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Little Red Herrings -- Living on the Fringe

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selection process and ability to predict use. In my view, the question is what is the impact of this work on meeting your patrons' information needs? It's kind of a scary question for vendors, as well. Most of the dominant business models are predicated on a "just in case" acquisitions approach.

Steve: You'll have to explain what you mean by "just in case acquisitions" — I'm not sure I like the sound of it.

Robin: Sorry Steve, I'm not sure who coined it, but it's often used to describe a model of purchasing content upfront in anticipation of need rather than buying content upon use or access. I agree that it is a sticky term in that it assumes a circulation-based assessment of what should or should not be purchased.

Steve: Hey, Library School was a long time ago! Well, as academic libraries increasingly have to explain or even defend resource expenditures to university and state officials, the "just in case" approach is fast becoming more of a 'just justify' your acquisitions.

Robin: Well, that's a good thread to carry this conversation into our next column. What results are university administrators expecting from their libraries, how are they being evaluated, and how should vendors help their customers respond to these expectations?

Steve: OK, talk to you then. 🍷

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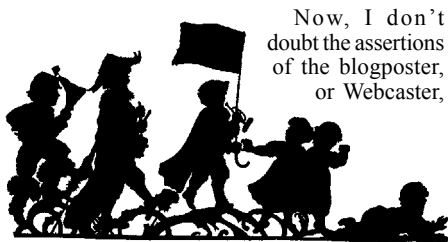
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Little Red Herrings — Living on the Fringe

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

Just when you thought the news could not get any worse for libraries, a new twist emerges on an old theme. When I saw the headline, I couldn't help *clicking*: "Books Are Becoming the Fringe Media." In a post dated 20 February of this year, **Kevin Kelleher** (<http://tinyurl.com/ylqya7h>) opines that books are, or are becoming, the new fringe media. People just aren't reading them anymore, and certainly no one wants to digest 300 pages of text. No siree, this is a slam-bam generation. We want it now, we want it fast, and we want everything you need to know in 140-characters or less. This came as somewhat depressing news to me, an over 50-something. Not only am I on the downside of everything, it turns out that my interests, too, are fringe-worthy. Forty years ago if you intimidated I wasn't fringe, or living on the fringe, or outside the mainstream, I would have asked you to step outside, assuming I wasn't at a peace rally. Now it appears that yesterday's radical animosities are today's conservative tendencies. What a brave new world in which we live!

Now, I don't doubt the assertions of the blogposter, or Webcaster,



or podundit, or whatever we call them these days. I can see the writing on the wall, and what's more, I can read it. Books are going the way of all flesh, not so much because we hate them, or because we have little use for them, or because they have become *démodé*. We're dispensing with them because this is a brave new world, and we have gadgets for that sort of thing now. Print is sooooo-oh-sooooo yesterday. Furthermore, it's not even — OMGY2BK — green.

We've known for the last, say, twenty-five years that reading is in decline. Studies done by just about everyone (but especially the **National Endowment for the Humanities**) show that *all* sorts of reading are on their way down: newspapers, books (fiction or nonfiction), plays, and short stories. In fact, you name the reading material, and you can be fairly certain it's no longer being read at all, or not like it used to be. Reports of the millions and millions of **Kindle** buyers (soon to be eclipsed, perhaps by **iPads** if the name or battery issue doesn't sink sales before they begin) hint, perhaps, that the picture is not so bleak. Ah, but we know that the mean age of those **Kindle** readers is, well, the fifty-something crowd who carry the water for all readers these days. The twenty-something crowd is reading virtually (pun intended) not at all, or slightly more than five minutes *a day*.

A number of reasons obtain for the current phenomenon. We have e-readers galore (more than four dozen by my count), the Web in abundance,

notebooks in surfeit, blogs in the tens of millions, and the Web in, well, let's just say the Web is the poster child for the definition of ubiquity. Furthermore, nearly everyone is now being educated at the **University of Google**. This means that classes must not last longer than 1.234 millionth of a second. Add to all this **Twitter**, in which Millennials and others wax philosophical about their latest break-up, grey hair (singular), or the fact that wow-who-saw-that-coming you have to work for a living and very few jobs begin at six figures for a BA and no experience.

Honestly, none of these are really bad things in themselves, if I may wax philosophical for a moment. I have done all these things: read a half-dozen books on a **Kindle**, have a half-dozen social networking sites I visit regularly, blog from time to time on our library's site, surf the Web, read a couple of dozen blogs, and so on. I don't think these things really are, in and of themselves, bad. And by themselves I do not think they hold all the blame or even the lion's share of it. Sure, all contribute, but none by itself is to blame exclusively.

They all come together, however, as I have said before in these pages, at the same moment and so have created a kind of perfect storm. All of these things are but tempests in teapots, taken together or taken separately. So what else is there? One thing more remains, and it is, if anything is, the williwaw, the tempest,

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the thundercloud, and it's so simple it's mind-boggling:

We no longer teach young people how to read.

And therein lies the saddest story ever told. For the past thirty-something years our schools have followed — and parents of young children with them — just about every conceivable harebrained reading scheme there is, and all of them with the same effect: young people leave elementary school either not knowing how to read, or knowing it only marginally, and hating it eternally. Part of this failure has to do with schools' love of the new, but more of it has to do with the way we fund education. Anything old-seeming we despise and will not fund, forcing tried and proven methods to die of funding starvation. Meanwhile, any educator with a scheme and a glib tongue can get millions of dollars for any experiment that involves the nation's youth. We do this with reading, with math, and with science. The end result has been that more and more of our young people cannot read, write, spell, add, subtract, or divide. (Oddly, they do know how to multiply, but that's a different rant.)

While I worry about the others, it is reading that bothers me the most. If a person knows how to read, he or she can do most anything. Obversely, if they cannot read, it is likely that their future will be bleak. Of course, exceptions exist to every generalization, but, by and large, a good predictor of poverty is not knowing how to read. Sadly, we know how to teach young people to read; we're simply not doing a very good job of it (in case you're interested, a great new book on this topic is **Dehaene's Reading and the Brain**, Viking, 2009).

This is not an issue about which we can simply throw our hands up in surrender. If young people aren't reading — and we know they are not — we are, all of us, in a great deal of trouble. It isn't that libraries will eventually disappear: of course, they will. It isn't because bookstores will all eventually close: of course, they certainly shall, and sooner than later as we Boomers die off. And it isn't because universities like the one where I earn my living will eventually become artifacts: of course, they will, and *online* learning is hastening the day they become relics. It is because the culture of these United States will disappear.

Now, I know some reading this will think that day cannot come soon enough for political reasons that have nothing to do with reading. The only thing I can say to them is that you never really know what have until you no longer have it, and as proof of this assertion I have only to point them back to their youths. To those less political, I can say only that reading is the lifeblood of our culture and preservation of our heritage. If we let this slip through our fingers, we will lose more than we realize. I fear we'll discover too soon that where we end up will be a very uncomfortable, very unpleasant, lunatic fringe. 🍄

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — “I Am the Only Bay of Pigs Librarian”

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

Column Editor's Note: *The business end of “vendor/library relations” sits on a foundation of personal relationships and friendships that, for both librarian and vendor, can be among the most fulfilling parts of a job. And among the most enjoyable, there's no doubt. For most of the 1990s and a little beyond, I looked forward to my regular visits to Miami and Florida International University, where the Head of Collections, Salvador Miranda, was among the best raconteurs I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.*

Sal had probably the most remarkable career of any librarian I've met. He grew up in Havana, Cuba. He was a member of the Bay of Pigs invasion force in 1961. He settled in the United States and, with his “Cuban thermostat,” suffered the cold in Philadelphia, where at Villanova University he turned what had been a childhood hobby into an M.A. thesis. Later, at FIU, as a “paper librarian” in the early days of our electronic era, he turned that thesis into an online resource that won him an invitation to visit Rome and that launched a worldwide correspondence that continues today. He is still developing “The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church,” by now a lifework, that anyone can consult — and many thousands have — at <http://www.fiu.edu/~mirandas/cardinals.htm>.

*Sal retired in 2001 to his condominium on Miami's South Beach, where we were able to enjoy a recent evening together and where Sal agreed to share a few of his stories and some thoughts on collection development with **Against the Grain**. — BN*

BN: *You were a member of the Bay of Pigs invasion force. That must have been an episode in your life that's unforgettable. You once told me a story about a column of tanks. Do you mind telling it again?*

SM: Having participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion, believe it or not, has been a very positive experience. I still benefit from what I learned there. I was only twenty-one and had had a very protected life, because I went to a private Jesuit school in Cuba, and I thought everybody in the world was like my classmates. And then all of a sudden I decided to take part in this, and I thought it was the right step to try to change the future of my country of origin.

Of course I have many, many stories during those days. But the one that I always remember is one time that I had a bazooka, and an auxiliary, who was the guy who put the rocket in the bazooka, and the shooter fires. One day we were walking in the front of the Bay of Pigs near a dirt road and all of a sudden one of the guys who were right before us warned us that there was a column of like twenty tanks coming our way. And of course a bazooka is the best weapon against a tank.

And I said well, at least we will take care of the first one, so that the road is blocked, and the other tanks cannot advance, because there were swamps on both sides, and there was no way that the other nineteen could move to the front. And I saw the first tank approaching us. Then all of a sudden it stopped. And I don't know for what reason, I prefer to defer to Divine Providence, they turned around and never came. So that was a sign that I was going to stay in this world.

BN: *Years ago when you told me that story you said that at that moment, you guessed it meant that you were meant to run an approval plan.*

SM: As far as I know, I am the only Bay of Pigs librarian.

BN: *A few years later, you ended up in this country as a student in Philadelphia, where your Master's thesis at Villanova was a project you had begun as a boy in Havana. Would you talk about that a little bit?*

SM: I can tell you the date on which I became interested in the College of Cardinals of the Catholic Church. I was always interested in reading the news, and, in 1954, when I was thirteen years old, I read in the paper in Havana that a cardinal had died in Rome, and he was on the front page of the newspaper. And I said, who is this guy that gets so much coverage? I read about him, and it sparked my interest, not only in that particular person, but in the office of the Cardinals.

So I did my first real cut-and-paste. I cut the newspaper clipping and pasted it in a scrapbook. And I continued. At first it was a very immature research. I guess when my classmates were collecting and trading baseball players' cards, I was cutting-and-pasting news about the cardinals. And I still have one of the pages of the scrapbook from 1955 with the news of the death of the Cardinal of Vienna. So I continued in a kind of youthful research. Then when I came more or less to the realization that it was an important if somewhat restricted or unique topic, I had already prepared biographies of all the cardinals of the twentieth century, which at that time were three hundred and something. Sometime later, when I went to get my Master's degree at Villanova one had to write a thesis on an original topic, if you wanted to continue towards the Ph.D. And I talked about it with my thesis director, and he accepted the idea, so the cardinalate in the twentieth century became my Master's thesis.

Then, twenty years later, in the computer era, I was a librarian at Florida International University in Miami and went to the systems department of the university to have my thesis digitized. They told me to come back in three or four days and they had the thesis, which was 319 pages long, scanned. Then, I spent innumerable days “cleaning it up” because of the foreign names of cardinals from all over the world.

In 1998, I put the dissertation in a worksite at

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