

2014

Jim O'Donnell Profile

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



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

Recommended Citation

(2014) "Jim O'Donnell Profile," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6659>

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.

position than it was before because we haven't thought systematically. I think it is fair to say that all the people I know in higher education, be they in the least privileged community colleges to the most privileged private institutions, do believe in our continuing to work together as a coherent system, but there are pressures and threats on that that we feel and that will then be reflected in the behavior that librarians detect coming from there, from on high.

ATG/TG: *Let me follow up. This is a question that I was going to ask you later that feeds into this. One of the main disruptive things that I see going on is "MOOCs," but you were a pioneer in doing those, weren't you? You were doing them back in the 1990s?*

JO'D: Well, I sort of claim I invented the MOOC [all laughing]. It was the best idea I ever had in the shower in my life, and so in the spring of 1994, in the days of Gopher and Telnet, we did a seminar worldwide on the work and thought of **St. Augustine of Hippo**, a subject I work on. We had 500 people sign up and as a percentage of worldwide users of the Internet at that point, that's probably the equivalent of a whole lot bigger number nowadays. It's been clear for a long time that there are certain kinds of economies of intellectual scale and operational scale that you can imagine; that said, I did about three of those back in the '90s, and at that point I said, "this isn't really going someplace," and I also said, "I'm not as excited on the third try as I was on the first try." The first time you do it, there is a woman lecturer in philosophy in a university in Istanbul talking about Franciscans. That's interesting. There is a country vicar in England who's astonishingly learned. By the third or fourth time you do it, the lack of direct contact and the lack of real interaction, that is the hardest thing to do, is turning into "You know, so this year I've got somebody in St. Petersburg who doesn't think that we respect Russians anymore." That's interesting, but it's not as interesting as that one in Istanbul was the first time.

So, there is evolution that's happened, certainly in the technology. You don't have to use Gopher anymore. You don't have to use Telnet. You can see what people actually look like. But, I worry because I have a very good friend from my days at the **University of Pennsylvania** who is very influential in this space and doing a MOOC teaching classical mythology, and I just caught a snapshot of him videotaping his lectures. He was in a studio. It was like this setting, but he didn't have you guys around. It was just him, a camera, and he was spending the month of August videotaping lectures. And I said, you know, the first morning videotaping a lecture is probably kind of interesting and kind of fun. The 25th morning standing there by yourself in the studio with the guy behind the camera saying "Cut! Could you try that again?" Hmm, you know, not as much fun as sitting in my office talking to one kid who is trying to get their handle around something in Roman history that I care about and care about talking to that kid about. I'm

against the grain people profile

University Professor, Georgetown University
204 Maguire Hall, Georgetown U., Washington, DC 20057
Phone: (202) 687-1861 • <jod@georgetown.edu>
<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod>

J. O'Donnell

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:

Professor and Vice Provost, U. Penn. (1981-2002)
Provost then University Professor, Georgetown (2002-)
Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, President of the American Philological Association (2003)
Chair of the Board of Trustees of the American Council of Learned Societies (2013-).

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Indispensable, challenged, innovative, energized. 🌱

struck that the MOOC world has been less "in your face" in the last year than it was a year before, and I think that there is a lot of growing pains and mission search going on to find where is the place in which these economies of scale can really be helpful versus where is the place where they run the risk of commodifying and cheapening something that really should resist commodifying.

ATG/TG: *I think on the librarian's part we're trying to figure out how we can fit into all this and how we might help if the university goes in that direction.*

JO'D: Well, I think the minute somebody in your university says "MOOC" you want to go stand next to them and say, "and what expectations do you really have of the library?" If you're going to have 50,000 students in your course, make sure that we understand whether our licenses and our contracts let us do anything for these 50,000 students and to make sure that the people doing the MOOC do understand that you don't just whistle up a librarian on the spot and say "could you deliver all those journal articles to all those students?" without a little thought and a little more planning than can happen when you are thinking the idea up in your shower, let's put it that way.

ATG/AJ: *We can think of this as an excellent learning experience for faculty members because as they come to the library and say "can you support this?" that is the opportunity to say "this is what it takes to support this" and you may wish to do some trials of various approaches ...*

JO'D: If I could just say — the other thing I would say about this is that the happiest MOOC-ers I know are the ones who either had done a lot of work on integrating technology with education before they got to the MOOC or they're the ones who are taking from their MOOC experience lessons that go back into the live face-to-face classroom, the for-pay customers back in their home institution. I have a colleague, **Professor Jen Ebbeler** at the **University of Texas**, a former student of mine, who has, as they say, "flipped" the big Roman

history survey course and is just world-class in what she is doing to make it possible to teach a lot of students who don't necessarily get up in the morning wanting to be in Roman History class, and to get them engaged and maybe really learn something from that encounter that happens using the stuff that has been learned in these other experiments. That's cool.

ATG/AJ: *In addition to being a pioneer in MOOCs, you were a pioneer in open access publishing with the Bryn Mawr Classical Review in 1990. Do you want to talk about the evolution of open access? Especially from my standpoint, I'm an acquisitions librarian so I really work a lot with budget issues.*

The budget issue of open access is very troubling for me on an institutional level, maybe not on the access level, but on the institutional — how one pays for those professors' fees, authors' fees, etc.

JO'D: Well, right. I mean the mantra goes around that "information wants to be free." That goes back to the great **Stewart Brand**, the man who invented the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and who is at pains to remind you if you quote this back to him that the next thing he said was "information wants to be expensive." I go more with my friend and colleague, classicist **Greg Crane**, who years ago said "if it's not on the net, it's not information." Think about that one for a moment. I think that is true, and it poses a challenge. We do want information to be as universally and readily accessible as we possibly can. There are realities that impede sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for bad reasons, I think we've seen now since we started the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* back in 1990, while we've been giving away this online journal. We've now got 11,000 subscribers reading current book reviews on current scholarship in classics, and we think it is wonderful that lots of people who aren't classics professors are getting to follow our work. We do that because we are cheap and we are subsidized. We're cheap just because we're cheap. We're subsidized because **Bryn**

continued on page 23