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Little Red Herrings — Ah, Libraries: How I Love the Smell of ... Electronic Access?!

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

In the olden days, when we Baby-Boomers would walk into our university or college libraries we would pause just long enough to take in that wonderful smell of high grade cowhide leather and aging papyrus before rushing off to study. There was something about opening any leather bound edition of anything and being transported by the smell to some distant land, not unlike **Charles Swann** in **Marcel Proust's** famous French novel, *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu, Remembrance of Things Past*.

And that smell is rapidly becoming just that, a remembrance of things past. For the past three decades there's been a dramatic but quiet (natch) revolution taking place in libraries across the country, and it's not only changing the way we think about them, but also changing the way we read. When you walk into a modern library, you're just as likely to be greeted by the rather odd smell of ... electronic access.

Of course, computers are not new to librarians or libraries. As early as 1967, the coming

revolution in the form of what is now referred to as **OCLC** was visible for all to see. While some lamented the loss of catalog cards, most dismissed them and their card catalogs gladly.

Being frustrated is one thing in life, a wise man once wrote, but getting what you want, that's when the real troubles begin. Computers ate their way into the life of libraries (and elsewhere) as quickly as ravenous termites into wood, and some would say with almost as much damage. In 1968 business spent zero dollars on automation. By the late 1990s, businesses were spending more than a *billion* annually. A very similar trend occurred in libraries. Whereas we once fought over whether to indent three spaces or four, we now argue about just how much longer we librarians will be required in our brave, new automated world. Now that's progress, eh?

In the last decade, libraries have moved farther into the electronic age. With the advent of the Internet, libraries now offer patrons *virtually* everything. It's now estimated that there are more than *seven billion* Web pages on the Internet.

That's right, *billion* with a "b." If this seems high, do a search on **Google** (almost any topic will work) and just about all of them come up, every time. This, too, we are told, is progress. We also don't seem to mind that none of the major search engines — **Google, Hotbot, Yahoo!**, etc. — search all the Web. Indeed, none of them search more than about 35% of it. We hear all the time that *everything* is on the Web. But with search failure rates like this, how can we tell? Doesn't matter.

The good news is that almost anything is on the Web: stock prices, medical information, home and gardening news, some of it is even accurate. The bad news is that any fool can put something on the Web and, with billions of pages out there, apparently most have. Most of us would have called it professional malpractice if a reference librarian gave to a patron thousands of books, articles, ads for erectile dysfunction and pornography with little guidance. Today, we call that a successful search. We've come a long way, baby!

To argue that all Internet sites are the same information-wise is as silly as saying, "My mother, drunk or sober." There *is* a difference, and patrons must be able to tell it before surfing too far on the Web. Trouble is, not many can, but that, too, is okay, because this is progress at its electronic best!

To dispute the value of the Web is to risk being called a Luddite so let me hasten to say how progressive it all seems. Like thousands of other good libraries, we offer our patrons access to proprietary databases containing information written by today's best scholars. These databases contain literally millions of articles, many of which are full text. Gone are the days of worrying about when the library is open. Access to electronic journals is open all the time. Of course it does cost two arms, both legs and your first-born to provide these services, but we're talking sheer, unadulterated progress here.

All of this fits in perfectly with our never-wait, sound-bite mentality because our users have access to all this material whenever they want it, wherever they want it. With wireless access, students have access anywhere in our building or a coffee shop in Charlotte! If that isn't progress, what is?

Of course there are downsides to be sure. Cost has already been mentioned. Now comes bad news about a sharpe decline in reading. It appears from a few recent studies that not only are 18-24 year olds reading less, they are nearly to the point of not reading at all, down almost 20% points from a decade ago. *Decline in Reading* tells us that this age groups does not read books, plays, articles, newspapers or home work assignments. The good news is they do all have Driver's Licenses, cell phones and iPods, and use all three at the same time! In their defense, their lives are so much busier than our own.

It would appear, too, that recent studies on young children exposed to computers very early in life do not read well later, and may never overcome their acquired reading difficulties. Small price to pay, don't you think? Still other studies argue that we are now seeing generation after generation of young people who are less intelligent than their parents. Unfortunately their parents weren't all Mensa candidates either, so this could pose a problem later. But not to worry. Computers are everywhere and everything's on the 'Net! Reading, we'll surely soon learn, is very highly overrated.

Baby-boomers will look nostalgically on those sprawling libraries that had that wonderful smell of leather, assuming of course they are still around to be nostalgic about. Children of baby-boomers will now have yet one more reason to laugh at their parents, and this time not about bell-bottoms. Imagine the head-scratching that will ensue when those once hip parents say to their children, "Don't you just love the smell of old libraries?" and their children respond, "Yeah. They smell just like a new computer!"



And They Were There from page 59

a few days before that any future **RAEs** after the 2008 one would be metrics-based, and that he was even going to consult about abandoning the 2008 **RAE**, on which most UK universities have already expended much effort. **Jonathan's** analyses suggested that what **Gordon Brown** was proposing might well be very feasible in the sciences but would be much less easy to implement in the social sciences and humanities.

There was, of course, the usual excellent exhibition with all the major scholarly publishers and vendors demonstrating their wares and plying the delegates with wine and other goodies, many useful and specialised workshops and briefing sessions, and product presentations by the exhibitors who each get their five minutes of fame in the main auditorium. We all went home exhilarated by it all, and looking forward to next year's conference back at **Warwick**, which will be under the chairmanship of the **UKSG's** new Chair, **Paul Harwood** of **Content Complete**, who was elected during this meeting. 🌳