Thomas Jefferson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and information history for the future

David Bawden

This is a keynote presentation given at the 50th anniversary conference of the CILIP Library and Information History Group, CILIP HQ London, 6 November 2012. It took a presidential theme, in acknowledgement of the US presidential election happening that day.

It was intended as a short introduction to the day, showing that the study of information history is not incompatible with a concern for the future of information and the information professions.

It began with a quotation from Jefferson, ended with one from Eisenhower, and in between gave a say to enlightened despotism. It also had a subsidiary railway theme.
Thomas Jefferson’s view would be shared by many in library/information disciplines and professions. So why bother with history, including information history? Should we not be more concerned with current and future developments? Particularly when we live in a time of rapid technological advances, which seem to make the past irrelevant.
Moore's Law. Although such rapid growth will level off, the general lesson is that if we can imagine it, technology will achieve it for us more quickly than we may think. The history of technology, and certainly information technology, is littered with false predictions about what can never be done. We need to assume that whatever we can think of will soon be technically possible.
Kurzweil’s singularity. We need not worry about whether this particular prediction is correct. The point is that technology will be enable us to do things we can’t yet imagine.

Remember Clarke’s Law – if an expert says something can be done, they are almost certainly right – if an expert says something can’t be done, they are almost certainly wrong. If a technical capability can be imagined, it will probably be achieved sooner than anyone imagined.

This rapid advance in technology is bewildering, and causes confusion, and even paralysis of thought, in trying to work out the best future for the information professions.

But we have been here before ...
There have been other periods, not so long ago, when technical progress was bewilderingly fast.
In the 1850s, the authorities of Austro-Hungarian Empire wished to build a railway line from their capital at Vienna to the nearest seaport at Trieste. But no locomotive then available, or in prospect, was powerful enough to cope with the gradients on the route.
The Emperor Franz Joseph 1st ordered construction of the line to commence, in the confidence that by the time it was finished locomotives would be powerful enough to work it. His confidence, not shared by his technical experts, was justified. The Vienna-Trieste railway was opened on 27th July 1857 in his presence.
Neither a wise man nor a brave man lies down on the tracks of history to wait for the train of the future to run over him.

Dwight Eisenhower reminds us of the importance of future-proofing ourselves and our discipline and profession. How to do this, in a time of unsettling and unpredictable technological change. We need to look at lessons of the past, avoiding shallow analogies, but seeing repeating lessons in how humans deal with information and knowledge, independent of technology. If we can imagine it, our technology will let us do it. Information history can help us to imagine well.