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Backtalk — Reading Is Never Exclusively a Passive Experience

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I have been trying hard not to write this column about globalization.

It's not the sort of topic that one expects to find in *Against the Grain*. But it seems so many things have happened lately in my part of the world that talking about globalization and libraries is unavoidable — for me.

It started with a recent taxi ride in Beijing. A local acquisitions librarian was taking me to lunch to eat borscht and other western delicacies. I had just finished giving a talk about American-style collection assessment. I had described the **RLG/WLN/OCLC** conspectus methodology hoping that I might have a new career spreading the gospel of that particular form of collection assessment (a inside joke made for the benefit of all my old friends who know me as one of the few Conspectus true believers). As I got into the taxi, I learned what globalization means: for what to my wondering eyes should appear, but a little red box with 8-10 McDonalds French fries left on the floor by the previous customer. I thought, wait a minute. It is one thing that the Chinese and U.S. students all dress alike, listen to the same kind of music, and seem to like to spend their time hanging [out] with their friends; it's one thing that our libraries are all filled with the same **Elsevier**, **Cambridge**, and **Springer e-journals**; but what has happened to the China that I love when I can now find leftover McDonald's fries in a Beijing cab? Globalization, that's what!

Globalization can mean a lot of things. At one end of the spectrum, **Noam Chomsky** defines it as "a conspiracy of the Western elite to establish private tyrannies across the world" (or so he is reputed to have said this according to information found on the Web (<http://www.globalism.com.au/>) the current premier tool of global cultural imperialism). At the other end is the **Disneyland** definition found in the song "It's a small, small world." In between these two extremes is the reality that world-wide we all have a great deal in common and the threads of commonality are increasing even in the face of counter trends to-

ward cultural exclusivity and isolation, as exemplified by fundamentalisms of all kinds.

Chomsky is perhaps most concerned with the economic and political forms of tyranny practiced by Western business and government interests in their ever expanding quest for larger and larger markets and resources. Cultural tyranny is, however, also possible. Our television sets have of late been saturated with the news of the clashes between opposing cultures. On the one hand, we librarians look with pride at the peace that exists in our libraries although philosophies radically opposed to each other are separated by inches and feet of shelving. On the other hand, we are also the agents of a worldview that values providing students with access to what some would define as correct and incorrect/corrupt/dangerous views. We even go to great lengths to guard our right to give readers access to what many would define as Web and paper porn.

What should we be doing? Should we collect only those books affirming the cultural mores of those who pay our bills? An anti-globalist might claim that it is the right of an indigenous culture to provide only those resources affirming the regime's legitimacy, which do not lead students philosophically astray. This happens, of course, all the time. I was interested in the pre-bombing **CNN** newsreel footage of a **Taliban** university library. While it looked very modern, I assumed its contents were carefully selected to support the views of the ruling party. An anti-globalist might have clapped for joy. A globalist would have done just the opposite. What should we be doing? Should we as librarians stick to our freedom-to-read beliefs and make sure our readers have access to the full spectrum of the good, the bad, and the ugly?

I suppose while I can sympathize a bit with the sentiments of the anti-globalists, I find that I have to side with those who believe that readers should have the right to read freely and make up their own minds. Recently, I came across a letter from a Chinese scholar who had recently spent several months using our library. While noting that the library was wonderful, he said something very profound which con-

firms the importance of libraries as well as publishing and bookselling: He said: "reading is never exclusively a passive experience. I have to bring the whole of myself to the experience . . . what I have been doing here is not a monologue, but has become a dialogue between the authors and me." I don't know the degree to which his home library is able to collect and present all points of view, but I do know that decades of war and civil unrest have taken their tide in China and weakened the ability of many libraries to provide the raw materials needed for scholars like this to commune with the millions of authors who have worked before them. You can't dialogue with absent authors.

But the ravages of war aren't the only causes of lost content. I fear too often we forget the importance of what is going on in our libraries. We forget that readers are entering into a dialogue with authors past and present. This truth gets lost in our librarian talk about e-learning and e-journals, resource sharing and collaboration, MARC and metadata, etc., etc. Since reading this reader's words, my own views of what is happening in the minds of our Gap-clothed students who sprawl their books and Sony laptops across library tables (very universal, very global in design), have changed. I try to remember that when my colleagues and I make decisions about selection, acquisitions, cataloguing (the non American spelling is the result of UK globalization power on my Hong Kong configured computer), reference, and preservation — what we are really doing is making decisions which will impact the dialogue that takes place between our readers and the thousands/millions of authors whose words inhabit our library.

Of course all of this is "the sky is blue" thinking. Libraries have and will always be critical to the learning process. **Karl Marx** and **Robert Morrison**, the first Protestant missionary to China, both sat in the same British Museum library and dreamed dreams based upon the dialogues they were having with the authors of the past. We just need to make sure we are physically and virtually making such dreaming/thinking possible.

Webworthy from page 93

archive of seven distinct components for each language. Contributions are heartily invited. The database, sponsored by the Long Now Foundation, will be available online, in a single volume reference book, and distributed on an extreme longevity nickel disk. — <http://www.rosettaproject.org/>

Reference

For international research in African studies, **Africa Research Central**, a clearinghouse of African primary sources, is the tool of choice for locating primary research materials. Founded in 1998 by Ph.D.s **Susan Tschabrun** and **Kathryn Green**, the site offers a fully searchable database of repositories by type (archives, library, museum), country, and 15 types of primary sources (such as ephemera, film,

grey literature, manuscripts), and the ability to simply browse by country. The persistent links offer a Preservation section for institutions to publicize their preservation needs, as well as a Resources section with links arranged in five categories including Guides to African Studies Resources, Other Sources of Repository Information, Organizations and Associations, Preservation and Conservation Information, and Information for Archivists. — <http://www.africa-research.org/mainframe.html>