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Back Talk: A Librarian Is Not Like A Bat

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Back Talk — A Librarian Is Not Like A Bat

Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

The famous philosopher **Thomas Nagel** asked in a very influential article a few decades ago “What Is It Like To Be a Bat?” (*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974), pp. 435-450). I woke up one day and found out I had become a librarian. So what is it like to be a librarian?

There are things around me that are just different — like all the people who asked if I needed help unpacking my books — never had that experience before. Then a couple more came along and asked me how my books were organized and if I had cataloged them. Hadn't been asked that before either and was too embarrassed to answer.

But I have the keys to the building now, and anytime I like, I can go out wandering in the stacks, where all sorts of wonderful stuff lies in arm's reach. For a professor of classics, that's pretty neat. I don't doubt my staff will get used to having to send somebody out to find me and reel me back in for my next meeting.

That's all the dream-come-true part, and I know I'm surrounded by smart and interesting and nice people. Already, even in my own behavior, I'm beginning to notice interesting things. For example, when I know that I want one particular book from the stacks, I sit quietly at my desk and click a few times and then a few hours later go out, downstairs, and across a broad concourse to the circulation desk to pick up the book there — I don't actually go out into the stacks to look for it. By the time I've had it paged, I have to walk further for it, but think less.

The stacks are pretty quiet most of the time. Our circulation figures don't show exactly how much of what leaves the building has been personally selected from the stacks by a patron and how much is paged down to the desk for pickup, but that category has grown dramatically.

Our buildings are heavily used by students, of course, but many of them aren't using library print materials when they do. A fair number are using our online materials from inside our building, of course, and we get an appreciable number of online chat connections coming from people who are sitting in our facility and could easily find a live librarian for face-to-face questioning if they looked up from their screen now and then. Going to the library, though, remains of high value as a way of making oneself get serious about one's work in a way that isn't so easy to do in a dorm room or a student union food court.

Divine wisdom decided to liven up my first month as a librarian by sending Noah's flood to our science library. (The “deluge” sprinklers failed in the wee hours of the morning and burst into action in an amazing torrent I wish I'd been there to see. Damage is in the seven figures.) With a lot of other things starting to happen, I saw this as an opportunity to intervene in the necessary reconstruction process, to figure out what we should do that would let us not just reopen but also reinvigorate the building and the services it provides. Everything is an opportunity if you look at it the right way.

Soon, the bigger conversations are coming. Our fifty year old main building needs drastic renovation, so that's an opportunity to think about what we want it to be for the next fifty years. That means getting faculty and students, who might normally take us for granted, to join in the thinking process. My instincts tell me that getting it right about the

print collection is *very* important for all our futures, and that at the same time getting it right about what's truly new in our world is just as important.

For example, think about your own information gathering, just today, before you took up this copy of *ATG*. How much of it consisted of reading things that had been written, edited, put in fixed form, published, and delivered to you in a neat package, whether in print or online? And how much, on the other hand, of the most valuable information you have used today came to you in the form of a page of Google search hits? Whatever the relative percentage, that second category is critically important and growing. If you ask a good question, that first page of Google hits is information for you of extremely high value, but nobody sat down to write it, edit it, publish it, and deliver it to you in any traditional way. As soon as you've used that information, it will be gone. Yes, the search may point you to some old-fashioned artifacts, but it probably also points you to some things that are themselves search results; it dives into the deep Web for the particular combination of data points that have meaning for you right now. Our libraries are full of resources that offer even richer possibilities for the right questioner as we move into the age of data mining.

The question that keeps me awake most these days is how to deal with the implications of such changes to our practices? What is it going to be like — well, for that matter, what is it already like, for us to live in a world where the information we most need and want doesn't come prepackaged, but is created for us at the intersection between our curiosity and intelligence — and that of a lot of other people we'll never meet or have any business dealings with? Librarians used to be able to put the right book on the table in front of readers. Now we increasingly work with readers as they go into the vast caverns of information possibility, hoping to shape the right query and get back what is most needed.

For myself, personally, that's a disquieting way to think about the world. It makes me happy to have moved into a place where I'm surrounded by smart librarians. I will need them, I think, more than ever. We all will. 🍷



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