The Future of the Book: Does It Have One?

Mark Y. Herring

Winthrop University, herringm@winthrop.edu

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The Future of the Book: Does It Have One?

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

Extra! Extra! Read All About It: 500-Year Old Invention Fails! This throwback to yesteryear headline declaring might yield the following in our future: Extra! Extra! Point and Click All About It! If the computer guru has their way, this silly beginning might indeed be our end. About every year or so — these days it’s more like every three months — we have new declamations about the demise of the book. With every new jump in megahertz, every new wireless laptop, we read somewhere — a library magazine here, The Chronicle of Higher Education there — that by golly, Ding Dong, the book is dead. And thousands of grieffule, small-minded folks go prancing through the pages of the professional and popular literature singing its dirge.

It’s hard to figure out why they are so happy. With reading skills plummeting and illiteracy rising, perhaps they are happy that with the new bar of measurement, our future benchmarks will be so much lower than before. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy in some ways. The lower the bar goes, the less people read. The less they read, the fewer books are printed and purchased. Fewer books mean more something, possibly computers. In the end, those who control the computers will be king.

Perhaps we need not resort to conspiracy theories. It could be that books are simply too old-fashioned to make it in our hip, savvy, high-tech, “my people will videoconference your people, and we must do e-lunch soon,” kind of world.

After all, when you can email a toilet to someone looking for one in Hong Kong, as the commercial has it, why in the world would you want to tote something that is 500+ years old under your arm? Talk about anachronisms!

On the other hand, as Aquinas might have said, there may be another point of view. Indeed there is, and herewith are six such views. Not all have bowed the knee to electronic access, and these six stand shoulder-to-shoulder to say why. None of them is a Luddite, though that is surely what all will be called. It is simply that each of us is certain that while the book’s obituary has long since been written, i, will not be printed (or posted, if you will) for some time. Too many factors impinge upon its power to wield influence over the world of reading. This gathering is by no means accidental. When the Chronicle of Higher Education posted a colloquy on the “death of the book” (a tidbit that followed an earlier “Deserted Libraries” preobedom), I responded as forcibly as I could that the book was not yet dead.

One must be careful what one says, for my friend Katina Strauch saw the posting and asked me to pull together some essays from others who might feel the same way. Against the Grain has always been on the cutting edge of free and open inquiry, so I gladly took up the challenge. The five others I commandeered to write should not be guilty by association with me; rather, they should be taken continued on page 18

If Rumors Were Horses

Hope you all had a wonderful holiday! I am just now spending time catching up on all the Rumors that are out there in our world. It reminds me of what my fourteen-year-old son said one night when my husband and I were discussing library “gossip.” (I didn’t know he was listening. OOPS!) “Gee, Mom, I didn’t know that kind of stuff happened in a LIBRARY!”

First up is the Faxon/Divine/RoweCom story. At the end of December, the listservs were tapping with rumors of financial collapse. For good coverage check out Barbara Quint’s and Paula Hane’s Newsbreaks http://www.infotoday.com/newsbreaks/nb021220-1.htm.

And on Friday, December 20, notice of an Ad Hoc Committee re RoweCom/Call for Library & Publisher Members was posted on Liblicense. Here’s the full announcement—Today, December 20, 2002, an ad hoc committee (the “Committee”) was formed in order to, among other things, perform investigations and analyses of the operations and financial condition of RoweCom, Inc. (“RoweCom”) and its parent corporation, Divine, Inc. (“Divine”), initiate negotiations with RoweCom and Divine, and to take such other actions that the Committee may determine are in the best interests of its constituency. The initial members of the Committee include a major research library as well as leading publishers (Blackwell, Elsevier; and Wiley). Going forward, committee membership is open to both publishers and librarians.

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The Future of the Book:
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at their word. Nothing I say here should be
tributed to them.

I'm certain, too, that none of us would say
that there would never be a time when the book
will vanish. This is, after all, a culture which
gave us Hollywood where, “based on the book”
generally means that somewhere in some library
within 100 miles of the filming, there was this
book, see, and it, … you get my meaning. This
is a culture in which trial lawyers can work for
more than $6,500 an hour (but no more than
$130,000 an hour) killing off tobacco compa-
nies, yet still be able to parade about on tele-
vision claiming the high moral ground. This is
a culture in which Global Crossings makes a po-
litical punt millions, yet goes bankrupt for all
the rest who were counting on the income.3
The point is, anything can happen, so none of
us would be willing to contend that the book will
forever be.

What we will contend, however, is that the
book is a far cry from dead. We don’t even be-
lieve it’s valetudinarian. Rather we see it as
robust and vibrant and ready to live another 100
years being, as Amy Lowell once said, “our es-
 sence and quintessence.” We are none of us
prophets but we are all eager to see this
Norostadian prediction come true. So, who are
we, alphabetically speaking?

Sidney Berger is the Director of the Cali-
ifornia Center for the Book. Mr. Berger holds,
in addition to his library science degree, a PhD
from Iowa. Berger contends that while there is
much to commend electronic access, it still has
a few bugs, so to say, that prevent it from being
the new panacea to all research ills. He praises
the book’s portability and more, its intellectu-
ally pleasing charm. While he praises elec-
tronic access with respect to journal accessi-
bility, he also points out some of the inherent
problems that every librarian agonizes over:
the instability of it all.

Edwin S. Gleaves is the State Librarian and
Archivist of Tennessee. Ed and I met about
twenty-five years ago, when I signed up for one
of his classes while working on my library de-
gree. Mr. Gleaves points out that we have been
through all of this before and the library has
remained. Books have remained. Reading has
endured. Moreover, we are in the middle of a
renaissance of book publishing of late, the
most obvious of which is the resurgence of
reading among the young with the publica-
tion of the Harry Potter books. For Ed, the
book may die a few more dozen times before it
really passes away.

In addition to his library science degree,
David Mash holds degrees from Southern
Methodist University and Dallas Theological
Seminary. It will come as no surprise then that
he holds the chief library chair at Columbia
International University, a small school de-
voted to Christ Uniting. Mr. Mash points to
the future of the book as anything but ill, yet
he sees rather formidable problems on the hori-
zon, not least of which are the many errors of
the Web coupled with its Soviet-like
disinformation.

David Oberhelman is the Humanities and
Social Sciences Librarian at the Edmond Low
Library at Oklahoma State University. Mr.
Oberhelman holds degrees from the Universi-
ties of California (Irvine), Pittsburgh, and
Rice. He tackles the question on the very ground
where electronic access should be its strongest:
searching. If electronic access can be found to
be faulty here, a fortiori, it can be found faulty
throughout. What Mr. Oberhelman evinces so
clearly’s that even at its strongest point, the
Internet, the World Wide Web and all the rest
do have serious shortfalls that the unwary igno-
rate at their peril.4

Allene Stuart Phy-Olsen is professor extraordinaire at Austin Peay University in Ten-
nesse. Professor Phy-Olsen has written ex-
tensively, including titles in the ever-useful
Twayne Series of Authors. Professor Phy-
Olsen envisions a brighter future for the Web if
it will only use its full resources. The Web sim-
ply cannot compete against that arena in which
it has no standing. She sees an interactive fu-
ture that will give eBooks the advantages they
have been touting for so many years but have
yet to deliver. If this comes to reality, Profes-
sor Phy-Olsen sees the potential for the web as
stronger in this area, rather than in one it can-
not win: print. Meanwhile, however, she’s
more than ever at home with endless ineffici-
ency of words on paper.

Jim Presgraves is the antiquarian book
dealer, par excellence. Mr. Presgraves, in ad-
tion to being unflappable, maintains one of
the wryest and engaging senses of humor I have
ever had the pleasure of encountering. In addi-
tion to his myriad yarns, Mr. Presgraves also
has one of the finest book dealerships I have
been able to find. We have been doing business
for more than two decades and, try though I may,
I have yet to be unhappy with the outcome.
If you need to buy a used or rare book, Jim
(and his Bookworm & Silverfish) is your
man. Mr. Presgraves’ concerns have to do
with the art form called the book as opposed
to its functionality as a tool of learning.
Though he is concerned with both, he points
out what may not be so obvious: all those
rare materials we look longingly will be
even more breath-taking when they are re-
placed by laptops under glass.

Finally, there has been one other person who
must be mentioned here. He is the unlucky good
fortune to have hired a retired English teacher
who acts as the Secretary to the Dean. Bessie
Meeks has done as much editing on these es-
says as I have, and more. Her proofreading
skills are sine qua non, and while she cannot be
audited for anything I have said, she has made
everything all of us have tried to say in these essays
so much the better.5

Endnotes
1. Incidentally, Terry McAuliffe remains the head of
the Democratic National Committee, “the
party of the people” after his $100,000 invest-
ment in Global Crossings made him $18 mil-
lion before going bankrupt. See www.
timeswv.com/V102902-HTM for more.
2. Technically speaking the Internet and the
World Wide Web are two different species of
the same or similar beast.

Rumors
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and especially those with disabilities
(www.cast.org), His work has involved the
design and planning for the creation of a na-
tional digital library of accessible curricular ma-
terials and is now completed. He is in the pro-
cess of reinventing his consulting practice under
the name of Electronic Publishing Associates.
EPA operates in two areas: (1) Working with
scholarly, professional and education publish-
 ers to develop, evaluate, refine and implement
practical electronic publishing strategies in sup-
port of their existing or planned print products
or stand-alone initiatives; and (2) Working with
school district and state education profession-
als facing the specter of litigation under federal
and increasingly aggressive state laws re-
quiring the provision of accessible curricular
materials, i.e., textbooks, for the over six million stu-
dents with disabilities currently in the nation’s
schools. In addition to helping education pro-
essionals develop accessibility plans, EPA will
work directly with school publishers to help
them address their customers’ pressing need for
accessible curricular materials.

Enjoyed talking to the vivacious Florence
Summar (summar@acs.org) and Matthew
J. Price (m_price@acs.org) from the American
Chemical Society at the recent Charles-
ton Conference. And watch for the barn-zowie
Bartow Culp’s <bculp@purdue.edu> upcom-
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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>