A COLLECTION of handwritten books helped create one of the world’s first libraries, the great Library of Alexandria, which was accidentally burned down by Julius Caesar in 48 BC. Yet it was technology – the invention of the printing press in 1439 – that led to an explosion of books (not to mention pamphlets, magazines, journals and other printed works) and of libraries.

Grand libraries were built in the 19th and 20th centuries, culminating in the grandest of all, the US Library of Congress, which houses 32 million books and other printed works.

Today, technology is also revolutionising reading material, and with that libraries. Books now comprise a small proportion of what we read – for Swinburne’s library, books are less than 25 per cent of what readers use; the rest is almost entirely digital and online content.

Professor John Tarrant, secretary-general of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, has said: “The coming of the information technology revolution … has changed the role of libraries just as radically as did the mechanical printing press.”

It therefore raises the question, ‘Can the library make a second radical change in its role – this time from print to digital?’

One of my roles since I was elected president of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in May 2008 has been to stay awake at night worrying about the future of libraries in a digital world. But need I?

There are positive signs. Librarians have formidable skills in organising, managing and storing information so that people can find it and get it when they need it. They are learning to apply these skills to the networked digital environment, and they are doing so in many ways.

Although the internet is uncontrolled, unorganised, anarchic and chaotic – on the face of it, the antithesis of the library – librarians love it. Access trumps on the face of it, the antithesis of the

unorganised, anarchic and chaotic – doing so in many ways.

In fact, Australian libraries have some brilliant achievements in the digital space: the National Library’s Picture Australia and the more recent Australian Newspapers Online provide resources that are at once archetypically ‘librarian-y’, and also impossible without the contemporary digital environment.

Also, digital libraries are being built from both digital and digitised books, pictures, theses and other content. Swinburne Library has been partner in the national ARROW project with Monash University (project leader), the University of NSW and the National Library, and funded by the Federal Government.

The project fostered the development of institutional repositories – open online databases of research publications established by universities – which provided new digital collections of Australian research.

For Swinburne, this led to the creation of Swinburne Research Bank and Swinburne Image Bank as well as current forays into publishing online journals and online conferences. Swinburne content is more findable than ever before.

The books make nice sound barriers. At Swinburne, the library has never been more heavily used, and other libraries are finding this too.

Library values are also very important. Dr Vivienne Waller, a Research Fellow at Swinburne working on an industry project (The Searchers) with the State Library of Victoria, refers to the “distinctive public good” role of libraries and suggests that “a focus on the enduring values of libraries may, ultimately, assist libraries in making the most beneficial use of digital technologies”.

It could be said that it is values that define the role of the library, as much as anything else, and the core values are openness and accessibility. The library provides access for everyone to all of documented human knowledge. Librarians are passionate about the free flow of information, and about universal rights of access to information, in print and online.

These values have led librarians to strongly oppose censorship, and to support balanced copyright laws, public libraries as a national information infrastructure, privacy qualified by the right to know, and the democratisation of access to technology. They still do, just as strongly.