

Transcript of Speech by Aslak Myhre, Director of National Library of Norway, at Fantastic Futures 2019: 2nd International Conference on AI for Libraries, Archives, and Museums

For a Norwegian to travel all the way from the polar circle and to Stanford, California to talk about AI is a bit dangerous and it makes me awestruck. You feel small in this place. To talk about technology in the places where the tools we use in our daily life, and mind you, the tools we never could imagine having ten or twenty years ago, were developed, while in the environment where the ideas were born, is something that creates a feeling of awe, of honor and respect. But also to be standing here and looking out of a crowd of librarians, of archivists, of the museum conservators, of people from the knowledge sector also creates for me a feeling of honor, of awe and respect.

For when we talk about AI and we talk about technology, we librarians are of course the juniors. If we gather all our developers, all our technological force, (and) put them all together in a room. The room doesn't need to be so big. If we compare ourselves to Google, to Facebook, to Amazon, to the big big companies working on this, we are tiny. We don't have the manpower or woman power or human power to be at the front of technological development. .

But at the same time, looking at us, we have something else that actually puts us in front.

What do we have? We have our collections. And if we put all our collections together, we have the collected memory of humankind, of six thousands or eight thousands or millions of years on this planet. That's what our collections are for. Each one of our collections is a small part of the cultural heritage and all together it's all of the cultural heritage of the world.

And we have another thing. We have community, we meet in places like this, all the time, to share, not to compete. There is no competition amongst libraries, archives, and museums. There's only sharing, a feeling of collectiveness. This is who we are. And in this, even though we are juniors, we might be actually the sharp edge, the pinpoint in the front of development.

When we talk about technology as AI, we inevitably end up talking about the future. And the title for this conference is exactly that, Fantastic Futures. The future that is so bright, we gotta wear shades and so on. And we love this. At least we librarians, we love to meet and talk all over the world, in each of our countries, and talk about what is a library, or even more popular, what is the future library.

And we are under a hard pressure to always think new, to always be creative, to always create the idea for the future. Looking at what I said, what we are, what we have together, I think, in the meeting with AI, machine learning and new technology, the first thing we need to do is to think old, not new.

We need to think old. Not ask ourselves what will be in the future, but what we are, what is an actual library? What are we? We tend to think that we are our technology. We tend to think that we are the catalogue, the library is a catalog, the library is the metadata, that the library is a collection on the shelves or now the digital.

But this is not true. And if you talk to the public libraries, they tend to think they are institutions that lend out books and materials to people, and that's the core of the library. But this is not true either. Lending out books is extremely new in libraries. Lending out books is linked to the development of public library in late 19th and early 20th century. Libraries are old, extremely much older than this.

And what are we then? Well, we are knowledge institutions. We know that. We try to gather, as I said, the knowledge of humankind, all knowledge, all cultures in one place. And we have been so since Alexandria and even before that.

But there has been one major evolution in the thinking of libraries. And it's also an old thought. The thought was that, we do not just keep the knowledge, we want people to use it. We are not gatekeepers of knowledge. We used to be gatekeepers, gatekeepers for kings, gatekeepers for universities, gatekeepers for the Pope or priests or whoever. We are now gate openers.

Every librarian all over the world today will want to be opening his or her gate, to give people access, wanting people to use the collections. We're agents for the knowledges in our collections. Agents for education, agents for culture, missionaries. We are people's enlighteners. We are the children of enlightenment. That is who we are. And that was a major change.

If we think that the library is the catalogue, and the librarian is a person who knows the catalog, is able to find the book in the shelf, or placed correctly in the Dewey decimal system, librarians will be as rare in the future as typographers, telegraphers and other old trades are today. We will not need thousands of people working the Dewey system. I am sorry. We will not need thousands of people working in the catalog. We will not need help to find the books on shelves. All that can be automatized.

But if librarians are holders of human knowledge, and agents and missionaries and gate openers for this knowledge, if librarians are enlighteners and educators, there will be more of us than any time. And there will be more need for us than there has been in any time in history.

This is where we should start thinking as new. As Mike said, looking at AI and machine learning not as magic, not as something strange to us, something we need to become, but as a tool. And as a tool, we cannot choose not to use this tool. We cannot choose not to go into this.

Fifteen years ago, the national library of Norway decided to digitize our entire collection. We did this from a very, very, very simple statement. We said, in the future, people will expect to find knowledge online. If our knowledge base shall be relevant in the future, it needs to be online. And thus, we need to digitize it. It's as simple as that.

We could draw a parallel to AI or machine learning today. In the future, and the very near future as in tomorrow, people will expect to have AI tools to help navigate their lives. They already

have, knowingly and unknowingly. If our collections and our knowledge shall be relevant, interesting and accessible in the future, we need to use these tools. It's as simple as that.

But then there's more. Because then comes the question. What are we using these tools for? How will we use them? And there's a boring and exciting version. And we need to do both.

The boring version is to make the machines do what you want to do today. And we've been doing that since the industrial revolution. Getting machines to do what humans used to. In library AI that means we need to make the machines see Dewey, to catalog, to give analysis, give us keywords, stuff like that, things we do today. But it's boring. It's really boring. We already have catalogs and keywords and Dewey. There's nothing new in that. What else can we do? And that's the exciting part. What can we do with AI and machine learning, and other tools that humans can't do today? And here comes, for me, the crucial point. We have, all together, all the knowledge of humankind in our collections. This means that we all together have created the all of information that is so massive that nobody actually can navigate it.

Just in Norwegian National Library we have now digitized about 2.5 million newspaper editions. It's magic, except who can read 2.5 million newspaper editions. Nobody can do that. Reading just takes as long time as it always did. When they are digitized you can search them and find what you're looking for if you know what you are looking for. But what about analyzing them? What about reading them all? Who can read them all? The machine can read them all. Can we teach the machine to read them and actually give us answers? If so, we will have answers no human could ever even fathom, because the capacity of analyzing our collections all together would be enormous. And that will give us both as researchers and as users experiences and knowledge we couldn't find in any other way. And that's the exciting part.

We will never be as many as Google or as many as Microsoft or as many as any other industry. But we still need to invest a hundred percent in this development, because we have, as I said, one thing that differs us from the others. We have the collections on the history of humankind. And we have something more too. We have an aim and a mission. When we use this technology on the collective cultural heritage of humans, we aim to improve the lives of humans.

Our aim is only one thing, to educate, to create knowledge, to give democracy. All in all it sums up to improving the human condition, to make lives better. We're agents and missionaries for our collections, not because we love the collections, because we think the collections are important to humankind. And thus we will hopefully address AI and machine learning in a different way than any other institutions could.

As knowledge institutions, we could actually make a great difference addressing this technology. And that's what we are doing now, having a Fantastic Futures conference. And that's why it's important. Because what comes out of our work collectively, we actually, maybe, hopefully, change the lives of people all over the world.

Thank you very much.

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Place: Stanford University Libraries

Date: December 4, 2019

Transcribed by the *International Journal of Librarianship*. April 2020.

Conference URL: <https://library.stanford.edu/projects/fantastic-futures>