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Little Red Herrings-Ten Reasons Revisited Part 3
Conclusions

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Little Red Herrings — Ten Reasons Revisited
Part 3 Conclusions

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

In parts one and two I reexamined my “10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library” (http://bit.ly/3oInQb) in an effort to see where I went wrong, or right, as the case may be. On balance, critics notwithstanding, the article holds up well against the empirical data, less so against what one hopes the Internet will be (but isn’t yet). Herewith, are some concluding remarks about this brave new, digital world.

Conclusions

While I still believe the Internet is no substitute for a library, I understand that I am in the minority in that belief. But believing that doesn’t make me, or anyone else for that matter, a Lud-dite. Unless one is a makebate who holds to an alternative. Even young people half that age are serious readers are over forty and are not yet sold on it for scholarly reading. More than this, however, is the fact that print publishing, with the cake box. If we do, we’ll likely never get libraries back. Moreover we’ll have nothing that is a viable ersatz. My objections to the Internet remain static at best. I hoped that my article then, and its reassessment now, would make the case that print books are not the enemy, and large libraries are not the devil in disguise. Sure, they are costly and yes, there are ways we can make them ever less so. But let’s not throw the cake out because it is a viable ersatz. My objections to the Internet are valid ones against a change that is not, not yet, the panacea for everything.

Print reading hangs on only because most serious readers are over forty and are not yet sold on the eBook reading experience as the exclusive alternative. Even young people half that age are not entirely sold on it for scholarly reading. More than this, however, is the fact that print publishing, the cash-cow of many publishers, will fade only when another equally-profitable model replaces it. Until then, expect digital delays. (And please, don’t ask again for Congress to fix the copyright problem. That’s part of this problem even now.) Let me remind you that eBooks have been around now nearly three decades. We should be within eyesight of the paperless horizon, but we have yet to reach its border. And now news comes that eBooks are on the way out in five years (http://bit.ly/N86JSu).

Even granting the rapid rise of eBooks, my 2000 text stands up better than my critics are continued on page 10
willing to grant. The Boing Boing piece came about because the individual posting it laughed that there were only three people in the library and two of them old. Of course the aged do not matter much in this country, but the critic — who did not explain his own presence there — should know that library visits (http://1.usa.gov/3NU3Tk) are higher than ever. Like any enduring service organization, libraries are much farther along in some areas, farther behind in others, and both are tied to budgets that cover only part of the needed costs. During all economic downturns such as the one we are now in, libraries become a haven for just about everyone. Aren’t we glad we didn’t eliminate them a decade ago when so many called for their extirpation?

The first large question is, Will the Internet replace libraries? I think the honest answer is, eventually, and probably sooner than later. In fact, it already has in some cases. School libraries are a thing of the past, and public ones, when not closing altogether, are cutting hours, even with visits up (again, budgets are killing them off, one by one). Too many young people who will inherit these large, sprawling, and grand libraries have no idea why they were built, and have no will to continue to fund them. Furthermore, the eagerness to get rid of print shows up at every turn. Magazines have all but died off, newspapers are dead, and only books remain. We think the Web can solve everything. Perhaps we should examine more closely its solutions to our problems to be sure those are the ones we want, not the ones we’re settling for.

But le livre reste, will the printed book endure? I do not see how it can. It will persist because there are still too many people like me who will work to keep them alive a bit longer. But rising generations see print books and digital ones as completely fungible entities, with the digital less costly and more convenient. Does it have to be all or nothing? Must everything go digital? Probably.

The second large question is, Will we be better off without libraries in their current form? I can’t imagine that we will. When Gutenberg invented his press, we not only lost the painstaking care of wonderfully-made books, but we also lost something of the love of them as tangible, almost sacred objects of knowledge. We gave that up for ubiquity and convenience. While it’s still possible to get a sense of book-making quality from the Folio Society folks (http://www.foliosociety.com/), the reverence for reading, for knowledge elegantly encased in something wonderful to hold, is already gone. And don’t tell me that’s just being old. The late Steve Jobs obsessed over the look of his tools as much as he did anything. Appearance does matter.

As we lose what we have known to what rising generations will never come to know, we have to weigh that loss. Is the substitution better for everyone? When books were scarce a thousand years ago, those who had them knew them by heart, literally. Today, books are everywhere, but reading skills decline and illiteracy abounds. We know that young people cannot read on screens as well as they read in print. We also know that while Google may not be making us stupid (http://bit.ly/cXNeEC), it isn’t exactly increasing our collective intelligence either. Are these things—declining reading skills, weakening concentration, digital distractions—merely phenomena of change and transition, or are they indicative of something more sinister about the digital environment? We don’t know now, but we are going to find out, for better or for worse. Is it a good idea to cast off the last life preserver, the last life boat for something we are sure is — must be — invincible? For those too young to remember, the last time we did that had a rather titanic and terrifying outcome.

Will the Internet successfully replace libraries? Not yet, but eventually.

Meanwhile we rush headlong to replace what has worked wonderfully well for millennia for what has yet to work as we had hoped for even half a decade. Frankly, I’m perfectly willing for the two to exist side-by-side until we know for certain what future we really want, and the one we must have to vouchsafe our intellectual and cultural futures.

To order the “10 Reasons” poster see http://bit.ly/dnSk5 for more information.

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