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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) – Academic Libraries and the “Arming America” Problem: A Response to Steve McKinzie

by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

In the September issue of *ATG*, **Steve McKinzie** presented a very well-written and carefully argued “case for getting rid of a celebrated book” — in this case, **Michael A. Bellesiles’** infamous *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*. **McKinzie’s** indictment of the book itself is pretty much unassailable: he demonstrates that despite the book’s commercial success, and despite its status (now revoked) as a major award-winner, *Arming America* cannot in fact be considered a reliable source of information about the history of gun ownership in America. **Bellesiles’** fabrication of data, his dishonest use of sources, and his statistical sleight of hand have all been carefully and exhaustively documented, as **McKinzie** points out. Libraries, to the degree that they consider it their primary role to provide good, accurate information to patrons, would do well to stop and think twice about adding such a book to their collections. **McKinzie** takes that logic one step further, exhorting libraries that acquired the book before its myriad failings were made public to remove it from their shelves.

McKinzie is careful in his recommendations: although he is deeply concerned about the “host of unwary readers” who may find in the stacks “a terribly misleading book that bases its arguments on fabricated data and deliberately misconstrued research,” he emphasizes at the same time that he is not suggesting “that as librarians we should buy and retain only those books whose analysis is thorough-going and scholarly.” His argument is focused more specifically on books which have been clearly demonstrated to be intellectually dishonest and factually misleading. Such books are not merely shoddy but actively harmful and, he says, should be “summarily jettison(ed)... from our collections.”

On its surface, such an argument would seem hard to refute. However, I suggest that it is built upon a mistaken premise about the purpose of libraries generally, and of academic libraries in particular.

I would argue that it is not the purpose of an academic library to provide its patrons with truth and truth alone. Instead, it is the library’s job — or, at least, one of its fundamental jobs — to help patrons solve their research problems. Obviously, most research

problems are best solved by reference to accurate information: if you need to analyze trend data related to smoking in North America or learn about treatment options for a particular kind of cancer, biased and inaccurate sources will serve you poorly. However, it is also true that some kinds of research are served — and, in fact, can only be served — by recourse to inaccurate, unfounded, dishonestly presented, and poorly written articles and books.

At first blush, this argument may seem bizarre. But consider **Adolf Hitler’s** notorious screed *Mein Kampf*. By no intellectual, literary, or moral standard could *Mein Kampf* be considered a good book; it is poorly written, disastrously argued, and morally repugnant. And yet it is difficult to see how any comprehensive academic library could justify that book’s absence from the collection. Why? Because it is a centrally important document in the social and political history of the 20th century. Its importance lies not in the quality of its ideas, but in the fact that it provides a unique window into the mind of one of the century’s most disastrously influential people. In other words, there are good and important research questions that can be answered by recourse to that book, and in no other way. I would argue, in fact, that access to *Mein Kampf* is essential not only for students and researchers in particular, but also for society as a whole; without access to that book and its repulsive ideas, it would arguably be much easier for those (and make no mistake, they are out there) who would like to see **Hitler’s** image rehabilitated.

To be sure, **Bellesiles’** book is no *Mein Kampf*, but the same principle applies. *Arming America* may be a very poor source of information about 18th-century American gun culture, but it is a highly valuable source of information about the modern American conversation about gun culture. Students and researchers studying the complexities and controversies of Second Amendment issues in modern times need access not only to the best arguments on both sides, but also to examples of dishonest and fallacious arguments, especially when those arguments have successfully influenced the national conversation. **Bellesiles’**

book has a place in library collections not because it is a good book, but precisely because it has been an influential and important bad book, and because it is bad in particularly instructive ways. An understanding of its content can contribute greatly to an understanding of the vigorous national discussion in which it played a significant part, and a command of that discussion

generally is essential to an understanding of the Second Amendment itself.

This leaves one of **McKinzie’s** important concerns unaddressed, however: what can (or should) libraries do to warn patrons what they’re actually looking at when they pick up *Arming America*? There is no faulting **McKinzie’s** legitimate concerns in this regard. It’s one thing to say that bad and dishonest books can be pedagogically helpful, and another to simply present those books without comment to a potentially uncritical audience. As it turns out, **McKinzie** himself offers an example of how one library has addressed this problem, and I think it provides a good model: he mentions a library in North Carolina that “took the unorthodox but possibly effective technique of taping a popular review to the inside cover of the book.” While this exact method may raise eyebrows, it illustrates what I think is an approach well attuned to both library values and library purposes: using more speech to counter bad speech rather than cutting potentially useful bad speech from the collection.

Does my argument imply that librarians should go through their entire collections, making sure that every controversial book includes a pasted-in rebuttal, or that they should buy controversial books on all topics without regard to their intrinsic quality? Absolutely not. Nor do I believe that most libraries should (or possibly could) buy every high-quality book that is available on every controversial topic, in the interest of making sure that every side to every argument is represented. As to the first point, I’m arguing only that in some cases it may well be worthwhile both to own a book and to give patrons a heads-up about problems with it that may not be immediately apparent.

continued on page 34

As to the second point, I'm arguing only that intrinsic quality should not be the only (or, in some cases, even the primary) criterion for acquisition. The primary criterion should be *usefulness*, and usefulness is determined by the library's mission and the needs of its patrons. Bad books can be very useful indeed, and *Arming America* strikes me as an eminent example of such a book.

By providing *Arming America* to its patrons, does the library run a risk that they will come away from it with dangerously incorrect information? Absolutely. But this raises a deeper issue with which our profession has grappled for more than a hundred years. Giving people access to information is, by its nature, a risky business. If we believe that knowledge is powerful, then we have to accept that it is therefore also dangerous. When we expose people to ideas we are not only fostering understanding and empathy and the broadening of minds, but are also running the risk that wrongheaded and mean and chauvinistic ideas will sprout and take hold. However, it seems to me that as librarians we have no choice but to take that risk. The alternative is actually rather awful to contemplate.

A Response from Steve McKinzie

by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

Mr. Anderson makes his case eloquently and persuasively. In a spirit of friendly exchange, I counter briefly. In the final analysis, my recommendation to get rid of *Arming America* hinges on a simple distinction that bears repeating — a distinction about scholarly books that contain inaccuracies. Simply put, I draw a line. I suggest there is a huge difference between skewed historical analysis and deliberately falsified research — between a historian who may have a jaundiced perspective and one who knowingly chooses to deceive — between an honest scholar who misreads his data and dishonest one who deals in blatant misrepresentation of his sources. I charge that in every case, *Arming America* falls on the latter side of this line of distinction and consequently merits no place in a scholarly collection.

Let's be candid. If any of us knew then what we know now about *Arming America*, would we have purchased the title? I think not. And there something else we should consider. If we eagerly discard older historical monographs and outdated research in the interests of saving precious shelf space, should we not also willingly jettison a title based on what we have learned about the utter dishonesty of its approach — indeed the utter dishonesty of the research on which it is based?

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate **Mr. Anderson's** analysis, and there is likely much on what we agree. But as for *Arming America*, I remain respectfully unconvinced. I still say throw it out. 🍷

ATG Interviews Lotfi Belkhir

Founder and CEO of Kirtas Technologies

by **Martha Whittaker** (Director, Content Management, Gelman Library System, George Washington University) <mwhittaker@gelman.gwu.edu>

ATG: *Let's start by learning about your background leading up to the founding of Kirtas Technologies.*

LB: I completed my PhD in physics in 1993, and in 1995 I left the academic community to join **Xerox** as a research scientist. My five-year career at **Xerox** spanned R&D, product development, corporate strategy and corporate ventures. I started the **Automatic Book Scanner** project while an executive at the **Xerox Venture Lab** in Palo Alto, CA in late 2000. In May 2001, I left **Xerox** with an exclusive license to the technology I developed, and started **Kirtas** in June 2001.

ATG: *Your Website has the engaging tag line "Moving knowledge from books to bytes." Tell us about Kirtas Technologies, Inc. — how it was born and the path of its development.*

LB: **Kirtas** owes its existence and its purpose to four global trends that are and will continue to affect our lives for many years to come: Digitization, Globalization, Knowledge-driven economy and the Internet. These trends are also intimately intertwined. On the other hand, back in 2000, while all forms of content, communication and entertainment were going digital, the accumulated knowledge of humankind from the last 1,000 years was still largely held captive in the analog world by the covers that bind it. I'm of course talking about the billions of books that lay on the library shelves of thousands of libraries around the world. The reason being that there was no technology available to en-

able the massive, rapid, high-quality and cost-effective conversion of all that content "from books to bytes." So I set out to change that and develop that dearly needed solution. Started in June 2001, **Kirtas** went on to develop the first generation model, the **BookScan APT 1200**, which we launched in August 2004. Some of our earliest customers were **Logo Bible Software**, **EBSCO**, **Northwestern University** and **Rochester Public Library**. We also opened a service bureau to provide digitization services a few months earlier, and our earliest customers were **Atypen**, **University of Michigan**, as well as **EBSCO Publishing**.

ATG: *Who are some of your clients? Libraries? Publishers? Others?*

LB: Today, **Kirtas** products are present in more than 30 countries with over 400 customers around the world. Our client list includes some of the most prestigious names in the academic, research, government, corporate, publishing and non-profit library world such as **Yale U**, **Cornell U**, **Emory U**, **John Hopkins U**, **Emory U**, **Novartis**, the **Air Force**, the **United Nations Organization**, the **British Library**, **Cambridge University Press**, **Hong Kong U**, **Government of Canada**, **McGill U**, **Polytechnic Institute of St Petersburg**, **Yeltsin Presidential Library**, and the list goes on.

ATG: *Why are the terms "scanning" and "digitization" not to be used interchangeably?*

LB: Scanning is usually understood as the process of capturing a digital image of a document, while digitization means the process of converting the content of that document into a readily usable digital file. While obviously digitization requires scanning as a first step, it also requires additional post-processing steps which, in the case of complex documents such as books, are usually far more challenging and technically sophisticated than the scanning step.

ATG: *What do you mean when you talk about the "three pillars of digitization?"*

LB: **Kirtas** introduced the concept of the "three pillars of digitization" to describe in more concrete terms how different digitization is from scanning, and what are the three fundamental components of digitization that in practice must be delivered by the digitization process in order to ensure the longevity, the interoperability and the repurposing of the digitized assets.

ATG: *How do you define "quality" as it is applied to digitization projects?*

LB: Defining "quality digitization" has been a thorny issue for librarians since the "Making of America" project by **Cornell University** and **U of Michigan**. Too often it centers on DPI, output format, OCR accuracy, full color vs. bitonal, etc. Needless to say that with improving technology, these quality specifications have become a moving target. But

continued on page 36