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Little Red Herrings -- YouIdiot.com

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While researching something else I ran across an item in a business journal that caught my eye. For those of you born on or after 1980, let me add that this is called serendipity in research. It's something that cannot be done in the electronic medium, and one of the many things we'll lose when all the world is digital. Now I know all the GenXers with hover parents will look askance and wonder why the anachronism but let me ignore them and go on. Serendipity is a coined word by **Horace Walpole** (I use as my authority the fabulous *Brewers Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, not the one online, but the 1870 edition that's damnably difficult to find anywhere anymore.) **Walpole** first used it to describe lucky and unexpected "finds" by accident. As he described it in a letter to his friend **Mann** in 1754, he based the word on a fable called *The Three Princes of Serendip* because the princes "were always making discoveries by accident and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of." Serendip is the ancient name for Ceylon.

One cannot do this now, or cannot do it well now, because so much is going digital. In the old days, when I was a boy, one hunkered down in a library and while working, did a good bit of browsing. One found many things on the way to the original quest, most of which one did not use right then, but made a note of it, literally, and used it later, most probably on an entirely different research project. Penicillin was discovered in this manner, along with many other things we now take for granted. With all things digital, the only serendipity one may hope to find must be in what text one had "up" at the time.

Anyway, while looking for this other thing, I ran across a notice where **Google** had purchased a thing called **YouTube.com** for over a billion dollars. It caught my eye because I thought I knew all about **YouTube** and could not for the life of me think why in the world *anyone*, even **Google**, would want to buy **YouTube** for a dollar, much less for almost two billion of them. Sure enough, there in the business journal was the purchase in October 2006. **YouTube** will remain independent but owned by **Google**. But, I said to myself, wasn't **YouTube** that site of various stupid clips, the best of which had been pulled for copyright and various other reasons?

So, off I went to **YouTube**. What could possibly be the attraction? Perhaps there were millions of things I had missed, or otherwise omitted in my original research. Perhaps I had looked at **Google's** videos before they bought **YouTube**, and so now **YouTube** would improve the silly clips on **Google**.

Once there, I recognized the site instantly and found myself in something of a predicament. **Google**

is, after all, the very site that is going to put us all out of work eventually if it hasn't already. I knew from prior research that young people use **Google** far more often than they use library Websites and even all those very expensive proprietary databases we librarians beat ourselves up over trying to secure to the tune of millions of dollars. In fact, *college-age* students use **Google** about three or four times more often than they use library Websites. It leads to the obvious question of why we librarians spend so much time and effort trying to secure them if students are only going to ignore them, but let's that pass for the time being. Let's leave, too, the obvious quodlibet why our own professional organizations, like **ALA**, complain that we aren't making our library search engines more like **Google** and so on. In any event, I want to be fair so I must give **YouTube** every opportunity to succeed even if I don't want it to.

I began delving into **YouTube** once again. By examining **YouTube's** top ten, its top 100, and its random categories I figured I would see its best, and so be able to judge it on its own merits. First on the list was a header which read "young woman with large hooters." This was followed by a young man setting his bum on fire as he tried to light his own flatulence, an enormous number of "jackass" stunts (appositely named), and about a dozen or more clips from various television programs, some of which I could view and others I could not because of my hardware. Since I didn't view the young woman I have no idea if her described attributes were her only "meritorious" ones, or whether she could also sing or dance as well. Perhaps she belonged to Mensa? Still, reading the first 100 descriptions, I wondered why in the world one of them would distract anyone from their daily labors. To say that the emperor, as personified in this **YouTube**, hasn't any clothes is to state both the factual and the metaphorical. Not only is the emperor naked, but also are the duke, the duchess, the prince and the pauper. Why would anyone go back to such a site?

As for the young man, well, there was one frame and sure enough he had a lighter and was poised for something. I did not view it either but I figured I had to dig deeper so I looked for more, sifting through nearly all "Top 100" as determined, I suppose, the way everything on the Web is determined to have value: for no other reason than many come to view it. Based on these merits alone — what makes people stop and gawk — every train wreck and every three-legged dog are more important than **Shakespeare**. Let's hear it for the self-absorbed and the unreflective. I can only hope the young man is suffering from third degree burns.

I did view a school principal, a white man, who was trying to rap. I suppose he did it to help children learn, though I do not know for sure why any educator, real or imagined, thinks this works. I can only guess that like principals who spend the night on top of an elementary school or cut their ties it is, putatively, to encourage children to learn. It makes sense, right? Do something stupid and children will jump at the chance to stay in school. What one has to do with the other is anyone's guess. I grew up in that antediluvian age when

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you learned for no other reason than that you wanted to. Apparently making such arguments is useless on today's hi-tech, Internet savvy young people. Such arguments have gone the way of the old "drill and kill" approach to learning where you memorized multiplication tables and long passages from great literature because you needed to, because you wanted to remember them and this constant repetition worked. We've dropped that for multiple strategies and theories that do not work at all and young people in increasing numbers graduate without being able to read, write, add or subtract. But by golly, they are having fun! In today's brave new world, every child's a winner even when they lose ... or something like that.

I eventually found an old clip from a very old "The Lucy Show" show, a clip from the "Three Stooges" and a few other clips from several news programs. Some of the latter did not open. The jackass stunts revealed only that there is a sucker born every minute, as **P. T. Barnum** used to claim (**Google** him if you wish). These varied in nature from harmless stupidity to the getting-hit-where-the-sun-doesn't-shine category of painful.

Hmm. And all of this caused someone at the **Google** brain trust to shell out over a billion? I guess there is some value to finding this, looking at it, laughing about it, and sending the link to a friend at work ... only four cubicles over from you. Wow! We're not even knee-deep into the digital everything and already the Web is *less* educational than television. Now *that* is saying something!

What are we to make of all this? I mean, what to make of it other than I am obviously over fifty and surely have no sense of humor? It *may* mean that libraries do not have anything to worry about from the Web. It may also mean that this grand experiment called the Web is actually going to replace "finds" like **Walpole's**. Oh yes, I know. I'm from that terrible elitist school where education should be something, for lack of a better word, educational.

On the other hand, it very well might be something we librarians want to give some thought to. It occurred to me this Thanksgiving as I played with our first grandchild, **Allene**, who just turned one. "Dear," I could hear myself telling her a decade from now, "I had to forgo your college education fund because my job was replaced. I lost it to a site where people make fools of themselves and *record* it for all the world to see." 🐻

Endnotes

1. Portions of this article are from a chapter in my *Fool's Gold: Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library* (Forthcoming, **McFarland**, spring 2007).

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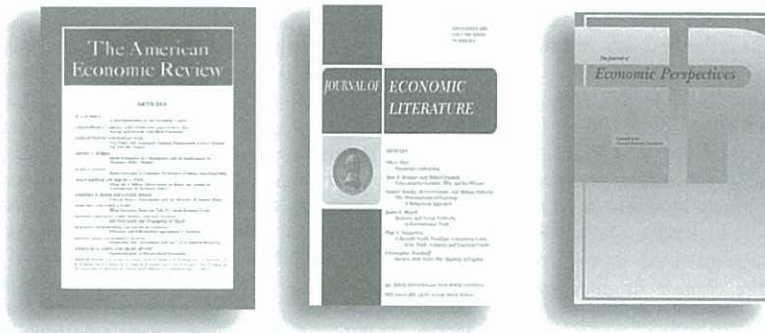
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Anniversary of the **Conclusion of a WIPO Diplomatic Conference** leading to adoption of the **WIPO Copyright Treaty (WCT)** and the **WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT)**, which are known as the **WIPO Internet Treaties**. IIPA also commends the 61 Members who have ratified or acceded to the WCT and the 59 Members who have ratified or acceded to the WPPT. www.iipa.com.

That's it for now. More coming up in February. And **HAPPY NEW YEAR!** 🐻