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Millenium Minutes-The Ditto Machine

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MILLENNIUM

Minutes

The Ditto Machine

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Excuse me while I turn my head and try unsuccessfully to suppress a laugh filled with bitter irony. I have been reading the reminiscences of various correspondents who have been wallowing in nostalgia over faded technologies of the past. They have regaled us with tales of **Card Catalogs, Kardex Cards, Microcard Readers, Electric Erasers, Cartridge Microfilm Readers**, etc., etc. While I have enjoyed snickering along with them at how klunky the technology used to be, I confess the smile on my face has often been twisted into a superior smirk. This is because, for sheer inefficiency, frustration, agony, pain, and all around damnability, none of the old contraptions could hold a candle to:

THE DITTO MACHINE!!!!!!

For readers born since the end of the Pleistocene era, and thus too young to remember this monstrosity, a **Ditto machine** was somewhat akin to a mimeograph machine. I don't have any idea what normal people used it for (newsletters and suchlike trash, I expect), but the subscription agency I worked for in 1972 used it for producing invoices and publisher orders. One day with this thing should have been enough to convince me of what I know now, namely, that the subscription agent business was exported to earth by evil aliens from Plant Zorgarac, in order to drive Earthlings mad. The aliens could then take over our world without any resistance. Alas, I was young and foolish, in love with the business, and had a mortgage, so here I am, 29 years later, still in the business and still unable to explain to my parents (both of whom are college

graduates) what it is I do for a living.

The machine lurked at one end of a table at the back of the office where I worked. About the size of a modern laser printer, one side had a tray for the heavy, slick, specially coated invoice paper; in the middle was a rotating metal drum; on the other side was a tray to catch the paper after it had been printed.

During the day, several "typists" — they were always women, invariably laboring to put their husbands through graduate school at Michigan — typed lists of titles for invoices onto special forms called "**Ditto masters**." The master had a special purple coating on the back. Truly it was a bear to fix if you made a typo, which our typists did with metronomic regularity. At the end of the day I would collect the completed masters and trudge toward the **Ditto machine** with the same sort of effervescent enthusiasm with which Jeremiah greeted the Babylonians. Here's why:

First you wrapped the master around the drum and clamped it in. No problem. Then you poured a clear but still nasty fluid (the ink) into the center of the machine. Then you pressed the button and the machine would print one or more copies of the page. The print was purple, and a freshly printed page smelled like a toxic waste dump. Then you unclamped the master, put it to one side, picked up the next one, and repeated the process to produce the second page. Then you did it again. And again...And again. If you had a client with 1,500 titles to invoice, you

repeated this process 100 times.

But still you were not done, not by a long shot. After you printed each page of the invoice, you had to print the analyslips. These were the rotten little three by five order forms, printed on one side, and during manufacture, overlapped on top of one another except for the very bottom portion, and then glued down both sides. The upper portion of each form had space for the ship-

to address of the library; the bottom portion the title to be ordered.

Now came the real challenge. You had to run the sheaf of analyslips through the machine so that the titles typed on the invoice were printed in the proper place on the bottom of each slip. "What's the big deal?" a reader might ask. "Surely the forms and machine were manufactured with such high tolerances and precision that the titles printed on the forms with perfect registration each and every time, right?" Yes, and my dog, Sparky, was the inventor of the scanning electron microscope. Two, three, four tries were often necessary to get it right, and you had to get it right *twice*; one (white) copy to send to the publisher with the check; the other (yellow) copy for the clerks to lose in filing cabinets made especially for losing analyslips.

Nope, not done yet. Then you cut off the portion of the **Ditto master** that had the client's ship-to address on it and re-clamped it into the machine. You took each sheaf of analyslips and used the paper cutter to cut off the glued ends, you stacked the now liberated slips into a pile, and ran them *back through* the machine to print the ship-to on each one. Of course, the company's highly-trained quality control engineers (that would be me) ensured that the reams of invoices and avalanches of analyslips all remained in perfect order so the next day clerks could attach them to checks and send them to the

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publishers. Finally, at 9:00 p.m., semi-stoned from the fumes of the "ink," and staggering with fatigue, you stapled the various copies together and headed home.

There you relayed the day's events and it made for brief and disappointing conversation. You could not claim "I put out a fire and rescued a small child," or "I invented a new programming language." All you could say, most days, was "I ran the **Ditto machine**." (For the benefit of any readers who happen to be my current, and last, wife Janet, I want to have it on record that the **Ditto machine** is the greatest invention since the credit card, because, in a way, it brought us together.)

When you got to work the next morning, you were greeted by the extremely Dutch owner of the company, who, in a voice filled with pained self-pity, pointed out on more than one occasion that each ruined sheaf of analyslips cost him a nickel. And in those days a nickel was worth real money: namely, five cents.

The real miracle in all of this was not that I quit and went into something less mentally stressful such as landmine removal, or that I did not burn the place down, or in the modern style, come to work one day toting a loaded assault rifle. The real miracle is not even that I stayed in the business, albeit with another company, **Faxon**, which used a computer to print its invoices and orders. The real miracle is that any of the clients got any of their journal issues, any time, ever, even one.

There are many reasons to not like computers. But, whenever I get the Blue Screen of Death on my laptop or one of my desktop machines starts printing gibberish, I have only to think back to the **Ditto machine** to get everything back in perspective. Final note: "**Ditto**" was a company name as well as a product name. I did several searches and could not find a trace of them. If **Ditto Corporation** still exists, and has a legal staff, none of the above is meant to disparage their fine products. If not

ATG Interviews Angela Adair-Hoy

e-Book Publisher and Author

by **Ron Chepesiuk** (Winthrop University, 782 Wofford Street, Rock Hill, SC 29730) <RChepesiuk@compuserve.com>

*As a pioneer in the emerging e-publishing industry, Angela Adair-Hoy is one of the most prolific and successful self published authors on the Internet today. She's been in e-publishing since June of 1997 and was one of the first writers to offer her e-books for sale. This past December St. Martin's Press published her co-authored book, **How To Publish and Promote Online**, which was one of the best-selling e-books ever. Adair-Hoy is the publisher of the **Writer's Market Report**, which now has 45,000 subscribers, and the co-owner, with her husband, of **BookLocker.com**, one of Internet's largest and most successful e-publishing companies.*

Contributing editor Ron Chepesiuk caught up with the busy author-publisher-entrepreneur in Greenville, SC at one of her recent speaking engagements and got her thoughts on the e-book trend and its impact on libraries.

ATG: What has been your experience with libraries?

AA: I've always loved libraries. In fact, I could live in one. We recently moved to the Bangor (Maine) area, and I remember going to the **Bangor Public Library** for the first time. It's highly subsidized by **Stephen King** and it shows. The building is huge and so architecturally daring and the inside is absolutely astounding. The library has books that you can only find in some of the bigger university libraries. Recently, I began to sell e-books to libraries.

ATG: What's involved?

AA: I'm used to getting purchase orders electronically from bookstores, but one day, a library sent **BookLocker.com** a purchase order through the mail. It was for a CD-ROM. I couldn't believe it. Then I thought about it. Wow! There is a whole new market out there that I haven't thought of. I had always associated libraries with feely, touch, and nice smelling books. I didn't associate them with digital files.

ATG: Have you got a lot of purchase orders from libraries since then?

AA: Oh, yes. Lots of them, mainly from public libraries. I should note one interesting thing about the library orders. Every one we've received so far has come by postal mail. That's interesting when you consider how much time and money libraries can

save if they send their orders electronically. I would be happy to bill them. But every order so far has been for the traditional book or for the CD-ROM. We haven't had a library order for a downloadable e-book yet.

ATG: How do you explain that?

AA: I think it's because libraries still aren't in tune with the e-book trend. Librarians want to handle books that are traditional form, which is like most everybody else at this point. But I think that's going to change.

ATG: You are the owner of BookLocker.com. How did that come about?

AA: I was approached by the original owner of **BookLocker.com** in 1999 to list and sell my "How to Write" e-books on his Website. He offered me 70 percent royalties and non exclusive rights. The contract was simple and the least greedy one I've seen in e-publishing. I said, "Let's do it." Within a week, my books were his best selling books. Then the owner offered to sell me **BookLocker.com** at a very reasonable price and I bought it. It had grown so fast that the owner felt he couldn't handle it. Today, we have 800 e-books for sale at the **BookLocker.com** Website, no small figure when you consider we reject 70 percent of all the proposals we receive.

ATG: What's involved in the submission process?

AA: I look at every submission before making a decision. The author has to submit the book in text or MS-Word so that my system can pick up the typos, misspellings and grammatical errors.

ATG: How do you see the e-book playing out? Do you see it making a major impact on libraries?

AA: I see the e-book playing a big role. First, there is the question of shelf space. I don't know of a library that isn't hurting for shelf space. You can put ten e-books in the space now occupied by one print book. You can't put a print book into a computer, but you can put thousands of e-books into a computer. You can give a person a CD-ROM or hand held reader or let them download every book by one author. Books will no longer be out of print anymore, and you'll always be able to find the book you're looking for. In fact, fifty years from now, you'll be able to find an electronic copy of any book you want.

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