

# The Knowledge Wizards: Hope in a Time of Darkness

*By Patrick Lambe*

I have been asked to write about libraries and their role in an increasingly knowledge-powered economy. April 24-26, Singapore plays host to the World Library Summit, with the theme: “Global Knowledge Renaissance”. The best and the finest will gather to learn about the future of knowledge, knowledge management and knowledge opportunities in governance, society and business. “We want people, and especially businesses, to understand the critical role that libraries, and this summit, can play in creating knowledge opportunities for Singapore and the region” says National Library Board Assistant Chief Executive R. Ramachandran.

Renaissance is generally meant to connote positive things: re-birth, creativity, newness, innovation, learning and the hopeful role of knowledge. Yet the European Renaissance that gave the world so much of art and culture and scholarship, was also a period of chaos, almost constant war, vast migrations and bloody revolutions. From this period and its aftermath come the graphic visions of Dante, Durer, Bosch and Milton with their terrible depictions of Hell, and their fascination with the bloody use of power, the deceptive hubris of knowledge, and the uncertainties of a changing, unpredictable, and dangerous world.

There has been a great nervousness in the air, a lack of ease. The dissolution of the World Trade Center on September 11 prompted it, though any other event of equal magnitude and visible terror might have served. We are witnessing another, more subtle dissolution, as the godlike Andersen splinters and fragments into nothing in a matter of weeks and days. We had been waiting for the advent of such a judgement, as the world changed around us, challenging our capacity to interpret it. The turning of a season or of an era must always be accompanied by signs that speak of our fear and uncertainty. As the inner core of the World Trade Center towers blossomed into an inferno, the outer smoke billowed and we saw the face of evil peering out. The horrifying, steady, televised rain of people falling from the sky spoke to us of the steady rain of Dante’s lost souls in Hell.

We have been preoccupied with the questions of what would prompt such terror. We will continue to evaluate and analyse the role of globalization, the role of technology that connects for the purposes of evil as well as for good, the role of an accessible connectedness that allows marginalized communities of despair to discover each other and rouses them to violent or creative action. And we will continue to ponder and argue about the role that the conspicuous display of ruthlessness and power plays in all of this – whether it be smart bombs burrowing deep into strategic targets, a belt of explosives on a suicide bomber in a café, or a platoon of Israeli soldiers punching their way through the connecting walls of houses in a Palestinian street.

So there is an introspective shadow, a pall that hangs over us, and fear is never very far away. When the defection of Evergreen from PSA to Tanjung Pelapas was announced, I received an SMS from a friend: “Singapore is in trouble. Losing Evergreen may be the tip

of the iceberg.” In some research we conducted on innovation in Singapore organizations, a civil servant barely conceals a sense of desperation: “People in Singapore are not waking up to the idea that the country is in crisis – we don’t know how to move forward.”

Singapore has been betrayed by its own success. What it has struggled so hard to know and to do is no longer enough. It struggles to cover both bases: a loyalty to its identity while seeking to differ from that identity. Contradictions abound. “By all means colour your hair blue” Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong tells an audience of sneakered, blonde and platinum Singaporean youths. “If you don’t have natural coloured hair, we will fine you and deduct marks” a polytechnic tells its students some weeks later. No wonder the obedient fat boy Terry Khoo, icon for the obedient Singaporean in Jack Neo’s movie “I Not Stupid” opens his mouth and bawls; “Aiyoh, you adults make me so confused!”

And we run back and forth in confusion, from feverish, imagined uncertainties back to our knowledge assets, our databases, our technologies and process methodologies; then becoming aware of the betrayal that our knowledge has served upon us, we run back to imagined uncertainties again. We buy our children fantasy games, buy them Harry Potter books, take them to see Lord of the Rings, exorcising by proxy our desperate need to be able to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, and find a new simplicity, a new wizardry that will guide us and empower us to act where science and engineering have failed.

We have been there before. Writing in 1919 of the brilliance of pre-war Europe, the French philosopher Paul Valery speaks of “great ships laden with riches and intellect” that sink without trace. The horrors of the first world war destroyed every illusion about the power of knowledge to civilize. The knowledge, science, technology, human ingenuity and artifice of that glittering civilization were all placed at the service of unimaginable barbarity – one that wiped out an entire generation of Europe’s finest minds. “And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life.”

So we may agree that renaissance has a dark side, and that it is indeed relevant to our current dramas of survival and threat. If it does indeed mean re-birth, then it will not come without blood, and pain, and pendulous, wrenching effort. But libraries? If knowledge has betrayed us, and if libraries are the backwaters of stored, packaged and dispensed content that we imagine them to be, what have they to offer us in this more critical, heightened state of nervousness, apart from a distraction, a useful civic resource, a place to send the kids, or study, or surf the web?

Yet if we seek a wizardry that will help us to navigate this new terrain, there are wizards hidden among us, in the library profession, and in the knowledge capabilities they possess. For although librarians gain their most recent reputations from their frumpish, bookish practices in gathering, cataloguing and regulating access to knowledge, they too have their powerful incantations, their taxonomies and strategies that help us navigate

and map terrains of new knowledge and discovery. Librarians have always been our most skilled practitioners in the arcane art of grappling with the universe of knowledge. We haven't always felt the need for those skills, as we struggled with applying technology to prior disciplines of knowledge organization, but as we come up against the limits of what we know, this art becomes a critical one. Librarians are those most versed in navigating ignorance, because they have never fully succeeded in completing their maps of what is known. So they fully understand, more than scientists or engineers ever could, the desperate limitations of what is known, and the importance of strategies and skills and humility in the face of what is not known. And their powerful ethic of service and access illumines the social power of such an art.

We are beginning to realize now that there is more to the interplay of knowledge and connectedness than straightforward administrative and systems issues. There are still-unravelling, but compelling issues of governance, authority, power, social cohesion, ownership, access, the translation of knowledge into action. "Understanding the knowledge needs of society is a very important issue for the world of business" says Johnson Paul of the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians. "The knowledge economy embraces more diversity than uniformity, and businesses need to recognise this if they are to survive. But the knowledge economy also offers opportunities: diversity promotes competition."

In the next part of this article, I will examine some of the ways in which the converging worlds of business, technology and the knowledge capabilities of libraries mesh and intertwine, to form powerful engines for change and innovation.

## Playing the Knowledge Game

*By Patrick Lambe*

In the first part of this article last week, *The Knowledge Wizards*, I discussed the ancient skills and insights that librarians bring to the world of knowledge and society, and the sudden demand for their experience in a world of uncertainty and social fragmentation.

There are already signs that technology companies are taking heed. Corporate approaches to knowledge were traditionally guarded ones, and the open ethic of libraries was suspect in a world of competitive advantage through privileged knowledge. Now, says Shirish Netke, Strategic Sales Director for Sun Microsystems, businesses must learn how to share knowledge and collaborate in order to compete. Nobody can manage the whole value chain in a complex market. Vivian Tay of NEC's System Integration Group enlarges on this: "Sharing our best practices and promoting standards is a platform building exercise – it allows us to operate from a new level. And we need to share with the market so that they know how to use the technology effectively."

And there are important roles that industry can play in the bigger knowledge issues that face nations and societies. Vincent Tan of Compaq Global Services notes: “Knowledge has zero value unless you can translate it into action. Libraries can help bridge social and digital divides by helping people translate knowledge into action. Technology helps them move the knowledge to the point of need – whether it’s storage, speedy transfer or access devices.”

Business also has an interest in the more serious issues of knowledge security and ownership. Sensitive knowledge, and ever-present issues of knowledge security are issues that libraries understand well. They have been guardians of socially inflammatory collections and materials held in trust for their owners throughout their history. Now the technology of authentication and biometrics led by companies such as NEC, can enable digital libraries that filter content appropriately to those authorized to see it.

Shirish Netke of Sun Microsystems points to the importance of copyright, long championed and protected by libraries: “Intellectual property protection encourages innovation, because it allows you to attribute ideas to the people who originated them, and they can reap the rewards. If you can’t do that, there’s no incentive to innovate.” And Koh Kok Tian, CEO of rich media management company Vidtools, picks up the theme of innovation as applied to Singapore: “Look at our history; we have so few truly innovative global impact companies. Singapore’s knowledge challenge is to learn how to combine its first rate technology and infrastructure with its innovation capabilities. You can’t just innovate once, the competition will simply catch up. You have to lead by innovating constantly.”

If the emerging role of libraries in the knowledge-powered economy is a witness to their wizardry, then in the Global Knowledge Renaissance: World Library Summit this week, Singapore’s National Library Board is a fitting host for such a powerful gathering of knowledge wizards. Rapidly becoming recognized as a world leader in stepping beyond the confines of boxed and regulated knowledge, it has extended its role into community learning, info-literacy, social cohesion through learning conversations, and innovation catalysis and inspiration. More than any library organization I know, it has stepped beyond the known business of packaging knowledge for consumption, and started to play daring knowledge games that seek to empower a whole society.

And games we must all play; knowledge will always betray us if we put it on pause, house and elevate it to the status of a value laden treasure or a gilded asset that we can sell or deploy or leverage – to borrow some terms from my respected colleagues in Knowledge Management. It is knowledge *play* that we need to master, not knowledge housing, storage or management – that’s the easy stuff.

It is only through knowledge *games* that we practise the wizardry of learning and discernment and mapping and discovery. Traditional approaches to knowledge management are still a long way off this goal. Knowledge is described as an asset, we use the term “knowledge capital” liberally, and we seek to count, quantify, value and measure it, as we would a sack of rice. But think of any truly knowledge rich environment, and

what happens within it. It's more like a game of tennis than a pile of tennis balls. And it's more fun. If one of the players hoards the ball and refuses to pass it back, there's no game. The skill and the fun is in the game's boundaries, and in the twist and spin you can put on the ball, and in how many times you can return the ball with something new added to its velocity or behaviour. There's an ingenious openness to a game, limitless possibilities within a framework of rules.

And this is what the National Library Board has started to discover. "Libraries have always helped societies to create meaning" says Johnson Paul. "In the aftermath of 911, more people are reading about Islam and terrorism, because they want to understand what happened." R. Ramachandran goes further: "At a public level, we have changed the experience of libraries. For us, a library is a centre of innovation, discussion, research. It is a meeting place for communities, where you can encounter new ideas and different people. Very few countries have treated libraries as engines of growth for the economy. Yet they impact everybody, from childhood to retirement. They can be incredibly powerful. That's why we believe it's so important to get the world of industry and business involved in the World Library Summit. There are enormous possibilities."

This very day in Egypt, the ancient library of Alexandria, one of the wonders of the ancient world, which was destroyed in a fire in 272 AD, will be re-established as a centre for the world's knowledge and learning. There is a story about the foundation of Alexandria which speaks volumes about the role that its library would also play.

The city was established by Alexander the Great, as a mark of his conquest of Egypt, and as the locus of a new imperial era. He hired the famous architect, Democritus of Rhodes to design a glittering city, an entrepot, an icon of greatness for the Eastern Mediterranean, a commercial and cultural anchor for his rapidly growing empire. As Alexander planned his expedition into Persia and India, he sent word that he wanted to inspect progress on the city. They had barely got beyond digging trenches for the foundations of the main buildings and thoroughfares. So they hit upon the plan of filling the trenches with chalk, and showing the city from a nearby hill, so that Alexander would see the scale and the layout of the city sketched in brilliant white.

The day before the emperor's galley arrived, they had filled perhaps half of the trenches – and they ran out of chalk. But they had large warehouses filled with flour for the vast army of labourers employed on the city. So they filled the remainder of the trenches by sunset, with a very satisfactory effect. Dawn came, and Alexander's galley approached the shore. The morning chorus of birds started, and then fell silent. The birds knew the difference between chalk and flour. They descended on the trenches containing flour and devoured it, erasing half of the painfully-drawn city in a matter of minutes. Alexander's officials were distraught: "He is a very superstitious man!" they said. "Surely, he will take this as a bad omen for the city bearing his name!" Ingenious to the last, they found a soothsayer to accompany Alexander to the prospect overlooking the half-erased city and the still-feasting birds. "This is a wonderful omen" said the soothsayer. "Your city will attract all the nations of the earth, and they will prosper here". Alexander was well

pleased, and departed, never to see his city completed. But Alexandria did become what the soothsayer predicted, and so did its library.

But notice the tension in this story between systems and order, and chaos and diversity. Would Alexandria have prospered and attracted so much diverse talent if its regulated streets contained only indigestible chalk? But could it have survived without discipline and structure? The openness of broken boundaries, as in a game that stretches the limits of its rules, is the only hospitable environment for diversity and new beginnings. Rule-bound, but generative of endless possibility. Knowledge games, and knowledge wizardry, not knowledge assets and artefacts, made the ancient library of Alexandria so influential. Its university fed the scholarship, conversations and research of Euclid and Archimedes among many others. The library at Alexandria burnt down, and its books were destroyed. But the learning and civilization it nourished would endure.

The renaissance we aspire to is a painful and learning act. It is bounded by an identity that must carefully be let go, without the familiar security of a new one. It embodies grief and danger as well as new hope. It teaches us the limits of our systems and rules and familiar things. It directs us to embrace openness, the spaces between rules. It invites us to learn. It invites us to play.