

The present as the source of future histories

Editorial by D. de Cogan which appeared in the IEE's Engineering Science and Education Journal
9(6) (2000) 242 - 243

We are told that we live in an information era and that there has been a revolution. In so far as there are winners and losers in any revolution this may be so. And yet, there are some who say that future historians will view the latter half of the twentieth century as an *Information Desert*. I would like to examine this contention from various view-points.

As the imperial nations were expanding during what Thomas Pakenham has called "The Scramble for Africa" there was a 'no-man's-land' between British, French and German territory. It suited all parties to allow one man, King Leopold of Belgium to indulge his ambitions in establishing the Congo as his private fiefdom. Adam Hochschild's book "King Leopold's Ghost" gives a chilling account of greed and personal aggrandisement at the expense of others. Ivory and later rubber were extracted in vast quantities and at terrible cost in terms of human misery. Leopold never visited the Congo and the method of remote control of his lands would not have been possible before the advent of cable telegraphy.

In researching his book, Hochschild was hampered by the lack of primary sources, but quotes:

" . . . One day in 1908, shortly before the colony was officially handed over to Belgium¹ the king's young military aide Gustave Stinglhamber walked from the Royal Palace to see a friend in the Congo State Offices next door. The midsummer day seemed particularly warm, and the two men went to an open window to talk. Stinglhamber sat down on a radiator, then jumped to his feet: it was burning hot. When the men summoned the janitor for an explanation, he replied "Sorry, but they're burning the State archives". The furnaces burned for eight days, turning most of the Congo state records to ash and smoke in the sky of Brussels. "I will give them my Congo" Leopold told Stinglhamber, "but they have no right to know what I did there". . . " (The king's policy of ruthless exploitation of the country's resources had led to world condemnation).

Even when archives are available we are confronted with problems due to the work of 'weeders', faceless people who decide what information will and will not be preserved for future generations. The case is made that it is necessary to be selective in order to conserve space, but this raises two questions. Can we be certain that those who make such decisions are being impartial and how do they know what people in thirty, fifty or one hundred years might deem to be important? In the first case, it is so easy to distort history by the selective preserving of documents. We still debate whether Richard III was really as bad as portrayed by Shakespeare or whether he was the victim of a Tudor conspiracy to discredit the Yorkist cause. In the context of the Wars of the Roses it might have been essential to do this, but we have quite a different perspective today.

In my own researches I have had to endure the zeal of the weeder. How were such people to know that I would like to see original copies of a set of cablegrams, whose interception and

¹ From 1908 until independence in 1960 it was known as the Belgian Congo. It is now the Congolese Republic

exploitation brought the United States into the First World War. The 'via' instructions which they contain would indicate which relay stations had been used. "via Galveston" which appears in the figures in Barbara Tuchman's book (The Zimmerman Telegram) was intended to conceal the fact that British Intelligence had broken the German ciphers. During the 1920s the Italians financed a trans-Atlantic cable which went from Anzio to New York with relay points at Malaga and the Azores. I have a copy of the messages which were transiting this cable at the precise moment that it was cut as Italy entered the second world war. It was difficult to identify the cables that did the deed? I believe that that same cable was diverted into North Africa as part of Operation Torch ". . . (the Allied landing in North Africa in 1942) to provide Eisenhower with a line of communication to the US that did not go via Britain." as one telegraph operator told me. The Torch records mention the fact that the invasion fleet included a cables ship but it was not named. How were the weederers to know that the cable equivalent of a train-spotter would come along sixty years later wanting the precise information that they perceived to be unworthy of preservation?

It took eight days to destroy the Congo records in Brussels and as Hochschild has said ". . . Hitler and Stalin in some ways left a larger paper-trail behind them". But today it is different! Never before have we been in a position to destroy information so effectively. The instruction interpreted in DOS as 'DEL *.*' was the beginning. GUI (Graphical User Interface) operating systems such as Microsoft Windows and Macintosh OS make it even easier, so that the 'Transfer-to-Trash' mouse action is all that is required to remove gigabytes beyond reach forever

Even if we do provide historians of the future with lots of primary resources, even if weederers are more conscientious, we must be aware that those who come after us may have quite different priorities and may make quite different demands on the information that we leave to them. The bible has an almost continuous line of communication but we now have a different perspective on Genesis and some of the genealogical details in Chronicles and elsewhere may seem less relevant to some than they were at the time of writing. We can hypothesise that the Egyptian glyphographers were inscribing histories to inform such as us, but there was a break in the link and first attempts to interpret hieroglyphs were quite speculative. The Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 is remarkable for the fact that the invading army was accompanied by archaeologists, scientists and artists. During the defensive preparations at Rosetta (on the Nile Delta) an inscribed slab of basalt (now in the British Museum) was discovered which provided the key; the same piece of text was repeated in three formats, including greek and hieroglyphs. Without the Rosetta Stone, we would still be in the dark.

Now, if these ideas are translated into today's terms, I am mindful that there was a time when I committed my work to floppy disks on a *Commodore Pet* computer (not an easy task). I then graduated to the wonderful *BBC Microcomputer*. A later development which exploited the properties of the Zilog Z80 microprocessor comprised a box which was attached to the 'Beeb' (as the BBC Micro was called). This allowed the Z80, using the CP/M operating system to use the latter's I/O facilities. At about that time communications packages such as *Kermit* were being developed so that information could be exchanged between computer platforms. It was thereby able to transport all Torch files to my first PC. This was fortunate, because it could not be done today unless I could locate the correct equipment (in working order) and still remember the OS syntax.

So, what happens when the replacement for the replacement for the PC is long obsolete and there are terabytes of information that cannot be accessed? Will we have a new breed of IT archaeologist or will the *Information Desert* contention be justified? It is up to us to address this now. On the basis that microscopes are likely to be available, should we not seek to borrow the latest technology from VLSI and store our knowledge in Roman script as 'nano-film' or should we now start to devise a unified encoding system (the modern equivalent of Latin) which will guarantee communications integrity for millennia to come?