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Little Red Herrings — A Call to Arms

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

This month I'm using my column to issue a call to arms. No, it isn't a call to arms for war, though it is going to be battle. It is a call to professional librarians who are interested in their jobs lasting more than a few more years. That sounds a bit hysterical but I don't mean for it to. Yet is it hyperbolic? I don't think so. We need to rethink, recast, redefine, and refresh our professional métier. I think the last twenty-four months make it imperative that we do so now.

Technological advances. I'm going to take the iPad as synecdoche for all the rest. The advent of the iPad represents the culmination of all the eBook activity over the last two years. No more infelicitous name could have been devised than this one, but I don't think that diminishes its overall impact. Problems exist with the iPad. It's a glorified iPhone; it's too big; it's too small; it's too sensitive; it freezes up too much; and so on. But I see these complaints as sidebars to the overall *mise-en-scène*. The iPad provides a convenient way to avoid libraries while it solves many of the more intractable problems the Kindle didn't address: underlining, note-taking, marginalia and so on. With the iPad, these issues become moot, or soon will. Couple this together with other advances (**Entourage Edge** (<http://www.entourageedge.com/>) comes to mind), and you have eliminated nearly all the complaints of serious readers against portable eBook devices.

Granted, the iPad is too expensive for most people, but prices are likely to drop over time as they have with all technology. When you add other innovations on the horizon (i.e., electronic paper which can be thrown away after using), the picture looks a bit gloomy for libraries. When people have at their fingertips most of what they want to read, why will they still want a library? Why will they need a librarian?

The Ithaka Report. Probably no other report in recent memory is more troubling than this one, which you can read for yourself (<http://www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/faculty-surveys-2000-2009/Faculty%20Study%202009.pdf>). The report chronicles for academic libraries where its key constituency — faculty — are now going. Hint: not the library. The report, which has been done every year since 2000, reveals a continuing move away from the library as the central starting point for research. The report argues that:

Faculty members' research practices and teaching methods have both shifted. ... [A] variety of new kinds of discovery tools, new services for information organization and use, and scholarly and pedagogical interaction and collaboration tools, have been the most important factor in leading this change. ... Traditional research practices relied heavily on the library itself and on locally implemented library-provided tools for discovery of books, journal articles,

and other materials. Today, there are numerous alternative avenues for discovery, and libraries are challenged to determine what role they should appropriately play. Basic scholarly information use practices have shifted rapidly in recent years, and as a result the academic library is increasingly being disintermediated from the discovery process, risking irrelevance in one of its core functional areas.

I think it's hard to argue that this is good news for libraries, or that this is news librarians can dismiss. Today, almost 50 percent of faculty begin their research at some place other than the library. While we librarians have known this to be true among science faculty, this report presents the sad datum that humanities faculty are also making the switch (closing in on 40 percent). Furthermore, faculty see their libraries less and less as a gateway to information and more and more as merely a buyer of electronic services that faculty cannot themselves afford.

Much more is in this report, but suffice it to say that the overall picture is not a happy one for libraries or for librarians. If all libraries are nothing more than brokers for electronic services, what will prevent that chore from being handed over to IT departments? It wouldn't be rocket science for an IT assistant to make them accessible over a given institution's Internet connection. Once more, neither libraries nor librarians are central for information access.

Mass Digitization Projects — I didn't say Google, but, of course, that's the one I mean. If Google is successful with its 12 million-plus book plan (or another "Google" is), and libraries have access, what need is there for either cataloging or acquisitions departments? What case can you make off the top of your head that can be understood by someone other than a librarian that you still need to buy and catalog books when you have 12 million-plus literally at your fingertips? Before the iPad's introduction, we could at least correctly argue that no one could or would read them online. That

argument begins to crumble with the advent of the iPad. With all of the technical services departments gone, libraries are effectively 50 percent smaller. Take it a step farther and make this 12 million-plus access available to everyone for a small price (and make no mistake about it, that's where this is headed). Once more, neither libraries nor librarians are central for information access.

Economic Conditions. Unless you've been under a rock for the last twenty-four months, financial conditions have worsened to the

point of Depression-era angst. Greece and a half-dozen other EU countries are bankrupt. The U.S. is not far behind, especially since our government has gone on a spending spree, the likes of which is unrivaled in our history. Unemployment is as high as it has been in my lifetime, and it is likely to go higher. Add to this, institutions of higher education are gasping for their collective breaths as they seek to stabilize their ships of state in the wake of this economic disaster, but knowing that the worst is yet to come. Next year, these same institutions will have to cope with the loss of hundreds of millions in stimulus dollars that stimulated very little and cost a king's ransom.

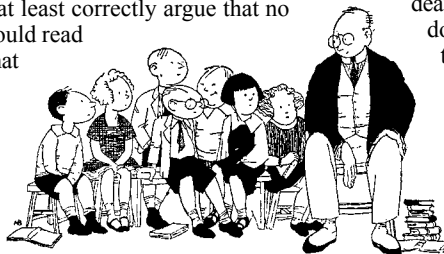
But we're not done yet with the doomsaying. Public libraries, even the largest in the U.S., including the **New York Public Library**, are struggling for their existence. Libraries in every major city in this country are scaling back hours, closing down branches, and laying off staffs. More and more cities are deciding that libraries just aren't a priority, even if they know that many people turn to them when laid off to help them retool. Do you think the decision to close them has anything to do with online offerings? It grows worse still. **Nylink** announces its closing after nearly four decades of bibliographic service to New York State libraries, and beyond.

Now add to this what we librarians have known for at least the last fifty years: libraries are financial black holes. It costs a small fortune to run a good library. Libraries generate little immediate revenue but occupy a sizable place on the expenditures' ledger. This is not a criticism but a fact of every library's life. Libraries are costly undertakings. Now we can talk a long time about the aesthetic benefits of libraries, and I would argue most vehemently in favor of them. We can also talk a long time about the long-term advantages of communities with strong libraries and I, too, would be there making that case. Unfortunately, dreadful economic times make those arguments fall on deaf ears. When a ship is sinking, you

don't stop on the way to lifeboats to admire the cherry wood wainscoting or the porcelain faucets with gold-plated handles. Both are important and extremely valuable; but when the water is at your knees, you don't just don't have time to admire or enjoy. Suddenly those campuses without libraries are sounding more fiscally responsible to more than just bean-counters. Once more, neither libraries nor librarians are central for information access.

Perishing publishers. While all of this is going on, publishers are perishing right and left. Newspapers have all but died on the vine. Later this year the so-called paper of record, *The New York Times*, will change

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for its premium online content. Meanwhile all other newspapers have reduced pages, staffs, the size of their pages, and the length of their stories. If newspapers are not dead yet, they are doing a very good impression of it. Magazine publishers are also either cutting back or falling by the wayside. The **University of Michigan**, a widely respected academic publisher, announced not long ago that they would print no more. Once more, neither libraries nor librarians are central for information access.

Patron Perceptions. Patron perceptions, too, are now running against us. More and more of the people we serve are finding other means for locating their information. **Google** searches often bomb, and no one knows this better than librarians who help the frantic who have spent half-an-hour or more trying to find useful information. But the trouble is, those for whom it bombs are fewer and fewer. And for all the bad that online activity fosters — and I have written a great deal about it — it matters less and less. The very people we serve are looking elsewhere and finding, more or less, not necessarily what they want, *but what they are willing to accept.* Meanwhile, libraries are closing, librarians are being laid off, publishers are disappearing, and books are disappearing, too. The generation that built our great libraries has left them to generations that do everything over a phone. That generation neither understands the value of libraries nor wants to pay for them. Once more, neither libraries nor librarians are central for information access.

Is this enough to make you nervous about our future? Granted, there are extenuating circumstances. The *Ithaca Report* consists of a small number of responses. We've heard over and over again that print is dead, but never before have we seen this many bodies. **Google** still has many copyright hurdles to clear, and the arguments against the brain drain fostered by online activities are indeed very, very real. Besides, libraries have always weathered various storms. My fear is that this happens to be the proverbial perfect one. I fear there is a very important debate going on about libraries, and librarians aren't in on it. More importantly, are we even aware it's taking place?

So why not a nationwide conversation about our future? Let's talk about the future of libraries and librarians, and *let's fashion the argument for them in a manner that anyone can understand and support.* I have ideas about how we reestablish our centrality in the information calculus but I bet you do, too. Moreover, I bet yours are better than my own. If you're interested in talking about — even and especially if you disagree with any or all of these presuppositions — email me at <herringm@winthrop.edu>.

If enough of you want to discuss it, we'll take our conversation online.

Of course. Where else would we do it? 🍄

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Another fast mover and shaker! **Aaron Wood** is moving from his current position of **Assistant Head of Technical Services & Metadata Librarian** at the **University of Calgary** to **Director of Software Product Management** at **Alexander Street Press**. In a nutshell, **Aaron** will be championing the user perspective for discovery projects (OpenURL, federated search, library discovery services, **Google**, and product-to-product linking with other vendor systems) and overall search

functionality and leading developments in these areas. **Aaron** says that his aim is to leverage, to the maximum extent possible, the metadata behind **Alexander Street's** products in order to drive discovery and enhance user experience. **Aaron's** email address is <aawood30@yahoo.com>.

Lots of moving and shaking going on and I missed this! The fantabulous **Dr. Elaine Yontz** <yontzm@ecu.edu> has joined the **Department of Library Science** at **East Carolina University** as **Professor and Chair** in January 2010. **Elaine** is a long-time

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