

Association of Research Libraries

<http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/br/br226/br226endofhistory.shtml>

The End of History? Reflections on a Decade

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I am honored 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."¹ 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.² 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.

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. 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 and that could, I think should, continue to shape a large part of the future agenda for the Association. 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 ARL: Never doubt that one person or a small and determined band of people can make something happen. Consider the following examples.

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 the new measures initiative be without Carla Stoffle and Martha Kyrillidou?

Where would our very effective partnerships with the AAU, NASULGC, EDUCAUSE, CLIR, NSF, IFLA,³ 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 in order 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, just 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, which 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 [BPL], where I began work as a high school student. As those of you with ties to Boston may recall, the north facade of the McKim building of the BPL, visible 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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Notes

1. See David H. Stam, "'Plus ca change...' Sixty Years of the Association of Research Libraries," http://www.arl.org/arl/plus_ca.html.
2. See Lee Anne George and Julia Blixrud, *Celebrating Seventy Years of the Association of Research Libraries, 1932-2002* (Washington, D.C.: 2002).
3. The acronyms stand for Association of American Universities, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, Council on

Library and Information Resources, National Science Foundation, and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, respectively.

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