

Op Ed — Little Red Herrings

E-e-e-e-asy Does It

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Is it just my e-magination, or are we in an e-lust for e-books? E-verywhere I look, now, I seem to e-ncounter something about eBooks. I have been ebombarded recently with a glut of eBook offers. I wish I could pay with e-money but they always ask for the real thing. That's the funny thing about e-stuff. It always requires real money, e-ven if it flops, or they tell you it isn't e-nywhere but e-verywhere. Still, you can't send virtual money. A recent article in the *Economist* reported a run on the bank in **Second Life** as if that were news. Not to worry. Its e-ventors are still making real money. But I've said e-nough about **Second Life**.

Friends (and in this group I also include e-nemies because without the second part I wouldn't have that many to count) think I may be a Luddite. So much so that they've threatened an e-ntervention. But I'm not, really. I'm just worried that **ALA** is going to e-lope with **Google** and leave all of us librarians in the e-lurch. One more panting article about **Google** and libraries by e-ither of our professional magazines and I'm calling the **FCC** about pornography, but that's another story. Seriously, am I the only one noticing all the e-xcitement about eBooks of late? I got so many calls from women tryng to sell me stuff that I think I must be one or two on their speed dial. So what gives?

If you want eBooks, there's no lack of looking. **eBook.com** sells itself as the "world's leading source of eBooks" [note the capital!]. Okay, I know I'm dense but that can't be too hard, especially if one has only 80,000 titles, the size of a very small academic library. They also tout, on **Google** anyway, lots and lots of e-titles. Two categories caught my e-yes: "sex" and "erotica." I hate to sound like a philistine, but is there a real — or virtual — difference? Seems to me both are about sex. Perhaps some cataloger will explain the difference to me. Can sex not be e-rotic or the e-rotic not be sexual? Anyway, the two are sandwiched (so to say) on **Google**, between "Computers" and "Business." Someone get me marketing on the line!

A number of eBook vendors have been around quite e-while and offer thousands of eBooks to download on your ... computer and/or laptop. But many of them are not doing as well financially as they would like. For example, one eBook content provider still beats the e-bushes for donations. Another began with millions of dollars in venture

capital but later ended up downsizing dramatically. While a few have made comebacks of sorts — rehiring some there, closing an office while enlarging another — none of them make very good business models to hold up for e-mulating to would-be e-ntrepreneurs.

One eBook content provider did a pilot in a city by offering end users a chance to get on e-board for pennies a year. End users could simply log on and get the book they needed, if what they needed was one of a few thousand in cyberspace. Don't have a computer? **Newt Gingrich** was ahead of his time when he offered the homeless laptops. See, if he had been successful, we wouldn't have that e-mbroglgio now between the have and the have-nots. Anyway, could this have anything to do with the decline of media centers in the K-12 schools? Of course, kids had to pay for the access but it was a mere pittance, right?

Another eBook content provider was acquired by a Consortium. While this vendor began with quite a bit in venture capital, most of the money went into cyberspace. That may be another way of saying that they didn't lose anything, really, but I'm not sure those e-venture capitalists felt that way. We have this access but it is by far and away one of the least used of more than 100 databases that are offered. And the lack of use isn't from lack of trying to stir up interest. Marketing didn't seem to help. There were no takers, real or e-magined. I don't want to be charged with omitting the e-obvious, so what about **Google's** gigantesque G-3,478 libraries and the plan to digitize e-very book in as many libraries that will agree to e-ngage with it? Copyright, e- or otherwise, did throw a wrench in the works for a bit, but that was e-asily overcome. **Google** e-ignored it unlike anyone e-lse has been able to. Money talks. For books still under copyright, one gets e-snippets; for those in public domain, the full text. We still don't know how this will be paid for (pay-per-view comes to mind, as do ads, but I'm only speculating), yet we're assured it will be affordable. (Whether the affordability has in mind **Google** owners, **Bill Gates**, or struggling libraries is anyone's e-guess.) Yes, yes, I e-know. It puts before the public millions of books that would otherwise be collecting e-webs. As an author, I ought to be e-ctatic about that. But I want readers, and that doesn't seem to be in the works when it comes to e-readers (see below). I also haven't seen anything about

re-mastering these texts,

something e-xperts tell me will be required at some point. Let's hope no one is using digitization as a replacement for traditional preservation.

Here's the part that confuses me. eBooks have been around about twenty years now, but today we're not very far from the starting gate. The last thing I saw e-ndicated that the niche for eBooks was still very low, e-reference texts and e-journals notwithstanding. And then there are the e-readers. One can't very well lug about a laptop, e-ven if wireless, so what's an e-reader to do? There isn't much on the horizon.

For example, one company set out with lots of hype for an eBook reader. This reader highlights all sorts of new technology and bells and whistles but it has been something of a bust in the short run. Still, it offers really only a handful of titles, comparatively speaking, via its database. You have to log in, download the book to a computer and then upload it to the reader. You can also upload directly to the reader. It's all very e-asy, you see, but not altogether convenient. Someone I know bought one and it's been in the shop for awhile and looks like it may go back next week. Twice now my friend has tried to schedule a training session and both times had to cancel because the reader wasn't working. The fine print indicates he can get another reader, but it will e-likely be refurbished (surely they sent us a new one to begin with). Of course, one e-xpects such glitches in any new technology, but it sounds like the same song with the same verse. While one "can" download texts not available from the database, the e-xperience was nothing short of e-xasperating.

Another eBook reader costs a lot so it should be better, right, but I can't speak to the advantages or disadvantages. It's just too expensive and we simply don't have the resources to test e-read it. I'm sure it works well, and of course at that price it had better work wonderfully well. But I'm at a loss to know how to make that work with thousands of students. Even buying one for e-very 50 users would be pretty e-xpensive! (What would really help would be textbooks made available as eBooks. Students might jump at the chance to carry around a 6 ounce reader as opposed to a 60 pound book bag!)

The problem isn't really the tech-

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nology — okay — not e-ntirely. The technology is there; and if it isn't quite there, it will be, I promise. The problem is people. You can predict technology. You can't predict people. So why the e-ffort to push so hard with e-texts when the pushers aren't getting very far? I have a suspicion, which I've outlined in my book *Fool's Gold*, recently released by **McFarland** in August of this year, so I won't bore you with the details. The short answer is this. We know from studies so far that virtually (no pun intended), no one, e-ven e-readers, reads an e-text from e-cover-to-e-cover (e-readers spend *minutes* with texts, not hours). We also know that the resolution on e-readers is at best about 50% or so the resolution of a printed page. Again, we know that the transferability of reading skills from screen-to-text is not so good, or not nearly as good when you go at it the other way around. So what gives with the grand push?

Part of it is e-conomic. I've submitted all my manuscripts over the last decade or so in some electronic format. Converting them is e-asy and requires little outgo on the part of the e-publisher. It also allows the e-publisher to reap just about 100% from every sold copy, something impossible to

do unless you're **Mellon**, which managed, or so I've read, to make a profit off only a dozen copies, a practice that did not win it accolades from scholars. What worries me about the push is that e-veryone is becoming print allergic. Students already are, and you know that if you work with them for any length of time.

But another worry obtrudes. Are we pushing something that will only insure us of a generation of e-lliterates? The snatch-and-grab mentality of the Web strikes me as threatening our freedom. Am I being hyperbolic? I don't think so. Our democratic capitalism works only for a well-informed e-lectorate. If that electorate isn't reading anymore

— and the latest study, *Decline in Reading*, more than indicates we're not — then that e-lectorate won't be very well informed. Maybe I am a Luddite, after all — there, I've saved you the trouble of sending me an email. But perhaps we should at least catch our collective e-breaths before venturing too far along this path. At least, maybe we should pause for just an e-moment before we get so far down that path we find ourselves completely lost in cyberspace. 🌸

