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Book Reviews: Monographic Musings

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A hearty thanks to ATG veteran Steve McKinzie for sharing his thoughts on ATG veteran Mark Herring’s new title, Are Libraries Obsolete? An Argument for Relevance in the Digital Age. Steve is the source behind this shrewd observation on the longevity of print: “Books offer something...that will enable them to sustain a market niche: durability, portability, and reliability” (ATG, November 2004, 56). Mark is the author of this most excellent statement regarding the endurance of libraries: “The Internet is marvelous, but to claim, as some now do, that it’s making libraries obsolete is as silly as saying shoes have made feet unnecessary” (American Libraries, April 2001, 78). Both are gems.

Happy reading, everyone! — DV


Reviewed by Steve McKinzie (Library Director, Catawba College) <smckinzie@catawba.edu>

In a book that is both alarmingly provocative and maddeningly candid in its appraisal of libraries and their place in an increasingly digital world, Mark Herring, Dean of Library Services at Winthrop University and frequent contributor to Against the Grain, asks questions that few librarians are honest enough to ask: do we really need traditional libraries? Do they have a future? Or more pointedly as the title of his book suggests, Are Libraries Obsolete?

With the advent of the Web and its marvelous ubiquity and extraordinary capacity to both fascinate and inform, many now argue that our modern digital culture has little need for those old bricks-and-mortar libraries with their traditional offerings, solid book collections, and enlightening reference services. Herring counters emphatically that we do indeed need these traditional libraries. As his subtitle suggests, An Argument for Relevance in the Digital Age, he insists that libraries are well-nigh indispensable. Losing them would be at best tragic and at worst catastrophic.

Yet, Herring is only guardedly optimistic about their future. Preserving traditional libraries and their litany of services won’t be easy. However theoretically valuable such libraries may be, librarians and those who care for what traditional libraries can offer, he maintains, will have to muster a good deal of tenacity and wisdom to enable their institutions to survive — much less flourish.

The author is a long-time user of the Web, a careful scholar of its potential as well as one of the Web’s and digitization’s most cogent critics. He wrote the amazingly-popular article “Ten Reasons why the Internet is no Substitute for a Library” in 1999 – (a title sponsored and promoted by posters and reprints by the American Library Association) followed by a full-length, similarly-titled monograph in 2007, Fools’ Gold: Why the Internet is No Substitute for the Library. In this new book he covers some of the same ground, but it taps into the latest scholarship. He provides the reader an even-handed and comprehensive evaluation of the Web’s strengths and its weaknesses.

Herring readily concedes the wonders of the digital world. Streaming video, eBooks, full-text e-sources, apps, and a variety of social media options are all amazingly useful and extraordinarily empowering, but he quickly reminds us that the Web’s advantages are only one side of the equation. What should we say with respect to the Web’s darker side? What should we make of the digital world’s drawbacks, or are we glibly assuming that there aren’t really any problems with the Internet — at least not any significant difficulties?

Herring insists that in our mad rush to go all-digital, we may be sacrificing a whole lot more than we suspect. The Web has a host of problems. Some of them are personal — shrinking privacy, the threat of hackers, and ongoing security issues. Others involve sustainability — the Web’s lack of quality control, linkage rot (what used to be there is no longer), and failures in digital preservation. Several entail breakdowns in Web integrity — shrinking intellectual property rights, copyright infringement, and piracy.

Of course, even if the Web were perfect and its problems were minimal — which to be sure they are not — there would be other concerns. Mounting evidence, for instance, suggests that our culture’s digital obsession may be weakening our ability to concentrate — undermining our capacity to sustain focus and enjoy in-depth reading. The Internet is no intellectual panacea. It is a mixed blessing at best.

All of this points, in Herring’s thinking, to the value of traditional academic and public libraries as a complement to the Web — places where you can get expert professional advice on research, access to proprietary databases, and hard copy books. It is time now, he adds, to work to see to it that these traditional libraries are not left by the wayside in our headlong dash to create an all-digital future.

So what should we do in the short run to preserve traditional libraries? Herring doesn’t purport to know all the answers. He offers no fast and sure blueprint, but he does insist that with a good measure of creativity a lot can be achieved. He argues that libraries should create more innovative portals, add more collaborative learning spaces, work aggressively to meet the research and information needs of their users, and avoid excessive political partisanship. He also recommends that librarians become less risk averse (a problem with too many of us he insists) and far more flexible in meeting what will be an unpredictable and possibly difficult future.

Are Libraries Obsolete? An Argument for their Relevance in the Digital Age is a first-rate book that takes on some really tough questions — questions about academic and public libraries, their future, and whether they have will have any sort of role or place in an increasingly digital world. As I mentioned earlier, the author isn’t overly optimistic about the future of libraries, although his concluding chapters offer a set of dualing prospects for them — the possibility of things turning out badly and a counter vision of libraries emerging with a new sense of relevance and mission.

Herring is likely at his weakest in this speculative, forecasting dimension of his volume. He draws well on his own experience. He has a seasoned familiarity with library design and management, and I like a lot of what he has to say. Predicting the future, however, and offering workable strategies to meet that future are at best difficult and at worst a fool’s errand.

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