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Back Talk -- Aphorisms, Patriotism, and Treating Others with Respect

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require myself and other librarians to take a stand—to be patriotic or not. Most librarians I know want to be both. We don't want to have to choose to be one or the other. Yes, we recognize that there are books and Websites about how to construct bombs and death dealing micro organisms, and we wouldn't want to circulate them to bad people who would use this information to destroy others. But we don't want to be part of an enterprise that wants to restrict what people can or cannot read, nor do we want to share with the government a list of what some of our patrons have been reading. I think groups that want to force us to join one or the other camp are misguided. I think we need to hang out someplace in the middle (an aphorism) and stick to the basics: treat others as you would like to be treated and pick leaders who will follow that dictum. If we do that, we'll allow others basic freedoms and we'll avoid the political messes we read about daily. While this is a naive way of thinking, we must not give into those who think everyone else is evil and require our help in controlling them at all costs. Of course if everyone did this people would probably not need to write so many books and we'd be out of a job. 🌱

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Assistant Professor, Daniel Library,
The Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina

This work's thirteen insightful case studies reveal the planning processes involved in renovating or constructing a new library in a hospital, academic medical center, or health organization. Each study plainly highlights objectives, methods, results, and conclusions, and reviews the design of the completed library.

"ANY LIBRARIAN CONTEMPLATING THE RENOVATION, EXPANSION, OR BUILDING OF A NEW LIBRARY WILL BENEFIT GREATLY FROM READING THIS BOOK — Examples include moving the library to a basement, merging two libraries into one tight space, and taking the library to various parts of the campus to be where students prefer to work and study."

Kathleen Murray, MLS, AHIP, Professor, Consortium Library, Health Sciences Information Service, University of Alaska Anchorage

Adventures in Librarianship — Noorg the Absurd

by **Ned Kraft** (Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State) <kraftno@state.gov>

After the Nippur Codex, the second earliest example of a library catalog is the set of hammered bronze plates compiled for the Finnish King Noorg the Absurd in 725 AD by his scribe Nebbish and his blacksmith, Saam the Repulsive. The plates were later transcribed on vellum by Pere Xavier Plumpe (that transcription is now popularly referred to as the "Codex of Dung," after the archaeological dig where the boxed codex was unearthed, outside the Estonian fishing village of Skwerlee Dung).

The Plumpe transcription, circa 1055, was thought to be an original work until 1967 when the bronze plates were uncovered by Dr. Horbert Horton and his team of Yale co-eds while digging a pit for a clam bake on the isle of Sylt. With his trained eye, Horton knew these were no pie plates, but important relics from a little known era of Finnish history.

The plates, 27 in all, were authenticated by the Archeology Department of the University of Helsinki. "Theese eese momentous party-like celebration day for Finns over the world, and for the chubby librarians," said Professor Jyri Tökin. Though no one knows what he meant by "chubby librarians," the University's enthusiasm for the discovery was clear. Here was an item-by-item description of the library of Noorg the Absurd — the inventor of the court game now known as "tic-tac-toe," the first Finnish king to eat with utensils, and, apparently, the first to catalog his holdings.

The bronze plates, each measuring 28cm square and weighing just short of five pounds, are bibliographic curiosities for several reasons. First, they describe both written works and books of illustrations for which no known examples exist. No library, Finnish or otherwise,

holds a copy of Collecting Taxes and Spending the Bounty on Frivolous Whatnots, or The Gentleman's Sport of Chasing Peasants on Foot with Very Few Bush Beaters in Tow. No art book dealer has ever heard mention of Happy Puppies, or Courtizans I have Known, or come across sets of illustrations that may have been pulled from such books. Scholars speculate that Noorg's library may have fallen victim to the Helsinki fire of 762 AD, known as the Great Inflammation. The bronze "shelf list," of course, would have survived.

Another oddity for bibliophiles is that the plates are the first catalog describing the location of each book. Many wondered why Noorg would have bothered having locations listed when he owned only 27 books. But the reason became clear when those locations were correctly translated from the Old Finnish in 1971. Noorg had no central location for his collection. The books were to be found in such places as "in the pine box where also is kept numerous sharp sticks and fish bones," or "beneath the floor boards five shoe-lengths from where Päälvä fell dead," or "wrapped in bull rope behind the festive silks that don't itch or irritate the skin." Was the King hiding his books, or was he simply careless? Was he hoarding against some medieval paranoia, or had he never heard of co-location? The mystery has yet to be solved to any scholar's satisfaction.

The King Noorg Plates are now on display at the Turun Yliopiston Kirjasto (Turku University Library) where thousands of Finns and hundreds of librarians from around the world visit every year. With as much as scholars have uncovered, the hammered bronze still holds its secrets. No one has expressed it as well as Professor Tökin himself: "Theese peoples come here, they see his own reflection in the old bronze things, then they go exit and buy little chocolate snack pieces in the café." 🌱

Back Talk — Aphorisms, Patriotism, and Treating Others with Respect

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

Aphorisms are the bane of living in another culture. Everyone around you understands what they mean, but you don't, and when you use aphorisms familiar to your own culture, your friends don't have a clue to what you are talking about.

This problem came to my mind when talking with an acquaintance about the soon to expire **USA Patriot Act** (of course **Patriot II** is in the wings and differing versions will be debated hotly this fall). I thought about using the phrase "let sleeping dogs lie" to suggest what I thought should be done. Yet, as I ran this through my mind, I wondered what was I trying to communicate if I used this old adage suggesting that it is better not to "stir up a problem that has lain quiet for some time" (<http://www.bartleby.com/59/3/letsleepingd.html>).

Was the **Act** in any way sleeping? Was I suggesting that this was a "dog" (e.g., poor, dumb, stupid) of an **Act**? Would my friend know that the meaning of the homonym "lie" to which I was referring was about lying about and not telling untruths? While there is some truth to this **Act** being a dumb response to a serious problem, I decided it would be better to simply say the US should let the **Act** die a natural death — whatever that means in politics.

Why, you might wonder, is **Tony** wasting time thinking about the **Patriot Act** anyway? Doesn't he have more important things to do? One year ago I wrote about the **Patriot Act** and our local Hong Kong version called **Article 23**, a proposed anti-secession law which would have tried to seriously limit the publishing, acquisition of, and distribution of books questioning the authority of our government. I wrote about both of these issues partially to get them off my chest and so that I could move on to other more

pressing issues. Yet three things have recently taken place to cause me to revisit the **Patriot Act** and the rights to publish and read all points of view:

First, I am about to attend my first **IFLA** meeting and I am a member of the **Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE)**. The work of **FAIFE** refers to the issues covered by both the **Patriot Act** and **Article 23**. As a member I subscribe to the **FAIFE** List (<http://infoserv.inist.fr>). Frequently this list seems to be the private domain of pro and anti **Castro** librarians/library users. The pro **Castro** forces use phrases like "brutal imperialist blockade" and "fallacies and lies spread about Cuba and its institutions" to characterize what they are up against. The opposition to the effects of **Castro's** rule is reminding everyone about how Cuban librarians have been put in prison for "daring to allow Cubans the freedom to read." The flaming back and forth between these two groups of true believers provides so many emails that I found myself adding the most frequent participants to my list of blocked email sources. I care about these issues but you can listen to the two points of view only so long before you want to tell them to duke it out by themselves (more American slang).

This email list produced a second reason for thinking more deeply about these issues. Some of the same people critical of **Castro** have turned their attention to China and its attempts to control bloggers, Websites, to filter email, and otherwise restrict Internet usage. Some of the responses to these criticisms have been angry and defensive noting that China is not one big jail and that its people do not have computer chips implanted to control what they think and do. Being a foreigner in China makes commenting

a bit difficult but I noted on the **FAIFE** List that

- China is very open as long as you don't go to forbidden [Internet] sites or broadcast forbidden messages.
- It can be supposed that since the majority of people are not interested in politics, the majority of people in China are not bothered at all by the restrictions.
- China is becoming more democratic by leaps and bounds but the existence of lots of cadre/bureaucrats tied to the old ways of thinking slows things down.

My own view is that China is becoming a less and less restricted system all the time. Anyone visiting China realizes this. You meet all sorts of people quite willing to complain about everything and you are impressed with the abundance of Internet cafes and the infrastructure to allow millions of people to access the Internet. I am always struck with the thought that the armies of bureaucrats currently assigned to monitor the people's Internet activities have a totally up-hill battle before them and its one that they will loose — the question is not if they will eventually give up, or loose their funding, but when?

The third reason for thinking about questions revolving around the right-to-read question has arisen from local developments here in Hong Kong. Our Chief Executive (CE) is named by China. Local and ultimately Beijing disapproval with the performance with the last CE resulted in his withdrawal for health reasons and the appointment of a career civil servant who was knighted by the British before they returned Hong Kong to China. Our new CE seems determined to not alienate Beijing and recently approved an executive order allowing covert surveillance without seeking the approval of the legislative unit in Hong Kong's political system. The distance between this sort of activity and demands for lists of reading material are not long. Perhaps recognizing that the rejected anti-secession act cannot be accepted and enacted, the new CE is attempting to put the same provisions in place one piece at a time. This is a distressing development.

So what is the big deal? What has this got to do with librarians? I think it has to do with patriotism. For me, an ex-patriot American, the word patriotism is a short hand aphorism for all sorts of things: thoughts about Fourth of July Independence Day parades, hotdogs, singing the National Anthem before ball games, ice cream, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with hand on heart in primary school, the Vietnam War, more hotdogs and ice cream, etc.

The pro and anti **Castro** librarians, the attempts to monitor/control Internet usage in China, and the attempts here in Hong Kong to limit intellectual freedoms can all seemingly

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