Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools

House Standing Committee on Education and Training
House of Representatives
Parliament of Australia

My submission has one major thrust: there are those who declare that books, or some subset of books, along school libraries and teacher-librarians can be placed with "the internet". These people do not understand what books are, or what the internet is. I believe that they have little sense of what education should be, and what education must be, if we are to do our duty by future generations.

I am a retired teacher, a one-time Principal Education Officer with a Master of Education degree in the areas of educational measurement and curriculum. I later worked as an educator and/or managed educational programs in two major museums before returning to classroom teaching. I have taught in state and private secondary systems, and taught a first-year degree-course biology in a CAE. I have worked in both selective and comprehensive high schools and taught "gifted and talented", "slow learner" and disabled students.

When asked what I taught, my preferred and most honest answer has always been "Children!". I know that education, teaching, training, wisdom, knowledge, learning, understanding and erudition are not the same thing. I fear that we all too often forget the differences.

I was originally a trained science teacher, but I worked for some years as a teacher of IT and computing. In my nominal retirement, I am a professional science and technology writer. I also write quite a bit of history for both adults and younger readers for several major publishers.

Most importantly in the context of this submission, I am a grandfather, sturdily and slowly approaching my ultimate end, maintaining a passionate concern that our culture, our civilisation, in all its facets, should be retained, refined and passed on to the generations that follow. I don't want to see my grandchildren betrayed by foolish and precipitate change based on a single false premise.

The threats to our civilisation are many. Past threats have been thwarted and the odds are that most future threats will be seen off with ease, because our intellectual, military, political and scientific leaders and thinkers have always been up to the task. With care, they will be so in the future.

Over the centuries, we have beaten totalitarian viciousness, we have repelled or absorbed the barbarians, we have made provision for earthquakes, floods, fires, famine and plagues. Humanity has triumphed because it can, because civilised people know what to do, because they think and plan.

It takes a complex and subtle mind to foresee possible future threats and plan to deal with them. Regrettably, lesser minds sometimes try the same game, but restricted by the premise that there is only one possible future, only one right way. In this submission, I wish to discuss those who declare that books are dead, and that by implication, libraries and librarians of any sort are superfluous.

It may help if we consider the way these muscular and forceful no-holds-barred renovators operate. Their catch-cry is "out with the old, in with the new", and like all populists, all would-be leaders of the mob, they represent an insidious threat to good policy, good government. Indeed, they have the capacity to threaten civilisation itself.

Historically, the renovator urge can be seen in the malicious Terrorism (in its original French sense) which led a French judge to declare that the revolution had no need of savants before sending the chemist Lavoisier to the guillotine. More recently, this wild form of enforced renovation erupted in the excesses of Mao's Cultural Revolution, but it was equally present in the destructive iconoclasm of Cromwell's followers. We are probably most familiar with the effect in the form of Orwell's

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fictional sheep, who cried "four legs good, two legs bad". It underlies any single-premise movement that seeks total change, purging and destruction.

In education, the renovators have called in the past for the replacement of teachers by pupil-teachers, teaching machines or programmed learning or by system-wide televised lectures, as though education was only the acquisition of facts or the transmission of rote learning. The premise in each case is simplistic: "*this is the inevitable future and we must not only accept it, but embrace it immediately and unquestioningly*".

Niels Bohr, the physics Nobel laureate, is commonly credited with saying that prediction is very difficult, especially about the future. Bohr did indeed say it once, but he later explained that he was repeating the words of cartoonist, Robert Storm Petersen. The point is that even when you can see a potential future, you cannot be sure of how a discovery may be warped or used.

Even those who foresaw the rise of the jet airliner were unlikely to have considered the aircraft's potential for helping the spread of HIV, SARS or swine flu, and I feel sure that nobody anticipated the use of civilian aircraft as assault weapons in 9/11. Alexander Graham Bell could not have seen that his telephone wires would one day carry the first versions of the internet. There are no inevitable futures, no absolute certainties.

In the 19th century, a great future was seen for the "pneumatic telegraph", where air pressure and a partial vacuum would whisk document-filled cylinders from place to place. Many, many futurologists have confidently predicted an era, close at hand when we would travel by flying cars and dine on food pills. In the late 1920s, the future of air travel was seen as coming from air liners which were in every sense "air liners", taking the entertainment frills of first-class ocean liners and placing them on monstrous lighter-than-air craft, Zeppelins on a larger scale.

Now imagine for a moment a world where the renovators had held sway, a world where the wires and cables had been scrapped to make way for more pneumatic tubes. Consider what would have happened if our roads had been sold to housing developers, on the premise that flying cars had no need of them. Imagine the suffering if all our agricultural infrastructure had been scrapped because we would all live on food pills, or the problems if the nation's airports had been converted to housing because airships had no need of long runways.

With the benefit of hindsight, each of those possible futures can be seen for what it would have been: a complete disaster—if it had been accepted as reality and acted upon.

Now consider the latest vision of the narrow-minded educational futurologist. This vision has little substance, but it is pushed forward with a great deal of muscle, and it is summed up in the repetitive chant "the book is dead, and everything we want is on the internet".

Sadly, those who bellow loudest that the book is dead are those who have little knowledge of the internet and even less of books and how they are created. They are people who cannot distinguish bullet-point facts from information from cogent exposition.

As a biologist, I understand that the ultimate fate of every species is extinction, but many species, though extinct, have descendants that evolved into something different. So it is with cultures, societies and the artefacts that help our societies function, like books.

Those who declare the demise of the book lack the historical insights to see institutions survive. When a sovereign dies, the word goes forth: "the king is dead, long live the king". In the same way, if the book is dead, it is alive again in a different form. The needs for management and guidance will still exist in slightly ways, with the essentials remaining constant.

Now lest I appear as an equally blinkered bibliophile Luddite here, let me state a few of my qualifications to comment on the apparent dichotomy (more fabled than real) between the internet and the book. First: I have been working with and around computers since 1963. I have been using the

internet since 1991, and created my first web page in 1995. One of my web sites has drawn some 1.9 million visitors in ten years, another has pulled 531,000 in three and a half years. I also spent five years writing, editing and initiating content for an Australian online encyclopaedia.

Then again, I have had 20 books (only one of them a textbook) published in the past 20 years, and I have two more in production at the moment. Some of those titles have been translated into Chinese, Korean, Russian, German, Polish, Slovak and American English. I have won several awards and been short-listed for others. In other words, I have a foot in each of the allegedly opposing camps.

I say allegedly, because there is a place for web sites and a place for web resources, and education would be a poorer thing without either, but there remains also a place for carefully planned, beautifully researched, thoroughly written, painfully revised, tightly edited, skilfully designed books which present a complete story to the reader. Web pages are easier to revise and update than printed books, but we are a long way from the time when the non-fiction book is worthless.

We find ourselves in an era when the book is changing. We can see it changing, but we cannot tell where the book will go, any more than Johannes Gutenberg could guess where his scheme to produce bibles, 180 times as fast as a skilled penman, would lead. Future books may be more unlike today's books than today's books are unlike the Book of Kells, but we cannot be sure of that, and any policy decisions made on uncertain "futures" are very likely to be bad decisions.

(My personal hope involves e-books that carry the option for readers, unfamiliar with the Book of Kells, to take a small diversion to view an online version of this marvellous piece of Irish art, an illuminated set of the Gospels, created 1200 years ago. In time, I would like to see "e-books" burrowing in to become an integral part of "the web", able to be updated, amended or annotated with a few key strokes. That could well happen and it would be nice if it did, but we cannot predict where the future will lead.)

In short, this is not the time to close down the libraries and it is far too soon to burn all the books. We cannot burn the textbooks (just yet), we cannot burn the non-fiction books, and we certainly cannot burn the fiction books which are, in any case, weeded in libraries every few years. We cannot throw out the bookshelves and replace them with computer desks. Not yet.

By the same token, we need to allow libraries to evolve. In time, we can expect both the book and the library to change, but remember the predictions of pneumatic telegraphs, food pills, flying cars and airships. Remember the decisions that might have been based on those wild beliefs.

This has not stopped woolly minds from declaring that books and libraries are dead because we can get all we need "from the internet". In one or two places, libraries have been closed and books have been replaced by marvellous machines that go ping! But where will these visionaries locate the food-pill machine, the flying-car garage, the airship bay and the portal for the pneumatic telegraph? They, after all, were once part of a perceived future, with probably better supporting evidence.

And if the libraries can be let go, think how much more could be saved by dispensing with librarians. In a time of flux and change, there is a desperate need for guidance, and for the next generation, much of that guidance will come from librarians, people who understand the competing strengths, weaknesses and values of print and non-print media.

In the case of schools in a few lucky countries, that role is played by a teacher-librarian, somebody who combines teacher training with professional qualifications in librarianship. They are essential to make sure that those coming along, my grandchildren among them, are given the guidance and assistance they need to make their way through the jungle of information and infomercials, to find their way safely past the seething throng of snake-oil sellers, the pedlars of smut, bad taste, hatred and plain wrong-headedness.

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There is a simple reason why we in Australia can survive all of the perils our environment can throw at us: we have trained and competent emergency services. Many of them are voluntary, some of them are professional. In either case, they are trained, but we cannot really rely on volunteers to train our hope, the next generation, to bring them to a peak of perfection. The Australian Institute of Sport could not function with untrained amateur coaches. In the same way, our institutions of education need trained professional coaches in the art of handling information which looks likely to change its format and packaging many times in the next few decades.

In a sense, teacher-librarians are a cultural equivalent of the emergency services, professionals equipped to handle, support and guide. They are our cultural emergency pack, able to help the next generation adjust to and make good use of whatever technology is able to offer and deliver.

At some point in the future, I envisage the USS Enterprise XXXVII, returning to Earth after a journey lasting thousands of years. One of their number visits a building where people sit quietly, looking at strange objects and manipulating them in an absorbed way. One of them looks at the objects in front of one of the sitters before saying into his communicator:

"They're books, Jim, just not as we know them."

I cannot guarantee that future. On the other hand, I am fairly certain that if we prematurely and on no real evidence declare the book and the library dead, if we eliminate the teacher-librarian, it is highly probable that the sitters of the future will be found to be just banging rocks together.

Humanity will deserve that fate, because they will have failed to develop leaders with complex and subtle minds, able to deal with threats to civilisation.

It may be merited in a general sort of way, but that isn't the future I want for my grandchildren.