

A Review of ‘Fool’s Gold’

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Fool's Gold: Why the Internet is No Substitute for a Library, by Mark Youngblood Herring. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007. 191p. \$45.00. ISBN-13 978-0-7864-3082-6.

The Internet has so revolutionized library services and our approach to information that people are beginning to wonder, and not only academics and bloggers are asking the questions. Those you meet on the streets, idlers at Starbucks, and college freshmen want to know. Does anyone need traditional libraries anymore? Has the Web rendered the classic library of carefully selected monographic collections, skillfully collated indexing tools and highly trained professional staff obsolete and irrelevant? Has the Internet so altered our information landscape that the library is no longer part of the roadmap to knowledge? The questions bear asking.

Mark Youngblood Herring, dean of library services at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, takes the questions head on in his book, *Fool's Gold: Why the Internet is No Substitute for a Library*. The author writes regularly for *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, and *Against the Grain*, and he has a solid handful of books to his credit. Herring knows libraries. He understands the Web, and he pulls no punches. His *Fool's Gold* is all about assessing the influence and potential of the Web and whether it can really begin to replace libraries.

Make no mistake. Herring is no Luddite, no reactionary technophobe. He uses the Web, and he uses it incessantly. Although a strong advocate of the Internet's importance, the author parts company with many in his profession, because he is no pie-in-the-sky optimist. Rather, he resembles the cold, realistic CEO's in Jim Collins's *Good to Great*—leaders and managers who insist on taking a clear-headed assessment of one's situation before moving ahead. It is that sort of gutsy, realistic analysis that Herring brings to the Web and its burgeoning role in our culture. The Internet, he maintains, for all its glitter and genuine utility, has serious shortcomings when we consider it a major avenue of knowledge. Indeed, the Web has deficiencies that only fools would gainsay or technocrats ignore. It cannot begin to compete with a well-run library.

Consider a short litany of the digital world's major inadequacies. For Herring, the Web's overall coverage may be vast but it is far from comprehensive. Indeed, more often than not, the average Google search misleads the user, since so much of the Internet lies outside the bounds of even the most robust of search engines and the vast majority of the available literature on a given topic never appears on the Web at all. Then there is the matter of quality control. Of course, the Web has none, becoming inadvertently the source of misinformation as often as the source of reliable data. On top of this, Herring reminds us that what he calls the "mad rush to digitize" almost everything has left a host of preservation issues largely unanswered and sometimes unasked. Copyright bedevils digitization projects, and the burgeoning eBook phenomenon itself, the coming digital miracle, has begun to look more like a pipe dream than a sensible replacement to the traditional hardcopy book.

The problem, in one sense, lies not with the Web, Herring argues, but with the way we use it. We tend to snatch and catch pieces of information, revel in the thirty-second sound bite trivia, and choose the shortest path to information. That kind of simplistic Web reliance has meant lower literacy rates and a disparagement of reading itself in a good many quarters. The Web inadvertently has produced a generation of readers who cannot read as well as their parents or their grandparents, all of which bodes ill for the future. A nation of nonreaders, we need remind ourselves, will never value libraries.

Fool's Gold may win its share of critics. For some, Herring's prose may be too exaggerated, his opinions too extreme. He writes with flare and an edge. He irreverently attacks the American Library Association's opposition to Internet filtering and resulting indirect defense of online pornography. For Herring, the ALA misunderstands and misuses the First Amendment. Elsewhere he argues that librarian enthusiasm for digitization stems from a misguided sense of access. "Access," he writes, "is for librarians what the Babylonian Whore is for the Apocalypse, the enticing, irresistible miscreant that leads to destruction." At another juncture, the author criticizes OCLC's Persistent Uniform Locators (PURLs). He insists that the use of such a system is well intentioned but far too labor-intensive and high-maintenance to be an effective solution to the Web's pandemic of bad and ineffectual links. Moreover, Herring's overarching zeal to catalog the Web's deficiencies also obscures its virtues, a practice certain to infuriate whole battalions of Web enthusiasts.

On the other hand, if critics abound, so may those who defend the volume, for the author has done what few in our profession seem willing to do. Herring has wrestled with some of the drawbacks and disturbing dimensions of the Web. He has also explored the cultural importance of libraries and their jeopardized future. The writer has undoubtedly trivialized a few Web advocates in the process and possibly made a few enemies, but no one (least of all, those of us who ply our librarian and information trades in the halls of academia) should ignore his arguments. Like George Orwell decrying the inanity of political ideology, H. L. Mencken lambasting the stupidity of the Klan, or Edmund Burke castigating the excesses of the French Revolution, Herring writes cogently and relevantly. And like those clear-headed critics of past absurdities, he has taken on the enemies at hand with an admirable deftness and commendable realism. His *Fool's Gold* merits close scrutiny. Few works have so richly detailed our overdependence on the Web or so powerfully exposed our undervaluing of libraries. Strongly recommended.—**Steve McKinzie, Director of Library Services, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144** <smckinzi@catawba.edu>.

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