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Back Talk -- Words, Memories, and Violence

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson
University of Hong Kong, ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk

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I Hear the Train A Comin’ — “Fishes, Ponds, and Gilligan’s Island”

Column Editor: Greg Tananbaum (Consulting Services at the Intersection of Technology, Content, and Academia) <gtananbaum@gmail.com> www.scholarnext.com

In the spring of 2000 I was a twentysomething marketing director at EndNote. I had no kids, no mortgage, and was living in the San Francisco Bay area. At that time, the air was thick with dotcom dreams. Monogrammed socks for your pet iguanas. Fabric softener delivered to your doorstep. Online fortune telling. There was gold in them thar eHills. So I did what just about every other twentysomething with no kids and no mortgage living in the Bay area did. I went panning for the big score. My departure from the academic software space carried with it more than a little ambivalence. I had come to enjoy traveling to universities, meeting with researchers, listening to their ideas, and tinkering with how to improve our products to better serve their interests.

Nevertheless, when I got recruited for a product management job at Wink TV, I leapt at the opportunity. Not familiar with Wink? The idea was a cool one, ahead of its time even. Working with cable and satellite television companies, Wink created an interactive experience for the viewer — trivia, games, sports scores, news highlights, purchasing opportunities, and so forth. With a click of the “Wink” button on your remote control, you could turn TV from a passive experience into a slightly less passive one. Wink was backed with $100 million from top-tier venture capital firms, including Microsoft founder Paul Allen’s Vulcan Ventures. On the day it went public, Wink’s valuation exceeded $1 billion.

And I was a part of it, both “little i” it and “big I” it. “Little i” it was a cutting edge technology that was geared toward mainstream consumers. Unlike EndNote, which threw a party whenever we reached another 10,000 user plateau, Wink had millions of users, and its potential reach encompassed every U.S. household. Suddenly, the pond in which I was playing had turned into an ocean. “Big I” it was the dotcom dream. I had stock options in a company that was listed on NASDAQ. I checked Yahoo! Finance five times each day to see how the company’s shares were performing. I attended product meetings called scrums. I paid attention to the company’s four P’s (product, profit, personnel, and publicity in the Wink model). I wore Doc Martins and khakis every day. I met friends for tapas and infused drinks after hours. Living the dream. And yet...

As it turns out, I was not cut out to be either a part of it or It. I realized this fairly quickly when I attended a consumer electronics convention in Las Vegas. Far from the modest Annual Reviews or Sage booths I was used to seeing at FASEB or Society for Neuroscience, I got lost in a three story HBO installation with better square footage than my apartment. Instead of listening in to talks by a National Academy member, here was a meet-and-greet with the guy who played Bernie in Weekend at Bernie’s. Rather than arranging focus groups with postdocs and graduate researchers, I was conducting roundtables with Madison Avenue admen. All toward the goal of getting more people to spend more time with their televisions.

Four months later, I was back in the academic pond. And it is here that I plan to stay. I returned to the fold for four primary reasons:

1. What we do matters. As publishers, information providers, and technology companies, we contribute to the Really Big It — the advancement of society. The tools we create, the efficiencies we are able to recognize, and the innovations we promote facilitate the spread of knowledge. The work we do has a hand in curing diseases and avoiding manmade and natural disasters. At Wink, any innovation I came up with meant that people could shop with their remotes slightly more easily. Contrast that with the work of a HINARI or a Public Library of Science or even an iTunes University. Commercial or NFP, fee-based or open access, if we in the scholarly communication pond are successful our efforts amount to more than a way to purchase Rachel’s scarf from Friends with the click of a button.

2. Our efforts are part of a continuum dating back to Gutenberg that sees each generation better able to access and assimilate the lessons of its forebears. There is something invigorating about being part of a tradition that extends five centuries. Making information more easily discoverable has its modern roots in the 1455 42-line Bible. The work we do, geared as it is toward more efficient means for the exchange of ideas, can be traced in a direct line from these beginnings. Wink, by contrast, nodded at its traditions by naming its three conference rooms “Gilligan’s Island,” “Scooby Doo,” and “The Brady Bunch,” respectively.

3. Our field is still evolving. Even after 550 years, we don’t have the formula down pat. One need look no further than the university press, which seems to be in the process of reinventing itself as a long-tail digital publisher. The Scholarly Kitchen blog posits daily on how innovations like cloud computing and Twitter can be leveraged to improve scholarly communication. The Libri-cense lifestory is a veritable Speaker’s Corner for new theories and principles concerning the future of our discipline. Collectively, we seem to recognize that there is ample room for experimentation and debate. We do not acquiesce to a single, settled worldview.

4. We have the most interesting people. In the past few months, I have had occasion to speak with two Nobel laureates, a scientist researching alternative breast cancer treatments, an economist who accurately forecasted the global credit meltdown, and a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Sitting in the lobby of the Francis Marion and conversing with Open Journal Systems’ John Willinsky, Yale’s Ann Okerson, Microsoft’s Lee Dirks, or SPARC’s Heather Joseph is as entertaining as it is informative. Our pond is overflowing with brilliant, dedicated, engaging professionals. I am consistently impressed with the commitment and passion I see from senior leaders to junior staffers working on scholarly communication issues.

I am now a (late) thirtysomething, with two kids and a Bay area mortgage. As a consultant working out of my home office, khakis and Dock Martins have long given way to umbros and flip-flops. And while my Wink stock options ultimately proved worthless (when I joined the company, shares were selling at $20; when I left four months later they were at $3, on the way to an eventual NASDAQ delisting), the lessons I learned in the big ocean were invaluable. For me, at least, the academic pond is the place to be. Our work — perhaps in a big way, perhaps in a small — contributes to the betterment of society. It allows us to engage with fascinating colleagues and explore complex issues dating back tens of generations. I look forward to swimming here for years to come.

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have such enormous faith in the power of the written word (ink on paper or the bits and bytes of computers). Proponents of the freedom to read, have much less faith in the power of the printed word.

So have I been converted by the opposition? Am I against freedom to read? No, I am still stuck in the freedom rut. While it is understandable that some are angry about past wrongs, books and magazines (printed, electronic, etc.) tell both sides of every story as long as librarians are allowed to select and store these materials. Fortunately librarians here in Hong Kong can continue to do this and things on the mainland are improving rapidly. Last words: buy more Chinese goods at Wal-Mart — your dollars feed the people of China and their libraries.
Back in 2003 when Hong Kong’s government was attempting to draft an anti-sedition policy, also known as Article 23, many librarians rose up in opposition because Article 23 threatened the rights of libraries to collect materials of all points of view, including those which could be construed as threatening the right of the government to rule. At the time as President of the Library Association I used to smilingly say that libraries were peaceful places: books by Churchill and Hitler, Chairman Mao and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and Kennedy and Castro could all peacefully sit near each other on adjoining shelves and therefore the government had nothing to fear from books or libraries. However, thoughts to the contrary came to me a few days ago while visiting a new historical museum in Yinchuan, the capital city of the Ningxia Hui Minorities Peoples (Muslim) Autonomous Region province of China. I began to query whether words might not contribute to memories of perceived past wrongs, which might in turn lead to violence.

I was in Yinchuan along with a number of other librarians from Hong Kong at a meeting sponsored by China’s Ministry of Education to give presentations about what we have been doing to collaborate with each other: shared acquisitions, shared authority file, we are about to build a shared repository of lesser used but still important printed books, etc. The meeting itself, although important printed books, etc. of lesser used but still important printed books, etc., would be construed as threatening the right of the Chinese ways and copied them. Therefore the contemporary knowledge worker who wrote the caption lamented the destruction of this adoption of Chinese ways by non-Chinese peoples.

The current goals of China’s government in Tibet and Xin Jiang are quite similar: China’s non-Han or Chinese citizens, for whom huge sums of money have been spent improving their schools, roads, and other developmental needs and in whose behalf the old feudal ways of governing have been set aside, are expected to act grateful and — like the ancient Xi Xia peoples — recognize the superiority of the Chinese ways.

But what has all of this to do with words, memories, and violence? Violence, it seems, is taking place all over the world because of memories of perceived past wrongs and books are full of words. Money may be the root of all evil but words/books/reading, according to this line of thought, may be the source of all violence: The Palestinians can’t forget that the lands now inhabited by the modern state of Israel were once theirs; the Al-Qaeda terrorists can’t forget the Crusades and Islam’s historic conflicts with non-believing infidels; the Russians can’t forget the glories of the former Soviet Union when it was a super power; the North Koreans can’t forget the injustices of Japanese colonialism and its war with the United States, the Tibetans can’t forget their theocratic government roots, etc.

The ideal solution, therefore, would be to wipe clean everyone’s memories of past injustices and instead implant new friendly-fuzzy feelings about everyone. I think this is impossible. However, the other day while surfing cable television I watched a few minutes of an old movie, Men in Black, before I remembered why I didn’t want to watch it, in which Tommy Lee Jones had a gadget about the size of a flashlight which when lit up would wipe clean a person’s memories of any event and allow the substitution of other memories.

Lacking such a finely tuned memory washer, the reality, it seems is that some groups of political, cultural and even religious groups want to control memory institutions so that favored points of view can be promoted. The original Article 23 proponents here in Hong Kong wanted the right to find out who was reading what in order to ferret out real or potential terrorists in opposition to the government. One of my favorite governments employs hundreds of thousands of Web surfers to identify and then close down “poisonous” Websites, in hopes of preventing erroneous points of view from developing. I have always found it curious that anti-freedom to read forces...