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## Back Talk -- Under the White Nights of St. Petersburg

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson  
anthony.ferguson185@gmail.com

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data, and other forms of content is transforming the book into a multimedia learning experience. Multiple online reading practices are based on various needs, e.g., research, leisure, fact-checking, commentary, etc. The solitary reading act will still exist, of course, but will be surrounded by a conversational dynamic that shapes the original act and overlays the initial experience, and hence the original memories. This is well underway today, but the trend will accelerate in the years to come. While face-to-book clubs will continue to flourish, for example, I would guess that they will be greatly eclipsed by digital reading in shared spaces.

### Memory Across Time

Let's come back to **Kandel**. He reminds us that, "The most important function of memory in the real world is to link past, present, and future... This intricate interaction of past, present, and future allows us to maintain a coherent identity and to develop flexibly and adaptively in knowledge and experience. It is essential to the development and maintenance of a self-concept and thus is integral to autobiographical memory."<sup>6</sup> In the digital age we face a bewildering and perhaps dizzying recalibration. Books and the printed word have profoundly shaped who we are, as individuals and as librarians, but our experience of cultural knowledge is undergoing a sea-change that is leading to new forms of knowledge, new forms of culture, and new values. While the science of memory has made enormous strides in explicating the functioning of the brain and the complex characteristics of memory, the future of how we remember and what we remember is an open question.

Is memory tumbling into a rabbit hole as we adapt eBooks and other digital forms into our lives? On a collective level, there are attempts being made to capture and excavate our collective cultural expression, such as the **Library of Congress'** decision to archive four billion tweets, and preservation initiatives such as **Haathi Trust, Portico, and LOCKSS** are becoming credible and successful, though still in their infancy. The library community is facing these challenges with new vigor and imagination and with a keen eye on sustainability as well. The **CRL** certification process for auditing trusted digital repositories is an important dimension of this new strategy of sustainability.

### The Rabbit Hole Again, or...

We, of course, don't have the option of returning to the "normal world" as **Alice** did. Our wired reality has many implications — positive and negative — for the experience of reading, our relationship with books, and the workings of memory. The more I read about memory the more fascinated I am. Long-term memory (e.g. what did I get for my sixth birthday?); short-term or everyday memory (e.g., what did I forget to buy at the grocery store yesterday?); procedural memory (e.g., how to ride a bike); and semantic memory (e.g., knowledge of the world, such as places and facts) — all of these are interwoven in our consciousness in complex ways... it is an ever-present pulse. As language

is critical to this process, how will the eBook affect memory formation and cultural definition? I'm no scientist, but I can't help but think that the new ways in which we will encounter and experience reading will certainly impact the functioning of memory.

The eBook implies new attitudes to navigating text, integration of other media such as video and audio formats, non-sequential reading, new forms of annotation, seamless collaboration, and standardized containers (e.g., **iPads, Kindles, Kobos**, etc.). The elephant in the room is our cognitive overload that plays havoc with memory — everyday at work I'm sure there are issues or tasks that

I'm surely forgetting about, and I doubt that I'm alone! Our immersive digital communication technologies and lifestyle will affect reading and memory like nothing else since the printing revolution that **Gutenberg** brought about in the 15th century. I doubt that we will end up in the rabbit hole with **Alice**, where past, present, and future have no compass. For **Alice's** sister this was nothing but "a curious dream." However, for us the eBook will play a pivotal role in redefining our relationship with ideas and narratives expressed in long form, and thus in reshaping our understanding of our selves... and the intense memories of reading that help make us who we are. 🐘

### Endnotes

1. **Bob Nardini**, "Print," *Against the Grain* v.22#6, Dec. 2010-Jan. 2011 p. 77.
2. **Nicholas Carr**, Rough Type blog, <http://www.roughtype.com/> accessed Jan. 19, 2011.
3. **Eric Kandel**, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a new science of the mind.* (New York: Norton, 2006), 210.
4. **Maryanne Wolf**, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain.* New York: Harper, 2008. p. 229.
5. **David Weinberger**, "Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder" New York: Henry Holt, 2007. p. 15.
6. **Kandel** 313.

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and development of electronic publishing in Poland, Russia, and China fascinating. While the growth in the former two countries has been slower than in some parts of the west, Russian publishing had suffered with the advent of Perestroika in the 1980s, its growth and development seem to be strengthening. For China, it was apparent to everyone that electronic publishing is very "hot" there. We also heard about exciting new efforts to resurrect the value of all of our libraries' heritage microfilm collections by blending automated metadata systems with PDF views of what we already have on microfilm.

We heard a lot at the meeting of the need for everyone to pull together to meet the challenges of the digital world. Webscale is the new watchword, the movement to reduce the cost of individual transactions by taking advantage of the Web's ability to do work on behalf of large numbers of customers or participants in a particular area, and through its use we might all make it out alive through this period of transition.

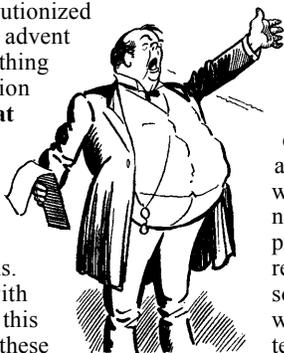
**Fiesole** was once again a great experience and I am looking forward to next year when the **Fiesole Retreat** returns to the golden hills of Florence, Italy. 🐘

# Back Talk — Under the White Nights of St. Petersburg

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library and Information Science Consultant and former Hong Kong University Librarian; now relocated to Sahuarita, Arizona) <anthony.ferguson185@gmail.com>

**T**he 13th Fiesole Collection Development Retreat held under the White Nights of St. Petersburg was a wonderful experience both intellectually and culturally. Like Florence, in whose hills the lovely town of Fiesole and the namesake of this conference resides, St. Petersburg is a city that is almost a large museum itself. Florence allows one to see remnants of Medieval and Renaissance times, and St. Petersburg allows you to view the remnants of Czarist and Stalinist times. Our mixture of time spent in the National Library of Russia with its unbelievably rich old collections, including **Voltaire's** library which legend has that it was presented to/sold to **Catherine the Great** to secure Russia's neutrality in the American Revolutionary War; visits to magnificently-domed Russian Orthodox cathedrals; a boat tour of St. Petersburg's many rivers and canals to view the architectural wonders of the city; time spent in the Hermitage and other cultural sites; and then meeting with old friends from previous **Fiesole Retreats** and new ones from the major libraries of central and northern Europe particularly, provided a sensory and intellectual delight.

I learned/relearned a great deal from the conference. For me, one of its major themes was that, like the Big Bang which brought an end to the age of dinosaurs, or the invention of moveable type printing by the Chinese and the Germans which then revolutionized scholarly communication, the advent of the Web has changed everything for the library and information world in which **Fiesole Retreat** attendees live and toil. Like the parent **Charleston Conference**, the **Fiesole Collection Development Retreat** is attended by a mix of publishers, vendors and librarians. While we are all familiar with the impact of the Web, to have this truth restated in the context of these



libraries, librarians, vendors, and publishers was most enlightening.

In the past, print publishing has been about disseminating scientific information, registering findings and declaring what was noteworthy through the peer-review process. However, so much of this has changed because of the Web. In some ways it led me to reflect back on the 1992 American Presidential election. **President George H.W. Bush** seemed to be set to win re-election because he was credited with winning both the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War, but then the reality of the economy and the campaign slogan, "It's the Economy, Stupid!" changed everything. Now our library and information world has to remember, "It's the Web, Stupid! We cannot forget the Web is the new reality, and any attempt to defend the past, to try to use copyright to ignore the inherent openness of the Web, or to resurrect predatory pricing practices, will be doomed to failure. The Web has upset the whole copyright enterprise; it has changed the information ecosystem to allow the ongoing nourishment and development of its parallel Open Access movement; it has set in motion a range of things which seem destined to continue to diminish the traditional reasons for valuing publishers, vendors, and librarians; it has uprooted the business models of publishers and vendors; it has ripped from the librarian's arsenal the value of its archival role of storing books for the use of future generations of readers. Everything is going digital, and so in the face of decreasing circulation, reference questions, and library entrance body counts, we librarians are scrambling to find new roles by making libraries the preferred study spaces on campus replete with food, noise, and comfy sofas and to find our spots in the whole new "blended learning" enterprise, in hopes of survival.

The Web therefore is like the apocryphal Arabian genie, or magic spirit, who when once allowed to escape its bottle, can never be stuffed back again. This doesn't mean we won't try to do just that, to stuff the genie back in. As librarians, we have grown used to the large budgets needed to support our acquisitions programs and to pay for the large number of employees needed to select, purchase, catalog, service, preserve, and then to help people find what they need in our ever-growing haystacks. We have not had the reputation of being the black holes of university budgeting for nothing (although I have always tried to make clear just how small our 2-5 percent of the overall budget we constitute). Consequently, budget-wise we will continue to ignore the fact that our **historical** collections continue to suck up resources even though there are 24/7 online free alternatives. Similarly, while we know from the **OCLC** report and the UK study discussed at this **Fiesole Retreat** that our students simply do not start with our library catalogs when they want information and instead use something like **Google** and even in the end ignore our expensive online resources, we will continue to argue for ever-larger acquisitions budgets.

Open Access, as already noted, is upsetting everything. Therefore I personally could not but wonder when I listened to a very informative presentation about the **Copyright Clearance Center** and its European arm, **RightsDirect**, whether or not these programs, which are smartly-designed to make it easy to legally reuse information resources, are not ignoring the inherent openness of the Web. The Web — which has more pages than the number of people on our planet — pages which for the most part have been contributed by people who have no thought of being paid for the information they have contributed, is simply not conducive to systems which want money for things which can be freely clicked on. When the masses refuse to abide by the laws of any society, the laws have to change. So let me clarify my position: I am not saying that copyright will be completely discarded, but it will have to change to reflect the free and open nature of the Web world in which it exists. At the conference we heard very interesting presentations from librarians from Sweden and the Netherlands about Open Access in their countries. In the case of the latter country we heard about the positive consequences of what can happen when a national library takes a proactive role in support of OA. **Springer** also reported on their experiments and experiences with OA (the **University of Hong Kong** is one such university which has embraced the value of providing the world with BOTH commercial and non-commercial access to their research findings).

While some of the above was a bit disquieting, I found the presentations about the growth

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