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## ATG Interviews Jim O'Donnell-Penthouse Interviews

Tom Gilson

*Against the Grain*, [gilsont@cofc.edu](mailto:gilsont@cofc.edu)

Albert Joy

*University of Vermont*

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# ATG Interviews Jim O'Donnell

## Former Provost, Georgetown University

2013 Charleston Conference, The Penthouse Interviews, Francis Marion Hotel

by Tom Gilson (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and Albert Joy (Acquisitions and Preservation Librarian, University of Vermont)

*ATG/Tom Gilson: Jim, welcome to the penthouse.*

**Jim O'Donnell:** Thank you. It's nice to be up on top here.

*ATG/TG: It's a delight to have you. This morning you chaired a panel of three university provosts that were discussing libraries. What did you learn and what do you think the librarians who attended learned from these three folks?*

**JO'D:** Well, I was really privileged to get to this for a second year. It's an interesting opportunity for librarians to get to see provosts out of their native habitat, but also for provosts to get out of their native habitat a little bit too and talk to some other folks. I'm going to tell you I learned three things this morning. One of them came from **Beth Paul**, provost at **Stetson University**, who was describing the value she sees in librarians being neutral within the institution. Well, we had a little discussion of that to see exactly what that means, but what I really resonated with is that when you are sitting at the center of the institution you are very much aware that there are a lot of stakeholders who have parochial interests. A business school dean may be interested in the business school and doesn't care all that much about the botany department. Librarians are not inert or neutered, but they are neutral in the sense that they do take an institution-wide perspective and when the librarian says to me "**Jim**, here is something I think we should be doing," I'm going to take that seriously, and I think the lesson for the librarians who are here is to know they've got that power, they've got that credibility, if they will use it to advance what they see as really a strategic interest of the institution.

**Janine Stewart**, who is the new provost at **McDaniel College**, formally provost at **Hollins University**, also woke me up when she described how she knows that many people in university look at the provost as somehow sitting on top of the pyramid. But, the provost really knows that he or she is in the middle of the hourglass. I would've said maybe with one pyramid this way and another pyramid this way and the provost is the poor so-and-so caught at a point in between — because it is a liminal job between, not just the senior stakeholders of the institution, but the board as well, and one lesson again for librarians is the provost can help the librarian best when the library helps the provost tell the story up the hourglass, up the pyramid, in a convincing kind of way. When the provost is doing a good job of managing up, the provost can be much friendlier managing down.

A third speaker was **John Vaughn**, who is the executive director of the **Association of**



**American Universities** and an old friend of libraries and librarians. He did a little informal survey of what provosts expect of librarians and what librarians expect of provosts. Interesting stuff on the whole program, but my learning from that was the provosts said, "I really hope the library is involved in innovative enterprises," and the librarians said, "we really hope the provost supports innovative enterprises." Ah Ha! A little light bulb goes on, and I say, "I think these folks can work together if they understand that's the way they are playing together." So, anyway, we enjoyed it a lot, and I think the audience appreciated it, and I hope everybody learned something from it.

*ATG/Albert Joy: I have a question about the library's role. You said the library is neutral but of course the library can also be parochial because the library has library centered interests. There was very little about what the library needs from the provost, and I want to bring up a number of issues about that in the course of the interview. I just wonder what requests you've seen coming from the library, because I know one of the problems of a provost is many good ideas come to the provost. Many more than there are revenues for and...*

**JO'D:** Well, I would say a university is a tool remarkably well-designed to generate more good priority ideas that it can ever fulfill. If you have a good faculty that is going to happen all the time. What I would say is that if the library comes to me and says "we need 'X' for the library" I'm going to be less able to be helpful than when the library says "the university needs 'X' for the library." That can

be facilities issues, it can be staff issues, but don't just say to me "the cost of materials is going up faster than inflation so I need more money," but, "the cost of what you and your academics need from me is moving in a particular direction, and we really are well-aligned with what the needs of our users are and this is what it's taking for faculty and students," not just to feed a supposed parochial need of the library. If it is really only a parochial need, I'm sorry; I've got to put that one a little further down the list. But, many of the things, it can come across that way are in fact equally, if not more importantly, understandable as statements about what the university needs.

The smallest, silliest thing that happened to the library at my time as provost was that we needed more electrical outlets, because students were sitting on the floor, and they knew exactly where the few electrical outlets were because, without any strategic planning, they'd all acquired devices that had battery lives and they needed more juice. Well, I don't need the librarian coming to me and saying, "I need more electricity in my building." I need the librarians saying, "your students need a good place to work and this is a condition of working now. Here's what we've got to do."

*ATG/AJ: Thank you. If I can follow up on that, one of the things that I see as a major role for provosts in relation to the library has to do with the expensive cost of the journals, the journal packages to which we all subscribe. The "Big Deals," which are typified by very questionable cost points, are very often based on historical spends. In the "Big Deal" we have to get everything: the good journals, the medium journals, and the journals for which we have no use. I wonder if you have ever considered or heard of provosts getting together to help speak with the publishers, either without the university or to work with the faculty within the university to work on this very difficult problem.*

**JO'D:** Well, interesting. I'm going to wargame that a little bit this way. I do know from a variety of perspectives that I happen to benefit from that there's been a lot of progress in making those deals both bigger but also better, and ultimately I'd say they are deals. They should be willing buyer, willing seller, and you should be able to find a way to come to an agreement. I don't think you're going to get a group of provosts to go off and do anything for you unless you make it easy for them to do it, and I think the place where we, the provosts club, would push back is to ask you to make sure that you are doing everything you can to collaborate and coordinate what you

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are doing as customers to maximum advantage for the system. There's been a lot of progress in development of library consortia over the last couple of decades as buyers' clubs, but I think there is evidence that there is a way to go yet in really developing that degree of cooperation and collaboration among libraries and finding the right size and shape group and getting people really to sign up. There are problems with that, no question, because you put together a consortium but then discover that libraries in the state of "So-and-so" are required by purchasing requirements of the state government of "So-and-so" to do things that are in fact not in the best interest of the libraries and academic institutions of the state of "So-and-so." So, there is work to be done in complexities, but I would say the provosts would push back to say "let's make sure we've gotten our own house as much in order and together as we possibly can" and ask how they can help to do that, and maybe they can. It's the provost who's going to have more luck going to the state legislature than the librarian is.

**ATG/AJ:** *I think the provost also plays a very important role in explaining to the other deans and to the faculty some of the impacts should we pull out of the "Big Deal"... the lack of access and materials needed for research and teaching. Some of this negotiation can be difficult, and there is risk involved.*

**JO'D:** There is. I mean, I would say for longer perspective on this, there are lots of things about the present system of acquiring and paying for scientific and scholarly information that we don't like, and with various exceptions and qualifications somehow it's sort of working. It hasn't broken; it hasn't collapsed. We've cobbled it together, the bubblegum and the string may be drying out a little bit and fraying a little bit, but there is nevertheless a system that is functioning. Understanding how and why that is and what you can do to improve it will advance us all, and I must say that for all the points at which people have tried to say "the sky is falling" at the very least, I guess I would say "you've still got to convince me the sky is falling. Don't just tell me the sky is falling," because on another level, I'm actually pretty well informed about libraries. There are provosts who are not. Simply to hear the sky is falling but have a lot of happy faculty getting everything they need, hmmm, I've got other skies falling at the same time. It's going to have to kind of clunk me on the head before I'm really ready to be as helpful as I could be.

**ATG/TG:** *It also sounds like the librarians would have to come to you with some solutions and some ideas to deal with the problem.*

**JO'D:** Sure, and the pre-work that it's credible to do that rather than just "oh, please, Mr. Provost, help us!" There is also a long line outside the provost's door of people saying "oh, please, please, Mr. Provost, help us!" And the provost has got — there is a different budget

the provost has of even just time and attention of where he or she can put the resource.

**ATG/TG:** *You mentioned earlier that you've done the panel a couple of times. Have you noticed any changes from the perceptions that the provosts talked about in this panel and the last year?*

**JO'D:** I think that is probably too short a timeline for this. I'll take it back to that hourglass, an ongoing concern that pressures are coming to presidents and provosts that are not always fully illuminated and enlightened. Let's put it that way: There are a lot of our outside stakeholders who think that "this is all going to change. Universities are dinosaurs. Disruptive change is coming. Brace yourself for some kind of landslide." I'm moderately skeptical about that landslide. I don't necessarily mean that there shouldn't be, but I also recognize that we have a huge installed base of societal expectations and structures that aren't, in fact, going to change as rapidly as a fantasist might think. If they are going to change rapidly, they're more likely to change at the privileged and elite end of the spectrum in a good way, and you are going to have challenges in some of the less privileged areas in other ways. I don't want, this is a metaphor I've used for years, I don't want us in universities to go the way of the U.S. Postal Service with FedEx and UPS and other opportunists taking away the places where the money is, taking away places where the opportunity is and leaving the challenge of particularly public higher education in a worse

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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- ).

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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**

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**Mawr College** lets us have a room, and lets us have some computer access. That's good. It's a book review journal, so publishers send us free books. In fact, at an early point in the history of the journal, I looked at my colleague and said, "who knew if you wrote off to publishers and said 'send us free books' they would? We should've started a book review journal 20 years ago!" But we also are subsidized because we've been publishing a small textbook series for about ten years before we started *BMCR*, and it's the small stream of revenue that comes from the textbook series, which is classroom paper textbooks, that enables us to pay the expenses that were cheap enough to meet. We've evolved going forward. When we started we had a for-pay three-dollar-a-year paper subscription that lasted about five years, and one time we did a CD of the retrospective collection of the first seven years of all of our reviews. Well, that was selling for \$10. Sales on that one maxed out somewhere in the low to mid one-figure range. We haven't gone that way again, so we have been open access because it works for us.

Lots of other models, lots of other experiments, lots of other directions are being taken to make information more readily available at a better price. I would love all of the scholarly and scientific information in the world to be available for free. Of course I would. That's an asymptote. That's a limit that we get to. I'd settle for fifty cents a day. I could even go to a buck, maybe a buck-and-a-half and if I think of what I'm paying for my iPad connection, for my iPad, for my cell phone connection, for my MiFi gadget and what not, I think I'm actually paying a fair amount per month for information. If you don't ideologically set the only acceptable price point as zero, then you can find in the domain of economics and sociology the place at which something is going to work. I'm struck that we're now at a point where OA has been successful enough that we're beginning to see that even when you give stuff away for free the laws of economics do apply and the laws of human nature do apply, and so it turns out that you weren't quite sure 25 years ago that certain publishers, whose names would be obvious to library colleagues hearing this, weren't just kind of cooking up journals in order to get articles and make some money. You know it is just possible there is somebody doing that with open access journals, and if there are author publication charges to be gotten out of doing that it is just possible that somebody is up to something there too, because it is just possible that people involved in this are human beings and stuff is going to happen.

I think we've made enormous progress. There are also things I would praise. I think some of the work that has been done by the biggest and most expensive publishers to make scientific journal information available at either zero cost or very low cost in developing countries based on their GDP and so forth is a thing of beauty, and I've seen examples of that being entirely wonderful. On the other hand, in my

field, there is an argument going on now in Britain over the government thrust there towards open access journals where the three leading associations of classicists have lived for a hundred years with a splendid business model where the revenue stream that comes from the journal pays for keeping these societies going and keeping in two cases the library shared by these societies stocked with books and going as a working tool. Not to say that it wouldn't be a good thing if those journals were readily and freely available, but it is to say that the social good that has been coming unmistakably from charging for those journals needs to be respected, needs to be thought about, and some other solution needs to be found if we're not going to use the business models we've now had. Sharp diversity in this between fields. Sharp diversity, in fact, between countries and between kinds of publishers, and I think we have made a lot of progress working through these, but, if anything, and I've seen some stuff just in the last day from some strong open access advocates saying that we've got to be careful that support for open access doesn't become an enemy of open access, and I think that's a wise mantra to hold onto.

**ATG/AJ:** *So, in the funding of open access, as a provost, or former provost, where is the revenue coming for the author charges? Do they come directly from the authors out of their pockets? Or do they come from the university in some sort of fund? Do they come from some of the funds given to the library to subscribe to journals that now are open access?*

**JO'D:** Nothing like this is going to happen miraculously overnight. If you say to me "So, support open access journals and the big expensive journals will go away" — I could imagine somebody saying that — I am going to be at that point, with my provost hat on, devious enough to say "so tell me the date certain at which the expense for those expensive journals is going away so I can tell my budget people to plan for how long we're going to be double charging for this." If you can't do that, it's a lot harder for me, go back to this description I gave of my tasks at the outset, it's a lot harder for me to put any money towards APCs if you haven't shown me with any confidence where that other kind of revenue is going to come from. There are projects now underway and there are both foundations, national organizations — and **John Vaughn** on our panel talked a little bit about stuff the **AAU** was doing trying to design what a transition would look like to get some of the hard parts solved. I was interested by what he said, and I want to hear more about the situation for the scholarly monograph for the junior scholar in the humanities and social sciences. We know that is a problem in several ways. He was suggesting that they are looking at models for treating a subsidy for publication by open distribution of your first book as the equivalent of start-up charges for a scientist, and rather than paying a subsidy to a university press to publish and sell for dollars is there a way in which you can use the subsidy as an APC in order to make that class of scholarly literature more readily available and sustainable than it is now and leave the presses to publish the

second book, the next book, the full professor book that that scholar writes which is the one that will achieve a wider audience and maybe a longer duration of value and therefore justify a greater concentration of dollars. At this point, the paradox is the new assistant professor's monograph probably costs more to publish than the serious book by the serious full professor, even though you would have to say that the next book by my friend **Tony Grafton** at **Princeton** is probably a greater contribution to the world than the next dissertation published by **Princeton University Press**, however good that happens to be.

**ATG/TG:** *Keeping the focus on open access, recently there has been some concern about peer review in open access. I wonder though, is that isolated just to open access? Do we have a problem with peer review in general? What is your take on that?*

**JO'D:** Peer review varies widely from discipline to discipline. There is the practice of what happens before the article gets published. There are, in some disciplines, efforts on post-publication peer review, on open peer review. I would emphasize that we have always had post-publication peer review in the sense that journal articles do get read and journals do have reputations, and both editors of journals and the authors who contribute to journals are making peer review judgments about this journal by whether they will submit their material or not. There was a big fight 25 years ago now in Classics over one of our oldest leading national journals, and it was a fight over what sort of things should be published. What really does constitute quality in our discipline now? And there was a fight and somebody stopped being editor, and a new structure was put in place and other people were put in place. So, we have a legacy system which is not mathematically quantifiably perfect in a variety of ways. There is a sampling error problem. If I'm the editor and I send the article off to three people and they all tell me it is good, lots of times that means something, and once in a while it doesn't mean something, but we're comfortable enough with that. But knowing who the editor is, knowing who you are sending to, knowing that the time and effort being put into it are imperfect, and there is now plenty of at least anecdotal, and beginning to be better than anecdotal, evidence that there are areas in which that is a problem. I don't think that is specifically related to open access journals. If it is, the only way I can imagine that would be is if I were a sharpie thinking up a way to make a quick buck to run a journal now, I would be statistically more likely to be starting an open access journal than a for-pay journal, so maybe just at the moment you are seeing a few more hoologans in that neighborhood than in the other. Okay, fine, that will sort itself out.

I think long term the challenge of evaluating and making clear the results of evaluation of what we produce and publish is a really interesting one for higher education. It's assessment. It's outcomes assessment, and so the post-publication peer review of things like citation and impact factor and H factor, and so forth, that seems to me to be important work.

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It's work that could be done in a bad way, a mediocre way, or a good way. My vote is for good, and I think there is a continuing process of debate and discussion in lots of fields about how you would do this, not turn this into bean counting, not turn it into a least common denominator generating review process. But, at the other end, be able to say to boards of trustees, to funding agencies, to the general public, here's what we do, here's how good it is, and here's how we know how good it is and how we can tell somebody else it's good, and it's not just a club. There's an old joke — I think it goes back to **George Bernard Shaw**, but if it isn't him it's somebody like that — who is said to have said that there wasn't really anybody left in the world who knew ancient Greek, but there was this club of guys who'd agreed with each other that they would tell the world that they knew ancient Greek. That's a little closer to the truth than absolutely necessary. We've got to make sure that that is not the way we're seen. We've got to make absolutely sure it's not the way we are.

**ATG/AJ:** *As an active scholar, can you tell us what your current research is and, importantly, what is the part of the library in your research? I'm sure it has changed over the years, especially as you get more mature in your profession and your knowledge of your subject changes but as a longtime scholar...*

**JO'D:** Well, **Artemis Kirk**, our distinguished University Librarian at **Georgetown**, knows that I have claimed for a long time to be one of her primary off-site shelving facilities. Even when I was provost I got nothing from her for this, what can I say? What I am actually working on right now is moving in two directions. One is continuing researches on late antique history and cultural history branching. I've always worked on the Latin side and I'm now working out of the Greek side more with Byzantine history. But, I'm also working at trying to write a book that explains to the enlightened general reader what it is people like me do. Is it possible to describe the most technical work we do as classicists in a way that the enlightened general reader can understand? And this morning the e-mail in my iPad is from one of the most distinguished classicists in the world describing a tiny fragment of papyrus about that big [gesturing with hands] which shows three or four letters from each of the beginning of the lines of about 20 lines of **Aeschylus'** play, the "Agamemnon." The discussion is that at the very top, there are a couple of little marks, and do those marks encourage us to think we know what line 7 of the play began with or not? Because line 7 is controversial. That is where the first letters of line seven would be, and can we tell from this tiny scrap, with magnifying glass or whatever, whether at the time that scrap was written, 200 A.D., the line we now see in our 1200 A.D. manuscripts was there or not? Well, I'm going to try to write a book that explains why and how that is important and what you make out

of it. So, I'm ransacking the libraries. I was on sabbatical last year. I was an experiment, in a way, because for a period of time I was living away from libraries and so developing a long list of books that I am still working through. Every week I spent the morning in the library getting a towering pile like this and crunching down and sorting through them just to see what I have been missing. At the same time, I will say that much of the value of our library traveled with me, even when I was away from libraries, and much of it indeed travels around in this device right now. I'm sure there has not been a day in the last year, even when I was away from libraries for a good six months, that I haven't used our library. The most striking thing people in my discipline have noticed — we depend on a lot of older materials — is that we use many of the materials that we cherish much more frequently than we used to. The accessibility of old journal articles: I read journal articles regularly going back to the mid-19th century, but I used to have to be in the building and go to the building and get them now. Now, I see the reference, and indeed the challenge is, it's too much like any other Internet rabbit hole, I see the reference and next thing you know, I'm clicking through **JSTOR** to read this 1912 article and see what it has to offer. The lesson for that, which should please provosts, is that the huge investment we have put into building collections, building historical legacy of scholarly publication, is now one that, with the technology, we can get more value from, and that should be good news.

**ATG/AJ:** *I think those online back files and collections, the full-text collections, are a great benefit to scholars.*

**JO'D:** Sure. Absolutely.

**ATG/TG:** *And you are seeing more and more primary source publishing in the electronic sphere and a number of companies are coming out and publishing primary source material.*

**JO'D:** Sure, and I will say there are risks, and I would underscore one risk. I had about 15 seconds, I think, of Internet fame back in August when I went to the **IFLA** meetings in Singapore, and **IFLA**, the **International Federation of Library Associations**, of course, has a lot to do with access to digital information, and I got there and I opened up my iPad and discovered that all of my Google books had disappeared because Mr. Google and Mr. Singapore aren't on the best of terms. They detected that my device was in Singapore and so all of my downloaded books disappeared, and I have still not gotten all of them back three months later in the sorting. It is a reminder that when you acquire material digitally, you don't actually often acquire material. You're acquiring access. You are acquiring something else. I have spent some time since August making sure that the Google books I have are downloaded to something that Mr. Google doesn't control, so the next time I take them to Singapore, I can put them on a device that I really do control and still be reading the stuff they are. But, it was literally two weeks before the semester began, I had three volumes in my Google books that I

needed to be reading in order to get my teaching ready for the semester, and I got to Singapore and "aahhh!"

**ATG/TG:** *They were gone. They were in hyperspace somewhere, and you don't have any idea of where.*

**JO'D:** They were just plain gone — a sobering lesson.

**ATG/TG:** *Jim, our last question is kind of a trick question. If you were sitting in Albert's and my chairs what question would you ask yourself?*

**JO'D:** I would expect you to want to understand better the place of your priorities and my priorities, and I think that is natural and normal. I am very struck from my experience provosting by the uniqueness of the range of things I know. Let me give you an amusing example that highlights it. Frequently, when I was provost, someone would come up to me and say, "**Jim**, what do you know about 'X'?" And I would say, "well, really not quite up to speed on 'X'." The street, meanwhile, would be babbling about 'X' because the street knew all about 'X'. Truth be told, I knew quite a bit more about 'X', but it came to me in a context in which I was not at liberty to discuss it or give any indication one way or another, so I had to do a little bit of tap dancing. Painful, of course, but on the other hand there are good reasons why these echelons and structures of information and awareness happen. I do think it is part of a provost's job to think as clearly as possible and act as clearly as possible about communicating to stakeholders in both directions, in both pyramids, both ways in the hourglass, what the perspective is from where I sit. But, it means I also expect good communication from the other partners that I have and mutual understanding and respect of the anomalies into which this puts us. The real challenge, then, is to build trust, to build trust between the partners so that when I have to say to you "I really don't know anything about that," that you take it that I am not being just devious, and evil, and wicked. I learned to live, and I think it is a feature of senior jobs, university librarians live with it as well, to live with the reality that I will be suspected unjustly of malfeasance, ignorance, and bad faith, and I've got to learn to live with it. I can try to make it away, I can try to work it down, but I'm never going to make it all go away. And I have to accept that and make up for it and fight back against it in the other ways that are possible.

**ATG/AJ:** *I think what you're saying is a feature of higher education and the issue of trust is a challenge at all levels.*

**JO'D:** Maybe the thing to say then is if we ever imagined ourselves moving into "Super MOOC U" we would have different structures we would require in order to make a kind of trust happen. I used to have a regular meeting with all of my direct reports and the sort of semi-direct reports when I was provost. About 25 people overcrowded into our conference room, and I knew that I should not start the meeting on time because an appreciable part of the value of that meeting was all of those people getting in the room with each other and

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### Interview — Jim O'Donnell from page 24

seeing each other catching up a little bit and making a lunch date and doing the lubrication that makes the university work, even when the purpose of the meeting was in a large measure me doing the same thing with that particular group. If you suddenly imagine the "Super MOOC University of the World" with professors teaching in their bathrobes from their cabins in Vermont and the administrative staff on a space station orbiting the planet, you would at least have to find different ways to work on trust, and we're only at stage one of doing that.

**ATG/TG:** *Something's obviously going to be lost in that setting.*

**JO'D:** Facebook helps, but it's not the answer.

**ATG/TG:** *Well, Jim, thank you very much. We really appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule here at the conference.*

**JO'D:** It's always a pleasure to be here down in Charleston with **Katina** and her retinue and assembly. This conference is one of the most extraordinary assemblages of smart people, and I like to go places where there are smart people, so it is always fun to be here.

**ATG/TG:** *Thank you very much.*

**JO'D:** Thank you. 🐼

### Rumors from page 8

And while we are on the subject of baseball, have you read **Bill Bryson's** *One Summer, America, 1927* (Doubleday, 2013)? There are some great **Babe Ruth** stories among other fascinating things. The book is so chock full of data that it's worth reading more than once!

Along those lines, be sure and read the astute **Nancy Herther's** article, "University Presses Facing 'Enormous Tectonic Shift' in Publishing" (this issue, p.12). There is collaboration going on! This article was originally posted online on the **ATG NewsChannel**. Did y'all meet **Nancy** in Charleston at the Conference last year? She said she was glad to get away from the Minnesota cold!  
<http://www.against-the-grain.com/>

Speaking of scholarly communication, **Myer Kutz** edits engineering handbooks for **Wiley**, **McGraw-Hill**, and **Elsevier** and still gets good print royalties. **Myer** asks if everything is going electronic, why are publishers still making print versions available? Another question is, why and where are the print books being printed and bought? Could it be that electronic counterparts are helping the sales of print? (This issue, p.57.)

Speaking of print versus digital, I have to agree with **Bob Holley** who mourns the loss of the print edition of *College & Research Libraries* (this issue, p.59). It seems to me

that it is much easier to avoid reading digital editions than print editions. It's the push/pull phenomenon.

Speaking of reading, several of us are wondering about the reading of virtual versus print content and what this does to comprehension and literacy of digital natives who are largely our library undergraduate population these days. **Mark Herring** (see p.50) and **Tony Horava** have both written about this in earlier issues of **ATG**.

With this issue, we have a new column "**Digital Conversations – Libraries, Learning, and Literacy**," by the astute and alert **Paul Chilsen** and **Todd Kelley** of **Carthage College**. Quoting **Marc Prensky** who coined the term "digital native," "by the time students reach their early 20s, they have spent 10,000 hours playing video games, sent and received 200,000 email and instant messages, but have allotted just 5,000 hours to reading books." (See the new column, this issue, p.44.)

To balance the reading scales, be sure and read **Raymond Walser's** "**Browsing on the Bayou**" (see p.37) about bookstores in New Orleans. Not to mention **Tom Leonhardt's** "**You Are What You Read**" (see p.46). Do you have a record of everything that you have ever read?

The industrious **Ramune Kubilius** has compiled the first series of reports from the **2013 Charleston Conference** (see p.64)

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