nature of the population of North America and beyond, changes in methods of scholarly inquiry, new organizational theories, and, not least, in the emergence of digital technology and much improved telecommunications.

The four trends that I regard as most important coming out of the ARL experience in the ‘90s are:

- Attention to Measurement/Assessment (moving beyond a rearview-mirror approach)
- CHANGES IN SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION (writ *very large*)
- Changes in the theories and practices of organizing and preserving knowledge objects (who knew “knowledge objects” or “metadata” 10 years ago?)
- Recognition of the need to prepare for a transformed workforce, including directors, in the research library community

In each of these areas, ARL made enormous strides in the '90s in mobilizing facts and opinions, seeking partners, and finding champions among member library directors and staff, and so was often in a position to promote wanted change.

Here is a core message for those of you new to the ARL: Never believe that one person—or a small and determined band of people—cannot make something happen. Consider the following examples. (I will miss some recently gone from the ARL ranks, but many of such people are still active.)

- Would SPARC have arisen if not for the passionate advocacy of Ken Frazier and the hard work of Mary Case and others?
- Where would advocacy for fair use and a reasoned balance in considerations of intellectual property be without Jim Neal and Prue Adler?
- Where would “new measures” be without Carla Stoffle and Martha Kyrillidou?
- Where would our very effective partnerships with the AAU, NASULGC, EDUCAUSE, CLIR, NSF, IFLA, and so many others be without a long line of ARL presidents, board members, and most especially Duane Webster?

In every one of the four areas I have cited we face new challenges. Who now will be the champions? Who will expand ARL's reach to cement relationships with old and new partners? Who will steward the time and energy of the Association—and its money—to target these always scarce commodities away from some still worthy purposes to meet new challenges?

I see four major—and I hope transitory—challenges in all of these areas:

- Scarce money—tight budgets at home, foundations still giving but from constricted funding bases, government showing some promise, but in neither Canada nor the U.S. do the levels of funding for libraries approach those of an earlier halcyon era, a generation ago.
- A persistent belief by many leaders in higher education and government in the efficacy of the market, with a concomitant tendency to accept the commodification of information. Is there hope yet? Perhaps our frustration is like that felt by the environmental community of a generation ago, before *Silent Spring* (a book, yet!) brought the society around.
- An aging population of librarians, notably in the ARL community, presaging at once the loss of much experience (and some wisdom?) and, at

the same time perhaps, the hanging on of too many of the Baby Boomer cohort—many because of suddenly flimsier retirement nests. Might some of us stay beyond our time, frustrating the younger, and sometimes more venturesome and energetic 20-, 30-, and 40-somethings? Will they be able to wait?

- An erosion of the near reverence for libraries that many in earlier generations of scholars and decision makers in higher education and sometimes government had. We may have been over successful during the last half-century in “professionalizing” the work of the library, and so unwittingly have pushed to the sidelines some of our strongest allies and advocates. Here, I see the transformation of scholarly communication, which is their issue and ours, reviving the chances for a true partnership that the last 50 years may too often have eroded.

We need to sustain our shared work, recalling the lessons of our storied and sometimes colorful past.

It is for that reason that I can ask and answer so confidently the question: Were the ‘90s the end of history? Of course not. Only another *fin de siècle* (not only David Stam can recall apt French terms) in which each of the institutions represented here came together to sustain our responsibility to society.

Let me close not with another French phrase, but with an English one. It comes from my home library, the Boston Public Library, where I began work as a high school student—inking, by hand, labels and shellacking them to the spines of thousands of books—almost 40 years ago. As those of you with ties to Boston may recall, the north facade of the McKim building of the BPL—where one emerges from the subway—bears a very New England admonition:

The Commonwealth Requires the Education of the People As the
Safeguard of Order and Liberty

Not a bad sentiment from the ‘90s, the 1890s of course. This is a statement of purpose worthy of any great research library—and of the Association that brings such libraries on this continent together in shared purpose.

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