

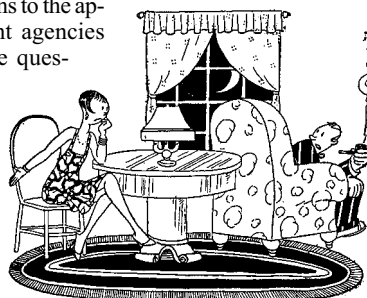
# Back Talk — Is Our Sacred Cow Icon Status In Danger?

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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 pillaging 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.<sup>1</sup>

**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-

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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. 

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*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.