



Keith Murdoch Oration 2019 Speech

Delivered by John Wylie, President, Library Board of Victoria

Tuesday 16 April 2019

- Premier of Victoria the Hon Dan Andrews
- Former Premier and Chancellor of La Trobe University, the Hon John Brumby
- Chair of the ACCC, Rod Sims
- Members of the Murdoch Family, in particular Chair of the Herald and Weekly Times Penny Fowler
- And our speaker and guest of honour tonight, Mr. Robert Thomson, Global Chief Executive of News Corporation

On behalf of the Library Board of Victoria and the State Library Foundation, good evening and welcome to this marquee night at the State Library Victoria, the 2019 Keith Murdoch Oration.

I firstly acknowledge that we meet tonight on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, the TOs of this land, and pay our respects to them and their elders.

I pay homage to all indigenous elders past and present and acknowledge that this country is the home of the oldest continuous civilisation in the world.

Thank you all for joining us tonight for this auspicious occasion.

The KMO is a highly significant night for the Library, held every two years since its inception in 2001 to honour the outstanding contribution of Sir Keith Murdoch as President of this Library.

Delivering the inaugural Oration, Rupert Murdoch described the principles Sir Keith had in common with State Library Victoria, namely:

“Dedication to the cause of knowledge and its fair distribution. A faith in the permanent value of the written word. And the determination to provide each and every curious citizen with access to information”.

Past orations have been moving and powerful with real impact. In my time on the Library Board we've had:

- former Prime Minister Paul Keating weave a compelling narrative about Australia's need to be more courageous as a country and to project itself more in the world, especially in Asia; and
- Lachlan Murdoch describe in evocative terms his journey through the media industry from his cadet days getting ink under the fingernails in the print room to industry leader, setting out a vision for the future of the media with his obvious love for the industry shining through, along the way giving us a poignant tour through Gallipoli where his grandfather made his name as a correspondent.

Two years ago, we were treated to a tour de force by Noel Pearson, arguing in his typically lyrical and charismatic prose for a new radical centre in the Australian polity as it relates to indigenous affairs. This speech proved to be a precursor and a foundation to the beautifully constructed and compelling Uluru Statement from the Heart by Australia's indigenous communities calling with one voice soon afterwards for indigenous recognition in the Constitution, an encapsulation of a spiritually generous radical centre in Australian public life.

Noel began his Oration with a story from his childhood, telling of a small bookshelf his father built – the only bookshelf in his childhood home – and the greatest gift his father had ever given him, an invocation quoting Francis Bacon that can be contemporarily updated as “reading makes a full person”.

If a single bookshelf can produce someone of Pearson's intellect and drive, it's easy to appreciate the value of a major public library like this.

These orations have had impact not solely because of their content but also because they were timely and relevant to pressing issues of the day.

And so it is tonight.

Since the time the commercial internet took off about 25 years ago, we've seen a digital revolution in society unlike any previous revolution in human history - for its power to disrupt, connect, and to transform personal relationships, society, politics and the significance of national borders to name just a few consequences.

The benefits of this revolution, at both a societal and practical individual level, have been many.

We can now expect to live longer and healthier lives thanks to the technology-driven roll-back of the frontiers of medical science. The ordinary person has been given a voice to make themselves heard. Political tyrants and oppressive regimes have found it more and more difficult to suppress the truth and a public wanting better lives, because information has become so much harder to control. The public has taken back power from corporations, courtesy of a ruthlessly efficient and transparent online marketplace for goods and services. Friends anywhere in the world are no longer “long lost” but only a click away. Cheap spare rooms in peoples' homes have displaced expensive hotel accommodation, making travel more affordable. Getting a lift somewhere is now reliable and quick, and amazingly enough in Melbourne, your driver cannot get lost. Even families have been thankfully spared the contributions of Dads like me on road trips who have proven themselves unable to read maps, the ensuing family conflict thankfully a thing of the past.

Societies have been transformed by technological change before but there are four reasons why this time it's different.

One, the network effects of digital technology mean that power from new technologies and its economic benefits have flowed to a very small number of corporations. In our capitalist system there is no better expression of this than the fact that seven of the world's ten most valuable companies today are tech companies – 5 from the US, 2 from China.

Two, those same network effects mean the technologies have global impact. They create a global village but they also shrink, homogenise and colonise it.

Three, these technologies pose a mortal threat to many forms of traditional employment, in ways we don't really yet understand. When Facebook pays US\$19bn to buy a tech company with just 55 employees, we should reflect on what that means.

And four, the revolution's not slowing down, it's accelerating. The new frontier is machine learning, the automation of automation itself. Facebook is working on a machine-learning algorithm that can build other machine-learning algorithms.

All of us are familiar with the unwritten contract we've signed up to with Big Tech and social media platforms: give us your data, some of your privacy, and we'll give you connectivity, information and purchasing power vastly greater than any previous generation in human history, for free.

We know the benefits - but in recent times, it's begun to feel like we're arriving at a major inflection point, where silent reservations about the hidden side of this bargain have grown beyond a whisper to a loud conversation about its social and economic consequences and the case for instituting controls to restore balance and even decency, to allow the public to take back at least a measure of social and economic power.

Shameful experiences like the livestreaming of the horrific events in Christchurch have provided a focal point for the need for change, but even before that there was a rising mood of concern about tech platforms: about their calculated addictiveness, the lack of responsibility they've taken for what is published on their sites that

no conventional media company could get away with; and the community's loss of privacy.

The conversation has extended to the economic consequences as well: the garnering of unprecedented global market power by a few, the scope for unfair economic competition that goes with that, and the propensity of their business models to siphon economics from adjacent industries which occupy an unfortunate place that has come to be known as the “kill zone” due to the effect that Big Tech has had on them. A conversation in which it must be said that brave regulators here in Australia and in Europe have shown themselves willing to lead and stand up and be counted.

You know that tech has strayed far from its early idealistic goals when Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the founder of the internet, described recently his distress at the way his invention has turned into an “engine of inequity and division.”

The greatest living sage on our planet, Dr. Henry Kissinger recently wrote a piece on AI entitled “How the enlightenment ends”, a remarkable synopsis by a 92-year-old of an AI-governed future. In it he said “The Enlightenment started with essentially philosophical insights spread by new technology (the printing press). Our period is moving in the opposite direction. It has generated a potentially dominating technology (AI) in search of a guiding philosophy.”

Now it's important not to be technophobic. It's difficult to dispute the notion that since the Enlightenment, advances in technology have been central to the advance of humanity. Technology will save lives in the future that can't be saved today. Technology will help rebuild Notre Dame Cathedral – and with the Honorary Consul for France here tonight, it's important to acknowledge the deep sympathy in our community for the cultural catastrophe that happened in Paris overnight.

But these questions about the impact of tech in our lives are fundamental questions. Fortunately for me, my role tonight is simply to pose the questions, it's the lucky task of our Orator, Mr Robert Thomson, Chief Executive of News Corp to answer them! Which given his unique position in the global media and digital information domains, I am sure he will do in fine style, in an address

I'm very much looking forward to. Our CEO Kate Torney will introduce Robert a little later.

Before we hear from Robert, I want to make some remarks about what this rapidly-changing world means for public libraries and this Library in particular.

Not long ago, it was conventional wisdom to question where public libraries were headed - what would be their relevance in the Google era, with more information than ever before stored in any traditional public library available instantaneously at people's fingertips on their smartphones?

I'm pleased to say, as is so often the case with conventional wisdom, the reverse has proven to be the case. This institution has become more popular and important in the community than ever before. Both physical and online visitation here have increased substantially in the past five years, to the point where we now have 2m visitors through our doors each year and 4m online, making us the most utilised library in Australia by a large margin and the 4th most visited library in the world, ahead of the great libraries of London, Paris and Berlin to name a few.

The success of this Library is the reason we've embarked on our ambitious \$90m Vision 2020 redevelopment project, to transform the Library for the future. This project has enjoyed pivotal support from the Victorian Govt under Premier Andrews – thank you Premier – and will create 40% more public space to accommodate our ever-expanding number of visitors. It will re-open and re-imagine some of the most beautiful public spaces in Australia, such as the Ian Potter Queen's Hall which we can't wait to show you.

But ultimately, while the building's lovely, this institution's not about a building. It's about an idea, an idea conceived 160 years ago that this community should have an institution which makes information free and accessible to all, without regard to privilege, opportunity, earnings, the suburb you live in, your political philosophy or background. To advance the cause of knowledge, the open contest of ideas and improved understanding, as vital ingredients of a better society.

Today, more than ever before, our Library is a bulwark of the values essential to a free and just society. It's a beacon of truth in a post-truth world. It's a place whose raison d'être is equality of opportunity in a world that feels it's becoming less equal.

These are ideas and values that are more important than ever before given the melancholy forces of ignorance, polarisation, fear and suspicion of difference that seem all-too-prevalent around us today.

Institutions with longevity only enjoy that longevity by understanding the needs of the community they serve and adapting to them. Indeed, anticipating them. That's what we're doing with the Vision 2020 redevelopment, delivering new services and programs, such as in entrepreneurship and digital media production, that we are confident will be embraced by the public.

And we are, as you would expect, adapting our role and services to serve the new needs of the community in the digital era.

I believe this Library has four specific public roles and obligations that give us a unique and important value in the digital era.

The first is to be the keeper of the community's digital memory. The community's reaction to significant events is now most honestly and representatively captured online, in real time. With some obvious exceptions, a community needs these to be edited and recorded for its future memory. With the explosion of online connectivity, that's a vastly larger, harder and less structured challenge than simply collecting a copy of every daily newspaper as in the past. Who is in a position to do that on behalf of future generations? A public library.

Second, given the pervasive lack of accuracy, fact-checking and often downright dishonesty of information on the web in the post-truth era, who can the community trust for information that will be reliable and come from an authoritative source? A public library.

Third, given the way the digital revolution is opening up a new "haves" and "have nots" divide in the community, between those who are digital natives (or at least digitally capable) and those who are not - and the increasingly significant consequences of being on

the wrong side of the divide in terms of social inclusion and employability - who can the public turn to to provide free training in digital skills? A public library. The Library is now, more than ever, a place that bridges divides between the young and the old, between the digitally capable and those who feel intimidated or left behind by new technologies.

Finally, we have a vital responsibility to make our amazing collection available and accessible to all, a task made easier in the digital world, but which also requires investment to make possible. We're about one-quarter way through our ambitious (but sadly expensive) project to digitise the Library collection. We've also proudly been a cornerstone partner in a project in recent years to share digital legal deposit resources nationally to improve access for people across Australia to online library resources irrespective of state boundaries.

I want to thank tonight our event partners: News Corp Australia; Herald Sun; Sky News; The Australian; The Pratt Foundation; Bertrand Bespoke; Maidenii; Mind Spirits & Co; M. Chapoutier; Pommery and Showtime.

I thank the Murdoch family for the exceptional support they have shown and continue to show this institution in so many ways down the generations.

I acknowledge and thank also La Trobe University with which we'll be announcing in the coming weeks the next stage in our long and productive partnership.

I thank all the members of our fabulous organising committee for tonight's event, the Library's Foundation Council led by Chair Maria Myers. You've done a great job and it's much appreciated.

And I thank all of you and for your support for our Library. You've already been generous by attending tonight; I ask you to be

generous of spirit again as you gaze at the donation forms on your tables. We are after all, a not-for-profit public institution that relies on the assistance of our supporters to be able to provide the community service that we do.

The value the Library provides today and tomorrow in formal and informal education, in civic participation, in creating a new generation of information-literate and curious people, is not only important to our community, it's vital. Because, reading - and to extend on Bacon's thought - literacy in all forms of information, and engagement with a diversity of ideas, makes not just a full person but a full community.

Please enjoy your dinner as we look forward to hearing Mr. Robert Thomson, Chief Executive of News Corporation, deliver the 8th Keith Murdoch Oration.

ENDS