

February 2006

Back Talk -- Is Our Sacred Cow Icon Status In Danger?

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

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Anthony (Tony) W. (2006) "Back Talk -- Is Our Sacred Cow Icon Status In Danger?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4843>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Back Talk from page 86

ians may be happening just when the need for them is lessening.


To return to my fiddling metaphor, **Campbell** suggests “Librarians *must* widen the discussion and raise the questions concerning the future of academic libraries” instead of making beautiful music while our libraries/our profession are being consumed by the flames of newer technology (page 28). He doesn’t try to answer the question but emphasizes that each campus must confront this question.

I think he is right but I find it difficult to come up with some possible answers that I could advance on my own campus to get the discussion going. I guess I would like to return to the ideas [a bit updated] advanced last year in my tongue in cheek short story in *ATG* of what the librarian whose library was destroyed by a tsunami should do (March 2005):

- Buy as many eBooks and e-journals as possible and get the faculty to use them for teaching purposes instead of our legacy printed collections that cost people and space.

- Tell the faculty to rely upon **Google Print** for old books and give them an account with which they can buy new books from **Amazon.com**.
- Build new space, or convert the old space generated by selling off all the books that can be found in **Google**, for enormous information commons complexes for student study needs. Provide most services 18 hours a day but keep it open the other six hours.
- If our newly emptied old buildings still have surplus space — turn them into gyms, theatres, etc., for all the people who are spending too much time in front of their computers.
- Replace paper and books conservators/bindery staff with more systems librarians able to deal with the new problems that come with digital forms of information.
- Look at the work that needs to be done and hire accordingly. Hire more subject specialists and make sure help desks are manned with people who know what they are doing. When a professional librarian is needed, hire him or her but don’t start

with a near religious belief in the need to find clones for ourselves. Cut the rest of the staff to the point that only those needed to do the above are left.

Do I really believe the above? I think I may be “just kidding.” Or am I? I suggest that you find **Campbell’s** article and spend some time thinking about these questions. 

*P.S. I would like to thank **Mark Miller** of **Montgomery College** in Takoma Park, Maryland who kindly pointed out that in my September 2005 Backtalk article I referred to myself as an ex-patriot when I should have said that I was an “expatriate.” Thanks so much for correcting me. All my patriotic relatives back home in Idaho will be much relieved. — **AF***

Endnotes

1. Campbell, Jerry D. (2006). Changing a cultural icon: The academic library as a virtual destination. *Educause Review*, 41, 16-30.

Innovations Affecting Us from page 79

emerging issues that include archiving and copyright concerns. How libraries will use this technology remains to be seen in many cases, but it may become more important if coursecasting proves to be a positive supplement to the university or college student’s learning experience.


According to the most recent **Pew Internet & American Life Project Report on Podcasting** (April 2005), over 22 million American Adults own an **iPod** or other **MP3** player and of those 22 million, 29% have downloaded a podcast. More specifically, almost 50% of the people who own an **iPod** or other **MP3** player and have downloaded podcasts are between the ages of 18-28. The report is available from http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/154/report_display.asp. Accessed 20 January 2006. 

I Hear the Train A Comin’ from page 84

participation? If the price is right, yes. In the United States, the requested amount is \$5,000 a year for three years for Ph.D. institutions, \$2,000 a year for schools offering Master’s degrees, and \$1,000 for institutions with undergraduate programs. More than 400 libraries worldwide have committed to the project. Combined with a National Endowment for the Humanities challenge grant, the library fundraising arms secured commitments of \$1.3 million in its first year.

To be sure, there is a free rider problem that the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** has not fully overcome. Some schools have not contributed (and may not be aware of the importance of their contribution), but nonetheless benefit from the contributions of others. The **SEP** has an outreach plan that targets institutions meeting criteria such as size, location, the kind of degree in philosophy it awards, and so forth. When a reader

from one of the targeted institutions attempts to access an entry, the system (using IP checking) returns a note at the top of the page gently reminding the reader to speak to his/her library about the benefits of financial participation. The hope is that, much like **NPR’s** pledge drives (or **bepress’s** own quasi-open access policy), the demonstrated researcher interest will convince the library to support the model.

The **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** is forging a new path in scholarly publishing. It is neither a subscription service nor an author pays model. Its content is free, but only so long as the community that benefits from it provides the necessary funding to attain its endowment threshold. It is operated not by individual scholars or university administrators or libraries, but by a combination of all the above. Will the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** succeed? Early returns, both in terms of content quality and financial planning, are promising. Will the model be replicated and extended by others? Time will tell. 

Rumors from page 43

He also held various sales and marketing positions in **Addison Wesley** and **Simon and Schuster**. **Beale** holds a bachelor’s degree from **Loughborough University**, UK, has studied extensively in the United States, and is an active member of the **UK Publishers Association**. He and his family will be relocating to the Ann Arbor, Michigan area in the coming months, and he will be


based out of the **ProQuest** global headquarters there. www.il.proquest.com/

Do you have **ARTstor**? We do in our library and are learning more about its functionality and content every day. Was talking to **Bruce Heterick** <Bruce.Heterick@jstor.org> about it. (He has been home recuperating from double-hip replacement surgery. Ouch!) Anyway, **Bruce** says that **Max Marmor** and **Kathryn Wayne** will be doing an article on **ARTstor** for *ATG*. Stay tuned.

A fascinating article to read — “**Vatican ‘cashes in’ by putting price on the Pope’s**

copyright” by **Richard Owen** in *The Times*, January 23, 2006. Seems that the **Vatican** has decided to impose strict copyright on all papal pronouncements. www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0%2c%2c13509-2005615%2c00.html

And, finally, be sure and read **Bob Nardini’s Issues in Vendor/Library Relations**, this issue, p.75. It reminded me of my father, a research economist. When I was in high school, he gave me a small book called *How To Lie With Statistics*. It taught me a lot, just like **Bob’s** column on numbers ... very ... umm ... factual.

Signing off. See you in April. 

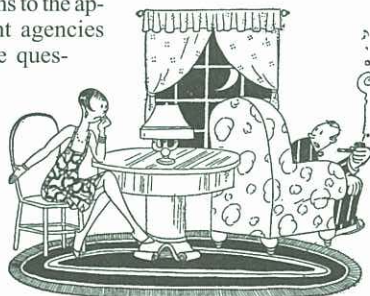
Back Talk — Is Our Sacred Cow Icon Status In Danger?

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

It is always unsettling to learn that things we thought were true are simply urban myths or legends. For example, the legend that **Nero** in AD 64 fiddled while Rome burned — the problem being that the violin wasn't invented until 1400 years later, I guess isn't true after all. Yet, let's suppose that this myth is true. It has often occurred to me that many of us as librarians are not merely guilty of fiddling away doing less important things while our libraries are at least figuratively burning, but we are guilty of spending even more time selecting the music to be played during the fire — or worse yet, developing the policy statement to guide the selection of the music to be played much later.

I recently wandered through the news content section of **Lexis-Nexis** looking to see what sorts of library issues were appearing in newspapers worldwide. There were thousands of articles of course, but here are some that caught my eye:

1. In the U.S., **The Nixon Library** cancelled a conference on Vietnam apparently because the conference would be overly critical of the former President. **The Kennedy Library** and the **National Archives** stepped in and announced that they would sponsor such an event.
2. In Australia, its **Parliament Library** was accused of asking that its librarians route questions to the appropriate government agencies before answering the questions posed by members of **Parliament**.
3. In Briton, there is a fight over who should have the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, manuscripts written between



715 and 720. Politicians from the North-East want them returned to their home libraries and the **British Library** wants to protect them.

4. In Nigeria evidence was received by a high court accusing the President of that country with a plan to link his presidential library to a private university he was building.
5. In Malaysia an electronic library has been created to help people obtain government information, including 3,000 forms needed to file for things like dog bites.
6. Librarians and government officials are concerned in India with the pilaging of libraries for rare books and manuscripts to feed the collecting tastes of rich western libraries.
7. In Russia steps are being taken to return the Sarospatak Library to Hungary — a trend which, if it caught on, would decimate many of our greatest national libraries.
8. Throughout Europe **Google Print** continues to produce concern and protest among librarians and politicians alike.
9. New options for downloading audio books in libraries seem very attractive to Canada's citizens.

10. And again, back to America, the opportunities for the **FBI** to learn more about the reading habits of our users was one of the headline grabbing stories that I found.

This very small crop of stories only managed to focus on issues of cen-

sorship, intellectual freedom, graft, theft, the Web and the ever fearful consequences of being put out of business by **Google Print**. Looking at these topics I have to ask myself, are these matters life threatening or are they our equivalents of fiddling while our library burns?

A new article in *Educause* by **Jerry D. Campbell** suggests that there is much we should be concerned with instead of just fiddling with these issues: Instead we should be thinking about our very survival.¹

Campbell begins by positing that we are losing our position as the place where most people go for information, that in less than a decade we have been replaced by the Web, and that people care more about ease of access to information than the degree to which it is authoritative. Moreover, the avalanche in digitization started by **Google's** announcement that it would provide the world with millions of titles from five world-class research libraries robs libraries of the "we have a corner on authoritative resources" argument.

Campbell then reviews in detail what libraries and librarians have been doing to "cope" (my word) with the situation: In addition to taking refuge in the fact that printed books are still being read and that we have unpublished and other materials that are not now nor may ever be in the freebie mass digital collections, we have been

- improving our learning spaces;
- providing needed metadata for digital materials so readers can find what they want;
- teaching readers how to find digital forms of information;
- providing readers with virtual reference services in order to help them find what they need;
- selecting and negotiating best prices for commercially developed digital information resources; and
- developing digital repositories in which to collect the native and non native digital resources produced by our user communities.

As I read through his discussion of these activities, I thought he did a wonderful job of describing the activities that my library included in its just submitted three-year budget plan.

But, **Campbell** suggests, while this might be sufficient evidence to prove that the position of academic libraries as a cultural icons (sacred cows) needs to be continued, and nourished with infusions of millions of dollars annually, the value of this evidence is deteriorating. He points to the wholesale replacement of professional librarians at one library, and the closure of others, as evidence that some are willing to knock our icon off the shelf. But never fear, he hints that the mass retirement of baby boomer librar-

continued on page 85

ADVERTISERS' INDEX

19	ACM	73	BASCH SUBSCRIPTIONS, INC.	43	GREY HOUSE PUBLISHING
7	ACS	87	BOOK HOUSE	73	HAWORTH PRESS
47	AM. ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION	14	BROCKHAUS/GERMAN BOOKS	88	MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE
27	AM. INSTITUTE OF PHYSICS	3	CAMBRIDGE SCIENTIFIC ABSTRACTS	2	PROQUEST
15	AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	79	THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	55	RITTENHOUSE
57	AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	10	THE CHARLESTON REPORT	21	SERIALS SOLUTIONS
67	AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	35	EASTERN BOOK COMPANY	11	WILEY
77	AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	13	ELSEVIER	23	WILEY
9	AM. SOCIETY OF CLINICAL ONCOLOGY	39	ENDOCRINE SOCIETY	33	WILEY
25	ANNUAL REVIEWS	61	FRONTIERS IN ECOLOGY AND	41	WILEY
29	ASME INTERNATIONAL		THE ENVIRONMENT	65	WINTHROP UNIVERSITY
5	ATG	51	GREENWOOD PUBLISHING GROUP	17	YBP

Ad Manager: Edna Laughrey Internet: elaughrey@aol.com
phone: 734-429-1029; fax: 734-429-1711