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Little Red Herrings — Stop the Presses: Feet No Longer Needed; Hands Next to Go

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

Am I the only one? Am I the only one who finds the spate of recent articles about the “digital tsunami” a bit odd and unquestionably professionally suicidal? In many ways, to listen to our colleagues talk about how digitization is fast replacing libraries is like the young man who, after being found guilty of murdering his parents, threw himself on the mercy of the court because he was an orphan. Keep this up and we’ll all be working for **Microsoft**, or not at all.

Take for example the article that appeared in the 1 July issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. **Fred Heath**, provost of the **University of Texas**, gleefully talks about how undergraduates this fall will come back to an “information commons” rather than the 90,000-plus volumes the library used to have. Replacing **UT-Austin’s** carping bun-heads will be “Internet-savvy” librarians! Notwithstanding his admission, **Mr. Heath** is not wet behind the ears either. “All of us are dealing with a creative tension between our commitment to this great print collection and the digital tsunami that’s bearing down on us,” he says. I don’t know if the Austin-heat got to **Mr. Heath**, but I have not felt that digital tsunami, unless of course he means to conjure the colossal damage tsunamis wreak in their wake. **Mr. Heath** goes on to inform us that, “The challenge is to re-engineer our space to be able to move into this suddenly, formidably huge digital universe.”

I don’t mean to pick on **Mr. Heath** but that is precisely *not* the challenge. The challenge is the same as it has always been: to deliver first-rate library service regardless of the medium. The trouble is, we’ve been down this road before. Anytime we make the medium, the format, more important than the information, the knowledge, we lose sight of what library service is all about. Years ago, when I first entered this profession, libraries faced the same weebegone future: microforms would turn every library into the size of a shoebox. No longer would we need library buildings because everyone would have his or her own library tucked under arm.

Here we are, twenty years later trying to figure out a way to close the book altogether on microforms.

When it becomes clear that the pitfalls of microforms were so formidable they would not be easily resolved, automation (in the form of catalogs) reared its hydra-head and promised to transform the library to a mere figment of our ancestors’ imaginations. Twenty years later, here we are adapting automation in various ways but certainly didn’t replace libraries with it. When we came to understand automation not as panacea but as merely another tool (like microforms), we got somewhat serious about library service.

But we were only serious until public television appeared on the educational scene. Now surely here was a turning point. Surely public television would *completely* transform not just libraries but every facet of education from kindergarten to college. University campuses would be transformed overnight, making it possible to teach tens of thousands of students via television. College and university campuses would be closing all over the country. Twenty years later here we are trying to find out if public television can produce an unbiased show. In many ways, public television reminds us of that old saw: “Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: what might have been.”

Are you able to discern a trend here? **Mr. Heath** may have forgotten that this country still maintains the most draconian copyright laws in the world, a point overlooked by **Google’s** grand digitization project but one it is slowly coming to grips with. We are discovering that **Google’s** grand project may turn out to be the equivalent of academic Web-bytes, snippets of books that provide a clue but not more and so miss the Scylla of copyright while crashing on the Charybdis shoals of flaneurism. Just what we need: another reason to make sure the rising generation not only never loses its allergy to reading but will be confirmed in it.

Or perhaps **Mr. Heath** has forgotten about ecology. Are Texas students more abstemious about printing than those on the east coast? Here

students hit the print key if the Web return is longer than three pages. Multiply that by 20,000 students at just one campus and you’ll make a tree-hugger out of **Rush Limbaugh**.

Other reasons obtain. When **CalPoly** determined on a new library building it erected a \$42 million conventional one. With the nation’s largest concentration of engineers and computer geeks at their disposal and they couldn’t come up with a paperless library. And what about all those failed, failing, or stumbling digitization outfits: **netLibrary**, **Xanadu**, **Questa** and others? Doesn’t this tell us anything?

Or where are those digital support industries that should already be present? We still don’t have an eBook reader that is worth the silicon it’s printed on. So far my favorite is one that simulates a turning page and smells like leather. Of course, you still can’t read it in the sunlight but who reads any more? Apparently not many at **UT-Austin**. Does this strike anyone as a potential problem in a rush to digital judgment day? When these objections are raised, they are generally brushed off as not something to worry about. It will all come out in the wash. Meanwhile, **Mr. Gorbachev**, tear down that library!

Oh, I know what you’re thinking. Another Luddite, a freak, a man from Erewhon raving like a madman about computers and Big Brother, and all that radiation from monitors. Pat him on the head and he’ll go away. Here’s the point of what I’m saying: there is a place for electronic services in every library, especially when it comes to serial information. But in the same manner that all our other tools are not the library-in-itself, neither is digitization. It is not a rolling tsunami washing the library away in its wake, or a fast-moving freight train that we must either board or be run over, if I may mix metaphors. It is simply another tool that we must insinuate in libraries, not to replace them, but to make them what they have always been: the first, best source for information access. Like all would-be-contenders before now, make the Web-alone, or any of its constituent parts a library and you have a very poor, very inadequate ersatz.

I see this talk about the Web replacing or making libraries obsolete as silly as if some academic were to rush forward and say, “Here’s a way to save money: let’s digitize all university athletic teams! We’ll save on liability, can get rid of very costly athletic departments, allow every student to play and determine the outcome (your team always wins), dispense with paying coaches millions of dollars, no longer have to put up with off-the-field or court antics of some players, and help focus every incoming students’ eyes on the very reason why go to college in the first place: to get an education.”

Even though such nonsense talk might get a hearing in some latte-corners of the world, it’s just palaver. Likewise is all this talk about digitization replacing libraries, or making them obsolete. It’s like saying the invention of shoes have now made all feet unnecessary.

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And speaking of meetings — Following a rapid development process, the **Circulation and Fulfillment Division of the American Institute of Physics** has launched its new online meetings registration service. A key function of the new service allows attendees to register online in real time, with links between the online registration site and **AIP’s** membership database to provide immediate confirmation of membership or other factors affecting registration fees

or benefits. **AIP** developed the capability to process online registrations with multiple variables at the request of one of its newest distribution customers, the **American Geophysical Union (AGU)**. **AGU** required multiple registration types based on membership type, days attending, products purchased, and guest attendance. The service ties all of this information to the individual’s existing account so that a society can track a member’s meeting attendance, along with their memberships, subscriptions, and contributions. The service allows for the processing and maintenance of nonmember registrations, as well. www.aip.org/

And speaking of meeting registrations, go to <http://www.katina.info/conference> and register online! The full conference program is up. See you soon! Cheers!