# Against the Grain

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# Book Reviews: Monographic Musings

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# Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

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*Column Editor's Note:  Probably, many of us have observed that time seems to pass more quickly as we get older.  As we age, each day, week, month, and year are a smaller and smaller fraction of our lifespan.  Perhaps that exacerbates my sense that technology is evolving at an ever-quicker pace — more specifically, technology that impacts our relationship with information and that shapes our relationships with one another.  Twenty years ago, when Internet usage was not wide-spread and **Google** wasn't even a twinkle in **Larry Page's** and **Sergey Brin's** eyes, libraries' big competitors were **Borders** and **Barnes and Noble**.  Gen Xers were beginning professional careers, but the term "Generation X" was only just being adopted, despite **Douglas Coupland's** 1991 novel of the same name.  But, to quote the **2001 Charleston Conference** theme: the trends they are a-changing.  Libraries often must justify their relevance, or at the very least must carefully consider their maintenance of many hard copy materials.  Institutions are staffed by members of two or even three generations, and technology and legal issues inform the way we approach everything from access to public services.  This month's review titles cover these subjects and more.*

*A hearty thanks to **ATG** veteran **Steve McKinzie** for sharing his thoughts on **ATG** veteran **Mark Herring's** new title, **Are Libraries Obsolete? An Argument for Relevance in the Digital Age**.  **Steve** is the source behind this shrewd observation on the longevity of print: "Books offer something…that will enable them to sustain a market niche: durability, portability, and reliability" (**ATG**, November 2004, 56).  **Mark** is the author of this most excellent statement regarding the endurance of libraries: "The Internet is marvelous, but to claim, as some now do, that it's making libraries obsolete is as silly as saying shoes have made feet unnecessary" (American Libraries, April 2001, 78).  Both are gems.*

*Happy reading, everyone! — DV*

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**Herring, Mark**.  *Are Libraries Obsolete?  An Argument for Relevance in the Digital Age.*  Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 978-0-7864-7356-4.  268 pages.  $25.00.

Reviewed by **Steve McKinzie**  (Library Director, Catawba College)
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In a book that is both alarmingly provocative and maddeningly candid in its appraisal of libraries and their place in an increasingly digital world, **Mark Herring**, Dean of Library Services at **Winthrop University** and frequent contributor to *Against the Grain*, asks questions that few librarians are honest enough to ask: do we really need traditional libraries?  Do they have a future?  Or more pointedly as the title of his book suggests, *Are Libraries Obsolete*?

With the advent of the Web and its marvelous ubiquity and extraordinary capacity to both fascinate and inform, many now argue that our modern digital culture has little need for those old bricks-and-mortar libraries with their traditional offerings, solid book collections, and enlightening reference services. **Herring** counters emphatically that we do indeed need these traditional libraries.  As his subtitle suggests, *An Argument for Relevance in the Digital Age*, he insists that libraries are well-nigh indispensable.  Losing them would be at best tragic and at worst catastrophic.

Yet, **Herring** is only guardedly optimistic about their future.  Preserving traditional libraries and their litany of services won't be easy.  However theoretically valuable such libraries may be, librarians and those who care for what traditional libraries can offer, he maintains, will have to muster a good deal of

tenacity and wisdom to enable their institutions to survive — much less flourish.

The author is a long-time user of the Web, a careful scholar of its potential as well as one of the Web's and digitization's most cogent critics.  He wrote the amazingly-popular article "Ten Reasons why the Internet is no Substitute for a Library" in 1999 – (a title sponsored and promoted by posters and reprints by the **American Library Association**) followed by a full-length, similarly-titled monograph in 2007, *Fools' Gold:  Why the Internet is no Substitute for the Library*.  In this new book he covers some of the same ground, but it taps into the latest scholarship.  He provides the reader an even-handed and comprehensive evaluation of the Web's strengths and its weaknesses.

**Herring** readily concedes the wonders of the digital world.  Streaming video, eBooks, full-text e-sources, apps, and a variety of social media options are all amazingly useful and extraordinarily empowering, but he quickly reminds us that the Web's advantages are only one side of the equation.  What should we say with respect to the Web's darker side?  What should we make of the digital world's drawbacks, or are we glibly assuming that there aren't really any problems with the Internet — at least not any significant difficulties?

**Herring** insists that in our mad rush to go all-digital, we may be sacrificing a whole lot

more than we suspect.  The Web has a host of problems.  Some of them are personal — shrinking privacy, the threat of hackers, and ongoing security issues.  Others involve sustainability — the Web's lack of quality control, linkage rot (what used to be there is no longer), and failures in digital preservation.  Several entail breakdowns in Web integrity — shrinking intellectual property rights, copyright infringement, and piracy.

Of course, even if the Web were perfect and its problems were minimal — which to be sure they are not — there would be other concerns.  Mounting evidence, for instance, suggests that our culture's digital obsession may be weakening our ability to concentrate — undermining our capacity to sustain focus and enjoy in-depth reading.  The Internet is no intellectual panacea.  It is a mixed blessing at best.

All of this points, in **Herring's** thinking, to the value of traditional academic and public libraries as a complement to the Web — places where you can get expert professional advice on research, access to proprietary databases, and hard copy books.  It is time now, he adds, to work to see to it that these traditional libraries are not left by the wayside in our headlong dash to create an all-digital future.

So what should we do in the short run to preserve traditional libraries?  **Herring** doesn't purport to know all the answers.  He offers no fast and sure blueprint, but he does insist that with a good measure of creativity a lot can be achieved.  He argues that libraries should create more innovative portals, add more collaborative learning spaces, work aggressively to meet the research and information needs of their users, and avoid excessive political partisanship.  He also recommends that librarians become less risk averse (a problem with too many of us he insists) and far more flexible in meeting what will be an unpredictable and possibly difficult future.

*Are Libraries Obsolete? An Argument for their Relevance in the Digital Age* is a first-rate book that takes on some really tough questions — questions about academic and public libraries, their future, and whether they have will have any sort of role or place in an increasingly digital world.  As I mentioned earlier, the author isn't overly optimistic about the future of libraries, although his concluding chapters offer a set of dueling prospects for them — the possibility of things turning out badly and a counter vision of libraries emerging with a new sense of relevance and mission.

**Herring** is likely at his weakest in this speculative, forecasting dimension of his volume.  He draws well on his own experience.  He has a seasoned familiarity with library design and management, and I like a lot of what he has to say.  Predicting the future, however, and offering workable strategies to meet that future are at best difficult and at worst a fool's errand.

Nevertheless, **Herring** is certainly no fool. Of that much you can be sure. However unpersuasive the author's vision may be to some, his clear-headed sense and insightful analysis of the current library malaise, the manifold challenges facing librarians, and his articulation in particular of the specter of a

potentially all-digital world are superb, and I suspect without peer.

This book has special relevance for anyone who cares about libraries, and for those who enjoy working in such places the title is mandatory reading. Persuasive, engagingly-written, and provocative, **Herring's** *Are Libraries Obsolete?* is outstanding. It may well prove one of the best library and information science books of the year.

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**Evans, G. Edward** and **Camila A. Alire**. *Management Basics for Information Professionals*. 3rd ed. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2013. 978-1-55570-909-9. 600 pages. $75.00.

**Munde, Gail**. *Everyday HR: A Human Resources Handbook for Academic Library Staff*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2013. 978-1-55570-798-9. 200 pages. $65.00.

Reviewed by **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

The first class I attended in library school at the **University of South Carolina** was Library and Information Management. It was summer 1997. I had finished my undergraduate degree not two months prior and was nervous about pretty much everything: new professors, a new and larger university, expectations for success in graduate school, where I might find a job after completing my degree, and all the other typical, new-student concerns. Due to my schoolgirl angst, I'm not sure how much I retained during that first week of class; but after my anxiety waned, I took away numerous lessons from the course. Like most young professionals, though, I didn't have the opportunity to fill a managerial role until later in my career (and, in my case, only after I moved from the library to academic administration). When I advanced to such a role, I was glad to have my copy of *Library and Information Center Management* (Libraries Unlimited, 1993) handy; though now, more than 20 years post-publication, much of the information in that page-worn text is dated. I imagine many in supervisory or administrative positions are in the same predicament with an outdated textbook, which is why brushing up on library management principles and practices might be a simple yet effective professional development project. Two titles might help in that endeavor, the first for all library managers and the second for those in academic settings: *Management Basics for Information Professionals* and *Everyday HR: A Human Resources Handbook for Academic Library Staff*. While these titles are not new releases, the information they convey is not dated; moreover, these titles might be just what you need to refresh your knowledge of leadership practices.

In its third edition, *Management Basics for Information Professionals* is both an overview of management principles and a reference with concrete and detailed instructions/advice for information professionals in management positions — either new or seasoned. *Management Basics'* authors, **Edward Evans** and **Camila Alire**, along with the book's Advisory Board, have a combined 175 years of management experience. Without a doubt, the expertise of the authors and contributors is outstanding, and it shows. The knowledge they share throughout the pages of the book is valuable and inspiring, and they do it in a way that is unpretentious and supportive.

Like many textbooks (such as the latest edition of my own library management textbook of yore), it is divided into different sections that explore the different aspects of management: the managerial environment, managerial skill sets, managing people, managing things, and managing yourself and your career. Each of these sections is further divided into chapters that highlight topics that most of those in leadership positions must address, 21 in all. Chapters range from legal issues to change management, assessment to money management, facilities to ethics. The only subjects about which I would like to read more are collaboration with outside agencies (including boards) and fundraising. Throughout the text are sidebars that offer "something to ponder" or prompt readers to "try this" — utilizing these text boxes is an easy way for students to gauge their grasp of the material.

Though it is likely predominantly used as a textbook for library science programs, it might be an even better resource for experienced professionals. One of the strengths of *Management Basics* is its attention, both specific and implicit, to generational differences. For example, the book is peppered with references, figures, and "authors' experience" sidebars addressing this issue: generational communication preferences, workplace communication across the generations, age in light of resistance to change, quality service and millennials, managing staff (paid and volunteer) that span several generations, generational differences vis-à-vis workplace expectations and motivation, and 21st-century students who ultimately

become 21st-century employees, to name a few. Consideration of and thoughtful advice for embracing these differences might not be as meaningful to someone who has not yet had the opportunity to manage an age-diverse group, like someone in library school who has not yet worked in a management position. This is not unreasonable, as while there are young professionals — millennials, even — who are currently in management positions, many managers have probably worked their way up the management ladder and are therefore older — perhaps even two or more generations older — than those they manage.

Even those who have been in management positions for many years, it can be helpful to have a single resource that outlines workforce matters. Though *Management Basics* offers excellent and relevant and timely information and "real life" examples for managing people, at times you just need specific and direct information about one particular slice of the management pie: human resources. Academic library administrators will find *Everyday HR: A Human Resources Handbook for Academic Library Staff* to be an excellent companion to *Management Basics*. Need a clear explanation of the different parts of a tenure-track librarian position description, as well as tips to write an effective one? Looking for conflict resolution strategies? Wondering what other libraries require in a promotion and tenure dossier? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then *Everyday HR* has the information you seek. At just over 170 pages, this slim volume succinctly covers legalities, policies, and institutional practices related to library employment in an academic setting. While *Everyday HR* is specific to academic libraries, there are parts of the book that translate easily to other sectors; chapters on employment law, working with others, and supervising others can be useful to anyone in a management position.

During her tenure in the faculty of **East Carolina University's** Department of Information and Library Science Education, author **Gail Munde** has published extensively on professional development, human resources management, and academic library management. Not only does she have 25 years of experience in library administration, she has also been a certified Professional in Human Resources for more than a decade. Her experience and wisdom shine brightly in *Everyday HR*'s "concluding thoughts," wherein she proposes several general principles for good HR practice — my favorites being to politely question the rules, and to then question everything else.

Together or independently, *Management Basics* and *Everyday HR* provide accessible information that can help guide you in decision-making, procedures, and professional development. Both are recommended for information professionals new or versed in management roles, particularly in academic libraries. 🦃