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## Back Talk -- Words, Memories, and Violence

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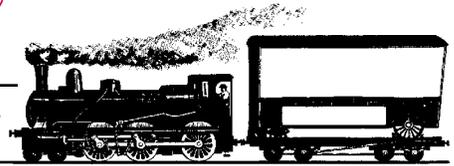
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# I Hear the Train A Comin' — “Fishes, Ponds, and Gilligan’s Island”

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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 forebearers. 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 **Liblicense** listserv 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 **Doc 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 printed 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 written 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 Talk — Words, Memories, and Violence

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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 conducted in Chinese, would have been very non-foreign to all the librarians reading this. There were discussions about the problems faced by academic libraries everywhere: expensive foreign books, getting staff to

change, getting the government to give more money, getting university presidents to "get it," library collaboration, IT and libraries, etc. Once conferences are over in China, however, attendees frequently travel around together to network and enjoy the local culture and surroundings. Our visit to this desert region was no different. Along with a camel trek across a bit of the sand dunes, rafting down the Yellow River on inflated sheep skins fashioned into rafts, and hiking the mountains which divide this province from Inner Mongolia, we also visited several museums and libraries.

The specific event which caused me to reflect upon the power of words to cause memories was the reading of an English language caption in a government run museum indicating that it was "unfortunate" that the Xi Xia dynasty had been destroyed by **Genghis Khan** and the Mongols more than one thousand years ago. Now nothing is ever as simple as it seems and this caption in a museum operated in a minorities province where there are two-thirds Chinese and one-third local Turkic people, is no exception. But why, I wondered, would the Chinese museum/knowledge worker who wrote this caption bemoan the destruction of one Hui people's non-Chinese kingdom by another Mongol non-Chinese kingdom?

I think the answer to this question lies in the similarity to the situation now faced by China in dealing with those ethnically and culturally different peoples which live within China's current borders. While the Xi Xia dynasty was a non Chinese kingdom which existed from 1038 to 1227 AD, based upon the information I obtained in the museum and the reading of Web-based materials since then, it was sort of a copycat Chinese

kingdom in which the Chinese and non-Chinese cultures, and ways of governing, had been brought together successfully. That is, it seems apparent that the Xi Xia people had recognized the superiority 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



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