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Little Red Herrings — Golden Apples of Deceit¹

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

Do you recall the myth about the Golden Apples of Deceit? It seems instructive to me during these trying, tense technological times. **Atalanta** had been warned by the god **Apollo** that she would lose herself if ever she married so she determined not to. Living in woodlands and hilly places she became not the fastest woman, but the fastest *human* alive. She offered her hand in marriage to any man who could beat her in a footrace. If he lost the race, however, he would also lose his life. **Hippomenes** at first scoffed but when he saw her beauty, he too fell struck even after witnessing the defeat, and death of those foolish enough to challenge her. **Atalanta** felt moved by the young man's beauty herself but refused to give in. He, on the other hand cried out to the goddess **Cythera** who lent him three golden apples.

As they began the race **Atalanta** closed in on **Hippomenes** to pass him. Quickly, he tossed a golden apple aside. She ran for the apple, amazed by its gleaming brightness (perhaps the first such woman to fall victim to the glittering of gold) and fell behind. Soon she caught up, however, and passed **Hippomenes**. Three times she did this, each time finding to her dismay, that she had been sidetracked by the glitter of gold. When **Hippomenes** won the race, only then did **Atalanta** realize what she had given up — her freedom — for ormolu, the pinchbeck of golden apples.

Do we librarians chase after golden apples of deceit? I'm afraid we do and those apples are, well, **Apple** — and **Dell** and **Macs** and so on. I don't mean computers *per se* but I mean our, at times, unwitting acceptance of all

and anything technological. We strive for the "paperless society" forgetting, it appears, that the lifeblood of our libraries is, uh, paper. I'm not advocating a return to print journals, or a Luddite revenge on everything technological *alla* the Unabomber. There is a place for electronic access. Rather what I'm talking about is our penchant for making *everything* paperless and right now. Too often, we view technology as the panacea for all that troubles us in this profession, and we aid and abet every crackpot idea that shows up on our — for lack of a better word — screens.

Even the inventor of the phrase, "the paperless society," **F. W. Lancaster**, is having second thoughts.² **Lancaster** recalls when he coined the phrase at a conference in Finland as describing "a largely paperless, network-based communications system having many of the characteristics to today's Internet-based environment."³

He saw the confluence of events moving us quickly along to a time when most everything would grow out of this putative electronic medium. "As the transition actually occurred, however, I became less enthusiastic about the developments and implications and, in the past few years, *downright hostile to toward them*."⁴ Moreover, **Sir Berners Lee**, the mastermind behind HTML and domain names, is regretting the "howling wastes" that is the Web. But how can this be?

Lancaster cites dehumanization as much to blame, arguing that at least in the United States it has replaced the human element. But he goes on to blame librarians because they have become "completely uncritical of information

technologies."⁵ While this is largely true it cannot be left unsaid that those who have criticized information technologies have been branded as Luddite or worse (for example, wild-eyed Unabombers?). **Lancaster** also goes on to point out that many of the "wild assertions" about technology that cannot possibly be true, such as providing access to information anywhere, any time, any place, because it assumes if it is in a database, it can be found easily when, "nothing could be further from the truth."⁶ He goes on to point out that many scholars and experienced researchers were happy with results found *until they discovered how many important items they missed*. Individual librarians, as well as a team of librarians, also missed almost as many important citations.

The point of all this is that there may well come a time when technology, to put this in the patina of the new age, "rulz!" But that time is far from now. Libraries should make a resolution to become more critical and thoughtful about our brave new world and all that it portends, both for now, and for the future. If we do not, we may well be creating the rope that will be used to hang us later. 🐼

"We strive for the 'paperless society' forgetting, it appears, that the lifeblood of our libraries is, uh, paper."



Endnotes

1. Portions of this essay come from my forthcoming *Fool's Gold: Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library*, to be released later this spring.
2. **Lancaster, F. Wilfrid**. "Second Thoughts on the Paperless Society." *Library Journal* (September 15, 1999) Vol. 124 (15), 48. See also his "The Paperless Society Revisited." *American Libraries* (September 1985) Vol. 16 (8), 553-555.
3. *Ibid*.
4. *Ibid*. (Emphases mine.)
5. *Ibid*.
6. *Ibid*., 49.

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works is a crucial task for teachers and librarians in any educational context. After conducting this Web research, however, I realized that online information regarding multicultural literature is still limited and should be further expanded in the future. This fact makes it more difficult for both teachers and librarians to accomplish their goals of bringing a wide diversity of quality literature into the library and classroom. However, I believe that exploring new potential through Websites and keeping updated information regarding multicultural literature helps educators refine their knowledge and expertise and ultimately accomplish their goals of building diverse collections of literature for all grade and reading levels. 🐼

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