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Little Red Herrings -- Stop the Presses!

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if the subject matter is of significant public importance, and that the journalist and the publisher had taken reasonable steps to verify the story. The courts set a standard that is no higher than that of ‘responsible journalism.’

In the **Ehrenfeld** case, **Dr. Ehrenfeld** did not defend the action in the UK, and judgment was awarded to the plaintiff by default. If the case had been defended, it may well be that qualified privilege would have worked, and the action set aside. The UK has manoeuvred the law into a position protecting free expression very similar to that of the US First Amendment.

Even if none of these defences work for the defendant, there remains the defence of an ‘offer to make amends’. This must be in writing, and consist of a correction of the statement made, an apology to the plaintiff, and agreed compensation and legal costs. Such an offer will not be allowed if the defendant has already raised one of the defences of absolute or qualified privilege.

There remains the problem of the ‘libel tourist’. Currently, provided the statement is published (i.e. disseminated) in the UK, it is actionable, even though it was never intended to be made in the UK, and the plaintiff is not a UK citizen or resident. The **Ehrenfeld** case clearly raises some disturbing issues about applying UK law to issues that originate outside the UK and only encounter UK jurisdiction by chance. But bad cases do not of themselves drive the cause of good law, or render existing law unworkable or unacceptable. Given the US record of trying to apply domestic US law to events and disputes that take place outside the USA, we British are entitled to be sceptical of US complaints of extraterritoriality, especially in such limited circumstances.

So what do we British make of this? Do we feel constrained from speaking our minds or writing columns like this? The short answer is no. But what the law does is ensure that even humble writers like your columnist check our facts. Moreover, publishers will be aware that libel actions are always complex, and very expensive to bring or to defend. In the UK there is a social and political tradition of free expression, and of mocking our leaders, in business, government or even in our local communities. There is no ‘public figure’ defence in UK law, as there is in the USA. Nevertheless, political satire of the most direct and savage kind has been meat and drink to British cartoonists, journalists and commentators for centuries. That an American thinks that UK libel law threatens free speech is made in the context of an American legal and social context where such rights are assumed to need rigorous statutory protection. The British wear these issues more lightly! 🍄



Little Red Herrings — Stop the Presses!

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

Last month a new study commissioned by the **British Library** and the **Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)** issued one of those “Duh!” reports. The new study (available here <http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf>) found that the “**Google** Generation,” or those brought up by computer wolves, is not very Web-literate. Stop the presses! News flash! For those in this profession once called librarianship (but fast becoming Cyberianship) this is hardly news. The study further found details that will likely amuse public services librarians in particular and any librarian working with the public but especially with children of “Hover Parents.” The “**Google** Generation” it seems, can be an impatient lot, though the jury is still out. They want both the search itself, and the navigation to pages to arrive in nanoseconds — and they want it now. They become petulant when the first five hits (I’m being generous) are unusable. In short, they have “zero tolerance” for anything that smacks of study. Okay, I’m editorializing now, but surely you get the drift.

The study is quick to point that these traits are now emerging across all age groups. I don’t doubt it. We elect presidents on a whim, decide important questions on **YouTube**, and solve our medical needs at the end of a point and a click. It’s hardly surprising that when surrounded by such harried behavior, even those old enough to know better now tend on that downward “snatch and grab” spiral. The implications of the study, especially with respect to the older age groups, aren’t the best of news as one might think. If the older generation is becoming more like the younger one, libraries will become the palimpsest on a computer screen, but more on that later.

On the face of it this study seems good news for information literacy proponents, the new catchphrase many of us are using to convince our administrations that we cannot, should not, in our growing girths, be replaced by the micro-thin **Apple notebook**. But the report goes quickly from sanguine to lugubrious. While libraries are charged with coming to terms that “the future is now,” libraries are also charged to make interfaces more user-friendly, more “standard and easier to use.” In other words, more like **Google**, which you’ll recall has created generation of Web-illiterate users. Okay, now I get it.

Now I don’t mean for readers to infer that I’m opposed to the idea of making our catalogs more user-friendly, or that I do not seek to make interfaces easier to use, or that I think making our exorbitant information in databases that rival the cost of bungalows on Cape Cod is inherently a bad thing. On the contrary I greatly favor the idea, though I believe some of the new products are much ado about nothing. (For example, what I may “dig” this year may not necessarily be something I’ll “dig” three years from now). In other words, some of the new technology seems purposefully dated for built-in obsolescence in about that same time frame that the new version will appear, but I digress). It is unquestionably true that we must make very expensive information more widely known and easier to search.

But what troubles me about this report is the underlying assumption that making users more intelligent searchers is next to impossible so we must make things more **Google**-like. That’s good news for **Google**, of course, not so good news for the rest of us. Embedded in the report, too, is the fundamental assumption that one can’t change users so we must change libraries. If libraries are to be useful in the future they must shuffle off all their intellectual pretensions and ape the “snatch and grab” mentality of the Web in order to be successful. In other words, live with the idea that their million-dollar enterprises may well be “pass on” weigh stations. It’s a high price to pay for pointing others in the right direction. This logic is similar to the shoe salesman who had only a size 9 for his size 11 customer so he just chopped off his customer’s toes. The shoe fit, you see, even if the customer did walk funny ever thereafter.

Other parts of the report will also raise eyebrows. For example, over the next ten years it predicts a unified Web culture. While it doesn’t make entirely clear what this will be — will it be **Google**, will it be tiered (so that those looking for serious information can bypass all the spam and vibrator ads) or will it be something else — immediately it is clear that libraries in most of their forms will diminish as they fade. The report also calls for a rise in eBook sales. We’ve been hearing this for the last twenty-five years with no significant change in those sales. This could well be the eBook decade but I reserve the right to doubt one more year. Occasionally the report resorts to bizarre language. Consider the following:

“Users are promiscuous, diverse and volatile and it is clear that these behaviours [sic] represent serious challenges for traditional information providers, nurtured in a hardcopy paradigm and, in many respects, still tied to it. Libraries must move away from bean counting dubious download statistics, and get

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You Gotta Go to School for That? — Love and Roses in the Library

by **Jared A. Seay** (Reference librarian and Head, Media Services, College of Charleston) <seayj@cofc.edu>

As I found out one night serving my public late on Valentine's Day evening, the stately aisles in the library can be the perfect place to express love to that special someone — even if they are not particularly the library type. Seems a young student (okay, so ALL of them are young) was all a-twitter because she could not for the life of her find a book on the shelf. Seems she had never looked for a book in the library before and ... well ... all them numbers did not make sense to her. After I explained to her the LC system (in easy to understand vernacular) the wee lass came back ten minutes later quite distressed and unable, still, to locate the book in question. It was all the more important because her boyfriend had said that she must find this book, as it contained some information vital to their relationship. I accompanied the nervous young miss to the third floor and found the book (*Poems* by **Lord Byron**). Lying upon the book was a yellow rose. A message was stuck



in the pages of the book. Imagine the surprise of both of us when the note told us (among other mushy things to which I was not privy) to locate yet another book on another floor, which also (you guessed it) had a yellow rose and another love note with instructions at the end to find yet another book.

This same thing went on for about six more books — with us running up and down floors and the increasingly embarrassed lass collecting an increasing handful of yellow roses. The girl seemed truly embarrassed and thanked me for helping her inasmuch — as she admitted — “I don't know much about the library, and I could never find these things. You see my boyfriend loves books and he does not know that I don't.” Methinks the lad was the intellectual, romantic one of the pair.

Well, the boyfriend certainly had varied tastes in books as we wandered across classic poetry, art books, philosophy, history, and for

some reason ended up in the technology books with the last yellow rose on top of the book and a long, fancy note attached. She read the note (perhaps a bit too quickly considering the effort that had gone into the whole endeavor) and thanked me profusely for assisting her.

“Don't guess you ever helped someone find roses in books in the library before, huh?” she said. I admitted that I had not, expressed surprise that the roses were actually still there, and pined that such things need happen much more often around here. She kept thanking me as we descended the stairs and she hurried out the front door (presumably to fulfill the request on the final secret message).

I returned to my reference duties, well exercised, and contemplating how the library had been so intricately involved in this particularly energetic Valentine effort. Glad to know I was part of making someone's Valentine evening a grand success. Times like these make one really appreciate being a librarian for more than just the intellectual stimulus and high salary.

Just trying to figure out how to record the ref stats on this one — one per rose? 🌹

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much closer to monitoring the actual information seeking behaviour of their users.”

If you can diagram either of those sentences, please send them to me. I don't know about you but if we have promiscuous, volatile users in our building, I'm calling security. Sure, I understand the idea, I'm just not sure I buy into fully. Yes, such users probably are the wave of the future, but it's a wave I'd rather not surf just yet.

On balance this is a report every librarian should read. Its unquestioned acceptance that libraries as we all know them are not only a thing of the past or dying dinosaurs at best, but by golly it's about time and are we ever glad! It will rattle but maybe it's what we need to hear to wake us from our reverie. Not the prognosis I wanted to read from a putative library-friendly entity, mind you, but what we may need to hear regularly. And in any event, what exactly is anyone — i.e., you and me — doing about it? I mean, really.

ALA rushes to embrace any new technology and almost — almost mind you — dismisses anything that reeks of real reading (unless of course you count those inane READ posters featuring **Brittney Spears** reading an upside-down book). I wish we could mount some truly engaging campaign about libraries, one that distinguishes mere information, data, from what we all want it to grow up to be.

Knowledge, and yes, in some cases, even wisdom. 🌹

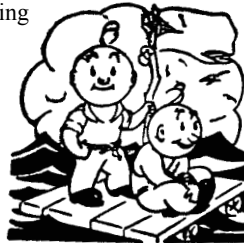
Adventures in Librarianship — Performance Appraisal

by **Ned Kraft** (Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State)
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Considering the implementation of the new Capricious library system, the failure of the University's accounting system (MUDL), and the basement flood in December, it has been a trying year for all Acquisitions staff. However, **Floyd Doormat** rose to the challenge and met each hurdle with flying colors and soaring confidence.

SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION: **Mr. Doormat** learned how to log into the new Capricious library system and find “Order Create.” We are confident that in the upcoming year he will become proficient at entering titles and authors into acquisitions bib templates. With any luck, actual order entry won't be far behind!

TEAMWORK: **Mr. Doormat** spends almost every moment networking with fellow staff. When the university issues an early holiday or snow dismissal, he is the first to know and he generously shares that information with all his coworkers. Those without windows depend on him for meteorological updates.



MAIL SORTING: After more than twenty years of experience, **Mr. Doormat** can still be counted on to ask his supervisor where the weekly *Economist* should go. His insight allows him to not only dispose of unwanted catalogs, but to dispose of all catalogs, regardless of importance with little or no supervision.

TRAINING: It is safe to say that **Floyd Doormat** has more training than any other employee! His supervisor knows that having **Mr. Doormat** out of the office for long stretches is certainly a benefit to the whole team in the long run.

This is his 14th year in the **Microsoft Word** class, his 5th year in the Accounting Basics class. Several instructors have commented on the rate of his improvement and the depth of his understanding.

SERIAL CHECK-IN: Although he was adept at listing incoming serials on official University stationary, because of **Mr. Doormat's** strenuous mail sorting duties, the

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