Ethics in Ink: A Conversation with Richard Ovenden

Author of Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge

Interview conducted by Alyssa Gluf, Content Committee, George Washington Journal of Ethics in Publishing



Introduction

Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge offers a warning about the fragility of free societies in an age where institutions of knowledge are frequently destroyed, neglected, censored, and weaponized for political gain. Written by Richard Ovenden, head of the Bodleian Library, the book explores why and how knowledge has been stored, destroyed, and lost throughout history so we may learn how to protect it in the present. As purveyors of information and narratives, publishers have a part in this dilemma through their editorial decisions and responses to societal pressure.

Ovenden and I spoke over Zoom from an ocean away—from New York and Oxford—to discuss new developments since his book was written, the

responsibility of publishers in preserving knowledge, and what the average person can do to help.

What follows is an edited excerpt from our conversation, condensed for clarity and length.

On Recent Challenges to Preserving Knowledge

GWJEP: *Burning the Books* came out in 2020. What would you say has changed most about the ethical landscape since then?

Richard Ovenden: I don't think there's a single answer to that. There's been a continuation of the literal destruction of knowledge in the form of archival and library institutions, and there's been an escalation since 2020 of that physical violence afforded to libraries, particularly the wholesale destruction of libraries in the hundreds in Ukraine has been quite striking.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): The other change has been in the U.S., where the war on public and school libraries over contested titles has reached near-epidemic levels. There have been leakages of that epidemic across the Atlantic, as well as north of the border between America and Canada.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): Something that is entirely new but moved up to a new level of intensity and social impact has been the degree to which major technology companies have exercised their control over the platforms of knowledge. Part of that has been the continued rise and weaponization of social media. Then, the rise of generative AI and the formation of large language models, largely through extraction of knowledge on the open web and increasingly through wholesale piracy, has been a new thing that was not present in 2020 or before I was writing the book.

After reflecting on new challenges, the conversation led to Ovenden's thoughts on recent developments on the matter and how people can support further improvements.

On Hope for the Future

GWJEP: Can you point to a development since 2020 that gives you hope about the fight to preserve knowledge?

Richard Ovenden: I do see signs of hope. I see extraordinary resilience in the librarians in Ukraine. They adapted enormously quickly to support their communities. I've seen in America how individual librarians have been incredibly brave and committed in the way that they have responded to personal attacks in many cases, and then the organization of the library community through the American Library Association for toolkits for support, legal

funding, and crowdfunding for legal defense. We've seen many cases where the various attempts to control through policy were overturned in the courts, so pan–America and its alliance between its library organizations has been really heartening to see.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): What I try to do through *Burning the Books* is raise the profile of libraries in the public discourse and public policy debate. That has continued to move forward, and I think people are beginning to see the value of libraries. I definitely do see signs of hope, but I'm absolutely the opposite of complacent. I think one has to continue to redouble one's efforts and keep fighting on multiple fronts.

On the Average Person's Role

GWJEP: In the book you recommend solutions like funding and policy support for protecting and maintaining information. Is there anything the average person can realistically do to move the needle, or is it largely a systemic issue?

Richard Ovenden: I do think there are things ordinary people can do, absolutely. The public policy around libraries is a political matter. The funds that are available to public libraries and municipal libraries are voted on by elected officials. The lobbying of those officials is only effective when it comes from voters—from ordinary people. They need to express their views and write to their elected officials. It's really as simple as that. That's one thing, and it's a critical thing.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): Secondly, you need to use the library, get a library card, check books out, borrow them online, go and sit in reading rooms, order books from closed stacks. Attend lectures, use the facilities, show through your physical presence or your online clicking that the library is a vital, useful thing.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): Thirdly, where you can, give money. That's even just going into a library café and buying a cappuccino, donating money, or getting involved as a volunteer. Doing anything that you can to support the financial well-being of the library sector, because we cannot be dependent on public funding alone.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): Fourthly, work with young people. Encourage young people to use libraries, because we need that younger demographic to see their value and to utilize their energy.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): Fifthly, what can you do that is the opposite of complacency? We've been too reticent. Society needs to be engaged with the whole issue, and some of that is those specific things like using libraries or helping financially. Partly, it's just that general awareness.

Having discussed the role of the general public, Ovenden offered insight on how publishers contribute to the preservation of knowledge and the fight against censorship.

On the Publisher's Role

GWJEP: Librarians and archivists are obvious guardians of knowledge, as *Burning the Books* highlights. Do you think publishers have similar ethical responsibilities to preserve knowledge? Sometimes that can combine with legal risk, harm to a person's reputation, and pressure over censorship.

Richard Ovenden: I think publishers do have a role beyond the simple commercial. Obviously as the publishing sector has become more aggregated, the commercial imperative can often take precedence. There's nothing wrong with making money with publishing books, but the issue is when those decisions limit unnecessarily the circulation of ideas, the freedom of people to choose what to read, or the way in which publishing maintains veracity, faithfulness, and truth. The mere act of publishing creates a unit of knowledge that can be recycled and reused over time. Those aspects can be often forgotten about in the publishing process.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): I think where you find editorial decisions being influenced by political issues and censorship, a publisher won't want to put their employees at risk of ending up in jail. At the same time, there are principles about the free circulation of ideas as being one of the pillars of an open society.

GWJEP: Right. Resistance has some necessary risk.

Richard Ovenden: Yes, absolutely. And there's never an easy answer to those kinds of things. It can be extremely difficult.

Speaking on the ethical responsibility of publishers, Ovenden elaborated on a related point in his book: archiving information online. We wrapped up with his thoughts on what he wants people to do after reading his book, encouraging readers to act on what they've learned.

On Privacy vs. Public Record Online

GWJEP: Your book talks a little about the tension between privacy and the public record, including peoples' desire to erase their traces online. What do you think about balancing privacy rights with the societal value of preserving things people say and do online?

Richard Ovenden: There are different aspects to this. For people in the public domain who are paid officials or elected representatives, I think there is a societal need to preserve what they say in the public sphere. That is part of

what it is to have an open society where you can hold elected officials or people in positions of power accountable for their statements, and they have to be mindful of that. I think where it becomes trickier is where it's material that was never intended for publication, and in the past this might have taken the form of a telephone call, but nowadays it's quite often using digital communications where people type out an SMS message, or a WhatsApp message. I think society hasn't quite caught up to the fact that this is written communication as we saw in the cases where individuals have been caught out by using encrypted communication technologies and where they should have recognized that these were subject to the prevailing archival legislation. That's where legislation and codes of practice need to be constantly updated, because the technology moves so fast.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): Where it becomes murkier is where it's not anything to do with the formation of public policy, where individuals will quite often transact very personal and private issues using those same technologies. The ability for those to be preserved unwittingly and shared without the knowledge of individuals has become a massive concern. I do hear accounts of politicians going back to relying on telephone calls for private conversation and being very alert to the fact that anything written down will find its way into public circulation. I think there's a risk there that we end up with the future being denied information that will be of long-term value because of that desire for the immediacy of access to be eliminated as a possibility.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): We have plenty of examples—we have the member of the First World War Cabinet who wrote down various things about his own views, remarks about things that had happened in cabinet meetings which give a color beyond the official record of those discussions, which really helps us to understand why the world went to the most catastrophic war. There's a social value in that. But I think if he felt there was a risk of that coming into the public domain in 1914 or 1915 he would have never written it down, and we would have lost that. That's what's happening now, and I feel that's unfortunate.

On Takeaways from the Book

GWJEP: When readers finish *Burning the Books*, rather than just thinking differently, what do you want them to do differently with the information you've given?

Richard Ovenden: I want them to think differently about the institutions that society charges with the preservation of knowledge, and to think about

the social value of the preservation of knowledge. That [thinking] might turn into doing positive actions. It might make them think about the photos they take on their smartphones; letting them sit there on the cloud or on the phone's digital infrastructure is not a safe thing to do if you actually would like them to be kept. So sort of thinking more actively about that and thinking about not relying on one single backup routine but having several different ones where you can exercise the, "lots of copies keeps stuff safe" acronym. Also some of those actions we were talking about earlier: lobbying your elected officials, lobbying those in positions of administrative power, voting accordingly, using your library and archive, helping to support them financially.

Richard Ovenden (cont.): I'd like people to actually use thinking and doing in the same moment. I wouldn't want people to either just sit and think great thoughts and do nothing, or to write to their local elected officials and not continue to think about it because the best libraries are ones that endure. They are stable institutions of our society sometimes lasting over centuries or even millennia, and that has an enormous value in a society that changes so rapidly. These places are kind of oases of knowledge. That in itself, that stability, is something that we should value and treasure.

GWJEP: So not just shaking up complacency, but keeping it in mind as times change.

Richard Ovenden: Absolutely.

Closing Thoughts

In discussing what has changed in only six years, Ovenden made it clear that preserving knowledge is an undertaking that requires continual awareness and effort from everyone, from elected officials to young students. It was heartening to hear Ovenden's words of hope, but we must remain vigilant for the myriad of forces—whether apathy, malice, or fear—that threaten our ability to record and learn from the world around us.

Author Bio

Richard Ovenden is Bodley's librarian and the Helen Hamlyn director of the University Libraries (the senior executive officer of the Bodleian Libraries), and is responsible for their strategic oversight. He holds this post together with being the head of Gardens, Libraries, and Museums (GLAM). He has written extensively on the history of the book, on the history of photography, and on current concerns in the library, archive, and information worlds.