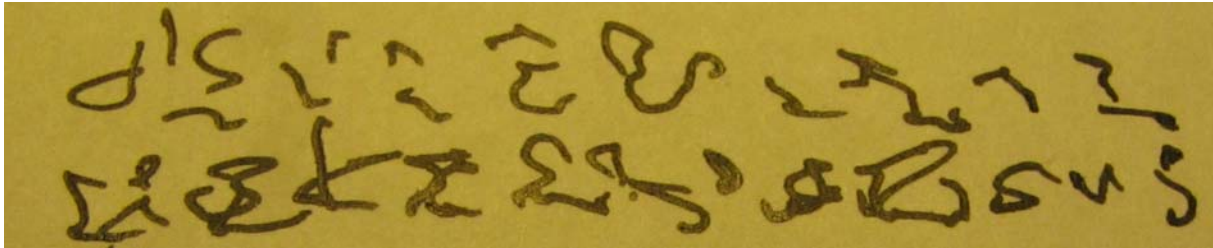


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If printed books disappear, what will happen when the lights go out – when we can no longer run our computers? Will we have anything to read? Will there still be anyone who knows how to read and will anyone still be able to write? Will the profession of scribe be resurrected?

We are entrusting ever more ‘written’ material to digital files which need hardware and software to allow us humans to read it or listen to it. Whole libraries of printed books and journals have been digitised to make them more widely accessible. Will the originals be kept? If not, we run the risk of losing their contents.

In the 1980s I published a quarterly magazine and all the files were on 5¼" black floppy disks in WordStar format. While I still could, I converted them to WordPerfect and saved them to 3½" disks. Eventually I converted these files to PDFs. They are now saved on a USB stick, a back-up hard drive and in a repository in the ‘cloud’. These files have nostalgic significance – they have no value outside this and there will be no major loss to our collective knowledge if the files become irretrievable.

Not so the wealth of human knowledge. We rely on the wisdom of our forebears. We have gone to great lengths to interpret the marks left by ancient civilisations and have been able to decipher much of this ‘written’ record. These were tangible, physical records, worn by time but still visible. How much of our wisdom, our thoughts, our deliberations will be accessible to people in five hundred or a thousand years – if there are still people then? All they may have to work with could be circular plastic disks and small black squares containing thin sheets of minerals.

In five hundred years, people may not even recognise these as possibly holding knowledge. If all software and information about the software is on these disks and squares, would there be any possibility of those people accessing any of our wisdom, no matter how misguided it may be? If they can, could they learn anything from our mistakes?

There is also the question whether information on digital disks and in solid state memory would survive over that length of time. We have only a few decades of experience about the integrity of data on these media.

Books and other physical records, including photos, are themselves subject to degradation and destruction by water, fire and organisms. But we have legible books that were printed more than eleven hundred years ago and handwritten books that have survived even longer – 1300-1600 years – and other writings on papyrus and parchment more than two thousand years old. We do not need any technology to read these even if we cannot readily decipher the words.

There is another question to be asked about all this: would it be better for future human society were it not to have access to our philosophies, wisdom and drive? Would this allow future generations to reinvent society – a society that is more considerate of its members and

of the planet, one that does not rely on the myth of infinite growth fed by mythically infinite resources?

We could, perhaps, ensure that we safely store all printed books and journals so that they will be available to people in five centuries. But where? How? In 2015 UNESCO listed more than two million books published worldwide. How *could* we secure their survival – and that of the millions of books that preceded these – even if a large number of them do not usefully add to the overall store of knowledge?

Come to think of it, we perhaps should not worry about preserving our ‘wisdom’ for centuries to come. We should do something about applying it today. Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* more than fifty years ago and how much notice have we taken of that important and prescient book? Carson’s is but one of hundreds of books whose messages and combined knowledge could have led us to a more sustainable way of organising ourselves. We fail to heed our own combined wisdom on a local and global level, and not because we cannot read or do not know how to access information stored on digital substrates.

What is the value of any of these millions of books journals and articles and blogs and reviews if we do not value what they contain?