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## What Is a Modern Library? Part I

I am going to try to answer the title question in two parts, in successive columns of this series. First, by saying what a modern library was in other “modern” times. That is for part one, today. The more challenging part will come next week.

First of all, the modernity of the past is defined, in significant part, by the technologies of the bygone day, just as is the case today. So, the earliest known, Babylonian libraries were collections of clay tablets. In ancient Mesopotamia, inscribed clay tablets were “the main and permanent medium of communication and of transmission of thought for nearly three thousand years” (D. Diringer, “The Book Before Printing: Ancient, Medieval and Oriental” (1982)). Imagine that; relative stasis for three thousand years, in contrast to the rapid changes in technologies within a single generation of our own times!

It is hard to track the origins of perishable “books,” but the earliest Egyptian papyrus rolls, like clay tablets, “date at least from the early third millennium B.C.” Clay tablets and papyrus rolls comprise just a taste of a wonderful story about writing, record-keeping and libraries in antiquity, before the printing press.

The invention of the printing press in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century by Johannes Gutenberg is one of those technological jumps to which we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have gotten so accustomed, even taken for granted. When joined with a capitalistic zeal for profit, printing became a force of civilization, driving how history itself proceeded (B. Anderson, “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism” (1991); L. Febvre and H.J. Martin, “The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800” (2010)). Perhaps, not at all unlike the computer and other like devices in our modern age. By 1500, “at least 20,000,000 books had already been printed.” By 1600, probably 10X that number had been manufactured.

Publishing was a boom industry. “More than at any other time” before Gutenberg, it was “a great industry under the control of wealthy capitalists.” And think too of this: paper itself had only come into common use in Europe in the latter 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was not invented in Europe of course, but in China.

So, paper with printing on it became the underlying vehicle of the library from those times, into (and beyond) our own colonial times, stories that I have told already in this column with accounts of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, and their Junto and Monticello Libraries, respectively. There was a relatively long period of comparative stasis after the disruptive invention of the printing press by Gutenberg. Reflect on that, too. Not much change about the medium of common use, the book, for centuries of libraries. Consider, too, the newspaper in which this column is written, which itself is still made available to you in paper format at your local library.

But, change is clearly in our midst with electronic communication, for better and for worse. Worse in the sense that we are, at light-speed, being bombarded with as much nonsense as we are informed materials. However, that is also an opportunity for public

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libraries, and next time I will conjecture about what our “modern” library might have to be. I will not speak about library space, but about new community needs to be met, which are unmet by digitalization alone. See you next Monday, right here.

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