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# Little Red Herrings-Is Literacy Still Possible at Our Hyper-connected World?

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**I Hear the Train A Comin'**  
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article processing charges (APCs), it marked a major development for so-called “gold” open access. For the first time, a governing body wasn’t pushing simply for public access to some version of an article after an embargo; rather, they were exhibiting a preference for “immediate Open Access with the maximum opportunity for re-use.” Further, they were putting teeth behind this preference in the form of high-value block grants to institutions to pay for APCs.

Whatever one’s feelings regarding open access publishing, the willingness of a major governmental funding body to commit this amount of money is sure to further legitimize the gold open access business model. It should also provide fierce competition as large subscription-based publishers expand their hybrid options in an attempt to capture RCUK money. How British institutions respond to the influx of funds and opportunities could have wide-ranging consequences within the gold OA publishing world. Subscription publishers can potentially offer steep APC discounts that exert tremendous pressure to lower APCs among all publishers. These publishers can, for the time being, afford to operate their OA programs at a loss, cushioned by the revenue stream provided by their subscriptions. This, in turn, could have the effect of pushing out OA publishers that rely solely on APCs. It is therefore quite possible that the RCUK policy, designed to give gold open access a leg up, could end up severely hampering it.

As always with the **Charleston Conference**, there are any number of treats for which Too Much Is Not Enough — the Lowcountry cuisine (particularly shrimp and grits, pimento cheese spread, and pralines), the Georgian architecture, the site of **Anthony Watkinson’s** magnificent beard, and the stimulating conversations to be found in the sessions and out in the hallways. I look forward to seeing you there. 🍷

# Little Red Herrings — Is Literacy Still Possible at Our Hyper-connected World?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

**E**arlier this summer, **Farhad Manjoo**, a *Slate* writer, published a piece about how people do not read well online (“You Won’t Finish This Article,” *Slate*, 6 June 2013). **Manjoo** opened his piece in hilarious fashion: “I’m going to make this brief, because you’re not going to stick around very long.” He then launched into a discussion about how little of any online article people actually read. According to his sources (mainly Chartbeat, which studies these things), 38% of all readers “bounced” almost as soon as they landed on the page. The longer the article, the more people leave. By the time readers have to scroll down to read the rest of the first screen, almost half have moved on, many of them to hit the comments page knowing almost nothing of the content of the article they are about to weigh in on. In fact, according to those who study such things, many people who write comments haven’t read even a third of what they’re commenting on!

This is hardly news to anyone who’s written for any length of time, especially online. Commenters often have an ax to grind (as do some reviewers) and nothing, certainly not the truth, will stand in their way. The problem with people not scrolling, or, heaven forbid, clicking through to the next page, is that they get almost nothing from the article (in **Manjoo’s** word, “Bupkis”). If there is any good news in **Manjoo’s** article, it is

bittersweet: almost all “readers” will look at the pictures or watch an embedded video.

Is this something we should be concerned about? Perhaps it’s just too early to tell, but if this trend continues in which online readers read only about 50-60% of the text, what will that do to our collective literacy? Moreover, what will it do to our overall ‘informed citizenry’ that our type of democracy depends so heavily on? Will we be reduced to dumbing everything down to a picture or a one-minute video? Excuse my mordancy, but are we sacrificing our literacy for the sake of convenience and oh-so-cool devices?

**Manjoo** isn’t the only one to raise this issue, of course. Others have complained about it, beginning with the *Gutenberg Elegies* (**Birkerts**), through *Dumbest Generation* (**Bauerlein**), to *The Shallows* (**Carr**), (and of course to that poster and book someone did a few years back). Most recently, **Morozov** took the Web to task with his excellent *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Internet Solutionism*.

I know it’s a bit out of favor to criticize the Web and all its glory, but it really isn’t the world’s knowledge so much as it’s the world’s chatterbox. That’s at least two steps from knowledge and one from information. While it does make billions of dollars for various interested parties, it may not be helping us as much as we think. It may even be hurting us more than we know, and certainly more than we’re willing to admit.



The Web hasn’t been an unqualified boon to libraries

either, so much as it has been an inadvertent competitor that routinely causes some people to question both the existence and continued need for them. When you look at rising generations who are spending most of their intellectual lives online, you do begin to wonder if this thing called the Web will replace libraries, not because it’s better, but because libraries cost too much to persist. Moreover, they demand a rather expensive bit of intellectual capital to expend. Let’s hope we’re all not digging our own graves here.

No, I’m not trying to put the toothpaste back into the tube. I am, however, hoping others will at least see that toothpaste is out of the tube and a good bit of it has missed the toothbrush. Our future is as messy as it is murky, but it is a future that we can control if we’re willing to do so.

Preserving literacy might well be a good as any place to begin. 🍷

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