SCIENCE fiction and fantasy have by and large escaped discussion of a dismediated informational world. In SF, it is true, subgenres like cyberpunk concern themselves with the concept that information is, or should be, free. A common trope in SF is that of the limitless library or archive with instant access to information that makes no visible use of mediators, search tools, or mechanisms for establishing context between and among bits of information. Look no further than Asimov’s Encyclopedia Galactica, of the Foundation novels, or the vast library of memories assembled by Lovecraft’s Great Race of Yith. Perhaps even more familiar is the image of a repository of information ultimately (if in detail-shy) fashion directed by a figure—“the Librarian,” the “Chief Archivist,” or known by a hundred other titles. Some of these institutions are open to all and sundry, whereas others are generally restricted to a specified audience (e.g. the library at Hogwarts, the Jedi Order’s Holocron Vault, the locked-away stacks of forbidden books at Miskatonic University, the Library at Unseen University in Ankh-Morpork).

However, whatever the structure of the individual institution, little thought in the genre is given over to the ethics and democratization of information, that is, to how or why is the information within the archive or library arranged, contextualized, framed, made accessible, presented? James Gunn has been one of the few to mention these kinds of issues; in his essay on the role of libraries in science fiction he speaks of “visions of futures in which libraries are even more important to the fabric of society than they are today and librarians may be only computer programs offer little more than a hint of what lies ahead for all of us, those of us who pull together information, those who consume it, and those who are the custodians and the taxonomists of it” (Gunn, emphasis added).

Likewise, Frederik Pohl, in a speech given in 1965 to the American Documentation Institute, discussed the possibility that science fiction could help real-life thinkers develop new and better systems of information retrieval. He theorized, in reference to his 1956 story “Wapshot’s Demon”, that “it seems to me that there is a difference
between information which is pertinent and useful and information which is not. I don’t know of a demon at present seeking the job of sorting them out, but I do rather think that such a demon, or at least some mechanical-electronic analogue of such a demon, may some day be found—on the simple premise that you and I are able to discriminate between such bits of information, and therefore, it should be sooner or later possible to teach a machine to do so too” (Pohl 102).

Information curation is a serious issue in the real world and the library profession, certainly. There exists a dichotomy between the library as gateway vs. librarian as gatekeeper identities. Librarian of Congress James H. Billington, for one, managed to believe in both these ideas at once. He pointed out in a 1998 article about the American public library system that “knowledge has to be accessible to all people” (11), a nearly universal sentiment. However, he went on to note that “the idea of knowledge-based democracy is threatened, in a peculiar fashion, by the information flood generated by the new technologies and by the overwhelming advance of the audio-visual, multimedia world.” (12) Furthermore:

I fear that all this miscellaneous unverified, constantly changing information on the Internet may inundate knowledge—may move us back down the evolutionary chain from knowledge to information, to miscellaneous raw data. We may be sinking down rather than rising up to wisdom and creativity—those twin peaks that are the highest attainment of the human mind and spirit. Instead of a knowledge-based democracy, we may end up with an information-inundated demagogy. (12)

In recent years, many librarians have tried to pivot their profession in order to cope with this informational Wild West, to reframe the old model of librarians who govern access rather than provide it. As one library blogger, Peter Murray, noted in 2006, “the library profession is a trusted gatekeeper—librarians have a track record of providing orderly access to shared information resources and taking seriously the responsibility to provide access to those resources under the terms with which they were acquired.” On the other hand, the Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) issued in 1999 defines libraries as “gateways to knowledge, thought, and culture.” “Gateways” is a telling self-definition, setting the modern conception of libraries and librarians apart from the more traditional or custodial role of gatekeeper, that is, one who guards the entrance to the court of knowledge and decides who gets
access to which sources of information. It is a repositioning with the potential to assign the role of librarian a new kind of openness, free (free-ish, anyway) from traditional arrogance or paternalism.

Of course much of this paradigm shift, as Billington and others note, has been driven by the rise and ongoing world domination of the Internet, where information can be, to say the least, unguarded. We all recognize the advantages to the democratization of information, in allowing everyone to have equal access to the information they need to be informed citizens insofar as they have Internet access. At the same time, in this current age of “fake news,” a dearth of information literacy, and the fetishization of equality of opinion (that is, my YouTube video from an unknown source is just as good as your trained scientist), there exists, however much we might like to think otherwise, a societal threat inherent in unfettered and context-free information access.

We see that threat made manifest in a fantastical setting: Fran Wilde’s novelette The Fire Opal Mechanism. Wilde’s story, the second in her Gem Universe series,\(^2\) is singular in the fantasy genre in its centering of the control of information as a theme. It does so not in the cliched sense from so many fantasy works of “which questing party gets whose spell book to defeat what evil dark lord,” for example, but in the very modern sense with which librarians and archivists are currently grappling and which, as noted, has enormous implications for the future of society.

The overwhelming menace in Wilde’s story comes from the Pressmen, a group of militant information populists with tactical and rhetorical elements reminiscent of both the eighteenth-century French Revolution and the twentieth-century Chinese Cultural Revolution. As was common during these real-life revolutions, Pressmen launch demonstrations and attacks—particularly stinging are those from former students who turn against their universities—on the traditionally curated information environment, and threaten or suborn educational administrators, in the name of destroying elitism.

The Pressmen derive their name from their magical machine, a reverse printing press into which eager hands toss books and which removes the ink (and therefore the content) from the pages. What results from this destruction is a so-called Universal Compendium of Knowledge, a constantly-updating information source lacking boundaries, context, or structure. For the Pressmen, this is the ultimate freedom, but it comes at the price of violence and the destruction of tradition, as
sorrowfully witnessed by one of the story’s protagonists, Ania Dem, a librarian at the beleaguered Far Reaches University:

The crowd shifted. Ania’s stubbornness increased at a swish of white and blue along the corridors. Two Pressmen stripped the robe from an art professor’s shoulders and let the garment fall to the ground.

Ania’s hopes sank in her stomach, suddenly heavy and sour.

The Pressmen hadn’t been held back. More colleagues, from university guards to Dean Andol, already wore blue and white cloaks, or shiny metal pins in the shape of a book split open, the pages left smooth and blank. (Wilde 23)

The Pressmen’s movement is one of violence and intimidation to ensure an egalitarian purity. This “purity” is represented in their symbol: a book split open, rent asunder, with nothing remaining but blankness. For Pressmen, emptiness is a virtue, representing the erasure of structural or social or human barriers to information, and at the same time the destruction of contextual meaning that made the information relevant in the first place. Their barrage of slogans gives voice to this fervent belief: “Knowledge Unity: An Education for All,” “Conquer The Losses of Time With Knowledge,” “Masters of what’s right, what’s poor! Soon you won’t decide anymore!”

Another of the story’s protagonists, thief Jorit Lee, overhears at one point a Pressman sum up their motives in terms eerily similar to modern faux-democrats who claim that “experts” are unnecessary and universities are nurseries for blasphemy, treason, and elitism:

“Historically, universities never even enriched the towns they occupied. They kept all their best knowledge tucked inside their walls. The Pressmen have always fought to share that knowledge equally,” the guide was saying. “Now that we have the technology, we’re able to do that far faster. What was once a small protest against academic fortresses? Is now changing the Six Kingdoms for the better.”

The new assistants nodded in the dawn.
“So go out today and find as many hidden books as possible. Buy what you can to keep people happy. Take the rest. If you find a professor, call for help. We’ll free these words from what binds them. We’ll share everything. And then we’ll level the rest.”

(Wilde 37)

Now that we have the technology. The coming of the Press signals the dawn of “true knowledge,” free of the heavy hand of undeserved authority. But note that Billington frames the issue in exactly the opposite manner: “The idea of knowledge-based democracy is threatened, in a peculiar fashion, by the information flood generated by the new technologies and by the overwhelming advance of the audio-visual, multimedia world. We talk now about the Information Age, not the knowledge age; we talk about information centers rather than knowledge centers” (Billington 12).

However framed, the divide between knowledge and information is at the heart of the ideological conflict Wilde presents. And, depending on the time and shifts in power, both sides are prone to ridicule, assault, and stridency against each other. A time-travelling Jorit and Ania (having been swept into the past by the mechanism of the story’s title) witness a confrontation early in the then-less-militant Pressmen’s movement across the Six Kingdoms:

Ania nodded, taking the paper back. More knowledge is better. Learn how to spot accuracy. “I remember Grandmother talking about this march”, she said. “Everyone thought the Pressmen seemed smart.” She shuddered. “That they’d add to the local arts and culture, not—”

“Control it?” Jorit nodded. “Something changed.”

. . . Men and women wearing academic robes marking them as members of the two nearest local universities yelled. Their arms swung and their robes belled out as they threw fruit. . . . “You cannot use what you can't understand; knowledge refined is better than knowledge to hand!” More academics shouted the Pressmen down. The crowd seemed to stutter, its affections pulled both ways.

The Pressmen still smiled, but their parade slowed. “We differ in our opinions, that is all,” one of the bearers of the false gems said.
“You are wrong! That is worse!” a professor shouted. “You need education, not just knowledge. Progress cannot happen without refinement. Discourse.”

“But you would choose who gets to talk. Who progresses.” (Wilde 99-100)

These early Pressmen are peaceful demonstrators; they smile and wave at the gathering crowds, and trumpet inspirational slogans like “Knowledge—More Valuable Than Gems.” Who would argue that knowledge is less important than riches or fame? Who would try to deny knowledge to others, especially when the deniers are academics at institutions that are attended by the elite? These seem like common sense and fair contentions, made emotionally more so by the disruptive and insulting attacks made by professors against the Pressmen. Jorit’s brother Marton agrees:

Marton had always been the one to try and explain the difference between being told a thing was true and experiencing the truth of it firsthand . . . Access to books and information should be easier than it is in the Six Kingdoms, he’d said while they studied late at night. We shouldn’t have to fight so hard to learn. She’d asked him then, But do people value it more when they have to fight for it? (Wilde 35, emphasis in original)

But as Jorit notes to Ania, “something changed.” In the intervening centuries, the egalitarian call made in initial good faith transforms into a brutish demagoguery, a sadly familiar pattern that recurs throughout human history and that comes with great societal and spiritual cost.

Without context and structure, argues Ania, there is a lack of the necessary spirit that humanity imbues in the literature it creates. The kind of informational environment envisioned by the Pressmen is cold, sterile, morally void, and, indeed, anti-human. Intermediaries such as scholars and librarians provide guidance and judgment without which knowledge is an indiscriminate mass that can actually do harm. (Scholars of information such as Safiya Noble in her 2018 book Algorithms of Oppression have pointed out how the creation of an “open” informational ecosystem with “unbiased” algorithms is, in fact, an avenue for prioritizing preexisting biases about race and gender.)

In passages familiar to any librarian or reader with an emotional investment in books-as-objects, Wilde records Ania’s meditations on the power of the works she curates and seeks to preserve.
All those words. The thought of Pressmen taking those words from her hands, churning them into pulp and ink, and thus into a full set of constantly current *Universal Compendiums of Knowledge* filled Ania’s stomach with dread. She’d loved books since she was a child playing in her father’s study while he taught his classes. Loved how each volume felt different in the hand, heavy or light; that each smelled of a different era, different knowledge; that they had to be handled carefully—like people—but that they were constant, finished—unlike people. How could she give any of them up?

“But the *Compendiums* could contain everything!” Dean Andol had, the year before, chided the reluctant Master Archivist, Sonoria Vos.

“How does a printing press lay down ink on a page that can twist and rework itself into new forms?” Vos had argued. “And what value do words have across a gap of time if they don’t stay put? Books are measures of time. They are made to grow old, to grow, occasionally, wrong.”

Ania, listening from the stacks, agreed with her mentor. She liked that books had conversations among themselves. That they, like people, sometimes faded or fell apart when not well called for. That made them precious. (15-16)

The human connection that makes collections of and commentaries on knowledge is crucial to that knowledge’s preservation throughout time. Ania would wholeheartedly agree with Billington’s observation that “[t]he very flood of unsorted information makes it more important than ever the librarians’ role of sorting, dispensing, and being neutral but informed navigators . . . the deluge of unsorted electronic information increases the need for a special cast of discriminating knowledge professionals who will add the value of judgment and the warmth of human mediation to all this unintelligible material” (13).¹ Left alone and untended, information has a tendency to drift and its very nature becomes malleable.

Wilde makes this process fantastically explicit in a passage describing the workings of the Press:

A group of four Pressmen with close-cropped hair sat doing simple tasks. Feeding newly blank books into a slim, high-tech press. Dumping sacks of strange ink—dust,
really—across the pages within a glass and iron box. The dust swirled like a storm. Then books emerged, filled *Universal Compendiums of Knowledge*. The Presskeeper lifted a still-warm book for him to see: *Far Reaches University*, the entry read. *Two hundred years and counting, raising leaders in a region known for shipping and fishing.*

As Xachar watched, the letters tangled and blurred, a ribbon of ink curling in on itself and releasing. When it stopped, the page read *Two hundred years of knowledge hoarding in a region known for shipping and fishing.* (Wilde 79, emphasis in original)

Of course, human mediators are perfectly capable of actively altering the narrative, and do, and have. But Wilde’s larger point is that informational intermediaries like librarians or archivists or professors serve a vital purpose in preserving the human chronicle intact across the temporal continuum, passing informed knowledge on to the next generations, and transforming conglomerations of unrelated and unconnected data into story. That is no small thing.

Billington relates the story of speaking to a Native American in Nebraska, who told him that “librarians today are like the oldest person in a tribe in the Native American communities that preexisted the first white settlers. That person kept in his or her head the memory of the tribe, the oral tradition of the community, just as a library later kept its written memory. ‘We didn’t call him the gatekeeper,’ he told me. ‘We called him the dreamkeeper.’ Librarians,” Billington concludes, “must be gatekeepers to useful knowledge—opening windows to the wide world outside; but they can also be the dreamkeepers of each civilization” (16).

*The Fire Opal Mechanism* is unusual in the fantasy and SF genres for Wilde’s thoughtfulness in considering the ethics and politics surrounding information access. As the introduction to this piece notes, all too often libraries and archives in works of the fantastic are background scenery or mere plot devices—opportunities to show off shelves of mysterious and dusty volumes, for example, or vast computer banks where the exact information required is available through a simple query. Little attention, however, is paid to the intricacies of information arrangement, classification, and access. In reality, these things, undramatic as they might be, are crucial to the structure of an informed society. Science fiction has long engaged with the important concerns of the day; how we receive and make information accessible are issues increasingly vital to our societal future, and deserve more treatment by genre authors. (Writers such as Neil Stephenson and Malka Older, for example, have
already produced substantial works concerned with the use and flow of information, so precedent exists for even greater specificity in future narratives.) It is more remarkable to see fantasy embracing this kind of subject matter that has significant societal import. This makes Wilde’s work all the more singular. What Wilde does so powerfully in Mechanism is to reinforce in a fantasy setting this need for a corps of dreamkeepers, to carefully curate and provide access to the knowledge that everyone—whether living in a fantasyland or not—needs in order to understand the human experience.

Notes

1. As a special collections librarian myself, who like many of my colleagues can become entertainingly frustrated at the inaccurate portrayal in literature and film of our profession, I do enjoy a particular exception to this trend in fantasy. In the series The Kingkiller Chronicle, set mainly at the arcane “University”, Patrick Rothfuss takes care to note the existence in the University’s Archives of phenomena familiar to us librarians: dueling and contradictory cataloging schema, an acquisitions department, a quarantine area for the removal of pests, and a staff of student workers to reshelve books and perform other grunt work.

2. See the first volume in the series, the Nebula and Hugo-nominated The Jewel and Her Lapidary (2016), for background. Lapidary takes places several centuries before Fire Opal Mechanism, set in a world where certain gems are imbued with spectacular powers and worn by ‘Jewels’ (the ruling class). The powers of these gems must be harnessed and channeled by human ‘Lapidaries’. In Mechanism, it is a rogue gem that is ultimately responsible for the destruction of knowledge that is central to the plot.

3. Note, also, that at the time of writing the United States continues to struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic, as not only ordinary citizens but state and federal politicians argue that expert scientific testimony is biased and unreliable in the face of “gut feelings” or self-obtained and unsourced information.

4. Whether or not librarians can be truly neutral (and I argue that they cannot), is a debate for a different forum altogether.
Works Cited


