
Back to the (Libraries of the) Future

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Abstract

The paper will start from a critical reading of J. C. R. Licklider's pioneering work *Libraries of the future* (The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965), seen in the context of the history of computing at the start of the Sixties. It will then compare the forecasts included in the book (centered on the deployment of "precognitive systems") with the actual road taken in a variety of fields: text encoding, ontologies, computer processing of natural language (NLP), librarian science and development of human interfaces for reading and writing, with particular attention to the idea of a "semantic web" fostered in particular by Tim Berners-Lee. The comparison will be the starting point for a quick checklist of what has worked out in the field, as well of what has not worked out, and why; at the same time, it will point to the historical roots of some recurring ideas in the history of computing and of knowledge work, making, it is hoped, a useful benchmark for some recurrent misperceptions regarding the nature of the information used in the real world.

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