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A Hard Rain's AGonna Fall

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Op Ed — Little Red Herrings



A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall

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

The June issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* showcased as its cover story the blaring headlines, "Should the Internet Be Scrapped?" Did this surprise anyone? If it did, you must not have been paying attention. Over the last decade, the Internet, the Web — yes, yes, I know the terms are *technically* not synonymous but have become so in usage — has become increasingly useless as a scholarly tool. The *CHE* story discussed the obvious problems: spam, viruses, unreliable connections, not to mention unreliable information, disinformation and even misinformation.¹

Later in the summer, *CHE* had a shorter piece on ex-ALA president Michael Gorman's excoriation of the Web. Side-by-side with his jeremiads were others who disagreed. Sadly, many who did were those in our profession. If all of this was not enough, the July issue of *College and Research Libraries* has a piece by Karen Hovde titled, "You Can't Get There from Here: Student Citations in an Ephemeral Electronic Environment." Essentially Hovde writes about linkrot, that ever maddening disease of the Web that makes anything important written as if on water. The longevity of open Web articles is about 36 months. Good luck finding it if you're in a hurry. In many ways, the Web has become what Johnson once said our minds were: vast uncataloged libraries. Google notwithstanding, finding something *important* on the Web beyond ready reference items is not an easy task even for the experienced Web user.

None of these problems is new. All are really ones that have exacerbated over time until the Web has now become a clutter of fiction, hoaxes, porn (don't get me on that soapbox!), stupid jokes, now stupid video clips, narcissisms run amok, and the occasional reliable fact, if it isn't in *Wikipedia*! And while I'm on the subject of *Wikipedia*, may I point out that a programmer at the University of California, Santa Cruz has now color-coded *Wikipedia* so users will know when it's nearly half right? Are we all now so much sold to the Baal of Bytes, Bits and Bill that it's come to this? Can you imagine an encyclopedia making it through numerous editions with color-coding? Now, imagine buying it after

the first notice that it was error-filled. But it's on the Web so we all bow accordingly. One wag wrote early of the "howling wastes of the Internet." He was only half right. It's now a cesspool.

But the library profession, I am sad to report, is on the vanguard of defenders and it would appear that the American Library Association has become little more than a shell for Google. If left up to ALA, it would declare libraries obsolete and sell itself to Google, or rather slatternly give itself to Google. The pandering now borders on the vulgar.

But a hard rain's a-gonna fall. Just the same way that our modern South Sea Bubble burst when the dotcoms went belly up, I predict that some similar thing will happen with the Web. I don't want it to, mind you, but the sheer weight of the imbecilities make it a near-certainty. And when it does fall, there will be tears a-plenty, especially for the — what is it now — the G-147 libraries that have so far sold out to Google?

The oddity is that we have happily become a spectator society, happy to see the world with our eyes, not with our minds, as Shakespeare had it. Some years ago a group of very clever women put up a site called "Get Real" in which they urged porn-obsessed men to date a

real woman rather than digital, virtual ones. It didn't work — three out of five men are now porn addicted — and the site is gone (that 36 month thing, you know). But I raise it as illustrative of our world. We all want to look but not think, reflect, interpret, analyze and synthesize. New studies indicate that rising genera-

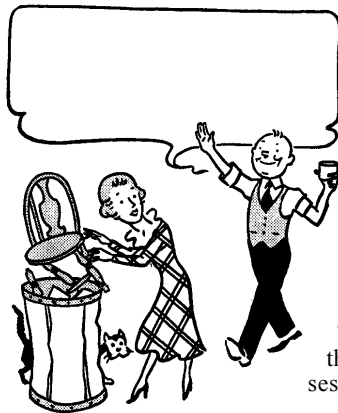
tions of students are more allergic than ever to the printed world and yet we still live in a near-exclusive printed world. The Web may have ushered in the single largest generation of illiterates ever.

So what do we do? I wish I knew. Administrators want everything electronic to reduce costs (when no such thing occurs). Students are happy with *Wikipedia* and *FaceBook* instead of the tens of thousands we spend on aggregate databases. Professors assign fewer and fewer reading assignments because too many end up reflecting badly on their evaluations. Meanwhile our privacy is invaded, our selves stolen, and our time held hostage with another Viagra ad.

It's a brave new world of course, but a hard rain's a-gonna fall. 🌧️

Endnotes

1. Normally I'm not one to do this, but my *Fool's Gold: Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library* (McFarland, August 2007) chronicles all this and more. Dacus, the library where I work, also has a nifty ALA-size poster suitable for framing for only \$10 (includes shipping & handling if mailed within the continental US. All poster proceeds go the library's staff development fund).



Rumors

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shares new research and innovations in digital technology with technical experts and thought leaders from the library, archives, and museum fields in order to enhance technology transfer among cultural heritage institutions nationwide and to promote institutional collaboration. It also provides grant recipients the opportunity to showcase exemplary projects and to demonstrate the impact of federal funding on the development and improvement of library and museum

services. The conference has been co-hosted in previous years by the University of Missouri at Columbia, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, OCLC, Inc., and the J. Paul Getty Trust, in collaboration with IMLS. The 2008 WebWise Conference will be held in Miami Beach, Florida, with tentative dates of March 5-7. The conference theme is "WebWise 2.0: The Power of Community." Online registration for all events will be available through the IMLS Web site in fall 2007. The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary

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