

# THE FUTURE OF THE LIBRARY



By Sheila Cui

JONATHAN ZITTRAIN'S  
KEYNOTE ADDRESSES  
INNOVATION IN THE  
DIGITAL AGE



The Internet has no prejudice. It is free and accessible to all regardless of race, gender, creed, or nationality. Now imagine an Internet lockdown at some point in the future. Isn't that a scary thought? It raises a series of questions that we need to confront now: How would a lockdown be possible? Is there anything we can do as a profession to put a stop to an unsettling destructive trend? What is the solution?

This was the subject of the AALL Annual Meeting keynote speech by Jonathan Zittrain, professor of Internet Governance and Regulation at Oxford University and co-founder of Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Zittrain's topic was intriguing enough, and his engaging presentation style kept the audience riveted during the 90-minute speech. The high quality of the content and delivery makes the audio recording of the session a worthwhile purchase.

Zittrain's inspiring thoughts and ideas were relevant to the Annual Meeting theme—"Innovate!" He opened with a discussion of traditional library settings and eased into an analysis of the issues facing libraries in the digital age by introducing new information technology (IT) concepts. Zittrain successfully distinguished himself as a competent speaker, seamlessly incorporating familiar examples into dry and sometimes difficult IT jargons and notions—an effective presentation technique that commanded the attention of nearly 1,200 attendees.

## Dangers on the Horizon

As people increasingly rely on Internet-

focused applications, vendors and their partners are gaining control over content and access. Some recent examples of this "tethered technology" include: digital video recorders designed to self-destruct; Kindle e-books programmed to mysteriously vanish; Global Positioning Systems (GPS) in cars conveniently eavesdropping on passengers; and new Web 2.0 applications such as Google Mashup and Facebook monitored and controlled by service providers.

Profit-driven companies, fully aware of the power of information in the digital revolution, have been pouring massive amounts of capital into digitizing all kinds of information around the clock. When a desired level of control over vast categories of information is reached, they will be celebrating their big pay day while the general public laments the loss of free access to information. Unfortunately, the digital publishing world appears to be insulated from the rules of conduct that apply in the physical realm. This alarming state of affairs calls for innovative solutions to create a healthy environment in which social structures, laws, rules, regulations, and ethics can all play their appropriate roles, thus freeing various aspects of cutting-edge information technologies from control or manipulation by a single gate-keeping entity, private or public.

A vivid example is Wikipedia, a typical Web 2.0 platform, which has been at the center of some controversies. Its greatest strengths and weaknesses are the communal nature of its accessibility and its knowledge-sharing features. Within Wikipedia, mistakes are being

made and corrected, then created again by global public editors as we speak. This intrinsic shortfall undermines its stability as a reliable source of information, leading Zittrain to consider it always "45 minutes away from self-destruction." Such phenomena make the Internet's prospects seem bleak, suggesting it is on a fast track to disaster.

## Taking Charge of the Web

Actions are required now to avoid an Internet tsunami down the road. The sooner we act, the better handle we can get on existing and potential problems. Zittrain concluded the speech with encouraging words, stating that the Internet's salvation lies "in the goodwill of its millions of users." By developing new technologies and social structures that allow users to work creatively and collaboratively while avoiding the excesses and abuses of openness, libraries can act as catalysts on many levels in the digital revolution. For instance, libraries rather than private entities can—and should—play a key role in digitizing and storing information for the public good.

A great speaker has solid expertise, understands the audience, and possesses exceptional communication skills. Zittrain scored high in all of these areas. He was able to communicate his extensive knowledge fluidly and effortlessly, and bring home important issues. He effectively utilized visual aids as well as physical gestures while articulating his messages in a loud, clear, and poised manner. His smart sense of humor was pleasantly entertaining. Throughout the session, he was able to keep the audience fully engaged with a high level of enthusiasm. As a conference attendee, I was enlightened and entertained at the same time. ■

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