

## Against the Grain

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# Little Red Herrings-Ten Reasons Revisited Part 3 Conclusions

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Send ideas by **July 31, 2012**, to any of the Conference Directors listed above.

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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) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

In parts one and two I reexamined my “10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library” (<http://bit.ly/5oYnQb>) 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 Luddite. Unless one is a makebate who holds to an either-or view of things, one can see the Internet for what it is, and still see libraries as, for now anyway, infinitely better as a full-service shop for research and resources. As the dean of a medium-size academic library, I cannot ignore the rise of the Web and the digitization of everything. For this reason, we have **ebrary**, loan **iPads**, **Kindles**, **Sonys**, and laptops. With rare exception, nearly all our article information is digital. At the height of print, we subscribed to some 3,000 titles. Today, that number is less than 600, but our students have access to more than 30,000 titles. Additions like multispectral imaging (<http://econ.st/s1X5iI>)

that delve more deeply into manuscripts to solve mysteries that heretofore remained unknown add up to positives on the Web side of the ledger, and make it a more robust tool for the future.

But none of these things are free. No individual could subscribe to the resources a library does all by herself. Meanwhile, library budgets 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 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 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

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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/vNU3Tk>) 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 the digital way? 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/cXNeCU>), 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/dnSsqk5> for more information. 🌿

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Column Editor: **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

**Editor's Note:** Hey, are y'all reading this? If you know of an article that should be called to **Against the Grain's** attention ... send an email to <[kstrauch@comcast.net](mailto:kstrauch@comcast.net)>. We're listening! — **KS**

### BIG BROTHER'S WATCHING AND HE FEELS VIOLATED

by **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

**ABC** is about to air the reality show "Life in a Glass House," which **CBS** says is a total rip-off of "Big Brother" including "plot, themes, mood, setting, pace, characters, and sequence of events." And **CBS** is suing.

But isn't taking cues from previous shows what everyone does? Is there much difference between "American Idol" and "The Voice"?

An added twist has 19 former staff including producers of "Big Brother" working on "Glass House." And there seems to be nondisclosure agreements involved.

See — **William Launder**, "CBS Accuses ABC of Copying Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 12-13, 2012, p.B3.

### NYC UNDERBELLY

by **Bruce Strauch** (The Citadel)

Five book picks if you're into old-time gangs of New York: (1) **James D. McCabe**, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1872); (2) **Tyler Anbinder**, *Five Points* (2001); (3) **Timothy J. Gilfoyle**, *A Pickpocket's Tale* (2006); (4) **Kevin Baker**, *Paradise Alley* (2002) (Vol. 2 of "City of Fire" trilogy climaxing in the 1863 Draft Riots); (5) **Luc Sante**, *Evidence: NYPD Crime Scene Photographs, 1914-1918* (1992).

See — **Geoffrey C. Ward**, "Five Best: A Personal Choice," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 12-13, 2012, p.C10. (Ward himself has just published *A Disposition to Be Rich* about his great-grandfather, the 19th-century Wall Street swindler **Ferdinand Ward** with Knopf.)

### Future Dates for Charleston Conferences

Preconferences and  
Vendor Showcase    Main Conference

2012 Conference	7 November	8-10 November
2013 Conference	6 November	7-9 November
2014 Conference	5 November	6-8 November
2015 Conference	4 November	5-7 November