

Can You Name the Newest Wonder of the World?

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The genius of every great scientist. Compelling accounts of the past from every acclaimed historian. The most aesthetic artwork human beings have ever created. And all the music that has ever stirred any's soul. All in one place. A library.

Would you want access to such a library? And if you did, what would you do once you got in?

Would you use it to learn every secret you could, searching for wisdom among its many aisles? Or would you invite your friends in, and turn it into a common room for banter and arguments?

This library exists

You are in it at this very moment, browsing one of its many books. It is the internet. The device you are reading this on, be it a smartphone or a desktop, is your library card.

The internet is the greatest library mankind has ever constructed, an incomprehensibly huge store of information. You could dedicate every moment of your life to extracting all the knowledge contained in it and die in a state of pathetic failure.

But extracting knowledge from the internet is not common. In this grand, ever expanding library, most people are not to be found exploring the dark aisles.

Most people are instead gathered in a tiny of the library – they are not there to read. Ironically, most people have come to the library... to talk.

When I was a child, my mother would drop me off at the kids of the public library – a brightly coloured den of beanbags and toys. There were a few children's books around, heavily illustrated and printed in a massive font.

It is in this of the internet where we dwell today

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are where the comfy beanbags are. And there we laze, boasting to one another about the quality of our lives.

We signal our virtue to any who will listen, expressing sympathy to the victims of the latest tragedy or promoting one cause or another. It doesn't matter what the cause is – you just need everyone to know that you are a politically-correct member of society who supports everything in vogue. We may even change our profile picture to achieve this, just to make sure that every knows you're for or against Brexit, Scottish independence, gay marriage, etc.

Likes, retweets, favourites make us feel good about ourselves – the more we get, the more accomplished and successful we feel. A lack of them in our lives makes us feel insecure and unsatisfied – our happiness begins to depend on them. Our online lives begin to consume us.

The aisles of books stretching into the distance stand silent around us, rarely touched. The occasional visit to Wikipedia to back up an argument in the playpen is as far as many will stray.

How did we get here? What turned such a great library into the noisiest venue on the planet?

In short, the librarians

Google and Facebook are two examples of the dozens of librarians indexing books and helping people find them. Each has their own way of cataloguing the books, and each specialise in different genres of books.

The internet was not always "searchable". Back in the old days, you couldn't ask a librarian to find you the book you were after. The aisles and aisles of books were not ordered or labelled, and exploring them was an exciting pastime for those with the navigational skills. But it took time.

And as more people came online, a business opportunity presented itself. If you could label and index all the books, users of the library would refer to your expertise whenever they needed a book. Rather than looking for it themselves, which could take a

significant amount of time, they could simply type what they wanted into your “search bar”. As they referred to your guidance more and more, you built up. You could then sell their reading habits to advertisers, marketers, or even intelligence agencies.

As the library gained more users, the skills required to browse the towering aisles of books without the help of librarians became very scarce. New users now enter the library without any such knowledge, and depend entirely on the librarians.

This dependency on the librarians has lent them great power

For not only can they sell your reading habits to the highest bidder, they can *change* your reading habits. Websites promoting views they like will appear more often in your search results. You can of course pay Google for your website to show up in more searches, but only if your content is aligned with what Google wants people to see.

If it doesn't like your book, it can be moved to the back of the list. When was the last time anyone looked past the second page of Google search results? Such is the state of the millennial attention span today, that if a statement in the search bar isn't verified by the first couple pages of results, it is judged to be false.

But showing up less in results is a rap on the knuckles. Should your website not be deemed appropriate for public consumption for whatever reason, it is removed from the index; thrown back into the piles of unlabelled books. It will not show up in searches at all.

“I'm sorry, we don't seem to have a copy of that book,” the librarian says, a fake smile hanging dead beneath cold eyes.

This practice of removing a book from an index is imposed differently by different librarians, but all of the big players do it one way or another.

On Twitter for example, there is a practice known as “shadow banning”

Post content it doesn't like, and Twitter will prevent it from showing up in the news feeds of those who follow you. The twist is that you don't know this is going on. You continue making tweets no can see, oblivious to the fact that you are effectively yelling alone in a soundproof cell. “Social” media indeed.

Of course if you are causing too much of a ruckus in the kids , the librarians will escort you out. Being banned, or having your account suspended, is increasingly common.

The more you depend on the librarians, the more powerful they become. Wealth soon follows of course, but it is a shallow reflection of the strength the librarians hold over modern society. Being able to bend public perception to your will cannot be understated.

Of course, the librarians don't want to limit access to the library – they want as many people online and using it as possible. They don't even mind if you venture beyond the kids – just so long as you ask for their help in doing it. So long as users need them to find books, they have control.

This will continue for the foreseeable future. Use of the internet will only increase over time – and the power of the librarians will continue to grow.

The Great Library of Alexandria

Hundreds of years before Christ, a man named Ptolemy Lagides created the largest library mankind had ever seen. It was immense. It stored hundreds of thousands of papyrus scrolls, including the work of prodigies like Socrates and Homer. Within its walls lay the history and culture of the ancient world. It hoovered up information as no library had before. One of Ptolemy's successors is said to have ordered each ship arriving in port to hand their manifests in to the library where the captains would wait for a copy to be made for them.

Two thousand years ago it vanished. It is generally thought to have been scorched from the face of the earth, however no has conclusively proved by whom, or when.

Its demise, like the secrets it held, remains a mystery. Many tears have been shed in recent times over the massive loss of knowledge the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria represented.

Today, a similar library stands in the centre of our civilisation – the internet. Yet we do seem to appreciate it as a library. Instead, we use it as a digital venue for squabbles and banter. Which makes me wonder – did the average Alexandrian really care about the knowledge in that great library? Or was it just used as a venue for people to gather around and chat about outside?

But if they did use it as a great font of knowledge – how much power did the librarians have?

What do you think? Let me know: boaz@southbankresearch.com.

Until next time,

Boaz Shoshan

PS Speaking of libraries, we're giving out a book. Don't worry, you won't need to return this one after a few weeks! It's yours, for free. And it's about the incredible future of cryptocurrencies. [Click here to find out more.](#)