

Scanning is the New Spinning
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Good evening!

We still do not know who burned the Library of Alexandria.

Perhaps it was Julius Cesar—who was trysting with Cleopatra but feared an attack from her brother Ptolemy. Cesar set fire to the wharves to prevent enemy boats from landing—and that fire spread to warehouses that kept books—and maybe it also burned the library.

Even if Cesar did not destroy the library, other invaders came and went—there were more fires—and we know a few hundred years later this magnificent temple of knowledge was gone.

In India, the great libraries of Taxila and Nalanda had been destroyed by then. The world was entering a bad time. India turned onto itself. Europe descended into poverty, intolerance, and ignorance.

It was the dark ages.

But in Arabia, the great Abbasid Caliphs built the House of Wisdom—the Grand Library of Baghdad—which kept knowledge alive. The texts of Greece and Rome and India were translated into Arabic, they were copied—and they were expanded.

The Hindu numbering system was adopted by the Arabs, indeed you probably know them as “Arabic” numbers—and that was then expanded into new knowledge—a breakthrough—al-Khwarizmi’s seminal *Al-Jabr*, a book whose title means “a reunion of broken parts”—what we now know of as Algebra.

The great translation movement in the House of Wisdom preserved the knowledge of the ages. Those texts went back to India and they also went to Spain, where the Moors had invaded Andalusia, which was the coal that was stoked into a fire.

Western scholars moved to Andalusia and learned Arabic just so they could translate the works of Aristotle and Archimedes into Latin, but also the great medical, astronomical, and mathematical treatises of the Muslim scholars. This was how we got our renaissance in the West.

The renaissance only came to be because the West stood on the shoulders of the Arabs, who in turn stood on the shoulders of the ancients. Those giants don’t walk the earth, but they live in our libraries.

It was by the replication of knowledge that knowledge was preserved.



Today, we have a new House of Wisdom on the Internet. The Internet Archive is the largest public library on the net, a vast trove with millions of books, video, audio, a complete archive of the Web, and so much more.

The Internet Archive is more than a temple of knowledge, it is a platform that we may all stand upon. It is a library that belongs as much to the readers and learners and developers of the world as it does to the amazing staff that keeps the Archive running.

This is a new kind of library, one that can unleash the great untapped potential of the Internet. Universal access to all human knowledge is the great promise of our times, and the Internet Archive is making that promise become real.



In India, we are using the Internet Archive to house copies of the Official Gazettes, the newspapers of government. We are using external sources to add optical character recognition in Indian languages to make them searchable.

Our volunteers—who go by the name “The Servants of Knowledge”—are crowdsourcing better metadata on books, we are scanning scads of important materials in our facility at the Indian Academy of Sciences and with our partners throughout India.

We have posted 19,000 Indian Standards which are being used by millions of students. We are making the entire scientific corpus available for non-consumptive, non-commercial, text and data mining.



The Sermon on the Mount teaches us to “earn thy bread by the sweat of thy brow.” The Bhagavad Gita says those who do not sacrifice for the greater good “eat stolen bread.”

Bread labor was central to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy. Bread labor means you should do something every day by the sweat of thy brow.

When you think of bread labor and Gandhi Ji, a picture no doubt springs to mind of Bapu and his spinning wheel, making kadhi. By empowering the people to make their own cloth, the Mahatma was battling the colonization of his country by the Raj.

What you may not know was that before Gandhi Ji started to spin, bread labor for him was printing. At the Phoenix Ashram in South Africa, everybody had to typeset every day. The dissemination of knowledge was their bread labor. He spread knowledge to fight colonization.



Today, it is knowledge itself that has been colonized.

Scholarly knowledge corporations function as latter-day East India Companies. Scientists are the new Indigo farmers, shipping their raw materials off to journal factories in England, then forced to purchase high-priced finished goods in the form of locked-down journal subscriptions.

What is Sci-Hub but an unlicensed salt factory on the edge of the ocean of knowledge, operating in defiance of this knowledge raj?

There are many factories on the edge of this ocean of knowledge, it is one of the miracles of the Internet. All too many of them though are corporate concerns.

But there is also a public factory, one operating at scale. The Internet Archive is also built on these shores.

The Internet Archive scans millions of books in its huge scan centers in Hong Kong and the Philippines. Volunteers throughout the world scan and upload. It is a tidal wave of knowledge.

Scanning is the new spinning.

The increase and diffusion of knowledge is bread labor that Gandhi would instantly recognize as public work— knowledge is not some corporate asset—we cannot own knowledge, we can only be trustees for the benefit of all humanity.

If we wish to combat the colonization of knowledge, if we wish to create a House of Wisdom—if we wish to realize the great promise of our times of universal access to all human knowledge—this will not happen without you.

This will only work if we all do bread labor.



We must of course thank Brewster Kahle and the staff of this gorgeous edifice they have built—a platform for the ages—a gift they have made for us all. But this is a gift that we must pay forward.

You can scan, you can code, you can upload, you can contribute in any way you see fit—but you must act—for the future of knowledge is up to you—it is up to all of us.

If we want to see an Internet Archive that lasts for eternity, we must be the library we wish to see.

Help save the world. Be a librarian. Help make universal access to all knowledge a human right.

Thank you very much.