

Are libraries ready for the big change?

Keynote Address

Chan Heng Chee

Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore



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Minister for Communications and Information, Associate Professor Dr Yaacob Ibrahim,
Dr Ingrid Parent, President, International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)
Mrs Elaine Ng, Chair of the IFLA WLIC 2013 National Committee
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

This is a very learned week in Singapore. Two days ago, we hosted the International Summit of the Book. Today, we have a gathering of the International Federation of Library Associations. In three days, I will be speaking to the Academy of Singapore Teachers. I think I was asked to speak to you because I am a book person. I love spending time in libraries.

It began when I was about 11-12 years old. I had to make regular visits to a doctor about twice a month. My father would drop me off at the USIS Library in Raffles Place which was near his office, leaving me to fill my time reading. Later that morning, around 11.00 am or 11.30 am, he would pick me up and we would go off to the doctor. As I had many such visits, I loitered among books. That was the beginning.

I can truly say some of my happiest moments were spent in the evenings as an undergraduate in the University of Singapore library scanning the shelves of books and journals and finding books not on the prescribed reading list and realising this was relevant stuff. It was luxuriating in this cool silent space. I learned the names of more

authors on the same subject because they were clustered together, and in later years, remembered those titles existed when I was preparing a paper or a lecture and drew on them.

The library is also a social space. Friends meet at libraries and boy meets girl in the library. The Clintons began their courtship in the Yale Library. The story goes that he had noticed her earlier on, he was a year her junior. They were circling each other and sizing each other up. Then one day, when Bill Clinton was gazing at Hillary at the other end of the Yale Library room, Hillary walked up to him and started the conversation saying: *"Look if we are going to spend this time staring at each other, we should at least get to know who the other is."* Well, we know what happened afterwards. Nothing like that happened to me, and I did not marry a future President, but I made many friends, men and women, in the library.

From using libraries, I now have my own library of books. I have so many books now I don't know what to do with them. Though I prefer the touch and feel of books and the smell of paper, I too have stayed with the changing times and now own a kindle. The e-book in an e-reader is a good light-weight substitute on a flight, but on the ground I am still deeply tied to the book.

I just read an op-ed in the International Herald Tribune which reminded me of what the author describes as "the bookness of books" when one reads a physical book, something quite missing with a e-book and e-reading. It is the thickness of the book, the cover, the graphics and the whole product itself. This makes having one's own library even more important because reading is an ephemeral activity, but to have rows of books lined up on shelves reminds one of what one has covered. They are markers of a person's intellectual or mental life and journey, just like trophies for sportsmen and women, or photographs of the family, but books are so much more. E-books read on an iPad cannot do that for us. They are not markers. They simply disappear into the space, the cloud.

This is a good point for me to segue to the topic I want to speak on today. I would like to invite you to reflect with me on the major developments that will impact libraries in the coming decade. The question I want to put forth to you is: "Are Libraries Ready for the Big Change?"

This is an era of impactful changes - technological, social, business and political. For the purposes of our discussion, I will consider the technological and the social change pertaining to demographic trends.

(1) Technological Change

We are all swept up by the technological revolution and the information age. The Internet has changed our lives and way of doing things. As Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman of Google and Jared Cohen, Director of Google Ideas, wrote in "*The New Digital Age*", a book they published this year:

"The proliferation of communication technologies has advanced at an unprecedented speed. In the first decade for the twenty-first century the number of people connected to the Internet worldwide increased from 350 million to more than 2 billion. In the same period, the number of mobile-phone subscribers rose from 750 million to well over 5 billion. (It is now over 6 billion.) Adoption of these technologies is spreading from the furthest reaches of the planet, and, in some parts of the world, at an accelerating rate.

By 2025, the majority of the world's population will, in one generation, have gone from having virtually no access to unfiltered information to accessing all of the world's information through a device that fits the palm of the hand. If the current pace of technological innovation is maintained, most of the projected eight billion people on Earth will be online."

Socially we are changed and our business models have to change to keep up. Politics, too, is profoundly affected by this technological tsunami. Politicians are scrambling to keep up with the technology and to harness it worldwide.

(2) Social Change

We live in a networked community. We deal with changing demographics, with different experiences shaped by education and technology and we live in a globalised world. I was looking at some American data. They foretell the trends to come and alert us to the change all of us should prepare for. By 2020, our society and workplace would be a mix of 5 generations:

- Traditionalists: born pre 1946
- Baby Boomers: born 1946- 1964
- Gen Xers: born 1965 -76 (Some have mapped this to be between 1965-1982)
- Millennials/GenYs: born 77-97 (I've also seen dates of 1982- 2001)
- Digitally connected Gen C

The digitally connected Gen C is the generation brought up on YouTube or the YouTubers. This generation can include the Gen Xers as well as the Millennials. They are digital natives and extremely tech savvy. Conceivably, there are Gen Xers who are not very digitally savvy and there is no reason why some Baby Boomers or Traditionalists cannot be fluent with the digital revolution, but they would be in the minority, I believe.

Why is it important to highlight these differences in generations? We need to understand these differences if our work involves outreach to people and communities. It is, understanding your market or your users. We have to negotiate with or cater for the 5 generations with different outlooks, different needs and different demands.

Putting technological change and the demographic change together you get a picture that according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project study looks something like this:


Slide 1: The Internet in U.S. in 2000

The Internet in U.S. in 2000

- **46% adults** used Internet
- **5% had broadband@home**
- **53% owned a cell phone**
- **0% had wireless Internet**
- **0% used social networks**

Information flowed mainly 1-way
Information Consumption was a stationary activity

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013




Slide 2: The Internet in U.S. in 2012

The Internet in U.S. in 2012

- **82% adults** used Internet
- **2/3 had broadband@home**
- **88% owned a cell phone;**
46% smartphone users
- **19% have tablet**
- **19% eReaders**
- **2/3 are wireless Internet users**
- **65% of online adults use social networks**

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013



Pew goes on to point out that the nature of information has changed. Information was scarce, expensive and shaped and controlled by elites, designed as a one way consumption, slow moving and external to our worlds. Now information is all around us, cheaper or free, shaped and controlled by consumers and networks, designed for sharing, participation and feedback. It is immediate and it is embedded in our worlds.

The cell phone, the mobile has changed our world. It moves information with us, makes information available anytime, anywhere; puts information at our fingertips; magnifies the demand for timely information; and makes information location sensitive. What did we do before the mobile and the iPhone?

The social networks surround us with information through our many connections, brings us information from multiple and varied sources, and provides instant feedback, meaning and context and allows us to shape and create information ourselves and amplify other messages.

Indeed, the Pew Internet data showed that search has been one of the most popular of Internet activities. 91% adults go to the Internet to use the search engine. 96% of those aged between 18 and 29 use the search engine. 91% of those aged 30-49 and 92% of those aged 50-64. There is a drop after 65. The college educated is more likely to use search engines compared to those with less education. Increasingly, Internet users are going to the search engine on Internet daily. In 2012, it was 54% of the users. Of course young people are now raised on search and are likely to use the engine when they grow up and age.

Comparing the situation in the US with that of Asia, we can say Asia will catch up one day soon. The data on Indonesia, South Korea and Singapore at the moment looks like this:

Slide 3: Asia Data on Internet Use, Population and Facebook

**Asia Data on
Internet Use, Population and Facebook**

| ASIA | Population (2012 Est.) | Internet Users (Year 2000) | Internet Users 30 June 2012 | Penetration (% Population) | Users % Asia | Facebook 31 December 2012 |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Indonesia | 248,645,008 | 2,000,000 | 55,000,000 | 22.10% | 5.10% | 51,096,860 |
| Korea, South | 48,860,500 | 19,040,000 | 40,329,660 | 82.50% | 3.70% | 10,012,400 |
| Singapore | 5,353,494 | 1,200,000 | 4,015,121 | 75.00% | 0.40% | 2,915,640 |

SOURCE: Internet World Statistics
Retrieved from: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia>

There is a marked take up rate in the last decade between 2000 and 2012. In Indonesia, the take up rate exploded from 2 million to 55 million in 2012 and South Korea doubled while Singapore's take up rate tripled in the same period. For social media, Facebook users are nowhere as prolific as the US and Canada in North America. It is a 50% penetration in North America compared to 5% in Asia and 30% in Europe. But in Asia, in Indonesia social networking through Facebook adoption is 88.6% of Internet users, in South Korea, it is 63.5% of Internet users and in Singapore, it is 83.7%.

We need a more in-depth study to find out what information they access. Unfortunately, I could not get the data on mobiles usage and what information is downloaded. I can tell you that I google often on my mobile for names, changes in Cabinets and Heads of State and Government, the latest trade figures of various countries, GDPs and any data I might need on the spur of the moment before I walk in to give a talk or start a working conversation with someone and I find I don't have the data on my fingertips. In my job it is important not only to convey a clear message but to show knowledge of the details and the fine points as well. The same pattern of usage as in the US will follow in Asia but to a lesser degree initially as there is a wider disparity in the level of education in our older population throughout the region.

Then of course, we must consider that the e-book is increasingly accepted and is now building up a following. The Pew Internet study reported that in 2012, 21% of American adults read an e-book in the last year. 68% read a print book. 11% listened to an audiobook and overall 19% read no books at all. I was fascinated to learn that some of the e-readers read their e-books on a cell phone (they must be young eyes), some on a computer, an e-reader and on a tablet. But the good thing is this does not mean the end of the book. Apparently book sales in the US are still up. Apparently many who have read books online are likely to buy a copy of the book to keep for personal use.

So where does the library fit in and how should the library organise itself to prepare for the change? Let me say as an academic who has taught for a long time in the university and as someone who likes to teach and have the face-to-face contact with students, I am filled with wonder at the success of Coursera, the delivery of online courses by some of the best universities in the world and their reach to those in the far-away places in the world who would otherwise not be able to afford to go to these universities or gain admission. The business model has been revolutionised for university learning. In the same way, I believe libraries are facing this revolution of accessibility too.

This is an information saturated world. People receive information online, from websites, in blogs, and through Google Search. Books, papers, and records will be digitized. People can get the information when they want, where they want, and how they want. IT literacy will be a requirement as an essential skill. Libraries and librarians must reinvent themselves to find new roles to be helpful and stay relevant. How do you plan for these disruptive changes?

I am not a librarian, not someone in the profession, and those of you present here, must have given this question plenty of thought. Clearly you must go beyond books. In spite of information going digital, I believe a physical library space is still needed. A library is a social space, it is a meeting space. It is a community space for the young and the old. Experts have also pointed out that although much content will go digital, there will still be materials that are non-digital and would require curating and storage.

Libraries and librarians will have to continue to assist people who need help with acquiring greater fluency and using the technology to get the information. Depending on where you are from, some populations are less advanced in the use of technology and this could be crucial work for librarians. I cannot emphasise this enough. Librarians will be friendly essential intermediaries to help point out new online sources, websites and search engines in the field.

Many countries are facing a growing aging population, perhaps more literate than the generations before, but will need assistance to get familiar with the new technology. When we are discussing demographic change in society, there is a tendency to refer to the aging population as if they were one monolithic group. They are not, and can be differentiated by socio-economic status and means and education and state of personal health. Many retirees may be in search of a place to help them keep their minds active. Can Libraries be a digital upgrading centre for reading and research? Libraries can help actively by taking the leadership to promote lifelong learning through your programmes and publicity. You can organise and promote reading groups, though the most sustainable ones tend will be formed spontaneously among friends.

Some libraries have become places that lead and innovate. Enterprise hubs are hosted in libraries along with business incubation centres. So the library can support entrepreneurs just starting out from college. It has an active role in economic development beyond being the depository of knowledge and information waiting to be accessed. The dynamics and chemistry between the creators of ideas hosted in a library space with books in the same building is a powerful inspiring symbol and can lead to a new buzz for the library.

As a political scientist I speak often of the need for countries to build social capital - that is social bonds that strengthen a people and nation and create a sense of the community, a sense of belonging. Libraries can and do play that role of enhancing social capital because the young and old visit the library regularly. Habits are formed around a library. People grow up with the library. It is often the 'sacred space' for the community. Urban sociologists and urbanists speak of the importance of having or creating 'sacred spaces' in a country or city to bind people to a place. Many New

Yorkers will name Central Park as their 'sacred space'. Some will say it is The New York Public Library. Singaporeans have named the Botanical Gardens and also the National Library as 'sacred spaces' when they were asked. Another great example is the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. I read about it in today's Sunday Times (18 August 2013). Students joined hands to protect the library against a protesting mob. Dr Ismail Serageldin, the Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina recalled "Then out of the crowd, young people...started making a human chain, holding hands and saying, 'This is the Library! Nobody touches the Library'". The young people had a sense and they "own it". It has become their "sacred space".

Libraries are 'sacred spaces' in different communities, and in developing countries, they have a special place. It is the key to learning and acquisition of knowledge and progress. The thing about a 'sacred space' is that you cannot create a 'sacred space' by just designing or ordering a space, though much can be said for good design. You create it by providing the space and nurturing it. Over time people attach a meaning or a quality to the space --- it is beautiful, meaningful, useful, eccentric, hallowed or all of the above. They 'own it'. I hope you will build on this idea and think through carefully how a library can ensure it remains a 'sacred space'.

I hope I have given you a few thoughts to mull over. I wanted to help start a conversation at this meeting. Some of you are already deep into thinking about this transition and sharing your experience. You will have a great discussion.

Before I leave this podium I want to take a moment to express my deep appreciation to all librarians gathered today for you have been my helper and my partner in all the articles and books I have written and published and speeches I have prepared in my career.

Thank you.