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Back Talk-Libraries, Collateral Damage?

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Back Talk — Libraries, Collateral Damage?

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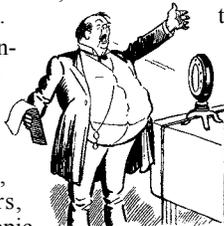
“Digital technology is eating away at the scarcity model of education,” and the traditional library is just collateral damage.

Last week I was touring the Bryce Canyon area in Utah with 17 grandchildren. I know, insane, but the canyons are beautiful and the kids are a lot of fun. On Friday, among other places, we went to Inspiration Point, elevation 8,100 feet above sea level. As I looked across the canyon and the delicate sandstone spires I was thinking, what am I going to write about in my **Back Talk** column? **Katina** and helpers are already hounding me for my piece, and the pressure will only get worse.

Now, back in southern Arizona, I am sitting at my iPad looking for inspiration before the next monsoon rainstorm hits my neighborhood. Yes, while we have scores of 110-degree-plus summer days, it also rains every afternoon for six of the hottest weeks here along the border with Mexico. Luckily, while we do have brief flash floods, mother nature conveniently evaporates the rain fairly quickly once it hits the baked earth in what we happily call home.

I am not sure if my trip to Inspiration Point did the trick, but I was inspired as usual to go in search of a topic by reading the recent issues of **OCLC's Above the Fold**,¹ edited by **Jim Michalko**, Vice President, **OCLC Research Library Partnership**. Its July 18 issue points to an article entitled “Disrupting the Faculty: The Changing Face of the College Textbook Business” posted by **Joseph Esposito** in the June 24 issue of *The Scholarly Kitchen: What's Hot and Cooking in Scholarly Publishing*.² **Esposito** is a management consultant and was previously the CEO of **Encyclopedia Britannica, Tribal Voice, and SRI Consulting**.

Esposito's article itself is very informative and provides insight into the challenges faced by textbook publishers and the reasons why we can expect to see changes: Bloated textbooks, bloated prices, resulting in unhappy professors, students, and parents. While this topic



deserves attention by itself, I was struck by one of the 40+ online comments posted by readers, this one by **Robert Martinengo**, a blogger and publisher outreach specialist representing **AMAC**, an organization devoted to helping post-secondary print disabled students. **Martinengo**, when discussing the consequences of the same problems examined by **Esposito**, noted:

“Over the years the print textbook was continuously refined to better meet the needs of faculty, but at some point the lack of a ceiling on price increases led to bloated, over-produced books that students (and probably many faculty) came to dislike, if not dread. [However] The disruption to watch isn't in the textbook market, it's in education itself. Digital technology is eating away at the scarcity model of education, and the textbook market is just collateral damage.”³

As soon as I read the last sentence about technology “eating away at the scarcity model of education,” I was struck by how well this states the condition in which traditional libraries find themselves. We used to be the only “information game” in town, information was scarce. But now because of information technology, information is not scarce and so unless we change, our traditional libraries will just be “collateral damage.”

Well, this is nothing new. We have been saying all of this for years. But this is especially important to me now. Next week I will move to Shanghai for six months to help **New York University** set up a new library in support of its new four-year branch campus in that city of 22+ million people. I will be there just long enough to help get things going while they recruit a permanent director (If you are interested, please email me). I am not too worried since **NYU's** staff has done this before in Abu Dhabi and they are a very talented group. Yet, this will nonetheless be a su-

per job for me and the next permanent library director because it will provide an opportunity to create a new library designed to meet unmet student and faculty information needs in our current world of information overabundance.

But how should we change? In April of 2012, **Brian Mathews** published a paper entitled “Think like a Startup: A White Paper to Inspire Library Entrepreneurialism.”⁴ I think it is full of really useful information for those looking to make changes in how libraries operate. He begins by saying “Don't think about better vacuum cleaners, think about cleaner floors.” Our challenge is to step back and stop focusing on better libraries but instead on how to make our readers become better information finders/users. He also suggests that we be open to taking up new jobs and giving up old ones when needed. For example, in the new **NYU Shanghai University** library we will provide space for those distributing textbooks to our 400 +/- new students. This will ensure that all new students get their books on time, find the library, and give us a chance to give them information on what we have to offer.

Mathews suggests that today's librarians need to be innovators and that “innovation is a team sport that has to be practiced regularly.” This is critical, otherwise the library will waste time in internal arguments between those who want to retain their parents' library and those who want to accept the challenge to think and practice librarianship out of the box. He suggests that “the library is not a building, a Website, or a person, it is a platform for scholars, students, cultural enthusiasts, and others who want to absorb and advance knowledge.” We need to make that reality.

Well I could go on and on about what we need to do to prevent our becoming “collateral damage,” but I just got an emergency flood warning on my iPhone and the street out front is beginning to look like a shallow river, so I need to send this to **Katina Inc.** before the power goes out. Come see me in Shanghai, the Pearl of the Orient. 🌿

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Endnotes

1. *Above the Fold*. <http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/newsletters/above-the-fold.html>
2. “Disrupting the Faculty.” http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/06/24/disrupting-the-faculty-the-changing-face-of-the-college-textbook-business/?utm_source=WhatCountsEmail&utm_medium=Above%20the%20Fold&utm_campaign=Above%20the%20Fold
3. Comment posted by **Robert Martinengo**, found in the “Disrupting the Faculty” article.
4. “Think Like a Startup.” <http://itechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/18649/Think%20like%20a%20STARTUP.pdf>