Living on the Fringe

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selection process and ability to predict use. In my view, the question is what is the impact of this work on meeting your patrons’ information needs? It’s kind of a scary question for vendors, as well. Most of the dominant business models are predicated on a “just in case” acquisitions approach.

Steve: You’ll have to explain what you mean by “just in case acquisitions” — I’m not sure I like the sound of it.

Robin: Sorry Steve, I’m not sure who coined it, but it’s often used to describe a model of purchasing content upfront in anticipation of need rather than buying content upon use or access. I agree that it is a sticky term in that it assumes a circulation-based assessment of what should or should not be purchased.

Steve: Hey, Library School was a long time ago! Well, as academic libraries increasingly have to explain or even defend resource expenditures to university and state officials, the “just in case” approach is fast becoming more of a ‘justify’ your acquisitions.

Robin: Well, that’s a good thread to carry this conversation into our next column. What results are university administrators expecting from their libraries, how are they being evaluated, and how should vendors help their customers respond to these expectations?

Steve: OK, talk to you then.

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**Little Red Herrings — Living on the Fringe**

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

Just when you thought the news could not get any worse for libraries, a new twist emerges on an old theme. When I saw the headline, I couldn’t help clicking: “Books Are Becoming the Fringe Media.” In a post dated 20 February of this year, Kevin Kelleher (http://tinyurl.com/ylyqa7h) opines that books are, or are becoming, the new fringe media. People just aren’t reading them anymore, and certainly no one wants to digest 300 pages of text. No siree, this is a slam-bam generation. We want it now, and we want everything you need to know in 140-characters or less. This came as no surprise.

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Steve: OK, talk to you then.
the thundercloud, and it’s so simple it’s mind-boggling:

We no longer teach young people how to read.

And therein lies the saddest story ever told. For the past thirty-something years our schools have followed—and parents of young children with them—just about every conceivable harebrained reading scheme there is, and all of them with the same effect: young people leave elementary school either not knowing how to read, or knowing it only marginally, and hating it eternally. Part of this failure has to do with schools’ love of the new, but more of it has to do with the way we fund education. Anything old-seeming we despise and will not fund, forcing tried and proven methods to die of funding starvation. Meanwhile, any educrat with a scheme and a glib tongue can get millions of dollars for any experiment that involves the nation’s youth. We do this with reading, with math, and with science. The end result has been that more and more of our young people cannot read, write, spell, add, subtract, or divide. (Oddly, they do know how to multiply, but that’s a different rant.)

While I worry about the others, it is reading— that bothers me the most. If a person knows how to read, he or she can do most anything. Obversely, if they cannot read, it is likely that their future will be bleak. Of course, exceptions exist to every generalization, but, by and large, a good predictor of poverty is not knowing how to read. Sadly, we know how to teach young people to read; we’re simply not doing a very good job of it. (in case you’re interested, a great new book on this topic is Dehaene’s Reading and the Brain, Viking, 2009.)

This is not an issue about which we can simply throw our hands up in surrender. If young people aren’t reading — and we know they are not—we are, all of us, in a great deal of trouble. It isn’t that libraries will eventually disappear: of course, they will. It isn’t because bookstores will all eventually close: of course, they certainly shall, and sooner than later as we Boomers die off. And it isn’t because universities like the one where I earn my living will eventually become artifacts: of course, they will, and online learning is hastening the day they become relics. It is because the culture of these United States will disappear.

Now, I know some reading this will think that day cannot come soon enough for political reasons that have nothing to do with reading. The only thing I can say to them is that you never really know what have until you no longer have it, and as proof of this assertion I have only to point them back to their history. To those less political, I can say only that reading is the lifeblood of our culture and preservation of our heritage. If we let this slip through our fingers, we will lose more than we realize. I fear we’ll discover too soon that where we end up will be a very uncomfortable, very unpleasant, lunatic fringe.