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Little Red Herrings — Is the Internet A Substitute for the Library After All? Part 1

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

I hope you'll indulge me in this, and it will be an indulgence, three parts' worth.

In 2000, I wrote a piece called "10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library." The article came out of an assignment my boss gave me for talking points for a new building (it didn't work, at least not so far, but this is, after all, South Carolina). I turned that work into the article and sent it out. At the time, the article was well-received. In fact, *AL* placed it for a time on its persistent links page of about a half dozen other articles that folks kept asking for and about.

A few people wrote to me after it appeared asking if they could get "the poster." Since there wasn't one, I created it (<http://bit.ly/dnSgk5>), never once thinking that many people would ask for it. Not long thereafter came requests to reprint the article, as well as many others who didn't bother to ask, but reprinted it anyway. Before long, it turned up in about seven different languages, according to Google. By the end of the first 18 months of poster sales, all of which went to the library's faculty/staff development fund, we had sold several thousand.



By now you must be thinking that I was feeling pretty good, and I must admit it was gratifying to have written something other than relatives said they liked. If you do any sort of writing, however, you know that such things last only for a while; and sure enough, *abyssus abyssum invocate*, one bad thing follows another. Boing, Boing posted a short notice of the poster (<http://bit.ly/ggo4u1>) last year that was followed by dozens of comments, most of them, when not hateful, simply sharply critical. But it's one thing to be criticized by those who worship the Internet and all things digital, quite another when your own family takes you to task, so to say. I didn't escape that either when **Greg Landgraff** took off on the piece saying, damming with especially faint praise, "It hasn't aged well." (<http://bit.ly/hVWHEn>)

All this got me to thinking, has it aged well or not? Was I right then but wrong now? I decided to take another look at the Internet and the 10 Reasons, and see whether my earlier musings about the Web and all things digital are today completely wrong-headed. So, here goes.

My first contention claimed that *not everything is on the Internet*. I think it's safe to say that's still true, though there is abundantly more (of the good, the bad, and the ugly) today than when I wrote the piece. Web-worshippers will argue that libraries don't have everything either, and that is also true, but I would argue that book-for-book, a library, even a small one, is better for research than the sprawling Web. Our students prove that to us everyday when, after hours of searching, they come to the reference desk, typically frantic, ask for help, and get it in seconds, really. This says nothing about *how convenient libraries are*, of course, but it does say that if you're doing research, serious research, and not quick facts or factoid hunting, a library with librarians is still to be preferred over the unfettered Internet. My main point then and now remains unchanged: too many people think everything is on the Web, and it hurts everyone, especially those who rely exclusively on it, to continue to propagate this myth.

My second contention that *finding what you want on the Web is often like looking for a needle in a haystack*, I would argue still holds true today, but with this caveat. If one wants to know what the distance is from the earth to the moon, you'll likely find that more quickly on the Web than elsewhere, assuming you hit on a scientific site and not some underachieving 6th grader's last-minute science project. Search engines still have difficulties (<http://bit.ly/jGRwOK>) that range from the trivial to the somewhat serious. Since 2000, they have greatly improved but still have a long way to go. Even Google proves something of a harrowing (<http://bit.ly/2iSIci>) adventure for scholars. Unfortunately, it appears Google still hasn't untangled this metadata mess (<http://bit.ly/t5SXbl>). And again, students everywhere using the Web will find that surfing it for papers and scholarly research will end unhappily as often as it does successfully. This is not a reason to jettison the one for the other but to underscore the need for both.

Quality control has much improved since the early 2000s but remains problematic. Pornography has not gotten any less ubiquitous. In fact, with the advent of so many more Web-enabled devices, it's getting more and more

difficult to get away from it, at least according to some (<http://nyti.ms/vpZgP5>). Further, embedded pornography is now becoming more and more a problem with which to contend, especially when using Web-enabled devices. I haven't noticed a diminution in spam on the Web, or disinformation either, but I will admit that things are much better than they used to be. The somewhat annoying habit of search engines to redistribute hits from one day to the next is distracting at best, annoying at most, but easily overcome by the wary. But the rise of hate sites, and even their efflorescence in the Internet age, is no small beer. Many of these groups, sadly but correctly, applaud the Web for giving them a new lease on hate.

As for what might be referred to as link-rot (<http://bit.ly/9ChOOd>, registration required), I can't say that I think the matter is better or worse; it's just the same. By and large, the web isn't much of an archive the way a library is. Rather it is a collection of about the last ten years of materials, that last word loosely used because it encompasses everything from scholarly papers to the latest imbecility. Of course, there are places on the Web you can go for more archival-quality materials, but first, you have to know about them; or, second, you have to be willing to look for them. Some of these sites are wonderfully rich (mainly because they are digital equivalents of library collections) and save a great deal of time if one cannot travel to the library holding them. But materials not used very often do not appear to last long on the Web.

Digitization is still very expensive, my fifth argument. Almost everyone is undertaking a digitization project, but only a few are doing it well. Some of the big players have dropped out (<http://cnet.co/8gYdtF>) of the race; others get in



for a little while and then bow out. It's unclear what this means for long-term research, but it does not bode well. Then there's that pesky little problem of low-hanging digital fruit. The really popular and much-sought after materials get digitized first, leaving scarce dollars for digitizing important but less popular materials. For the average web user, this isn't a big deal. For scholars, it can be the difference between the right information and the wrong.

In the next part, we'll look at eBooks and more. 