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Little Red Herrings — Reading Is, Like, You Know, Sooooo Gross!

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

“*Huge Decline in Book Reading*” ran one headline. “*Cultural Atrophy!*” read another. “*Study Links Drop in Test Scores to a Decline Spent in Reading*” ran one for the “Duh!” award. “*Americans are Closing the Book on Reading*” said one, vying for the pun-acious trophy.¹ Whether the stories reported on the first such study about the decline in reading (as do the first two headlines) or the second such study (as do the last two headlines), the news is equally depressing, lamentable and alarming: reading among young people is dreadful while reading among adults awful. Young people, like, hate to read, you know, like, it’s just so, you know like, not awesome, while older people would rather watch “*Survivor*” or “*American Idol*.” What may well be more alarming than the study, however, is the near silence of librarians about either the study, the issue, or whether this has any impact at all on what librarians do.



This should come as no surprise, though it is. Since entering the profession now almost thirty years ago, I have been dismayed by the cavalier approach to the importance of reading by our profession. It isn’t that we take it for granted. It’s that we are hell-bent on making the profession about something else entirely. We want it to be about relationships with “information-seekers” or about the next generation and what that generation wants or needs. We want it to be about data, not about knowledge or, heaven forbid, wisdom. It is as if all such notions are so horribly Western, so embarrassingly not allocentric, that the profession has endeavored to bury reading in an unmarked grave and move on quickly to something else — anything else — as rapidly as possible.

When the **National Endowment for the Arts** released its 2004 report, “*Reading at Risk*,” the data were frightening enough. Fewer than half of all Americans over 18 read novels, short stories, plays, or poetry. This year’s report is summed up by **Dana Goia**, chairman of the **Endowment**, in a short, concise sentence that most Americans cannot or will not read: the data are “simple, consistent, and alarming.” Both reports have their detractors. Some felt that reading was defined in too highbrow a manner in the first report (that changed with the second). Another knucklehead (from

academe, natch) argued that reading had not declined at all; people just read different things in different ways now, whatever that meant. **Nancy Kaplan**, executive director of the **School of Information Arts and Technologies** complains that in the current report data have been massaged and presented in an irresponsible way. Her take (read it here: http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2007/11/reading_responsibly_nancy_kaplan.html) essentially argues that the patient, while not breathing, isn’t really dead. Moreover, the vital signs from **NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress)** and **NAAL (National Assessments of Adult Literacy)**, data sets from which both reports were drawn, are just not all that bad. Of course, **Ms. Kaplan**, in a school of technologies, doesn’t want technologies to be blamed. But anyone who has worked with young people at all knows without any doubt that reading, its facility and proficiency has, well, tanked. The new report tackles these issues, defines reading as widely as **Andy Warhol** defined “art” and yet the results are the same. As one of the researchers argued, we can’t “nitpick or wrangle” about whether reading is in decline. It is, and the decline is precipitous.

So just how bad is it? While finding at least two hours a day to watch television, 15-24 years olds barely find seven minutes a day on voluntary reading on weekdays and a whopping ten on the weekends. Proficiency is also in decline no matter whether readers are (trying) to read a blog or a can of soup. Whatever Americans choose to read, they are not doing it well or often. If you think I’m being elitist, those Americans with advanced degrees read only marginally better and longer. (For those of you who work in higher education, you know this to be the case!)

Young Americans aren’t reading newspapers, newsletters, or, ostensibly, the little packing slip in a new pair of jeans. They do surf the Web, a lot, and some of them have inane, poorly written blogs. **iPods** proliferate, and every child, while not only being a winner, must also have a laptop. We have phones that connect to the Web, will make pictures, and will send msgs tht rd lk ts. We have become the most technologically advanced nation in the world. But we are also a nation of illiterates. It isn’t that there will not be books in the future. There will be many books: there just won’t be anyone who can read them.

This can’t be blamed on young people alone. Reading programs in this country, as I have written in this space before, are idiotic, mind-numbing and gormless. When educators aren’t touting the look-say method, they are championing **Whole Language**, two programs that have done more to destroy reading than a million bad books by poetasters or pundits.

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as any other company. This includes tax relief on the interest paid on its loans. However, if a large company is highly leveraged, its debt servicing is effectively being subsidized by taxpayers, while the private equity owners make large profits upon selling the business. Moreover, the tax treatment of private equity executives, at least in the UK, has become controversial; the profits made by them are taxed as capital gains rather than as income, on the basis that they are investing in an unquoted company and making a capital gain. But this means they pay much less tax than the rest of us obliged to pay income tax. And what they do in the office every day does not seem to be any less a regular job than what the rest of us do. The private equity industry has suddenly woken up to the need to be more accountable and more transparent in the way they relate to the community at large.

In 2007 we have seen the beginning of the end of more than a decade of economic growth. The credit squeeze that has followed the collapse of the “sub-prime” housing loans market

in the USA is having global consequences. As the availability of bank loans has dried up, does this mean the end of private equity as we know it?

The answer lies in the undoubted success of private equity in acting as an alternative to a full stock exchange listing. While bank borrowings are much more difficult to come by, there is still a great deal of money within the private equity system that will find its way into investment. It may well be that we have seen the last of the really big private equity acquisitions, funded largely by bank loans, at least for a while. But pension funds, mutual funds and insurance companies still generate money that has to be invested. It is merely the scale of acquisitions and investments that might change.

This was confirmed by a neighbor, who is a partner in one of the smaller UK private equity firms, **Risk Capital Partners**. **RCP** has just bought **Borders** book stores in the UK and Ireland. To him, all that the credit squeeze has done is alter the way some of the deals are put together. So private equity has arrived, and will be with us for as long as investors have money. It is just another chapter in the long story of adventures in capitalism. 🍷