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The Front

Breaking Down the Middle

The first two installments of *THE MIDDLE* discussed older items I'd tagged for *TRENDS & QUICK TAKES* more-or-less chronologically, resulting in particularly miscellaneous conglomerations. After completing the second chunk, I concluded that this wasn't the best way to proceed. I've gone through the set, retagging old "tqt" items with a handful of narrower tags. The largest of the resulting clusters yields this issue's *THE MIDDLE* on *FUTURISM* (and the second part, *FORECASTS*, in the next issue).

As anyone foolish enough to track my Diigo account knows, I've done similar breakdowns in other areas, some of them truly obscure to anyone else. Currently, I see more than 20 subdivisions for copyright, which is far too many (especially given that I'm not writing *nearly* as much about copyright as I did a few years ago), eleven subcategories for ebooks (some too small, a couple too large), twenty subdivisions for "miw" (which isn't getting any new tags, since those would be tagged "libraries" or "lib-" with a subdivision), and four subdivisions for social networks.

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There are three tags with far too many occupants, in each case more than 100 and in one case more than 260, and I've avoided even looking at the contents—but need to one of these days. "blogging" may need a combination of subdivision and radical trimming. "oa" is astonishingly large, given that I basically stopped writing about Open Access in *Cites & Insights* in late 2009, then returned to the topic with *Open Access: What You Need to Know Now* (ALA Editions) in 2011. Not sure what needs to be done there.

Finally there's the monster, 269 items out of my total 1,968 (as I write this—that number should shrink this week, but it seems to float around 1,850 to 2,000 over time): "gbs"—which includes not only the

probably–failed Google Books settlement but other Google Books-related items. If, as seems likely, the settlement has completely broken down (as has, most probably, Google’s business plan for its scanned books), then there are two fairly obvious choices: scrap all the items or write a retrospective on what happened and, more specifically, library-related comments and what they may say that’s still meaningful. It’s not a pretty picture. (Given that, on average, quotation-and-commentary essays seem to run about 500 words per source document, “gbs” is clearly intractable for an essay or for a two- or three-part mega-essay: It’s a book, and not a small one.)

That’s a future problem. Only a problem, of course, if I continue to believe that *Cites & Insights* is meaningful and sustainable.

Polls and Reality

It’s been interesting to watch what happened after I took the poll results seriously—reducing the suggested contribution based on what people said they’d be willing to contribute and creating a new single-column narrower PDF designed to work well on e-devices larger than smartphones.

As for people’s *actual* willingness to contribute, that’s a simple story: Contributions for 2012 total \$0.

As for use of PDF formats, I did get a nice note from somebody who appreciated the single-column format (but, so far, hasn’t found it worth paying for). As I edit this (April 24, 2012) it’s been 50 days since the March 2012 issue emerged in both formats and 27 days since the April 2012 issue appeared. So far, the “on” formats (single-column PDF) account for 30% of all downloads of Issue 12.2 and 27% of all downloads of Issue 12.3—and I do note that Issue 12.2 totals nearly 800 PDF downloads, a good figure for early reading (Issue 12.3 is at 530, which is also good for less than a month). Conclusion: So far, most people prefer the print-oriented two-column version...but enough are using the single-column version to make it worth the (modest) time required to generate it. And maybe one day a few readers will actually kick in a few bucks.

If you’re wondering about HTML pageviews for essays in these issues: The highest, for SOCIAL NETWORKS in March, is at 301 pageviews—more than the one-column PDF but less than 40% of PDF downloads overall. Second highest, and impressive for the first month, is no real surprise: PUBLIC LIBRARY CLOSURES in the April issue, already at 299 pageviews, more than half as many as overall PDF downloads. (The lowest is not THE FRONT in the March issue; it’s the set of old-movie mini-reviews in April—and at 143 HTML pageviews in less than a month, that certainly doesn’t tell me to stop doing those.)

Libraries

Public Library Closures 2: Investigating 1998-2009

This article continues the discussion begun in *Cites & Insights* 12:3, April 2012. Partly as a result of questions raised in that discussion, Will Kurt compared IMLS data from year to year, looking for libraries that are in the database in Year X and not in Year X+1. The results of those comparisons appear in "[Public Library Closings—1998-2008](#)," posted March 20, 2012 at Kurt's *Library Data* blog.

There's one graph in the relatively short post and you should look at it directly—it has one line for "branches and central" (that is, the overall number of library outlets), one for "central only" (the libraries I've been looking at), and trend-line projections based on each of those two lines.

The results are fairly clear. Both trend lines head downward, from around 125 library and just over 200 outlet closings in 1998 to *much* smaller numbers in 2008. The actual lines aren't smooth, with big drops in 1999 and 2000 and a spike in 2001 (for libraries) or 2002 (for branches). But the message is clear. Quoting Kurt:

Confirming what Walt Crawford had mentioned in a [post not long ago](#) the state of public library closings is not actually as bleak as it seems. From the data we have it even appears as though public library closings are actually declining over time!

I've definitely heard a lot of talk about public library closings, but, anecdotally, whenever I would investigate further I would frequently find that at the last minute plans to close were cancelled. The results above lead me to believe people threaten to close public libraries much more frequently than they actually do.

At my request, Kurt sent me lists of the apparent closings. I added the apparently-closed libraries remaining from 2009 (those remaining from ones directly reported to IMLS as closed). That's 785 in all over 12 years. This article details my investigation and its results. Yes, it's wordy: I'm taking you through the process. You can skip to the conclusions if you're in a hurry—or wait for the article I'm hoping to place elsewhere, a nice, neat, 1,500-word wrapup of the results and why they matter.

Stage 1: Duplicates

I converted Kurt's lists into an Excel worksheet—adding the year after which the library disappeared from the IMLS report to each row. The first step was to sort the worksheet by state, city and library name.

That step yielded 80 duplicates—cases where the same library appears and disappears more than once during the 12 years. I moved those cases (all but the earliest example for each library) to the “resolved” worksheet, leaving 705 possible closures.

Stage 2: Apparently Open in 2009

For Stage 2, I extracted columns from the IMLS 2009 database and saved them off as a readily sortable spreadsheet. I sorted that spreadsheet by state, city and library name and compared it with the “possible closures” spreadsheet. My assumption is that a library that shows actual circulation in 2009 can be considered open. I flagged libraries with *imputed* numbers (that is, not reported by the library but imputed by IMLS) for further investigation.

Here’s what I found in that pass:

- Two hundred fifty-one (251) of the libraries were open in 2009, in some cases with trivial differences in reported names (e.g., “Lib” instead of “Library”).
- Five were branches that had been in the library database.
- Two libraries had merged into one two-location system.
- Twenty-nine libraries were either renamed or replaced by a library in the same location or nearby (within two miles).

Fifteen of the missing libraries show up in the 2009 IMLS report—but with imputed rather than reported circulation. At this stage, those were treated as possibly closed.

That leaves 418 libraries (including the 15 just mentioned) that *might* be closed over the course of the decade and not yet reopened: Slightly more than half the original count, but still quite a few libraries.

Stage 3: Branches of Open Systems

In addition to the five already noted in stage 2, there are libraries in the list that are *probably* branches—e.g. ones that say “Branch.” In this pass, I took the 2009 IMLS library *outlet* report (which includes central libraries, branches and bookmobiles) and checked the 418 libraries against it.

That process revealed 138 libraries that are branches of other libraries—some that always were, some that may have merged into other systems. In a few cases, the names have changed slightly.

Now we’re down to 280 possibly closed libraries and the process of checking becomes a little more difficult: Looking at libraries on the web, seeing whether non-obvious name changes and organizational changes are at play. Note that we’re already down to 280 libraries over twelve years: Not great, but still less than 3% of the nation’s libraries.

Interstage: South Dakota

In a follow-up to Part 1 of this investigation, the State Librarian of South Dakota informed me that South Dakota had cleaned up its records in 2008, reclassifying nine libraries that didn't actually meet IMLS requirements for public libraries as reading rooms. A couple of those reading rooms are clearly still operational; the others may also be. That reduces the working number to 271.

Here's the message from Dan Siebersma, State Librarian of South Dakota:

Thanks for the excellent article about public library "closings." You are so right that our profession's constant harping on the "Libraries are closing!" meme simply serves as fodder for those who want to see libraries as obsolete anachronisms.

To add another wrinkle to your story, I need to point out to you that the "nine libraries in small South Dakota communities [that] apparently closed in 2009" didn't really close at all. In the past, the South Dakota State Library had a tendency to count every collection of publicly-accessible books in every small community as a "library." It didn't matter whether there was a staff, a board, or any of the other technicalities of being an actual public library.

A few years ago, we decided to clean this up and made a concerted effort to differentiate between legal public libraries (those meeting the state's legal definition) and simple "reading rooms" (community book collections in mostly very small towns). Because reading rooms don't meet the legal definition of a library, and because they often don't even have a staff, and because they invariably don't have the resources to participate in the annual public library survey (which provides the data used by IMLS), we chose to drop these collections from the list of libraries we submit annually to IMLS.

So, those nine "libraries" didn't necessarily close, the State Library changed their designation from "public library" to "reading room" and dropped them from the IMLS Public Library Survey. Most of them are probably still operating in exactly the same fashion as they've always operated, though one or two may have actually closed because "the lady who took care of the books left town" or something similar.

At any rate, we do not count these as "closed" public libraries, so your count of closed libraries has just been halved...and South Dakota's public libraries remain strong and stable!

This is excellent news—and I suspect South Dakota isn't alone. Meanwhile, let's see what we can find out about the remaining 271.

Stage 4: Looking for Libraries

The next stage was to look for the libraries on the web itself without doing extensive research. This pass yielded the following resolved cases (in addition to those above):

- Four libraries show up in the 2009 IMLS list with slightly different names or locations.
- Fifty-three libraries are open, but are (now) branches of library systems.
- Sixteen “libraries” are regional system headquarters that serve other libraries and don’t themselves have LSAs.
- Two libraries merged into other libraries in the same immediate area.
- Sixty-four libraries are clearly open based on available web information, although some of these libraries may not qualify as public libraries based on IMLS definitions. (They may not have paid employees or direct public funding.)
- Two libraries are peculiar: One is a library for a private community, one is open only by appointment.
- Thirty-seven libraries are open but with different names
- Two libraries separated, now offering two or more service points for the same area.

That’s a total of 180 libraries, leaving 91 libraries. Of those, a dozen are pretty clearly closed and nine are listed in state directories but with no other contemporary web evidence.

That’s 91 libraries over 12 years. It’s worth investigating each of those libraries and the townships or villages to see what’s happened and what sort of library service is now available. This time, we’ll proceed chronologically based on last appearance in IMLS listings (or *first* last appearance for duplicate cases) and look at address as well as other factors

Stage 5: The Final 91

The process for this longest stage: On a year-by-year basis, I went to the IMLS data for the last (or first last) recorded year, noting the address, zip code, county, staff, income, and hours, as well as the LSA and total circulation.

Then I looked at the 2009 outlets list (including branches) for the zip codes and addresses. That check cleared up cases that aren’t otherwise obvious: If it’s the same zip code and same address, I concluded that there’s an operating branch or library.

Otherwise, I went back to the web—not only for that address and for signs of the library (or its history), but also for more information on the

town or village. Note that some libraries reported as open here may not fit IMLS or state definitions of public libraries.

It's important to note what I consider "verifiable" web indications of an open library. There are dozens, maybe hundreds of setups that create websites from databases such as the IMLS ones. The resulting pages have nothing to do with the library or city itself, existing only to draw advertising. These pages do not go away when IMLS drops a listing: They remain as ghost sites. I ignored all such sites, typically at least a dozen for each library. But if there's a current city website showing a library, or if a recent news report mentions a library, or if a *current* state library listing shows a library (and directory)—those and similar items offer verifiable indications of an open library.

1998

Nine libraries remain that appeared in this list and not in 1999—but three of them are back, at the same address (or in one case on the same block) but with different names. Let's look at the six other cases.

Koyuk Public Library, Koyuk, Alaska

Discussed in Part 1—a library that appears and disappears over time, in a community with 347 people (296 in 1998) and almost no circulation. In 1998, it had 0.25 staff and around \$12,000 income. and circulated 666 items during the supposed 740 open hours. But see later: Reverse phone lookup reached a Koyuk tribal website that shows the library as currently open 48 hours per week.

Pilot Station Public Library, Pilot Station, Alaska

In 1998, this library showed 558 LSA, 4,261 circulation, 0.25 staff, \$2,835 total income—and it was reported as open 480 hours, a bit less than nine hours a week. The 2010 census shows 568 people: The town (Tuutalgaq in Central Yup'ik) is neither shrinking nor growing significantly. Neither the library (if it still exists) or the town has any web presence.

Littleport Public Library, Littleport, Iowa

In 1998, this library showed an LSA of 480 people and circulation of 3,355 items in 321 hours (but with no reported staff and only \$2,980 income). A flood in May 1999 destroyed much of the town; by the 2000 census, only 26 people were left. The city has disincorporated.

Cook Public Library, Cook, Nebraska

In 1998, this library served 333 people, circulating 1,947 items in 1,780 open hours—with 0.38 staff and \$5,980 income. The 2010 census shows 321 people—essentially stable. The local history says nothing about a library.

Lake City Public Library, Lake City, Pennsylvania

The only closed library from 1998 serving more than 1,000 people in 1998, this library shows a 1998 LSA of 2,519, circulation of 6,259, 0.58 staff, \$13,995 income and 1,030 open hours. As of 2010, the borough of Lake City shows 2,811 population. The library has a listing in the state department of education directory. Unclear: If it's operating, it's invisible on the web.

Roberts County Library, Miami, Texas

In 1998, this library served 988 people, with a total circulation of 2,140, 0.23 staff, \$13,468 income and 544 open hours. A 2008 website notes this library operating in the Roberts County courthouse, so I'll count it as open.

1999

Eight libraries appear in the 1999 report and not the 2000 report and are otherwise unaccounted for.

Old Harbor Library, Old Harbor, Alaska

This library served 297 people in 1999, circulating 810 items with one FTE staff and \$12,561 income. It was open 960 hours. IMLS doesn't show an address. The town itself (Nuniatq in Alutiiq) had 237 people in the 2000 census and 218 in 2010; the local school apparently does have a school library. There is no indication of the library itself.

Elberta Public Library, Elberta, Michigan

In 1999, this library served 984 people, circulated 12,784 items, had \$12,784 income, 0.43 FTE staff and was open 780 hours. The village itself had 457 population in the 2000 census. It was formerly a rail/marine transportation hub until the railway was abandoned in 1982. The village calls itself "poised for growth and a rebirth of commerce"; the website shows no mention of a library. The nearest public library seems to be six miles away.

Hoffa-Wiest Community Library, Stover, Missouri

This library served 964 people in 1999, circulating 18,396 items with no staff, a budget of \$18,336 and 620 open hours. The building at the library's address has no visible label (in Google Street View) but looks like it could have been a small library. No further information available.

Powell Memorial Library, Troy, Missouri

In 1999, 5,137 people were served by this library, with 28,349 circulation, 1.55 staff, \$43,834 budget and 2,496 hours—making this one of the larger apparently closed libraries. Further searching, however, yields a current Troy city website showing the library open a healthy 59 hours per week. This library appears to be active, run by (and coterminous with) the school district.

West Dakota Library, Carson, North Dakota

This library was reported as serving 383 people in 1999, with no staff, \$542 income, 1,296 hours and 8,030 circulation. There's no current trace whatsoever of the library. Carson itself, the county seat for Grant County, has a slowly declining population—down from 319 in 2000 to 293 in 2010. The Elgin Public Library (16 miles away) explicitly serves all Grant County citizens.

Cedarville Public Library, Cedarville, New Jersey

In 1999, this library showed an LSA of 2,817 people, circulation of 4,089, one FTE staff, \$6,333 income and 179 hours open (that is, three hours per week). Cedarville itself had 793 residents in 2000. No current information is available. The county library is 7.4 miles away.

Freedom Public Library, Freedom, Pennsylvania

This library showed 1,897 LSA in 1999, with 1.2 staff, circulation of 4,759, budget of \$24,558 and 1,224 hours open. While the Direct Update Libraries list for Access Pennsylvania shows Freedom Public Library as part of the Beaver County Library System as recently as 2009, the BCLS website shows no such library—but there are three other BCLS libraries within less than three miles, one (Monaca) within two miles. Google's street view at the library's last address shows a building that includes a fire station and police station. Freedom itself had 1,763 people in the 2000 census.

Gates Memorial Library, White River Junction, Vermont

In 1999, this library had an LSA of 9,404, total circulation 4,615, income \$51,338; it was open 1,664 hours. The village itself is part of Hartford, Vermont, with a population of some 2,500 in 2000. The historic building is now a health clinic and dental clinic. The Hartford Library is about two miles away.

2000

Three libraries that appeared in the 2000 IMLS database but not in the 2001 database are still not accounted for. (One of these, Ore City Library in Texas, doesn't actually appear in the 2000, 1999 or 1998 IMLS database.) Two of these libraries appear as outlets in the 2009 database, however—leaving only Ore City Library

Ore City Library, Ore City, Texas

While I can find no trace of an Ore City Library, the Ore City School Library's website includes this explicit statement: "Our library is a community and school library, and is open all summer for the students and community of Ore City to enjoy." Thus, Ore City is being served by a library that is in practice (if not in name) a school/community library, perhaps appropriate for a community that, while growing, currently has about 1,100 people.

2001

Nine libraries appear in the 2001 IMLS data but not the 2002, and haven't already been accounted for.

Kake Community/School Library, Kake, Alaska

Now called the Kake City School Library, this continues to be a school/public library. Open.

Nellie Weyiouanna Ilisaavik Library, Shismaref, Alaska

In 2001, this library showed an LSA of 562, circulation 735, 0.4 staff, 768 hours and \$12,700 income. The village—Qigiqtaq in Inupiaq—has 563 people as of 2010. It's on an island threatened by erosion. The community needs to move to the mainland, a *very* expensive process. I find no indication of a library in this threatened subsistence community.

Montour Public Library, Montour, Iowa

In 2001, the LSA was 285, circulation 852, income \$1,781, staff 0.25 FTE; the library was open 520 hours. Montour appears to be depopulating. Its school system shut down in 2005. The nearest public library appears to be 4 miles away.

McGregor Public Library, Highland Park, Michigan

This library served 16,746 people in 2001, with 62,401 circulation, 5.5 staff, \$175,033 budget and 1,866 open hours. The city (surrounded by Detroit) was formerly Chrysler's headquarters. It is currently in bankruptcy. Attempts to reopen the historically significant library continue—but as of now, it appears to be closed.

Gabbs Community Library, Gabbs, Nevada

In 2001, this library served 318 people, circulating 5,000 items with one FTE staff and a budget of \$15,000; it was open 966 hours. The city discontinued that year. I can find no signs of a library (other than the school library). But see later: Reverse phone lookup shows the school library as a community library with recent grant funding.

Nash Public Library, Nash, Oklahoma

This library had an LSA of 280 in 2001, with 2,270 circulation, 0.37 staff, \$8,803 income and 1114 hours. Nash itself shows 224 people in 2000. Very little about the city on the web, and no indication of a library. The closest public library is about 20 miles away.

Oilton Public Library, Oilton, Oklahoma

In 2001, this library served 1,099 people, with 8,910 circulation, one FTE staff, a budget of \$34,553 and 1,114 hours. The city's population declined from 1,099 in 2000 to 1,013 in 2010. The library still appears in Oklahoma's official library directory and must be presumed open.

Nicholson Area Library, Nicholson, Pennsylvania

This library circulated 2,425 items to 2,144 people in 2001, with 0.1 staff, \$4,140 income and 624 open hours. I find a reference to it in a 2011 document, and conclude that it is—in some manner—open.

Volin Public Library, Volin, South Dakota

In 2001, this library served 207 people with 2,178 circulation, 0.3 staff, \$4,978 income and 423 hours. The town's population declined to 161 in the 2010 census, and it's likely that the library is either closed or operating as a reading room. The nearest public library appears to be 21 miles away.

This leaves a total of six libraries with no apparent signs of being open: The worst year to date.

2002

Five libraries last appeared in the 2002 IMLS database and aren't already accounted for.

Surf-Bal-Bay Public Library, Surfside, Florida

This library shows a 2002 LSA of 5,035, with 29,926 circulation, \$93,064 income, 2 staff and 1,770 hours. Surfside reimburses its citizens for Miami-Dade Library System patron cards; the nearest branch is less than two miles away.

Somerville Town Library, Somerville, Maine

In 2002, this library served 458 people with 326 total circulation, no employees, \$10,684 income and 103 open hours—that is, two hours a week. No current verifiable information. The nearest public library appears to be three miles away.

Ironton Public Library, Ironton, Minnesota

This library had an LSA of 650 in 2002, with 1,049 circulation, 0.22 employees, \$4,169 income and 466 open hours. The town's population was down to 572 in 2010. Ironton is explicitly served by the Jesse F. Hallett Memorial Library in Ironton's adjacent twin city, Crosby. Given the explicit service and adjacency, I count this as a replacement.

Flatonia Public Library, Flatonia, Texas

The 2002 LSA for this library was 14,550, but total circulation was 2,501; there were no employees, \$3,042 income but 2,021 open hours. Flatonia shows a population of 1,377 in the 2000 census. I find no sign of an operating public library. (The street address does not exist, as it is for "N. Main" on a Main that runs East-West; the equivalent E. Main address is the Chamber of Commerce.)

Stella Ellis Hart Public Library, Smiley, Texas

In 2002, this library served 13,677 people (that is, the LSA was 13,677)—but total circulation was 675, with 0.4 employees, \$1,107 in-

come and 852 hours open. Smiley had 453 people in 2000. The city's website, updated in 2012, shows the library as operational, and it appears in the state's directory. Thus, it appears to be open.

That leaves three libraries of uncertain or closed status.

2003

This was a tough year for apparent library closings, with 13 libraries appearing in 2003, not appearing in 2004 and not otherwise accounted for. Of those, two appear under slightly different names (either as branches or libraries) in the 2009 list, leaving 11 unaccounted for.

Sabattus-Town Square Library, Sabattus, Maine

This library showed an LSA of 5,901 in 2003 and a total circulation of 4,008, with no staff, \$4,300 budget and 302 open hours. The town's population was 4,486 in the 2000 census. No further information available.

Breckenridge Public Library, Breckenridge, Missouri

This library served 465 people in 2003, with a total circulation of 4,347, a staff count of 0.45 FTE, \$9,072 income and 200 open hours (that is, four hours a week). Given the inclusion of the library and a current director's name on a contemporary list of Missouri library directors and a 2011 news report on an event at the library, it appears that this library is, in some form, open.

Gerald Area Library, Gerald, Missouri

In 2003, the LSA was 1,218, the total circulation 11,760, with 0.9 FTE staff, \$25,204 income and 1,800 hours open. Based on a January 2012 news story (about donated books), it appears that this library is, in some form, open.

Keytesville Public Library, Keytesville, Missouri

The library served 523 people in 2003 with 4,889 circulation, 0.51 staff, \$10,203 income and 926 open hours. The town had 533 population in 2000. Given that the town's website lists the library and it shows a current director in Missouri's state list, it appears that this library is open.

Newburg Public Library, Newburg, Missouri

For 2003: 481 people, 4,497 circulation, 0.46 FTE staff, \$9,385 income, 2,250 hours. Newburg had 484 people in the 2000 census. The town's website photo of its city hall still shows "Library" below "City Hall," but the website's text doesn't mention a library. No verifiable indications of an operating library.

Sheldon City Library, Sheldon, Missouri

This library served 526 people in 2003, circulating 4,917 items with 0.51 staff, \$10,261 income and 550 open hours. The town's population is rela-

tively stable—529 in 2000, 543 in 2010. There *are* clear indications that this library was open (in some form) in 2011.

Somerdale Public Library, Somerdale, New Jersey

2003: 6,221 people, 47,484 circulation, 3.96 staff, \$135,123 income, 1,986 hours—larger than most libraries reported closed, but still a small library. The large Vogelson branch of the Camden County Library, in Voorhees, is just over a mile from the stated location of Somerdale Public Library and probably provides better library service than Somerdale’s library could. I’ll call this a replacement.

Navajo Community Library, Navajo, New Mexico

In 2003, this library served 2,097 people but had 412 circulation despite its 0.97 FTE staff, \$22,596 income, and 1,933 open hours. Navajo itself (Ni’iijihí in Navajo) reports that many people, but lost its primary employer (a sawmill). In this case, there’s a definitive answer: The Navajo Community Library became a branch of the Navajo Nation Library in Window Rock, Arizona—and is labeled as “closed until further notice,” which indicates that it may reopen. It thus counts as a branch closure. (The Navajo Nation Library is about 38 miles away, but has an ambitious book distribution service.)

To’hajiile Community School Library, To’hajiilee, New Mexico

This library served 1,189 people in 2003, with 7,586 total circulation, 0.97 staff, \$21,326 income and 2,052 open hours. To’hajiilee Indian Reservation is a small non-contiguous portion of Navajo Nation. The Laguna Public Library, in the Laguna Pueblo in the same zip code, is clearly operational—and the community school itself appears to be operational. Unclear status.

Leechburg Public Library, Leechburg, Pennsylvania

In 2003, this library served 2,386 people with 3,212 circulation, 0.4 staff, \$8,728 income and 864 open hours. The address given for the library is the Leechburg Junior/Senior High School. The borough had 2,386 people in 2000. Multiple local online news stories show Leechburg Public Library operating as a public entity in 2012.

Ryegate Corner Library, Ryegate, Vermont

This library served 1,150 people in 2003 (the population of Ryegate)—but showed only 50 items circulated, no staff, \$150 income and 260 open hours. The building where the library was located is apparently the Ryegate Town Clerk’s office. The nearest verifiable public library appears to be 10 miles away in Groton.

Summing up: One library is now a branch (and currently closed), one library has been replaced by a larger library about a mile away, five of the libraries appear to be open (in some manner), and four libraries may be closed.

2004

An even worse year for possible library closures, with 17 libraries that appeared in the 2004 IMLS database not appearing in 2005 and not yet accounted for. An initial check against the 2009 IMLS database shows that one library has been explicitly replaced by a nearby library serving two communities and two libraries are open, possibly as branches, in 2009. That leaves 14.

Highland Home Public Library, Highland Home, Alabama

The 2004 figures: 798 LSA—but only 90 circulation, one FTE staff, \$9,450 income and 490 open hours. No indication that this library still exists. Highland Home is served by the Crenshaw County Public Library, some 20 miles away in Luverne.

Packwood Community Library, Packwood, Iowa

In 2004, this library served 223 people (Packwood's 2000 population) and circulated 4,736 items, with 0.1 FTE staff, \$716 income and 1,003 open hours. Neither the town nor the library has any verifiable web presence.

Cooper Free Public Library, Cooper, Maine

2004 figures: 155 LSA, 1,980 circulation, no staff, \$1,702 income, open 468 hours. Cooper itself had 145 people in the 2000 census. Cooper's approved community plan explicitly says that library service is available through the Calais Public Library, 19 miles away.

Carleton Public Library, Carleton, Nebraska

In 2004, this library served 136 people, circulated 885 items, had 0.13 FTE staff, \$2,760 income and was open 1,014 hours. Carleton itself (with 136 people in the 2000 census) had dropped to 91 in 2010. No verifiable information. An operating public library is 8 miles away in Bruning.

Edgar Public Library, Edgar, Nebraska

This library served 539 people in 2004 and had 3,508 circulation, with 0.51 FTE staff, \$10,934 income and 1,014 open hours. The population (539 in 2000) dropped to 498 in the 2010 census. The city website says nothing about a library. The nearest public library appears to be ten miles away.

Brumbaugh Public Library, Glenvil, Nebraska

In 2004, this library served 331 people with 2,161 circulation, 0.32 FTE staff, \$6,735 income and 1,014 open hours. The village of Glenvil dropped slightly from 331 people in 2000 to 310 in 2010. The library appears in the current Nebraska library directory, with pictures, so it appears to be operating in some manner.

Union Village Library, Union, New Hampshire

This library shows in the 2004 IMLS data as serving 4,691 people—but with no circulation, despite 0.15 FTE staff, \$5,000 income and 312 open hours. (Going back to 2003, the library shows 1,828 circulation with lower income—\$1,009—but otherwise similar numbers.) Union village, within Wakefield, shows a population of 204 in the 2010 census. The whole of Wakefield is now served by The Gafney Library in the Sanbornville portion of Wakefield. Call this a replacement.

Dexter Public Library, Dexter, New Mexico

In 2004, this library served 1,300 people and had 983 circulation, with no staff, \$1,912 income and 2,000 open hours. No local website or verifiable library information; the nearest good-size public library (in Roswell) is 18 miles away.

Elida Public Library, Elida, New Mexico

This library served 180 people in 2004 with 645 circulation, no staff, \$500 income and 130 open hours (that is, about 2.5 hours per week). No local website or verifiable library information.

David F. Cargo Public Library, Mora, New Mexico

In 2004, this library served an LSA of 1,745 people, with 3,547 circulation, two staff, \$37,696 income and 1,890 open hours. Based on photos and recent (2010) grants, this library appears to be under the radar but still operating.

Frances E. Kennard Public Library, Meshoppen, Pennsylvania

This library served 1,336 people in 2004, with 1,205 circulation, 0.5 staff, \$20,316 income and 1,040 open hours. News stories indicate that this library was operating in 2011.

Groveton Public Library, Groveton, Texas

In 2004, this library served 1,122 people, with a total circulation of 2,174, 0.5 FTE staff, \$7,067 income and 972 open hours. The library shows up, with an acting director, in the 2012 Houston Area Library System member listing, and appears to be open.

Harry Bengé Crozier Memorial Library, Paint Rock, Texas

This library served 466 people with 1,253 circulation in 2004, with no staff, \$3,765 income and 415 open hours. The town of Paint Rock shows 320 population in 2000. The library is still listed in the Texas state directory, and may be open in some form.

Gilman Community Library, Gilman, Vermont

In 2004, this library served 1,328 people and circulated 24,546 items, with 0.2 staff, \$5,500 income and 905 open hours. A contemporary regional library directory shows this library with staff and hours, so it appears to be operating.

Summing up: Six libraries appear to be open; one has been replaced. That leaves seven with no definite status.

2005

Five libraries that appear in the 2005 IMLS database don't appear in the 2006 database and haven't been previously resolved. One shows up in the 2009 outlet database as a branch, leaving four others.

Russian Mission Community/School Library, Russian Mission, Alaska

In 2005, this library served 329 people with 275 circulation, 0.23 FTE staff, \$20,054 income and 446 open hours. The community (Iqugmiut in Central Yup'ik) has 312 people as of 2010. The school is operating and the library appears to be operating.

Cross Trails Regional Library, Opp, Alabama

Opp has an operating public library. The Cross Trails Regional Library was at the same address, with one staff member supposedly serving 45,160 people with 43,567 circulation, \$46,500 income and 1,998 open hours. The city library still operates, but there's no current information on regional library services. (Another county's board shut down the Cross Trail Regional Library Board.)

Soldier Public Library, Soldier, Iowa

In 2005, this library served 207 people with 1,428 circulation, no staff, \$4,235 income and 1,019 open hours. The address given is the Soldier Town Hall, as is the phone number. Neither town nor (supposed) library have any web presence.

El Paso County Library, Fabens, Texas

This library supposedly served 91,284 people in 2005, with 36,316 circulation, 5 staff, \$158,757 income and 1,968 open hours. While there is a large El Paso library system, its only outlet in Fabens (a town of some 4,000 people) is the Fabens Independent School District Community Library, which is still operational.

Summing up: Two libraries appear to be operational, one regional library service no longer operates (but the city still has its library), and one small town's library may have disappeared.

2006

Nine libraries appearing in the 2006 IMLS database don't appear in the 2007 database and haven't been previously resolved. One shows up as an outlet in 2009, leaving eight to investigate.

Ipnatchiaq Library, Deering, Alaska

This library served 138 people and circulated 330 items in 2006, with 0.3 staff, \$16,200 income and 600 open hours. Deering (Ipnatchiaq in Iñupi-

aq) is down from 136 people in 2000 to 122 in 2010. Listed in the current Alaska Library Directory, so may be presumed open.

Drake Public Library, Drake, North Dakota

In 2006, this library served 322 people with 1,260 circulation, no staff, \$1,302 income and 85 open hours—roughly 1.5 hours per week. Drake itself went from 322 in the 2000 census to 275 in 2010. No information available. The address given for the library is Drake-Anamoose High School.

Goodrich Public Library, Goodrich, North Dakota

This library served 163 people in 2006—with 43 items circulated, 0.05 FTE staff (two hours of paid staff time a week), \$1,032 income and 1,056 open hours. There is strong external evidence that this library was still operating (in some form) in 2009.

Erwin Public Library, Erwin, South Dakota

In 2006, this library had an LSA of 54 people, circulation 399, 0.06 FTE staff, \$1,171 income and 1,056 open hours. The town itself was down to 45 people in the 2010 census. Now redefined as a reading room; may still be open.

Estelline Public Library, Estelline, South Dakota

This library served 669 people in 2006—but circulated only 676 items, with 0.29 staff, \$5,788 income and 303 open hours. The town is growing, with 768 in the 2010 census. Now redefined as a reading room; may still be open.

Silverton Public Library, Silverton, Texas

In 2006, this library served 947 people but circulated only 600 items, with no staff, \$1,000 income and 500 open hours. A 2012 news report indicates this library is being renovated; it counts as open.

Tornillo Media Center, Tornillo, Texas

This library served 3,571 people in 2006, with 23,000 circulation, one FTE staff, \$56,702 income and 2,660 open hours. Tornillo itself shows 1,600 people in the 2000 census. The address given is the Tornilla Junior High School; since the media center is listed in the Texas state directory and the school has an active website, it's fair to assume that the media center is operational.

Wills Point High School/Wingo Public Library, Wills Point, Texas

In 2006, this library had an LSA of 14,623, circulated 26,374 items and had two FTE employees, \$108,035 income and 1,200 open hours. Wills Point showed a population of 3,496 in 2000. Wills Point High School is operational and has an operating library, and the library is still listed in the state directory.

Summing up, all but one of the libraries have either been redefined as reading rooms or still appear to be open, in one way or another.

2007

Every library in the 2007 IMLS database but not the 2008 database has already been accounted for.

2008 Revisited

Nine libraries were in the IMLS database in 2008 (including all but one of those reported therein as permanently closed), not in the 2009 database and not already accounted for—but one of those, on closer inspection, turns out to be open with its own website, but with a slightly different name. Another town library appears to have been replaced by a branch library roughly two blocks away. That leaves seven libraries, including four that appeared closed on last inspection.

Ruby Community Library, Ruby, Alaska

The last year in which numbers were reported, this library served 173 people and had 4,401 circulation. No current information is available.

Dora Public Library, Dora, Alabama

The last year in which numbers were reported, this library served 2,413 people with 3,019 circulation. The neighboring town of Sumiton does have a public library (and Google seems to think that the Sumiton Library and City Hall are at the address given for Dora's Library and City Hall).

Cotopaxi School/Community Library, Cotopaxi, Colorado

In 2008, this library had an LSA of 2,656, circulated 5,360 items, showed one FTE staff, \$34,750 income and 1,120 open hours. Cotopaxi itself has 47 people. The Cotopaxi school, at the address given for this library, continues to be open and have a library.

Adams Public Library, Adams, Nebraska

This library served 573 people with 3,373 circulation in the last reported year. While the library definitively closed, the community retains library service: The Freeman Public School Library is now also explicitly a community media center offering library cards to Adams residents.

Valley Public Library, Anthony, New Mexico

In 2007, this library served 1,050 people with 4,616 circulation. No evidence of current operation.

Copperhill Public Library, Copperhill, Tennessee

In 2008, this library had an LSA of 3,830 people, circulating 3,723 items, with 0.3 FTE staff, \$8,048 income and 624 open hours. It appears that the East Polk Public Library, roughly a block away, replaces this library.

Turkey Public Library, Turkey, Texas

This library served 595 people in 2008 with 2,200 circulation, 0.25 FTE staff, \$4,337 income and 1,500 open hours. Turkey, declining in population over the years, had dropped below 500 people in the 2000 census. Turkey's claim to fame is that Bob Wills was born there: The city hall is the Bob Wills Center (at the address and phone number given for the library) and Turkey's internet presence is now at bobwillsday.com, the former turkeytexas.net abandoned and now a parking page.

Summary: One library apparently still open, two replaced by extremely nearby facilities, four that may be closed.

2009

Once South Dakota's redefined libraries were clarified, there appear to be four closed libraries (one of them a bookmobile) in 2009. These have not been further investigated.

That leaves a total of 41 libraries apparently closed and not directly replaced during the past 12 years: Less than 0.5% of all U.S. public libraries. But there's one more step—calling the phone numbers (if not reassigned) to see whether some of these actually are operating (presumably as volunteer-run libraries or reading rooms) under the radar.

Stage 6: Phone Verification

I began by searching the phone numbers themselves (using Bing, since it's been a better engine for me). Situations where this changed something:

- **Koyuk Public Library:** I reached a current Koyuk village website (not reached in other searches) that shows the library as open 48 hours a week.
- **Gabbs Community Library:** The number links to the Library page on the Gabbs School site. The library has received recent grants and is open.

That's two more down, 39 left to go. In cases where a reverse lookup shows that the phone number belongs to city hall or the police department, I chose not to call. In others, where there was no such indication—I did attempt a phone call. That turns out to be ten libraries.

This process didn't yield anything except, in one case, a business that had been assigned the library's old phone number, where the owner sighed and said the library had been closed 4 or 5 years now.

I would assume that any library with a disconnected or reassigned phone is definitely closed.

Stage 7: Open Call

At this point, I counted 14 libraries definitely closed and 25 more that can't be verified as open or directly replaced. I wrote a post on *Walt at Random* asking for feedback on those libraries, and also posted the list to PUBLIB. Michael Golrick at the State Library of Louisiana forwarded the PUBLIB post to a private list for state library people.

I received a number of responses from state library directors, others in state libraries and in a couple of cases, people with direct knowledge of the situation in one or more of those 26 libraries. My thanks to Stacey Malek, State Data Coordinator for Texas; Daria Bossman, Assistant State Librarian of South Dakota; Michele Balliet Unrath, State Data Coordinator at North Dakota State Library; Patricia Moore, Technology Consultant at New Mexico State Library; Jacque Gage, Director, Joplin Public Library (Missouri); Aimee Pittman; Glenda Paate, County Librarian, Cedar County Library (Missouri); Patience Frederiksen at Alaska State Library; Scott Dermont, Library Consultant, Iowa Library Services; email signed only "City of Turkey" (Texas); Libbie Crawford, OCLC; Jenny Melvin, State Data Coordinator at Maine State Library; ConnieJo Ozinga, formerly at the Elkhart (Indiana) Library; Beth Goble at the Nebraska Library Commission; and others whose names I may have overlooked.

This stage yielded the following:

- Drake Public Library (North Dakota) has merged into the Anamoose School / Community Library.
- Elida Public Library (New Mexico) is open, albeit only one afternoon a week.
- Turkey Public Library (Texas) is open every day.
- In all but six other cases, libraries are fairly definitively closed. It seems likely that the last six are also closed, although one or more of them might remain open and "under the radar," operating with volunteer staff or as a reading room.

If you're counting—and noting that this list *does* include 2008 and 2009 from the earlier study—that's a grand total of 36 public libraries that appear to have closed entirely and without direct replacement (although members of the community are in many cases likely to have service from a bookmobile or from another city or county). That's roughly 0.4% of the total—over a period of 12 years. But even that's not quite the whole story.

Summarizing the Situation

Of 785 libraries originally considered, the breakdown is as follows:

- Two hundred fifty-five (255), 32%, are open (sometimes with name changes) and reporting circulation in the 2009 IMLS report.

- Two hundred nine (209), 27%, are open but listed in the IMLS “outlet” report—that is, they’re branches of library systems rather than independent libraries.
- Ninety-four (94), (12%), are clearly operating based on direct web evidence but may no longer be public libraries by definition (i.e., may be entirely volunteer libraries).
- Eighty cases (80), 10%, are duplicates: libraries that have appeared and disappeared from IMLS reports more than once over the 12 years. The 80 represents duplications; the earliest disappearance is treated as a possible closure.
- Seventy-seven (77), 10%, are either renamed or replaced by operating libraries in the same immediate area. In most cases, they’re simply renamed (or the names are entered differently).
- Sixteen (16), 2%, are (now) system headquarters that don’t directly serve library patrons.
- Eleven (11), 1.4%, are still operating but *definitely* no longer defined as public libraries by state or IMLS terms; these are mostly entirely volunteer operations or reading rooms.
- Five (5), 0.6%, have merged into other libraries in the same or an immediately adjacent location (generally within three miles).
- Two are (and may have always been) semi-private: One open by appointment, one funded by a community association and open only to that (gated) community.

As for the others—the 36 that do appear to be closed and not replaced (so far!)—let’s break those down by year, in keeping with the discussion in Stage 5.

1998

Four libraries closed this year and are still closed (although one or two may have reopened and reclosed): Pilot Station Public Library (Alaska); Littleport Public Library (Iowa); Cook Public Library (Nebraska); Lake City Public Library (Pennsylvania).

Littleport has essentially disappeared, washed away by a flood and almost wholly depopulated. Lake City is served by the Rice Avenue Community Library in Girard, but that’s a few miles away. The other two are both communities of fewer than 600 people.

1999

A bad year for libraries. Seven libraries closed and are still closed (although one or two might have reopened and reclosed): Old Harbor Library (Alaska); Elberta Public Library (Michigan); Hoffa-Wiest Community Library (Stover, Missouri); West Dakota Library (Carson, North Dakota); Cedarville Public Library (New Jersey); Freedom Public

Library (Pennsylvania); Gates Memorial Library (White River Junction, Vermont).

Carson (ND) is explicitly served by the Elgin Public Library, 16 miles away. Cedarville is served by the county library, 7.4 miles away. While it's not clear who serves whom, there are three Beaver County Library System libraries within three miles of Freedom (PA), one of them less than two miles away. White River Junction is actually part of Hartford (VT), with the Hartford Library about two miles away. It seems likely that only three libraries represent serious service disruptions. Those three each served fewer than 1,000 people.

2000

No libraries unaccounted for.

2001

Five libraries closed and stayed closed: Nellie Weyiouanna Ilisaavik Library (Shishmaref, Alaska); Montour Public Library (Iowa); McGregor Public Library (Highland Park, Michigan); Nash Public Library (Oklahoma); and Volin Public Library (South Dakota).

This short list includes two of the most tragic cases (Littleport being the third). Shishmaref is being eaten away by erosion. The community needs to move to the mainland, an incredibly expensive process for a subsistence community. Highland Park had an impressive library—but Chrysler's departure hit it hard. The town is in bankruptcy and efforts to repair and reopen the historically significant library have so far failed.

Montour appears to be depopulating (the school system shut down in 2005), with the nearest public library four miles away. Like Montour, Nash has fewer than 300 people—and that's also true of Volin (one of the cases that *might* still be there as a reading room); in both cases, the nearest public library is 20 miles or more away.

2002

Three libraries stayed closed: Surf-Bal-Bay Public Library (Surfside, Florida); Somerville Town Library (Maine); Flatonia Public Library (Texas).

Surfside reimburses its citizens for Miami-Dade Library System patron cards and the nearest branch of that system is less than two miles away. Somerville has fewer than 500 people; the nearest public library is about three miles away. Flatonia is a mystery: While the 2002 LSA was 14,550, total circulation was 2,501 and Flatonia itself had 1,377 people in the 2000 census.

2003

Although fourteen libraries disappeared from the IMLS report, only three appear to have closed and stayed closed: Sabattus-Town Square Library

(Maine); To'hajiile Community School Library (New Mexico); Ryegate Corner (Ryegate, Vermont). Except for the possibility that the Laguna Public Library in the Laguna Pueblo serves To'hajiilee, I have no information about these three—and Sabattus had 5,901 in its service area, larger than most closed libraries.

2004

Another bad year for libraries, with six apparently still closed: Highland Home Public Library (Alabama); Packwood Community Library (Iowa); Cooper Free Public Library (Maine); Carleton Public Library (Nebraska); Edgar Public Library (Nebraska); Dexter Public Library (New Mexico). Except for Dexter, all of these libraries served fewer than 800 people, most of them fewer than 300.

Highland Home is served by a county library 20 miles away; Cooper is explicitly served by Calais 19 miles away; Carleton is within eight miles of an operating public library; Edgar has an operating library ten miles away; and Dexter is 18 miles away from a good-size public library. I'd say that in all these cases community library service has become *at best* inconvenient.

2005

Only one public library apparently closed and stayed closed: Soldier Public Library (Iowa), serving 207 people.

2006 and 2007

No libraries closed and remained closed.

2008 and 2009

Of the libraries in these years—all of them discussed in the April 2012 article—eleven of the 17 that seemed to be closed on first examination turn out to be open (or redefined as reading rooms and probably still operating as such). That leaves these six: Mountain Village Public Library (Alaska); Ruby Community Library (Alaska); Dora Public Library (Alabama); Summerfield Public Library (Kansas); Royal Public Library (Nebraska); Valley Public Library (New Mexico); Big Read Wagon bookmobile (Vermont).

You can go back to April 2012 for the individual stories of those libraries.

The Overall Picture

Possible public library closures, 1998-2008



This chart shows the overall results of this investigation. The dotted line is very nearly the line you'll find for libraries in Will Kurt's post (that line is actually the sum of the two lines on this chart—but that's never more than a difference of seven). It represents all libraries that *appear* to have closed based on appearing in one year's IMLS report but not the next one. The lower line represents libraries that are apparently closed based on actual investigation. (I've omitted 2009 since the 2010 IMLS report isn't out yet, but there are four closed libraries at this point.)

I do not want to minimize the possible disruption of local library services. It always hurts a community not to have a local or very convenient nearby library. I'll suggest that four of these communities, including three of the largest ones, *do* have convenient replacement services, with libraries no more than three miles away.

What of the other 32?

- Fourteen served fewer than 500 people each (including five serving fewer than 200).
- Another seven served 539 to 984 people, but still fall into the smallest library category.
- "Larger" public libraries include five serving 1,000 to 2,499 people; two serving 2,500 to 4,999; one serving 5,000 to 9,999; and three—one of them a bookmobile—serving 10,000 to 24,999. *Not one* of these is large enough to be classified as an urban library.
- The total served by all 32 libraries: 73,931 people—not a trivial number, but still 0.02% of the population served by America's public libraries, even

though it's roughly 0.4% of the nation's libraries (noting that more libraries have opened than have closed over those 12 years).

What Does It All Mean?

Here's what I said in April (partly quoted from a *Walt at Random* post):

I don't believe it serves the library field to repeat the false notion that American public libraries are shutting down all over the place. (Note that qualifier "American"—I really can't speak to the situation in the UK.)

For that matter, I don't believe that always stressing the negative side of library budget issues is healthy.

For what it's worth, the 2009 IMLS report does note that public library funding has grown in inflation-adjusted dollars since 1999...and the funding per capita has grown since 1999. No, it hasn't grown as much as usage, but overall, libraries were better funded at the depth of the recession than they were ten years earlier.

I think that's an important story. I think it's important that Oakland, a city with enormous budget and other problems, made a point of not cutting library services in this year's budget—but that story doesn't show up in the library literature as much as any cut would.

I think that's a shame. Building from strength works better than trying to stave off weakness.

Of course many public libraries should have better funding than they do. I don't question that. (Are there overfunded public libraries? I won't touch that one.)

Of course some public libraries have had to close branches in a manner that hurts residents, and more have had to cut hours, staff and services. I don't think there's any good picture of how public libraries have fared in a recessionary period compared to other public agencies, and I think that's an important issue.

I believe perception is important in any field, and perception within the field even more so. If librarians believe public libraries are shutting down like crazy, they're ill-equipped to work to build their own libraries from good to better. If politicians believe that other public libraries are shutting down all over the place, they're less inclined to assure that their own libraries are strong.

Maybe that's all there is to say. Every time a librarian says "public libraries are closing down" or, worse, "...all over the place," the librarian helps to demoralize other librarians and encourage politicians and others who would *like* to close public libraries. To some extent, deathwatches are or

can be self-fulfilling prophecies: Say “Public libraries are going away” often enough and they’ll start to go away.

The message *should* be a positive one.

A Better Message

Healthy cities, towns and villages have public libraries. Even struggling cities, towns and villages will struggle to maintain some form of public library and will fight to reopen public libraries if they do close. They are generally successful. A community that lets its library close is likely facing more severe problems; it is, one way or another, hollowing out.

Healthy public libraries promote healthy communities. Well-funded libraries can do more for community members and communities than badly funded libraries. America’s libraries need to build from strength, and that requires local and regional commitment. But the message is not just “Don’t let us close”; that’s rarely the real issue. The message needs to be “Give us the funding to improve the community and its members”—because healthy communities have, and need, healthy libraries.

When I was speaking at state library conferences many years ago, I was fond of doing quick spreadsheet analyses comparing circulation to funding. Almost always, better-funded libraries were better bargains: Their cost per circulation was lower than less well-funded libraries. It would be interesting to expand that analysis, adding in other countable services (e.g. program attendance) and using a conservative version of the library ROI calculator. Would it be the case that better-funded libraries have a higher ROI than others? I suspect so, but that investigation requires additional work.

I Was Wrong (and I’m Delighted)

At the end of the April 2012 essay, I noted that I was starting work on this larger study. I’d already eliminated 10% of the possibilities (duplications) and said of the rest “We’ll see what that boils down to.” But here’s how I finished, in parentheses:

(Here’s a wild-assed guess: Somewhere between 100 and 250, probably closer to 100. I will cheerfully admit to being wrong if that turns out to be the case.)

I was wrong, and rarely have I been so happy to be wrong. It was certainly closer to 100 than 250—but it was closer to zero than 100. I would never have imagined the number would be as low as 36 libraries over 12 years, but I’m delighted that it is.

The Middle

Futurism

It's time for another roundup of forecasts, trends and other bits of futurism, including some related to libraries. (I've excluded items that relate primarily to the future of ebooks.)

The original title here was "Futurism and Forecasts" but there's too much source material for one essay (given that there are other essays in this issue). So this half is futurism and specific longer-term predictions; the second half (probably in the next issue) will be FORECASTS—specific short-term forecasts that can be checked and judged.

Future Past

Let's kick things off with a trio of items about *old* futurism, always an amusing topic.

How 1983 wasn't like "1983"

That's Steve Lawson's title for [this See Also... post](#) from way back in September 2007, which somehow got mislaid. (Sorry, Steve.) Lawson notes a mention (in *Glut: Mastering Information Through the Ages*) of [an 1883 essay](#) by Charles Ammi Cutter offering Cutter's vision of "The Buffalo Public Library in 1983." (The link is to Lawson's extraction of the essay from a larger Google Books scan of *ALA Papers and Proceedings* for 1883. Can you believe there was a time when ALA published proceedings for its conferences? Think about what a *Proceedings* for, say, the 2011 Annual Conference might look like...)

Lawson notes that the author of *Glut* finds it interesting that "Cutter foresaw electronic book requests for readers and a telegraph-style network that allowed libraries to share information." Lawson then notes some of Cutter's "blind spots and apparent enthusiasms that haven't aged as well." Here's that set of bullets in full:

For example:

Cutter seems obsessed with circulation, not of books, but of air. "Ventilation was their hobby," Cutter writes of his notional 20th-century librarians. "Nothing made the librarian come nearer scolding than any impurity in the air."

I believe all librarians are referred to as "he" or "him." But, then, this is Cutter writing, and not Dewey.

Reading fiction in "1983" is still looked down upon. The librarian of the future says "We have not yet escaped the preponderant use of fiction though we have diminished it since your day. It used to be 75 per

cent. Thanks to our training the school children in good ways it has fallen to forty. I doubt if it gets much lower.”

I found his description of the photographic catalog system (pages 52-3 in the original pagination) completely incomprehensible.

In “1983” open stacks haven’t been invented yet. Readers enter the call number they want on a little device in their desk and a boy runs and gets the book for them.

The library of “1983” is open every day, and kept open as late as anyone wants to stay.

Gender segregation still goes strong in “1983” with separate service desks for men, women, and children.

Cutter’s librarian of the future uses the term “great unwashed” ironically: “Every one must be admitted into the delivery-room, but from the reading-rooms the great unwashed are shut out altogether or put in rooms by themselves. Luckily public opinion sustains us thoroughly in their exclusion or seclusion.”

In short, the library of “1983” is suspiciously like a librarian’s ideal of a library in 1883, plus some electric lights and a telegraph.

I can’t resist quoting Lawson’s final paragraph:

I’d love to read my own blog and others like it with 125 years of hindsight. On second thought, I think I may be lucky to be spared that particular fate. I can hear them now: “Social software? I guess that is what people talked about before [the singularity](#).”

I don’t have much to add. The article itself is fascinating. Apart from Dui-like spelling (only of certain words, mostly substituting “f” for “ph,”) I especially enjoyed the description of Buffalo’s large group of *listening-rooms*, 50 or more of them, where people gathered to hear the best books or stories read to them from foil fonographs. And, to be sure, the four million volumes of Buffalo’s remarkable library—which, as it turns out, isn’t that far off (as of 2009, the Buffalo & Erie County library had 2,069,856 books).

Mr. Edison’s Kindle

Harry McCracken used that title for [a January 24, 2010 post](#) at *Technologist*. The subtitle: “Fifteen amazing gadgets that were way, way ahead of their time.” It’s an interesting read, based on perusing the Google Books archives of *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics* and others. A key paragraph:

The brightest inventors on the planet keep coming up with ideas that never amount to much—even when they set out to solve real problems, and even when their brainchildren foreshadow later breakthroughs. And professional tech watchers have long proven themselves prone to

getting irrationally exuberant about stuff that just isn't ready for prime time.

Here are some of the fifteen with brief notes. The original article has longer notes and links to page images in Google Books:

- Thomas Edison's metal books (described in 1911): A vision of 40,000-page two-inch one-pound books printed on superthin sheets of nickel (which will take printer's ink). The hype from *Cosmopolitan* at the time: "Here...is a prospect of real culture for the masses Forty thousand pages in a volume! A single volume the equivalent in printing space of two hundred paper-leaved books of two hundred pages each! What a library might be placed between two steel covers and sold for, perhaps, two dollars!" McCracken thinks ebook readers are "modern counterparts." Well, maybe...but \$2 in 1911 dollars is \$46 in 2012, and you can't buy either an ereader or anything close to 200 non-public-domain books for \$46, much less both.
- The "automobile wireless telephone" (described in 1913). In this case, the inventor had a working model—he made wireless calls over a distance of 35 miles from a phone in his car. There's a wee bit of over-head in this early cellphone, to be sure—well, you need to see the picture. I wonder whether creating phones that work in cars was *ever* a good idea?
- Telenewspaper and electric writer (described in 1938), in the study of the home of the future. One interesting thing is that this study had so many *separate* built-in display devices: a TV, a radio, a "telenewspaper" and an "electric writer." How many *built-in* displays are in your "study" or living room?
- Watch-case phonograph (1936), a tiny wind-up acoustic phonograph in a watch case. Using miniature records, of course, with a horn just big enough for a person's ear. McCracken shows his bias in calling the modern counterpart the iPod, not MP3 players in general.
- "Magic lantern talkies" (1937) allowing businesses to create color slideshows synchronized with audio tracks. Apparently businesses were expected to do full-fledged productions: A typical "lantern talk" was expected to cost around \$25,000 (in 2010 dollars). Need we say PowerPoint?
- Talking newspapers (1938): This one's strange for the described enabling technology—not to read you the newspaper, say, over the phone, but to attach recordings of events to newspaper stories, printed as strips that you, the reader, got to cut-and-paste so they were playable. As McCracken notes, this was an even *less* convenient version of later failed attempts to encode information in periodicals—namely Cauzin Softstrips and the :CueCat. "I'm not sure why *Popular*

Mechanics, which had already reported extensively on experimental TV broadcasts, thought that anyone would prefer to cut up the evening paper to get the news in words and pictures.”

- Newspapers by radio (1939): Again, not somebody reading the news to you, but delivery through fax—already an old technology by 1939. Some newspapers tried this. One big problem: “It took fifteen minutes to broadcast one page of content.” I will refrain from snark about how long it takes TV or radio news to offer the equivalent of one full page of a broadside newspaper.
- Colorfax (1947): This one’s *wonderful*—a \$150 box (plugged into an FM radio) that created color documents by *drawing them* with colored mechanical pencils. (There eventually was a standard for color fax, but it never amounted to much.)
- “Highway Hi-Fi” (1955): A traveling turntable (running at 16 2/3 rather than 33 1/3 rpm). Planned *only* for the auto, with no compatible home devices, so you’d have to buy your music twice. Chrysler actually tried this out, and in 1960 tried a 45rpm player. I think McCracken’s right in his “original” contemporary equivalent, the CD player, but he goes for an AUX port used with “iPod” (the other 30% of the portable player market *does not exist*, apparently). Yeah, but the CD player’s actually a spinning disc, much more comparable—except that there’s no physical contact to read it, which helps. (I still find it a bit miraculous that auto CD players work at all, much less on rough roads.)
- “Punch-Card Picture Phone” (1961): A multiline videophone with document sharing features. The “punch card” part is apparently the user interface.
- Microlibrary (1962): Basically ultrafiche and the idea, which came around from time to time, that *we’d all* own readers for these devices and use them instead of print books.
- Neck-strap TV (1963): A portable Sony with a 4” screen. It did reach the market. It weighed six pounds and you wore it hanging from a neckstrap. Think about that. McCracken says “today’s FloTV” is the modern counterpart—and two years later, that link is broken. FloTV, which did exist for a while, is dead and buried.
- “DIY Home TV Tape-Recorder Kit” (1963): A homebrew VCR. It wasn’t great: It recorded ten minutes on an 11” reel and sounded like a runaway lawnmower. But in this case realistic VCRs were only 12 years away.
- Computer tutors, with elementary school students learning English and math through a very expensive mainframe-based system. East Palo Alto spent \$1.5 million in mid-’60s dollars to educate 100 kids for one year. I hope it was grant money.

- Home teletypewriters (1967): The interesting point here is that the *Popular Science* article dismissed the idea of home computers: connecting to mainframes was going to be too cheap for home PCs to make sense. Are we getting the same sales pitch again—this time called the cloud?

Interesting article, even if some of McCracken's remarks are as annoying as some of mine probably are. One comment notes that the reason AT&T's design for a "punch-card picture phone" was telephone-based was because it *had* to be, based on AT&T's 1956 consent decree. They weren't allowed to work in other fields. Some other interesting comments...including one pair where people are writing past each other. One says the pages of a "nickel book" would have to be 50 millionths of an inch thick (making them excellent razor blades); another responds that this is nonsense ("Fail" is his word), that each page would actually be 1/20,000th of an inch thick. Of course, if you divide 1,000 (the number of millionths in one-1000th) by 50 you get—oh, look, 20. "1/20,000th" and "50 millionths" are *exactly the same thing*. (Eventually, someone pointed that out.)

Historical views of the future

That's Richard Watson [on January 19, 2012](#) at *What's Next: Top Trends*, discussing John Maynard Keynes' view of life in 2030 in a 1930 essay—and a view of 2011 in a 1911 newspaper.

Keynes' essay "[Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren](#)" is certainly interesting. Keynes is determinedly optimistic in the face of recession.

[T]his is only a temporary phase of maladjustment. All this means in the long run *that mankind is solving its economic problem*. I would predict that the standard of life in progressive countries one hundred years hence will be between four and eight times as high as it is today. There would be nothing surprising in this even in the light of our present knowledge. It would not be foolish to contemplate the possibility of a far greater progress still.

He thinks it reasonable to assume that by 2030 we would, on average, be eight times better off in the economic sense than in 1930. (With the growing disparity between the ultrarich and everybody else, "on average" becomes more and more nonsensical, but never mind.) More to the point, he believes "the *economic problem* may be solved" by 2010—but with two key caveats: "assuming no important wars and no important increase in population." He seems to be saying that, given those caveats, people won't have pressing economic cares but will need to figure out "how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well." It's certainly

true that other futurists seemed to believe we'd have minimal workweeks and vast amounts of leisure time by now.

Yet there is no country and no people, I think, who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread. For we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy. It is a fearful problem for the ordinary person, with no special talents, to occupy himself, especially if he no longer has roots in the soil or in custom or in the beloved conventions of a traditional society

That's only a sample—and it's interesting to read, albeit a bit depressing.

[The earlier one's](#) more fun—it's an image from *The Ladies' Home Journal* (a magazine, although *buzzfeed* calls it a newspaper), a piece entitled "What May Happen in the Next Hundred Years," by John Elfreth Watkins, Jr. The "may" immediately makes odd forecasts less humorous—and a few of them aren't far off. Just a few of the predictions (without the details in the original):

- The U.S. will have 350 to 500 million people (too high, but not by a lot)—and Nicaragua will ask to become a state, as will Mexico and "many of the South and Central American republics" (the latter to stave off European takeovers).
- Americans will be an inch or two taller (probably about right)—and will live "fifty years instead of thirty-five" because we'll all live in suburbs: "The city house will practically be no more" while trips from the suburbs to offices will only take a few minutes and cost a penny. I'm happy to say current life expectancy is a *lot* more than 50 years.
- We'll get rid of C, X and Q, go to spelling by sound and turn English into a "language of condensed words expressing condensed ideas." English will be the most widely spoken language, followed by Russian.
- You'll get your heating and cooling by turning on spigots, supplying hot and cold air from central plants to city houses.
- No mosquitoes, flies or roaches. All swamplands will be filled in for health reasons.
- Precooked meals for sale at reasonable prices: Right. Delivered by pneumatic tubes: Wrong. "Having one's own cook and purchasing one's own food will be an extravagance." Half right.
- "No foods will be exposed"—a greengrocer exposing food to "air breathed out by patrons or the atmosphere of the busy streets" would be arrested.
- Coal on its way out (one can only hope)—but replaced with *entirely* hydroelectric power, with "every river or creek" dammed for power generation.
- Right: Trains 150 miles an hour (in some countries). Wrong, sigh: Everybody will walk ten miles a day. Bizarre: "Fast electric ships" going 60

miles an hour to reach England in two days. There will be “air-ships” but they won’t compete with cars and boats.

- No wild animals. No rats or mice.
- Pretty much on the money: Being able to “see around the world,” make telephone calls around the world, hear high-fidelity music broadcasts.
- Not so much: oranges grown in Philadelphia, apple-size strawberries, beet-size peas. Free university educations for all.

It’s worth noting that a group of the wisest and most careful men can be much more broadly and interestingly wrong than one person. Especially with no women handy to make fun of their lunacy. Also worth noting: Not only no concerns with the environment, but treating as desirable wiping out whole groups of species and turning every river and creek into a controlled power-generation unit.

The Futures of Publishing

I’ve deliberately excluded “ebook futurism” from this roundup, but that leaves a number of items taking on presumed futures for publishing and reading.

Clive Thompson on the Future of Reading in a Digital World

On one hand, this is from *Wired* ([posted May 22, 2009](#), in issue 17.06, presumably the May 2009 issue)—but on the other, it’s by Clive Thompson, sometimes one of the less gaga writers at *Wired*. Not, I think, this time. He starts with one anecdote—a McKenzie Wark book on gaming that also appeared as an online series of conversations—and turns that into a *universal* need for transformation of the written word. He explicitly says that books can survive “in this Facebooked, ADD, multichannel universe”—but “*only* if publishers adopt Wark’s perspective and provide new ways for people to encounter the written word. We need to stop thinking about the future of publishing and think instead about the future of reading.” [Emphasis added.] As always with the *Wired* mindset, it’s *the* future, not *a* future or many futures.

Every other form of media that’s gone digital has been transformed by its audience. Whenever a newspaper story or TV clip or blog post or white paper goes online, readers and viewers begin commenting about it on blogs, snipping their favorite sections, passing them along. The only reason the same thing doesn’t happen to books is that they’re locked into ink on paper.

Which he follows with “Release them, and you release the crowd.” It gets stranger: He approvingly cites one “e-publishing veteran from the CD-ROM days” who believes that “setting books free” would produce a class of professional readers: “People so insightful that you’d pay to download

their footnotes.” Because people are so ready to pay for content online in general, they’d be even readier to pay for annotations?

Of course Thompson repeats the anecdotal data that (a handful of) authors who give away digital copies end up selling more print copies.

Thompson backs away from universality slightly in his closing paragraph:

I’m not suggesting that books need always be social. One of the chief pleasures of a book is mental solitude, that deep, quiet focus on an author’s thoughts—and your own. That’s not going away. But books have been held hostage offline for far too long. Taking them digital will unlock their real hidden value: the readers.

Except, except...books have never been “held hostage.” You don’t need to have the text of a book online in order to discuss it online, and never have. Most discussions of TV shows don’t embed the entire episodes in the discussion and discussions of films almost never do; indeed, most discussions of TV and flicks that I see (on Friendfeed, for example) don’t even embed clips.

I guess Thompson is attempting to show how wonderful crowd footnoting will be, as he’s using some add-on that allows sticky notes in the text: Several passages have yellow highlighting and, when you set the cursor over a balloon with a number (one that sometimes obscures the text), readers’ insights pop up. I read all of the annotations; they don’t constitute particularly strong endorsement for the column itself. (Notes could only be added by “active and trusted users” and mostly they were saying “great stuff.”)

Here’s a question: Do you believe that most newspaper stories are *transformed* because of comments and the like? TV shows? White papers? Really?

Future of the book is not a “container question”

That’s Helene Blowers in [an August 3, 2009 post](#) at *LibraryBytes*—and it could easily be a follow-up to Thompson’s column. She even cites the same online service, [BookGlutton.com](#), as a prime example of what she’s talking about. (I haven’t heard much about BookGlutton.)

Blowers seems to think the “digital age” can change reading from consumption to creation:

Reading at its core is actually a consumption activity that at its best is a solitary pursuit. When we read, we consume and amass someone else’s knowledge, ideas, and stories. For many of us it’s an escape from our own day-to-day by providing the ability to jump inside someone else’s head.

The jump from print to digital actually doesn’t change any of this. However, when I think about the book as digital format from a larger perspective, I see a much bigger picture unfolding. Not only is knowledge no longer bound to its physical format, it’s no longer

bound as *medium designed primarily for consumption*. With digital formats offering the ability to connect with other readers (consumers you might even say) over networked platforms, the consumption of knowledge can actually become a participatory activity resulting in the *creation and sharing of new knowledge*.

I have two reactions to this: First, reading has *always* been a major factor in creating “new knowledge” (I’ll say “new media,” since knowledge only happens in someone’s head after they, err, consume information). Second, there’s nothing wrong with books being *primarily* a medium designed for consumption; that’s true of pretty much every medium except possibly social networks, including blogs, movies, TV, magazines, wikis...

I find Blowers’ final two paragraphs (except for a one-sentence question) unconvincing and (to me) a bit incomprehensible. They’re reproduced precisely as written (including emphasis):

Indeed, the conversational quality of books takes on new meaning when the content is unbound and as the battles continue on in the race for the perfect ebook container, I can’t help but think we’ll be losing the war if all we focus on is the impact of the digital book as it relates to consumption activities and don’t take a look at where libraries can really add value in the bigger picture.

Libraries need to think about impact of the ebook not from the aspect of providing access to materials in digital format or as containers to merely support reading, but from the aspect of what it means to support the sharing and creation of *new knowledge* from published knowledge that in the digital format can be easily *unbound*. I know that supporting this type of shift is not only huge, it’s also contains many unknowns and challenges. But if we’re not thinking about how to support “the book” in its unbound state, you can bet with today’s exploding information economy that someone else is.

I’m all for public libraries facilitating creation (as an additional service, not as a replacement for collections and programs)—but I don’t see that this has much to do with “unbinding” books. I *infer* that Blowers believes books are predominantly going (or should go) digital, although that’s not stated. Her final question yielded two comments—one of which is entirely orthogonal to her discussion (a person wants to have digital readers at reference desks) and one that’s interesting but (to my mind) a little peculiar...but maybe that’s because I don’t believe 95% or more of book readers have much interest in comparing five different versions of the Bible or comparing use of the word “finally” in fifty books. Reading is the basis for most of my creative activity, but when I’m reading books, I’m *mostly* interested in “consumption,” in enjoying other people’s creations. I’m guessing I’m not in the minority here.

Why *In Fact Publishing Will Not Go Away Anytime Soon: A Deeply Slanted Play in Three Acts*

This playlet by John Scalzi [appeared February 3, 2010](#) on *Whatever*. The three characters are Scalzi, his wife, and “Elton P. Straümann, a modern-thinking man with exciting ideas.” Scalzi chose that name carefully and with full intent. As always with *Whatever*, you should read the original—Scalzi’s so much better a writer than I’ll ever be that the comparison’s ludicrous. To summarize:

- Act 1: Straümann announces that the publishing world is changing, with “fat cat middle men” no longer getting in between authors and audiences. Scalzi asks about editing, copyediting, covers, book design, publicity...and is told “Yes, yes. But all those things you can do *yourself*.” Scalzi: “And I’m supposed to write the book, too?” The *natural response* from this kind of futurist: “As if writing was *hard*.”
- Act 1, Scene 2: Months later, Scalzi returns with a book, which took a while because he had to do all the publishing functions as well as writing it—which cost “thousands of dollars out of my own pocket and the better part of a year.” Straümann responds by pulling out his ereader and saying “I’m sorry. I only read on *this*.” As Scalzi sighs and leaves, the futurist asks why he’s not writing more and wants the sequel.
- Act 2: A year later. Straümann wants to know why there’s no sequel. Scalzi says he spent all his money on the first book, which didn’t sell very well. The response: “Well, what did you expect? The editing was sloppy, the copy editing was *atrocious*, the layout was amateurish and the cover art looked like it was Photoshopped by a *dog*. Who would want to buy *that*?” When Scalzi notes that he couldn’t afford professional support, he’s informed that he should be able to find professionals who will do this for “almost nothing” or, better, “exactly nothing.” Oh, and that’s fine, because they profit from the exposure—and since printing costs money, Scalzi should just make it an ebook. Which Straümann says he’ll get off a torrent, since he spent his money on the ereader. “So, pay people nothing to help me create a book I make nothing on, for people who will refuse to pay for it.” The futurist says he wouldn’t put it that way—but yes.
- Act 3: Still no sequel. Scalzi found that *good* editors and artists don’t work for free. Straümann’s solution? Scalzi’s wife should be his publisher—finding the money *somewhere* to pay for the functions. After taking this in, Kristine Scalzi offers a rational response to both of the men involved. I’m going to quote the end of the play directly:

KRISTINE clocks *STRAÜMANN* in the head, stunning him, then rips off his testicles, stuffs them into his mouth and sets him on fire while he chokes on them. *STRAÜMANN* dies.

KRISTINE (to SCALZI): You. Find a *fucking publisher*.

SCALZI: Yes, dear.

This sounds about right for books intended for a large audience (that is, for writers who actually hope to make a living at it). This being *Whatever*, you get a *big* bonus: 339 comments from the generally interesting and sane community (aided by Scalzi's occasional moderation). I didn't read the entire stream, but along with a number of "great stuff" notes, there's at least one dissenter who seems to infer that there can be no exceptions (which I certainly didn't get from the piece) and a fair number who do see that, while some writers can (or must, given the niche nature of their work) do the whole job, it's not a reasonable expectation in general. I've done the whole job, and I've worked with publishers. Good publishers do it better than I can.

A digression here: Given [The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing](#), which specifically deals with a form of self-publishing, am I being hypocritical in recommending Scalzi's ode to traditional publishers? I don't think so. I'm not suggesting micropublishing as *the* future of print books, because that would be nonsense. I'm offering *a* way to do special things well, special things that traditional publishers just can't afford to do.

Back from ALA—the death of commercial publishing

Jamie LaRue [in a June 27, 2011 post](#) on *myliblog*—and this one was tough, as it could belong in this section or the one that follows. He recounts his 12 minutes on an ALA panel, "The Future is Now! Ebooks and their increasing impact on library services," in which he said "The bullet has passed through the brain of commercial publishing. Now we're just waiting for the body to fall." Hyperbole, yes—and, I believe, intended that way. Here's part of the more nuanced version in the post:

Obviously, commercial publishing is still around. Patrons still ask for traditional content. Libraries have to find ways to get it. My library is working with Overdrive, 3M, and others.

My premise is that ebook and self-publishing together represent an explosion in the quantity of writing, and librarians don't know much about it. It's easy to dismiss it all as bad. Much of it may be. Much of commercial publishing isn't so hot, either.

But if the job of public libraries is to gather, organize, and present the intellectual content of our culture to the community, we'd better get busy. We need to look into it, find ways to sample and deliver it, figure out what it means. Maybe even take part in it, help our communities make rich, compelling, and high quality contributions to it. Become publishers ourselves.

And in a time when a lot of publishers are suddenly refusing to sell this content to us at all, I think it's important to remind them that

they aren't the only game in town. They are not even where the action is. Many independent publishers and writers are EAGER to sell to libraries....

My message to the ALA audience was to start some experiments with the managing of content, instead of passively waiting for vendors to tell us what they'll allow us to do....

I don't believe commercial publishers will or should go away—but I do believe “ebook and self-publishing together represent an explosion in the quantity of writing” and that this explosion shouldn't be ignored by libraries. I *certainly* agree that much of what the Big Six produce “isn't so hot, either.” That paragraph beginning “But if...”—well, I couldn't agree more. When I read this post, I was inspired to ask Jamie to read my manuscript on micropublishing. He was willing, and provided an outstanding blurb for the book.

But that's not why I'm citing this. He's making good points. He's also trying to follow up on them—including his library's (and Colorado's) experiments in alternative models for library ebook circulation, models that mean libraries *own* the ebooks they buy. I believe LaRue looks at futures (plural) for books and publishing and sees interesting roles for libraries in those futures. I agree.

Are books and the internet about to merge?

That's the “question” in Damien Walter's [February 15, 2012 post](#) at *The Guardian's book blog*—and I put scare quotes around the word because it's not really a question as the subtitle makes clear: “The difference between ebooks and the internet is minimal, and we should be glad the two are growing closer and closer.”

He quotes Hugh McGuire saying “the book and the internet will merge”—and I don't buy that at all. McGuire's case seems to assume (or presume) that ebooks will replace print books entirely, and it's true that an ebook and a webpage are similar things. So far, so typical: A digital universalist celebrating the inevitable triumph of digital over analog and the new over the old, regardless of history and people's preferences.

Then it gets strange. Walter says his original reaction to a similar McGuire argument in April 2011 was this: “Books are researched, written, edited, published, marketed ... and hence paid for. The internet is ego noise, hence free.” And he's *still* saying “Books are something we pay for. Webpages are things we read for free.” He has a clear preference as to which model will win out (and, of course, *there can only be one*):

Unless you are one of the very small number of people whose fortunes rest upon the outdated business model of publishing, you should hope that the latter wins.

He brushes off the issue of “how writers and editors get paid for the valuable work they do”—because his claim is that we “are very close to

making all human knowledge accessible to all people for free.” This trumps everything else: All books should be ebooks should be *entirely free*, because everything *has to be free*.

I can only assume that Walter does not write or edit for a living, since there is surely no room in his optimal and inevitable future for doing so. Unless, of course, one recognizes that fiction doesn’t represent “human knowledge” as such, a distinction I don’t see him making. Nope; it all has to be free...for the good of all humankind. Except anybody who makes a living writing, editing, copyediting, or doing anything else that would actually *create* new works (and who isn’t independently wealthy, in academia, or ad-funded). As is frequently the case, one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia.

The second comment gets this, I think. The final line of that comment: “If books can only be made by hobbyists and the very rich, it’s no longer so fair.” (Walter writes a dismissive response.) Most commenters are less single-minded than Walter and one even comments on the legal way many of us read books for free: From the library. Ah, but Walter’s having none of it. He’s claiming UK libraries cost £4 per book circulated (since, of course, that’s all libraries do). Actually, that response is so hilariously dogmatic that it deserves quotation in full:

No. You can receive them free at the point of loan, having paid for them in advance through taxation. At an average cost of around £4 PER LOAN! A rate at which every young person and pensioner in every borough of the country could be given a free ereader preloaded with every book ever published....

Right. That last sentence is, other than being a clarion call to *get rid of those nasty old public libraries*, almost hard to read without giggling. (Later, Walter informs us that anyone with “half an ounce of savvy” can hire an editor and designer and self-publish. As long as you have deep enough pockets...)

One very brief comment is hard to ignore: “D’you get paid to write this, Damien?” Ah: Turns out Walter’s writing a novel...*with a grant from the Arts Council*, a luxury damn few writers in the U.S. or elsewhere get. It becomes clear in Walter’s responses that he has some set points and isn’t really interested in facts. He does say flatly that publishing will disappear *entirely* within five years. If I was a gambling man, I’d take that bet. (Some other, lengthy, interesting comments in the thread.)

The Futures of Libraries

I would use *Future Libraries* as a subhead but I’ve used that title elsewhere...*seventeen years ago*, which makes me feel even older than usual.

Confronting the Future: Strategic Visions for the 21st Century Public Library

Here's an odd one: [a 34-page PDF](#) from ALA's Office of Information Technology and Policy, issued in June 2011 and written by Roger E. Levien. Who's he? A consultant (formerly vice president for Strategy at Xerox) who was a fellow at OITP from 2008 through 2011. The slant of the report is pretty clear: Public libraries facing formidable challenges because of "The digital transformation of all media"—which, of course, is 100% inevitable, complete and all that. Full stop: If it's analog, it's dead. Which makes it interesting that one of the first mentions of the report (and related ALA program and, ugh, "webinar") is from Bruce "Digital Triumphantist" Sterling's "Dead Media beat" at *Wired*, where his full comment (before reprinting the press release) is "Whistling past the graveyard."

No, I take that back. Sterling wins even more friends by inserting this comment after a one-sentence paragraph in the press release (his comment in multiple parens):

Public libraries fulfill a key role in providing information services to America's communities. (((Although, if they hadn't existed for 200+ years, no modern American would imagine inventing them.)))

Getting past Sterling's one-fingered salute to public libraries (who have probably introduced thousands of readers to Sterling's fiction), I realize that I don't remember a lot of commentary about this report since it was issued (and going on the web doesn't yield much that seems particularly noteworthy). It appears to have been issued and largely ignored. Maybe that's just as well.

I won't attempt to comment on the entire report. Levien's laying out a number of alternative visions—but with obvious bias in a number of areas. For example, he says that a purely physical library (with physical facilities and physical media) "is no longer strategically realistic," which may or may not be true—but then goes on to say that the "most realistic extremes" toward the *physical* end will consist of *primarily off-site collections held jointly with other libraries in its region*. Really? For any valid public library to serve its public and community, it *must* send most of its books to regional storage facilities? And that's the *extreme* toward providing physical materials?

I found it difficult to get past a bias that extreme, based on—as far as I can tell—nothing much more than What Roger Levien Asserts. Given that most of America's 9,000+ public libraries are locally controlled, the assertion that even the *most physically-oriented* of them must ship most of their collections to regional storage facilities, presumably under regional control, strikes me as flatly absurd. Even NYPL is having trouble convincing its users that offsiteing most of its collection is desirable; for most smaller libraries, it would be (I believe) a damaging decision.

At the other extreme, Levien seems to think *entirely* virtual public libraries (not virtual outlets or branches, but virtual *libraries*) are sensible, with no physical programs (story hour, etc.), no physical collection, no physical anything—but, presumably, lots of public tax support. Oh, and that “almost all” public libraries “are being drawn toward the virtual endpoint by the rapid growth in the availability of digital media over the Internet.”

The second dimension in the study strikes me as a false opposition: “Individual to community libraries.” At one extreme, libraries focus purely on the individual; at the other, purely on the community. At the “community” extreme you’d presumably get rid of circulating collections entirely—and at the “individual” extreme there would be no programs. Why is this even a dimension? Doesn’t any workable public library (with even close to adequate funding) do both, serving communities (which are made up of individuals) and individuals?

The third dimension is also odd: Collection to creation. Yes, I believe more public libraries will and should be more involved in creating—but not at the expense of building and maintaining collections. Neither extreme seems at all sensible to me.

Similarly the last, at least for public libraries: Portal to archive—one extreme being a library that doesn’t own anything at all, the other a library that *only* provides access to its own collections. I don’t see people paying for purely-portal libraries, and there are precisely zero public libraries that have Internet terminals available for public use but are archive libraries: It’s not possible.

Looking at the rest of the report, the biases—physical media are going away, nobody will want them anyway, everybody will have high-speed broadband—flaw the discussions, as does the assumption that all libraries will, in effect, be regionally controlled. Consider the expanded case of the purely physical library—remembering that this is the *physical extreme*, as close to a current library as Levien will admit for, say, 2030:

Thus in this modified case of a purely physical library, the library’s facilities remain physical, but the media it offers its patrons are likely to have left the building, returning by courier from other facilities or, more likely, arriving via the Internet.

That’s his retrograde extreme. As I read on, it becomes apparent that Levien *really* wants national digital library systems—the Digital Public Library of America as *the* public library system. Oh, cities would still pay (although Levien suggests that it’s appropriate to expect patrons to pay directly as well), but with no real local control.

Maybe I’m being too harsh. (I read the other six detailed “case studies,” and found them even less convincing than the first two.) I wonder how many public libraries actually found this document useful, compelling, *workable*?

I'll quote the Conclusion paragraph, and I don't disagree with it—I just don't see that it's connected to the rest of the document:

The changes confronting public libraries over the next 30 years will be profound, just as those of the past 30 years have been. That libraries have responded so effectively thus far is encouraging, yet it appears that they will have to face even more difficult challenges in the future. The choices described in this policy brief respond to the possible outcomes of the economic, social, and technological forces and trends that will affect libraries. Yet they all assume that public libraries will continue to exist. Unfortunately, it is not impossible to imagine a future without libraries. If that is to be avoided so that libraries can continue to fulfill their role as guarantors of free and unbiased access to information, they must play an active role in shaping their future.

That's true even if—as I believe—the futures are likely to mix print and ebooks, physical and virtual media in other areas, single patron-oriented and group-oriented services and both collection and (generally to a lesser extent, I suspect) creation.

Public libraries: A long-overdue argument

The writer and venue here are both significant (for this discussion and in general): futurist Richard Watson, [posting on August 27, 2011](#) at *What's Next: Top Trends*. Also worth noting: Watson is currently based in London—where the situation with public libraries and the future is especially troubling, in part because UK public libraries *have* had decreasing usage (apparently), unlike US public libraries.

It's also notable for one of those wonderful cases where somebody publicly admits to error. Watson's the person who put out the “extinction timeline”—which included public libraries expiring in 2019. Says Watson now (emphasis added):

Now at this point I have to put my hand up and admit to being wrong. Some time ago I created an extinction timeline, because I believe that the future is as much about things we're familiar disappearing as it is about new things being invented. And, of course, I put libraries on the extinction timeline because, in an age of e-books and Google who needs them.

Big mistake. Especially when one day you make a presentation to a room full of librarians and show them the extinction timeline. I got roughly the same reaction as I got from a Belgian after he noticed that I'd put his country down as expired by 2025.

Fortunately most librarians have a sense of humour, as well as keen eyesight, so I ended up developing some scenarios for the future of public libraries and I now repent. I got it totally wrong. Probably.

Watson separates public libraries from their collections (he's still inclined to believe books will go away) and assumes that most people who think libraries are dying do so because all books are or will be cheap and fast to download or buy, so "why bother with a dusty local library?" Let's pass over that "dusty" for what follows:

I'd say the answer to this is that public libraries are important because of a word that's been largely ignored or forgotten and that word is Public. Public libraries are about more than mere facts, information or 'content'. Public libraries are places where local people and ideas come together. They are spaces, local gathering places, where people exchange knowledge, wisdom, insight and, most importantly of all, human dignity.

A good local library is not just about borrowing books or storing physical artefacts. It is where individuals become card-carrying members of a local community. They are places where people give as well as receive.

Libraries are keystones delivering the building blocks of social cohesion, especially for the very young and the very old. They are where individuals come to sit quietly and think, free from the distractions of our digital age. They are where people come to ask for help in finding things, especially themselves. And the fact that they largely do this for nothing is nothing short of a miracle.

"Not *just* about borrowing books" is both right and apropos—although unless "they" in the last sentence refers to community members, it's a little off: Communally funded is not "for nothing." Then Watson offers the argument (definitely *not* a strawman—see the previous discussion) that public libraries shouldn't have buildings, that they can just offer services virtually, maybe for a fee.

Costly mistake. This would be a huge error in my view, partly because what people want is not always the same as what they need and partly because this focuses purely on the information at the expense of overall learning and experience.

Some people have argued that content is now king and that the vessel that houses information is irrelevant. I disagree. I believe that how information is delivered influences the message and is, in some instances, more meaningful than the message.

As I've already said, libraries are about people, not just books, and librarians are about more than just saying "Shhh." They are also about saying: "Psst – have a look at this." They are sifters, guides and co-creators of human connection. Most of all they are cultural curators, not of paper, but of human history and ideas.

You may want to read the whole essay (it's not that long), so I won't quote much more, but I will quote two more paragraphs, with the one-

sentence paragraph illustrating why I like Watson a whole lot more than I like Bruce Sterling:

What libraries do contain, and should continue to contain in my view, includes mother and toddler reading groups, computer classes for seniors, language lessons for recently arrived immigrants, family history workshops and shelter for the homeless and the abused. Equally, libraries should continue to work alongside local schools, local prisons and local hospitals and provide access to a wide range of e-services, especially for people with mental or physical disabilities.

In short, if libraries cease to exist, we will have to re-invent them. There's more that I won't deal with. Also a range of comments, some of them interesting.

Not Worried About Circulation

Here's a think piece by Joe Grobelny, [posted December 12, 2011](#) at *All These Birds with Teeth*. Two caveats before quoting: I'm generally avoiding writing about *academic* libraries (partly because I worked indirectly for them for so long, partly because they're almost as heterogeneous as public libraries, partly because I don't feel I understand them any more)—and Grobelny's post didn't get any comments, which surprises me. But here's (most of) what he has to say (with a reference to Weinberger that I have to leave in even though I'm omitting the precedent):

The shocking truth about print books: 49% of our stacks has never circulated since 1996.

This tweet came through the other day, and frankly it didn't bother me the way it used to. It leans on a little bit by Raganathan's first law, which is "Books are for use." If they're not being used, then why keep them? I like to make the argument that we can't always anticipate how things will be used by others. Consider Mendelssohn's "rediscovery" of Bach. Books are not just for current use, but they easily translate into future use.

There is some precedent for this; the logical methods of observation and refinement at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution enabled the creation and improvement of the microscope and the telescope. In turn, these tools both grew and shrank our sense of the world, enhancing the idea of hierarchies. Much social and scientific organization followed that path and destroyed its predecessors. We build the tool to change things, and then the tool changes us. -Quentin Hardy, [How the Internet is Destroying Everything](#)

This is the logic that leads most folks into a postmodern tailspin, where everything eats itself. It's a fun place to be, and the revolutionary excitement is great, but it leaves you with a hangover...

...The internet relies on massive underlying power structures, they are just in different hands that those who made books, although there's some overlap, clearly.... What shouldn't be bought is the easy bill of sale for something that actively destroys lasting value in order to create current value, because frankly, Weinberger isn't making that trade either.

So I am not worried about the end of books as material objects—in archives and private collections, at least. I think they will always be needed and valued. The changes that most college libraries are undergoing have created an era of unparalleled opportunity for collectors and teachers, like me, and who can foresee what the outcome of this reshuffling of printed materials will be? I look forward to the apocalypse as much as any romantic, but if we are witnessing new forms of creative destruction, I think we are also seeing a counterbalancing, reflexive trend toward the creative preservation of the past using both traditional and digital means. -William Pannacker, [We're Still in Love with Books](#)

There's a lot of shifts coming up, and yes, it'll be nice to have more shelf space, but libraries also need to protect the culture of learning over time, not just its resources. So yes to creative destruction, yes to weeding more, yes to being more critical about the books we take in, but think about your core values as opposed to the values that are sold to you, because often, you're paying a price. Value is more than money, and it's our job to build value over time. That includes not just current use, but future use.

There's a link between this and the previous post. To wit, at least for some libraries, collection maintenance (the combination of development and weeding) needs to consider Grobelny's final two sentences—and to remember that, at least collectively, libraries (and librarians) are “cultural curators...of human history and ideas”—many of which are maintained most effectively in books.

Future Libraries and 17 Forms of Information Replacing Books

There are futurists and then there are Futurists, like Futurist Thomas Frey, “Google's top-rated futurist speaker,” who styles himself “Futurist Thomas Frey” in the little bio on the sidebar of *FuturistSpeaker.com*, his blog—where [this appeared on March 2, 2012](#). He also signs his posts not “Tom” but “Futurist Thomas Frey.” Did I mention that Frey regards himself as a futurist? And specifically, given his banner below the post, “Book Futurist Speaker” and author of “the book that changes everything.” (OK, I'm jealous—like most folks, say, 99.9999...% of writers, I've never written a “book that changes everything.” I'm not even sure the Bible changed *everything*, and I'm nearly certain no other book justifies that claim.)

It's one of those infuriating piece, because I like some of what he's saying and wish Frey wasn't such an absolutist when it comes to print books and physical media in general. Thus, the very first paragraph:

Question: As physical books go away, and computers and smart devices take their place, at what point does a library stop being a library, and start becoming something else?

Note that "As"—this isn't "To the extent that" or "If," because either of those would suggest that "computers and smart devices" can coexist with print books, and that's not part of Frey's Singular Future.

He says "Libraries are not about books. In fact, they were never about books." If you add "solely" after the first "not," I'd applaud that. (The second sentence is historically questionable.) But his statement as to what libraries *are* is so simplistic that it bothers me a lot:

Libraries exist to give us access to information.

Hmm. There goes story hour. There go fiction collections. There go most community functions of most public libraries. And, indeed, if the *only* function of libraries is to provide access to information, then libraries just might be doomed.

Frey doesn't believe books work very well any more and lists "17 basic forms of information that are taking the place of books"—and a very odd list it is, since it includes some media that are nearly a century old (and some comparisons that are bizarre, but I'm not going to fisk the whole essay).

His concluding paragraphs are fine, once you separate them from his digital triumphalism:

Libraries are here to stay because they have a survival instinct. They have created a mutually dependent relationship with the communities they serve, and most importantly, they know how to adapt to the changing world around them.

I am always impressed with the creative things being done in libraries. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." There are a lot of beautiful dreams taking place that will help form tomorrow's libraries.

Who am I to argue with "the dean of futurists," a "celebrity speaker" who is executive director of a futurist institute (which he launched) and, in what I assume to be his own words, "a powerful visionary who is revolutionizing our thinking about the future"? Nobody important; just someone who believes that books, including print books, will continue to be a significant part of tomorrow's culture and the history of our culture—and that libraries are not only about a lot more than just books, they're about a lot more than just information.

General and Specific Futures

This cluster of items relates to a variety of commentaries about the future (or some futures), which have in common that they're not very short-range forecasts (the focus of Part 2 of this roundup).

Your Roger Corman Future

Jason Scott posted this at *ASCII* on November 10, 2010. Among other things, he's produced two *truly* independent documentaries on aspects of technology [BBS](#) (about bulletin board systems) and [GET LAMP](#) (about text adventures)—except that they're not single documentaries.

The two films have grossed (versus netted) six figures apiece. I am my own distributor. I am my own agent. I am my own packaging and art director. My subjects are specific and niche and in both cases, the films stand as the defacto baselines of the cinematic meditations on the subject. I am, by most standards, a wild success. Therefore, if I'm saying anything now, I'm saying it within the guise of the guy who has actually succeeded at making independent films.

He distinguishes lower-case “independent” from “the bullshit term Independent,” basically Hollywood wannabes. (From the “independent” flicks we've been seeing, e.g. those distributed by Fox Searchlight and Sony Classics, “Independent” now means Hollywood Lite: Flicks done with seven-figure or low-eight-figure rather than high-eight and nine-figure budgets, but still using Hollywood methods and at least one recognizable star. Maybe those are INDEPENDENT! films.)

He's offering his informed predictions on media over the coming years—and I'm certain he's wrong on the first:

It will be strange to buy physical media for your entertainment by 2013. Strange like buying a CRT TV for your house, or buying vinyl records. You will do it, because you're of a certain type, but you will be in a fun little minority and it will be an effort to acquire the physical media. Right now, it's just annoying. Within a few years, it'll be pretty strange. Eventually it will be totally weird.

Given that every Target, all the supermarkets around here and many other stores carry sizable collections of DVDs and Blu-Ray in April 2012, not to mention Amazon, “by 2013” is *way* offbase. And “physical media” include books and magazines: Neither of those is going away in physical form in a *long* time, certainly not by 2013.

The other three predictions: There will be no more than a dozen “networks for distributing entertainment media”—with only about ten workable ones; the networks are going to screw media creators really hard; and “films that are not locked into these networks in some way are going to be even more pathetic and desperate than they are.” Note how the focus has shifted from media to *films*, period.

Thus “your Roger Corman future”—that “independent” flicks will be Corman-esque, which is not a compliment. Scott talks about the way he makes films (does he actually use film these days, or is “film” just convenient shorthand for “moving picture”?):

I make extremely geeky films that take years to craft that attempt to be exhaustive, human-oriented narratives brought out of countless interviews of technically-astute people. Not content to merely assign a bunch of pre-fitted spoken narrative from an announcer over slowly-moving slides, I attempt to bring in the voices and the accompanying material a sense of what caused this event or subject to happen. I leverage current technical limitations to make very large bodies of work, in the multiples of hours in length, and provide them as a finished, massive package which itself is an integration of the values and themes of the subject.

Yes, the whole paragraph’s in italics. Given that Scott’s blog is white letters on a black background, this shouldn’t be surprising. (It’s worse than that: When I turn off my “use the typeface I want to see” preference, I see that he’s using a monospaced Courier-like typeface, Droid Sans Mono, except that it’s sans, so it’s even *cruder* than Courier. The font-family is “Droid Sans Mono, Monaco, courier new, courier, monospaced”—Scott *really doesn’t like proportional type.*) Whew. Pardon me while I turn off Firefox’s “Allow pages to choose their own fonts, instead of my selections above” control and get back to Palatino Linotype...

Anyway, back to Scott—who I find interesting and worthwhile on many levels, although blog aesthetics definitely isn’t one of them. He offers reasons that his documentaries take a while to make and cost a fair amount, then notes some of the reactions people had when his latest came out at \$45. They are pretty nasty reactions, offered *before* the documentary was released. Here’s his conclusion:

I’m mostly bringing up this collection of saucy quotes to point out what’s going on here: the film, the idea of film, is rapidly becoming devalued. Not just devalued; *decimated*.

[I know, I know: Properly, decimated means being reduced by 10%. I think that battle has been lost.]

He goes into a well-spoken rant about Netflix—and I think he’s making a bad assumption. (He seems to think people assume Netflix pays royalties based on rentals; I certainly never assumed that, at least not for disc rentals.)

I am at this point convinced that a large amount of audience have little or no idea of what it costs to make a film. I’ve encountered folks who literally think the cost is the physical media of printing the DVD and the packaging, and if they download a copy at zero, my costs are therefore zero, and we’re quits. I’ve been informed what my movie *should* cost and the next set of calculations are based on that *should*.

And I've encountered a lot of strange ideas over what exactly constitutes a fair price—and the crime I am committing not holding to it. He sees two solutions to the problem that people think movies should cost \$2 or a game \$1 (but, y'know, *millions* of people pay \$15 for a movie or \$20 for a Blu-ray version if they actually want to *own* the movie, or \$20-\$40 for a TV season—oh, never mind...): “Make no profit, or make shittier movies.” He quotes a letter from a student who won't pay \$45, expects to get it from a torrent real soon now, and *recommends* that he give it away and ask for \$5 or \$10 donation—and closes with this: “I really hope you make some money off this and I really cant wait to see it, but for \$45 dollars I will wait. Best of luck and sorry to chew your ear off!” *Right*. “Now that I've told you you *need* to give it away, and made it clear that I think pirating it is legitimate, best of luck and I hope some idiot's willing to pay you.”

You've got to really put this one up on the lift and root around under it to see where it is coming from and where it's trying to take me. Again, this was sent directly to me, an education from someone half my age explaining how the world works; he felt I needed to understand this, this idea of what things really “cost”. His business model, a sort of begging freemium, is well established and predates him by a while, but his interest in me going that way is by explaining to me, in no uncertain terms, that not only should I do it this way, that if I don't, I will be pirated. (As a side note, a high-res scan of the gold coin is not yet as good as the gold coin, but he seems to think otherwise.)

I am less specifically interested in the kid himself than what he represents—an idea that things are inevitable, that films of a specific quality just happen, that they should all go to a \$5/\$10 optional payment, and it will all work out, like a game of Super Mario Brothers. That in a world where you “will” end up on The Pirate Bay, that people will gravitate towards payment regardless, and not just consider your work a part of the background, another thing to play for 15 minutes until moving onto the next shiny button. I think he's right that I am going to encounter more and more of his type, who do not just consider these works to be side-effects of the ecosystem of technology, but not, in the greater sense, worth any more than anything else. A movie as ringtone; a song as system beep; a book as forum post.

Which brings him to Roger Corman, who he says makes “shit films” that occasionally aren't shit for more-or-less accidental reasons. “But what they also were are *cheap*.” No question: Corman makes movies for almost nothing and in almost no time. The results show it, if you pay attention. I think Scott's right here: The Corman approach *can* result in great stuff, “but it is also a place where you are guaranteed a lot of excruciatingly

awful stuff will happen. But goddamn, that stuff is cheap. Sell that for five bucks a head and you'll not lose a dime."

Here's his real message—and, taking away his first prediction, I'm not sure he's wrong:

What I'm saying is, if you degrade the meaning of media to the point that you expect, *may feel the need to write the filmmaker should he decide to charge for his work*, you will get Roger Corman. You will not get me. If you get someone like me, you will get one film out of them, one that cost them a lot of money but which they are very proud of. But they won't be able to go another round—there's no money to do it with.

Scott suspects this may be the future. He may be right for *some* media; I'd like to think he's wrong as a universal stance.

Then there are the comments. The very first one suggests "well, sell it for \$10 as a download, not \$45 for a DVD." One *consultant* says maybe it should be \$100, not \$45. A few people seem to get what Scott's saying. Some are a little bizarre (I wonder what Orson Wells and his cinematographer for *Citizen Kane* would have to say about the claim that "The introduction of sound made filmmakers stop giving a shit about cinematography for about 15 years"?). One lectures Scott on this being all his fault—and uses that phrase! There's this (noting that Scott has successfully used Kickstarter for seed money):

As somebody who has both contributed to the completion of *Get Lamp* and bought the DVD, I'd like to say that I'm deeply sorry that I did. Not because of the work, but because this post has finally convinced me that Mr. Scott is an incredible asshole with views that make Gates's infamous letter from 35 years ago look progressive. Thanks for your attention.

There's an incredible asshole involved in that particular interchange, but I don't think it's Scott. As he makes clear, *he's* doing OK—both films did pretty well (and they're both CC licensed). He sees a *general* problem, not a specific problem. I'm going to quote the last four paragraphs of Scott's comment, because the last part of it offers one reason I really like Scott (despite his atrocious taste in blog typography):

This is mostly me looking out on the landscape and finding that things are not going to be as easy to bring out that aren't quick-n-dirty jobs, maybe looking good but with razor-thin margins and tiny production times. Good by luck, not always by design. Like Corman's films.

I'm not in trouble. I just don't think things are going to get better for some kinds of films, including what I make.

Also: "Incredible" asshole is inaccurate. You meant "World-Class" asshole.

World. Class.

Those who *really don't get economics* continue to not get it: One earlier commenter basically says only consumers get to decide prices, not creators, that “its not for you to decide” what something should sell for and “you just have to accept it.” There’s a *great* response to that (not from Scott): “I have decided that \$500 is a fair price for a brand new Corvette. It’s not for General Motors to decide, and they’re just going to have to accept it.” A *bunch* of people seem to miss one central point: That not only did people decide Scott’s documentary wasn’t worth \$45, they *felt obliged and empowered to bitch at him about it* and tell him what it *should* cost. There are also, to be sure, some excellent (and in some cases) long comments.

Oh, hell, go read the original post and comments. Even if I have just spent way too much text on them. And if you care a lot about text adventures, pony up the \$45 for *GET LAMP*. (I would say “If you care about *Cites & Insights*, pony up the \$10-\$25,” but now I’d probably just get lectured on why that’s unreasonable.)

Five factoids for the future

There’s an interesting difference between the title of [this May 5, 2011 post](#) at *What’s Next: Top Trends* by Richard Watson—and the page title/URL title: “Five facts that will turn your world upside down.” The direct title is modest; the page title *shouts importance*. He’s “revisiting five trends to highlight a few ways in which our world is changing.” I’ll give the five factoids (an interesting choice of words, given that I think of “factoid” as something that has every appearance of being based on good information but that may not itself be meaningful—and I don’t think that’s what he intends), but it’s his discussions that are significant, and I’m mostly referring you back to the article for those.

- Half of all the people aged 65+ that ever lived are alive right now. (He thinks this leads to a “global war for talent due to a lack of skilled workers” and “a power shift from employers to employees”—and, because the US is almost unique among first-world nations in having a growing working population, that it means the US economy is fairly resilient. I’m waiting for those part-time job offers given the lack of talent...)
- China has 21% of the world’s population but only 1.8% of the world’s oil. (Go read his discussion, but I think he overstates the ability of market forces to *create* new sources of oil.)
- There are now 4.1 billion mobile (cell) phones on the planet, 75% of which reside in developing regions. (Somehow this means “a movement of power away from companies and governments toward individuals.” Maybe. Maybe not, at least in the US.)

- China consumes 40% of the world's steel production, 30% of the world's coal and 25% of the world's aluminum and copper. The country also accounts for 40% of the increase in demand for oil since 2001. (This seems like a broader version of #2.)
- In 2008 an average PC was 32,000 times more powerful and 12 times less expensive than an average PC in 1981. (I question the "12 times less expensive," but 1981 is a *really* early date...and I certainly question the prediction that the number of internet-connected devices will go from five billion in 2011 to *one trillion!* by 2013. But never mind. It's all about the Incredible Increasing Pace of Everything.)

No additional comment here.

5 Myths About the 'Information Age'

Robert Darnton, [posted April 12, 2011](#) at *The Chronicle Review*—and I'm not going to blame Darnton for starting a headline with "5." *Especially* not after an opening paragraph like this, paying special attention to the seventh and eighth words of the first sentence:

Confusion about the nature of the so-called information age has led to a state of collective false consciousness. It's no one's fault but everyone's problem, because in trying to get our bearings in cyberspace, we often get things wrong, and the misconceptions spread so rapidly that they go unchallenged. Taken together, they constitute a font of proverbial nonwisdom. Five stand out:

The five, each stated as a quotation?

- "The book is dead." (Darnton notes that new print book production—I think he means titles, not copies, but I think he's right in either case—continues to grow year over year. Oh, by the way, total sales are starting to rise again as well...)
- "We have entered the information age." As he points out, every age is an age of information—and it's "misleading to construe [today's pace of] change as unprecedented." I think this one can be pushed at, but I'm not ready to do that refutation. And, of course, "the X age" is always sort of simplistic.
- "All information is now available online." A long paragraph leading off with this gem: "The absurdity of this claim is obvious to anyone who has ever done research in archives."
- "Libraries are obsolete." Another great paragraph, starting: "Everywhere in the country librarians report that they have never had so many patrons. At Harvard, our reading rooms are full. The 85 branch libraries of the New York Public Library system are crammed with people." And continuing to note the many new services—ways that libraries "are responding to the needs of their patrons." His close here:

“Libraries never were warehouses of books. While continuing to provide books in the future, they will function as nerve centers for communicating digitized information at the neighborhood level as well as on college campuses.”

- “The future is digital.” Here he says “True enough, but misleading.” That is: Yes, most “information” will be digital, “but the prevalence of electronic communication does not mean that printed material will cease to be important. Research in the relatively new discipline of book history has demonstrated that new modes of communication do not displace old ones, at least not in the short run.” And, of course, more. *Dominantly* digital—whatever that means—doesn’t mean *entirely* digital, or at least it shouldn’t.

Darnton doesn’t just explicate five myths. He notes why they’re important:

...I think they stand in the way of understanding shifts in the information environment. They make the changes appear too dramatic. They present things ahistorically and in sharp contrasts—before and after, either/or, black and white. A more nuanced view would reject the common notion that old books and e-books occupy opposite and antagonistic extremes on a technological spectrum. Old books and e-books should be thought of as allies, not enemies.

There’s more and it’s excellent reading and thinking. (There’s also at least one mistake, not part of my selections: In at least one case—law—Darnton may have confused “available online” with “*freely* available online.” Also some interesting comments (and some faintly bizarre ones, and *of course* somebody claiming Darnton’s raising straw men because nobody ever said any of these things! And one “Howard” who persistently says “Not so!” in various ways.). Perhaps the funniest (or stupidest?) comment is from one Paul Adams, who nails Robert Darnton to the wall with this:

The rantings of somebody who got a degree in library science that now feels like the last person to pay for training to be a switchboard operator. Your field is going bye bye. Evolve or die.

I imagine it will come as quite a surprise to Oxford’s history department that it’s really a library science department (and presumably actually [granted Darnton](#) an MLIS, not a PhD). Naturally, our friend Howard agrees with him.

The future of lighting: walls of light, LEDs, and glowing trees

Stepping back from the big and partly philosophical questions to James Holloway’s [July 2011 piece](#) at *ars technica*, considering the “four main heirs to the incandescent throne” that are likely to become dominant in future lighting, especially since more and more countries will forbid the

sale of the most readily-replaceable traditional (tungsten incandescent) bulbs. This is, in other words, a story about aspects of *one part* of the future, not “everything is going to be X” but “W, X, Y and Z seem likely to be increasingly important over time.” Given that lighting supposedly accounts for 11% of residential and 25% of commercial energy consumption in the U.S., there are good reasons for change.

The four main heirs are linear fluorescent (the sticks that have been around for decades), compact fluorescent, LED and OLED. I’m a little surprised that high-efficiency incandescent (halogen and otherwise) isn’t there, but I’m also not a lighting analyst or expert.

This is a fairly long piece (*for a website*—it’s about 2,500 words or, say, three pages of *Cites & Insights*) and I think it bears reading in the original. Holloway notes the likely bright future of LEDs (a future that’s currently hampered, for home lighting use, by high prices and the lack of really bright bulbs) with their very high efficiency and (if properly cooled) longevity, and notes that LED lighting *outside* the home is already a big market. Traditional fluorescent is a lot cheaper initially and current tubes are about as efficient as LEDs, although long-term costs may favor LEDs. I trust that the article’s right in asserting that *modern* tube fluorescents don’t flicker or hummmm... As for CFLs, what’s there to say? They’re here, they’re good at what they’re good at, but in the long run LEDs are likely to replace them too. (If one prediction—that the cost of LED bulbs will drop by 90% by 2015—is even half right, I’d be delighted, and we’d be replacing a whole bunch of incandescent *and* CFL bulbs.)

Then there’s the dark horse (since Holloway doesn’t even mention halogen). OLEDs—organic LEDs—which are area sources rather than point sources. “That is, OLEDs are light *planes*, not light *bulbs*, and they are better at illuminating areas than objects.” So they’re great for the PlayStation Vita and cell phones—but so far, they’ve been difficult to scale up, and early ones aren’t all that energy-efficient. (Apparently the hallmark for high efficiency is at least 100 lumens per watt; current OLED *lamps* only reach 25, while the other three can all reach that barrier.) Realistically, you wouldn’t buy OLED replacement screw-in bulbs; you’d buy OLED *panels*, tiles of light, and such panels have broken the 100 lumen per watt barrier. Unfortunately, OLEDs are relatively dim, so you’d probably have to replace whole ceilings or walls with OLED panels to get enough light. The article includes some notes on more exotic futures.

What do I take from it? Chances are, LED is the most plausible long-term direct replacement for the bulbs we have now, and it has a way to go before it’s really there. OLED would serve complementary purposes. And fluorescents will be around for a while, but may become lesser players over time. Given the number of places in our energy-efficient house where we *can’t* use CFLs for various reasons, I’m ready...

Oh, as to comments: 100% of the comments are useful and helpful. There aren't any.

Why 3-D Printing [Is|Isn't] Like Virtual Reality

Here's a fun one (and one where I don't have a horse in the race): a pair of items at *Technology Review*—Christopher Mim's [January 25, 2012 assertion](#) that 3-D printing isn't likely to be revolutionary and Tim Maly's [January 27, 2012 response](#).

Mim first, because this really is point/counterpoint and also because Mim's fun. The first paragraph:

There is a species of magical thinking practiced by geeks whose experience is computers and electronics—realms of infinite possibility that are purposely constrained from the messiness of the physical world—that is typical of Singularitarianism, mid-90s missives about the promise of virtual reality, and now, 3-D printing.

Oh, I *like* “Singularitarianism.” Ah, but it turns out it means those who Believe in the Singularity, rather than those that believe there's only One True Future with One Way to Do Anything. Too bad.

Mim cites “usually level-headed thinkers” like Clive Thompson and Tim Maly declaring the end of shipping because we can all just create whatever we want using 3D printers.

This isn't just premature, it's absurd. 3-D printing, [like VR before it](#), is one of those technologies that suggest a trend of long and steep adoption driven by rapid advances on the systems we have now. And granted, some of what's going on at present is pretty cool—whether it's in [rapid prototyping](#), [solid-fuel rockets](#), [bio-assembly](#) or just [giant plastic showpieces](#).

I haven't followed the links...all of which seem to be to other Mim pieces. In any case:

But the notion that 3-D printing will on any reasonable time scale become a “mature” technology that can reproduce all the goods on which we rely is to engage in a complete denial of the complexities of modern manufacturing, and, more to the point, the challenges of working with matter.

The rest of a fairly brief piece expands on that—and it helps to understand that Mims thinks 3D printing is *neat* and has real (if limited) uses—and I believe may lead to this as the core takeout:

The desire for 3-D printing to take over from traditional manufacturing needs to be recognized for what it is: an ideology. Getting all of our goods from a box in the corner of our home has attractive implications, from mass customization to “[the end of consumerism](#).” With stakes like those, who wouldn't want to be a true believer?

Reading the comments, I see a common situation: Many either didn't read or didn't understand the article and are responding to the headline. They assume Mim is writing off 3D printing entirely, which requires *complete* misreading of the article (just as I'm sure he doesn't write off virtual reality entirely).

What of Tim Maly's response? It's...interesting. He uses 2D printing as an analogy—but, fact is, most printing on paper is *still* done commercially on big fat traditional presses and shipped around to where it's needed. He does agree that today's 3D printing isn't going to replace much of anything:

It's clearly a transitional technology. The materials suck. The resolution is terrible. The objects are fragile. You can't recycle the stuff.

Which does make me wonder about all those (yes, I've heard them, some in the library field) shouting that we should get on board with this vast revolutionary technology *right now* before it passes us by.

What's his actual counter? People are working on it. And there's this one:

At the same time, it's not hard to imagine a convergence from the other direction. Some materials and formats will fall out of favor because they are hard to make rapidly. Think of how most documents are 8.5x11 (or A4) these days. It's just not worth the hassle of wrangling dozens of paper formats.

Um...so I'll stop wanting integrated circuits in my cell phones and wood beams where strength for weight counts, and go to all-plastic (and, by the way, wholly nonfunctional) cell phones *because it's easier*? That certainly explains why all modern books and newspapers are 8.5" by 11"...oh, wait a minute...

Then Maly goes off in an entirely different direction:

It's also important not to confuse 3-D printing & desktop-class fabrication. These aren't the same thing. There is more to desktop manufacturing than 3-D printers. A well-appointed contemporary maker workshop has working CNC mills, lathes, and laser cutters. A well-appointed design studio has the tools to make and finish prototypes that look very nice indeed. Aside from the 3-D printer, none of these tools are terribly science-fictional; they're well-established technologies that happen to be getting cheaper from year to year.

But Mim's article wasn't talking about fab shops; it was talking about 3D printing as a consumer technology. For that matter, the "well-equipped design studio" is no more able to make the LED light bulb I want or my next notebook computer than it is to *create* wooden decking from some printable slurry.

It's always interesting when Point/Counterpoint turns into Point/Some Other Point Entirely. Disappointing, but interesting.

What may be the most fascinating element here, given that these both appear under the auspices of MIT's *Technology Review*: At least as commenters read them, both writers appear to be writing off virtual reality as a pointless fad. Not just Second Life, but VR in general.

The five technologies that will transform homes of the future

Casey Johnston, "[about a month ago](#)" (sometime in March 2012), *ars technica*—and given that it starts off with a Jetsons cartoon, how could I be less than upbeat about it? (The caption: "Sadly, the home of the future will not include a flying car. But it will sit on a pole.")

If you moderate "homes" with "some" or even "new" and recognize that *nothing* transforming the home happens all that rapidly, this is probably good stuff. Here's the Jetsonesque summary in the first two paragraphs:

You get home from work on a Tuesday evening. Sensing your arrival, your home turns on the lights in the living room and kitchen. You stop by the bathroom and step on your Internet-connected scale—it absorbs your day's activity levels from a clip-on fitness monitoring device, then logs them on a website along with your sleeping activity and health history.

After making dinner, you sit down in front of the TV and tell it you want to buy a series you heard about on the way home from work. It responds to your voice, and in a few seconds downloads the entire first season over a gigabit connection. The series automatically downloads to your tablet, too, so you'll have it available on the go tomorrow.

As should be clear to most of you (many of whom are *way* more familiar with this stuff than I am), this isn't Mysterious Deep Future: Other than the gigabit connection (which isn't going to happen for most of us in the US any time soon, for perhaps stupid reasons), all of this *can* happen today, for those with the money and interest. Ah—and look at that: you're still making dinner and watching TV and working. That makes this *very* conservative forecasting compared to much of the woowoo we see. (Hey, it's *ars technica*—same publisher as *Wired* but a whole lot less woowoo.)

So what are the five technologies?

- Super high-speed internet. Supposedly there in Kansas City (both from Google—which is interesting, given that Google's Mountain View citywide net (its home base) isn't particularly high speed. Eventually? Truly high speed, no caps on capacity, reasonably priced? Maybe, but don't hold your breath, at least not at any reasonable price. And if you're in a rural area? Lots of luck on optical fiber to the home.

- Smart thermostats and the future of power. Hey, we've had a programmable thermostat in our house ever since we replaced the HVAC. This article touts a "learning" thermostat, but I'm not sure that's much of a development (several commenters note that \$60 programmable thermostats like ours are a lot more sensible for most people than \$249 "learning" thermostats like the one cited and pictured). Smart grids and smart meters—here now, with a huge "but" that involves citizen resistance (most of it ill-informed).
- Centralized entertainment and the streaming revolution. Nothing terribly new here, if you buy into an "everything happens ONE WAY" future; some folks already have centralized entertainment and some have given up on physical media.
- Personal health tools meet constant connectivity. FitBit and its like: Great (as long as they're optional). The rest of it...well, we'll see. When somebody says "Your doctor will have constant awareness of your activity, body mass and sleep habits" I hear "Your insurance company will have constant..." but that may be paranoid.
- The "personal content experience": e-readers, tablets, "phablets." As *the* place for personal entertainment. Why? Apparently because there can only be one future. So you'll trade in your 54" immersive wide-screen TV so you can watch the shows on your iPad. Well, that's your choice. Oddly, my brother and sister-in-law both love their iPads—but they watch most TV on a big plasma with surround sound, and I'm guessing they'll continue to do so.

My main argument comes with the sense that we should be buying into these as the exclusive way of the future. As bits and pieces, with some people using more, some fewer, some none at all—no argument from this quarter.

What We Lose in a Post-PC World

That's Joe Brockmeier, [writing on March 8, 2012](#) at *ReadWriteWeb*. Oddly, although citing [Gartner's projections](#) that PC shipments are going to continue to grow, Brockmeier's ready to believe that Tim Cook's "post-PC world" (you know: the iPad makes the PC irrelevant) is coming.

Like it or not, the post-PC era looks a lot like the iPad, Kindle Fire, Xbox 360, Roku and any number of smartphones. While these devices are way better for some tasks than traditional PCs, we stand to lose a lot in the transition as well.

Why do these devices make the PC irrelevant? Because—hell, I don't know. Because Apple's new CEO says so? In any case, Brockmeier disclaims negative thoughts about iThingies and the like. He's mostly doing

an odd sort of (to my mind) premature mourning for what's lost as we (all?) (inevitably?) stop using PCs.

What do we lose? Upgradability. Freedom and choice. Platform portability for programs—er, *apps*.

I know for many users, the post-PC world will be just fine. You might be one of them. But overall, I think we're losing something as we embrace computing appliances over general-purpose computers.

The problem here is basic, I think: He sees a death that I don't see. Neither do some commenters. He argues with some of them. It's an odd performance. (If you tell me *most* households probably won't have recent-vintage personal computers, defined as notebooks or desktops, in another 10 years, I probably wouldn't argue. Does that mean PCs will be dead? Not really; not even close.)

Reader Request Week 2012 #4: Future Doorknobs or Lack Thereof

I can think of no more fitting way to end this long, long, rambling roundup of futurism than with John Scalzi's [March 21, 2012 post](#) at *Whatever*—one of a series in which he writes posts responding to readers' questions.

Pay attention: This is *important stuff*.

Here's the question, from Molnar:

It appears to be a near-universal assumption by science fiction writers, directors, and producers, that there exists a set of precipitating events leading to our complete abandonment of doorknob technology. Do you share this assumption? Would you be willing to speculate on the reason for this assumption, or on the nature of the developmental pathway? Do you foresee any significant downsides, should this eventuality come to pass?

Scalzi immediately responds "I love this question." So do I. And, as a non-writer (of science fiction—I've tried, and I'm a terrible fiction writer) but reasonably avid reader, I have the same answer, but Scalzi says it a lot better:

[F]or a while there, having magically sliding doorknobless doors was a cheap and easy way of showing that you were in THE FUTURE. Here in the crappy present, you had to open your own doors! Through physical effort and mechanical energy! But in the future they will *slide open on their own*. All you had to do was be there for the miracle. This is also why, incidentally, in the future, doors would also be replaced by irised portals. A *door*? Shaped like a *rectangle*? How *quaint*. Do you hand crank your car windows, too?

In other words, sci-fi (and the doorknobless future really is more about sci-fi, movies and TV, than about science fiction) uses this as cheap woowoo: "It's also why you'll drink synthahol and wear silvery tunics and whatnot."

In reality? “We mix and match technology from different eras without thinking about it.” He’s writing the post at a 17th-century-technology kitchen table: wood and nails and glue. Ditto the chair. The laptop’s a MacAir, so that’s 21st century, but he’s using three books (print books—very old tech) and on the table are examples of technologies from several centuries.

He also informs us that doorknobs are fairly recent: they [date to the 18th century](#). (Before that, people had irises that closed or opened when they sensed intruders or friends. Or maybe not.)

There’s a lucid explanation of *why* we mix and match technology, one that will disappoint Wonders of the Future Home aficionados but rings true to me. Oh, and his science fiction novels *do* have doorknobs in some cases. “Doorknobs, while not exactly the sexiest technology, are also pretty reliable, unfussy things. I think they’ll stay around.” (If you include door handles as doorknobs, so do I. Most of our doors use handles, and if we replace any knobs we’ll go the handle route, apparently far more common in Germany.) He also notes that today’s SF writers don’t feel the need to impress readers with THE FUTURE.

There are 88, count’em, *eighty-eight comments* on this world-shattering screed: *Whatever* is one of a kind. One points out that “spiffy doors that open when you walk up to them” aren’t that futuristic these days, not if you shop in supermarkets, for example. *Of course* at least one person offers a set of reasons that doorknobs should go away (it’s a fun list)—just as someone refines his labeling of a kitchen table or chair as 17th century (it’s more complicated than that). The stream is fairly fascinating. Including the *real reason* doors in the old Flash Gordon series were so heavy and hard to open. I won’t spoil it for you.

Social Networks

The Social Network Scene, Part 3

This third and final (for now) catch-up effort on social network situations that don’t cluster neatly into a group begins in April 2011 and brings us pretty much up to date.

Tumblr and danah boyd

How’s this for a lead paragraph?

People wonder why I have control issues. I refuse to use third party email services because I’m terrified of being locked out of my account (as I was when Yahoo! thought I was a part of a terrorist organization because I was working with Afghani women in 2001). I maintain a

blog on my own server because I'm terrified of it all just disappearing. So I shouldn't be surprised when it actually happens but it doesn't stop me from being shocked, outraged, and disappointed.

Really? danah boyd a terrorist? (You know how it is with those PhDs working for Microsoft—especially ones who lowercase their names!) The title of [this April 27, 2011](#) post at *apophenia* makes it clearer: “Tumblr disappeared me...”

Without notifying her, Tumblr caused her posts to vanish—and “a company who also uses the name zephoria is now posting at that Tumblr page (and seems to have been for the last two days).”

My guess is that they removed it because a company out there declared they had the right because of trademark. This kills me. I've been using the handle “zephoria” online since around 1998 when I started signing messages with that handle while still at Brown. It's actually a funny blurring of two things: zephyr and euphoria. Zephyr was the name of the instant messaging service at Brown and the name of the dog that I lived with in 1997, two things that I loved dearly. And talking about euphoria was a personal joke between me and a friend. I registered the domain name zephoria.org to create a private blog that would be separate from what was at danah.org. I chose .org because I liked to see myself as an organization, not a commercial entity.

A few years ago, I learned that there is a technology consulting company called Zephoria.com. And apparently, they've become a social media consulting company. In recent years, I've found that they work hard to block me from using the handle of zephoria on various social media sites. Even before the midnite land grab on Facebook, they squatted the name zephoria, probably through some payment to the company. But this is a new low... Now they're STEALING my accounts online!?!?! WTF?!?!?!

She's a little upset with Tumblr as well, and since she's an excellent writer I'll refer you to the link for that discussion. It's a good'un—even with inserted caveats and updates. For that matter, one of the updates makes me suspect someone with a lower profile than danah boyd would not get this kind of response:

John Maloney, the President of Tumblr, wrote to me, confirming that the issue was indeed one of trademark. He sent a screenshot of the customer service request, indicating that they had tried to email me but that I did not respond. They apparently emailed me on Passover and turned over the account 72 hours later. I responded that I did not believe that this protocol was appropriate. I argued that they were in the business of brokering reputation and that trademark isn't an acceptable justification for allowing a company to overtake an individual who isn't trying to pretend to be the company...

She had a “lovely conversation” with Maloney. I trust Maloney is similarly outgoing to an ordinary person who gets caught in this sort of trap. Comments include this charmer from Marshall Kirkpatrick:

If one of the chapters in the Social Media Consulting 101 handbook was “piss off world-renowned social media thought leaders like danah boyd” I sure missed that one! Ooops!

A Customer Service Nightmare: Resolving Trademark and Personal Reputation in a Limited Name Space

That’s boyd’s thoughtful next-day commentary on this situation (she did get her “identity” back along with an apology). It [appears on April 28, 2011](#) and it’s (naturally) well-written and worth reading in the original, but I’ll offer a few excerpts.

In some ways, I feel really badly for Tumblr—and all other small social media companies—because brokering these issues is not easy. In fact, it’s a PITA. Who has the legitimate right to a particular identity or account name? What happens when the account is inactive? Or when the person who has the account is squatting? Or when there are conflicting parties who both have legitimate interests in an account name? Or when the account owner has died?

As she notes, it’s not a new issue. Domain name battles began in the 1990s. “People have spent millions of dollars buying domains from squatters and there have been countless lawsuits over who has legitimacy in these situations.” But social networks (she uses “social media”) take “the identity battle to an entirely new scale.”

...Once an entity has a trademark, they work hard to protect it so that customers don’t confuse their competitors with them, especially when they’ve worked so darn hard to build up their brand. As with most things law-related, trademark law is complicated and gnarly, impenetrable for the average person who often lacks the financial resources – or incentives – to go out of their way to protect their image with such a formalized method.

And here’s where the internet makes everything messy. There are all sorts of people roaming around the internet, building their reputations and associating them with nicknames, handles, and pseudonyms. They aren’t necessarily building businesses or engaging in commercial acts, but they are building a public reputation no less...

The typical rule has been “first come first served,” but that’s neither adequate nor always fair—especially when you have “squatters” grabbing major names in the hope of getting Big Bucks selling the name. Then there’s the situation with “zephoria” on Tumbler—which she doesn’t use all that much:

...If a hipster band came to me and begged me to have that account for some legitimate reason, I probably would've given it up. But I don't believe that the consulting company wanted the account for anything other than an opportunity to try to downgrade my pagerank. They haven't updated their corporate blog in years; they haven't updated their Twitter account in over a year; and they have no content (and no likes) on Facebook. They may have the trademark, but in social media land, they're squatters. And they're probably pissed that they're a search engine optimization company who has failed at the SEO game because, without any explicit effort to do so, I've managed to be a more relevant result in search engines than they are. All because I'm actually a legitimate person who doesn't have to pretend to be authentic to gather an audience.

danah boyd *knows* she's atypical:

Because of my work, I've built a pretty powerful reputation. This gives me a shitload of privilege (and is most likely the reason why companies are willing to call me when I bitch loudly online). But I wouldn't be me if I didn't try to use that privilege to challenge the status quo. I recognize that most people don't have the privilege to protect their reputations when more powerful institutions go after them. And since posting about this yesterday, I've received countless emails from individuals who have been screwed over by every social media site you can name and struggled to assert their rights (e.g. [girlgeeks](#)). This is a problem that is bigger than me. So what can we do about it?

She suggests a five-step process for dealing with account name conflicts, and it strikes me as an excellent start. Briefly: Try to contact the account holder and give them enough time to respond; post a message on the account indicating that there's an issue (and asking for help in resolution); ask *both parties* for comments (and maybe the user community); deal with cases individually; publicly explain the process. I'll quote the final sentence from the fourth step: "Don't simply reinforce existing power by assuming that the company is more legitimate than the individual."

Are those steps foolproof? Of course not. But they're a step in the right direction. (Assuming that you want to prioritize creating a community over turning a profit... which may not actually be true for some social media services...) Public accountability and discussion is a critical component of creating a digital environment where people are treated fairly. Trademark on the internet isn't a black-and-white solution. And we have the opportunity to set the standards, to tease out how we resolve personal reputations and institutional authority. And we have a responsibility to do so because we are creating digital spaces in which reputations are made and broken. It's time that we recognize that with great power to control the attention economy comes

great responsibility to create a world that we want to live in. And that means that we have to think about fairness, not just legality.

Did I mention that you should read the whole post [in the original](#)? There's even a reading list. Comments includes boyd's note that the company Zephoria has never contacted *her*. There's another comment that's a little too telling: A person informs her that paying attention to individual cases isn't "realistic" for internet companies—it "would be very time consuming and take away from other critical company functions that produce a greater return on investment." Since us poor schnooks with accounts on these networks are *not* the customers, this reads clearly enough.

An item by Adrienne Jeffries at *betabeat* [on April 28, 2011](#) summarizes the situation—with a notable slant. There's a picture of "Tumblr President and customer service special agent John Maloney"; the infrequency of boyd's use of her Tumblr account is accentuated by giving the actual date of her last entry; the piece accepts as gospel Maloney's claim that there have only been four cases of such difficulties—and that the best-known previous case was "a case of squatting"; oh, and she's Danah Boyd throughout, even though her strong preference for "danah boyd" can't be that obscure. To me, the piece reads as a puff piece for Maloney's wonderfulness in dealing with a "miffed" well-known user. (When the person involved in the earlier incident objected to the way it was characterized, the writer responded "Just quoted him, didn't state it as fact." Except that the article doesn't put the claim in quotation marks, unlike almost everything it attributes to boyd.

Have social networks and blog companies gotten better about balanced handling of trademark claims? I'm guessing the situation is somewhat like YouTube's handling of the millions of copyright infringement claims from Big Media: Suppress first, ask questions later.

The Lies Social Networks Keep Telling Themselves

That's the title for this Bobbie Johnson piece [on April 28, 2011](#) at *gigaom*. Johnson links to [a post by Tom Hume](#) at his eponymous blog (on April 19, 2011) written after hearing Robin Dunbar—of the Dunbar number, the idea that we can't cope with more than about 150 actual acquaintances—speak. He notes that the Dunbar number "pops up everywhere." For reasons that aren't clear to me, this leads him to collect "lies of social software" based on his experience with blogging, Flickr, Twitter and Facebook. Without the commentary, here are his four lies:

- Your friends are equally important
- Your friends are arranged into discrete groups
- You can manage hundreds of friends

➤ Friendship is reciprocal and equal.

Portions of Johnson's commentary on those lies:

Almost every service offers you a way to make a connection with as many people as you want, and tools to help you categorize that connection into one of a few buckets. Many of us have started to adopt this way of managing our online friends, to try to eke some efficiency out of the system, but let's be honest: Very few of us manage our lives in this way. We have siblings who are friends, and siblings who are not; we have co-workers we'd share intimate secrets with, and those we just can't stand. We have friends who are closer to us than we want, and acquaintances who are further away than we'd like. In short, people are messy—and very few pieces of social software are able to reflect the complexity of real relationships.

As Johnson notes, when a social network *does* break away from a lie, it's not always recognized. Johnson gives Twitter credit for asymmetric relationships: You can follow anybody you like (unless they have a private feed), with no corresponding expectation that they'll follow you back. I like that about Friendfeed as well—and it's one that's improving in a number of places. Facebook now lets you follow a person without having to be their friend; Google+ goes bizarrely in the opposite direction, letting you tell people to follow you without *their* permission. There have been other improvements, to be sure.

I'm not sure I'm wild about "improvements" that Hume suggests, such as this one:

I bet Google or Facebook could take away much of the pain of creating these lists by analysing my flow of communications. I bet they could notice and prompt me to confirm changes ("you're emailing Freda a lot at the moment—working late or is she a friend outside work nowadays?").

Seems to me Facebook tries to do that to some extent already, and I don't care for it. What about you?

Johnson concludes:

In many ways Facebook is not a great deal more advanced than it was when SixDegrees and LiveJournal helped set the standard: and it still, by and large, subscribes to these same mistakes about how human relationships work.

Johnson asks whether that's something that will ever be fixed. I wonder what "fixed" would actually mean. Admission: I haven't found Google+ "circles" all that useful except to identify those who I actually want to pay some attention to, but that's me.

Which may lead naturally into...

What Will You Do About The Age Of Anti-Social Media?

That's the provocative question asked by Ilana Rabinowitz in [this May 24, 2011 piece](#) at *Social Media Explorer*. She notes the extent to which “we” choose to be “distracted on a monumental scale” by following blogs, scanning Twitter, checking Facebook and so on—and notes the studies showing that “being connected” all the time is “detrimental to our ability to focus, to make good decisions, to be productive and to be creative.” And here's what she says about it, in a one-sentence boldface paragraph:

There's a movement afoot to convince us to change the way we relate to digital media.

Expanding slightly:

The message is that we need to step away from it to refresh, relax and recharge by unplugging on a regular basis.

The movement is being led by an unlikely group—the upper echelon of connected people—people at places like Twitter, Facebook, and Google. By the very creators of the tools of this onslaught. The message is that we need to spend less time online.

She claims it's a “movement with a lot of momentum,” based largely on a February 2011 conference (“Wisdom 2.0”) that many people viewed when it was “livestreamed.”

A memorable moment at the conference was when a panel of people spoke of the long hours and constant computer time being logged at places like Facebook and Twitter, and mention was made that “everyone at Twitter was doing the work of twenty people.” Jon Kabat-Zinn, world-renowned mindfulness teacher, laid a simple, but obvious truth on us, that can be applied to the way we are connecting today in four words:

“This is not sustainable.”

There's more—and it's worth noting that Rabinowitz self-identifies as a person “active in digital marketing.” She assumes people *will* start filtering more and connecting less and offers suggestions for “connecting” (here without her commentary):

- Don't reach as desperately for quantity. Focus more on quality.
- Just because there is unlimited space on the internet, doesn't mean you should use it all.
- When you write a blog post don't repeat what you've read hundreds of times.

- Get outside of a narrow area of interest and learn from people who you don't usually read. (In this discussion, she says "if you are curating," using what seems to be the new hot word on the web.)
- Take breaks from the computer to spend time doing the activities that you personally find restorative...
- Remember that a post works best if what it conveys is drawn from the life you are living.
- It's always been true, but now and for a future where content is going to be consumed more selectively, only the most creative, inspiring, helpful and fascinating content (and its authors) will be embraced.

I wonder. Some of these are the platitudes we've heard over and over, and I'm frankly not wild about most of the ultra-pithy writing I've seen (which frequently seems to sacrifice complexity, nuance and thought for brevity). I'd love to believe that last bullet (quoted in full), but that's so wildly improbable that I can't. It has *never* been true that only the best "content" will be embraced, unless you really believe Thomas Kincade and James Patterson represent the pinnacles of art and writing. Still, the fourth and fifth points do need repeating, and I think the sixth ("Remember...") is excellent advice as well.

Special Report: The Social Web

This [set of seventeen articles](#)—plus another handful of web-exclusive articles and podcasts—comes from *IEEE Spectrum* and dates from June 2011 (although podcasts date as early as April 15, 2011). I'm pointing to it and saying "may be worth perusing, and it can't be *that* outdated yet"; I'm not going to comment on each article.

The lead essay, "The Social Era of the Web Starts Now," calls this the "third great era of the Web" (following browsers and Google), the era of social networks—and the report came out just as Google+ was getting started, thus making it a good time to posit a battle of the titans (that is, Facebook and Google). (Along the way, I see an example of IEEE's orientation: previous "great conflicts" include RISC vs. CISC and Windows vs. Unix, not Windows vs. iOS/OS X.) That essay makes it clear that "ads are what makes this cockeyed caravan go"—both Facebook and Google are essentially ad agencies, although it doesn't use those words. Two key paragraphs look even better a year later:

What Google and Facebook have that old media don't is information about you—data that they collect and process with a barrage of advanced technologies, software, and math to wring money out of you with far greater efficiency. They do that by using the information to target you with ads that can be so specific and relentless that they seem a little creepy at times. Use Google's Chrome browser to search for a fruit-flavored green tea and you will probably find yourself

hounded for days or weeks by ads from tea sellers that pop up to the side of other pages that Google points you to. Writing the code that does that is how some of the greatest mathematical minds of the current generation make their living these days.

That's Google's edge: It is in the enviable position of benefiting from having users online in almost every way (but it greatly prefers to keep them at sites available to its scrutiny through the Chrome browser and Android apps). Facebook, on the other hand, can learn about people and profit from them only when they're on the site (a fact that helps explain Mark Zuckerberg's fervent desire that we all just get over our archaic notions about privacy). So now Facebook's triumph is emboldening the network to take on more and more services in the interest of keeping users within its walls.

That last sentence and Instagram—and the growing interconnectedness of the Google universe. Sounds right to me. There's more to the essay, with most of its second half introducing the range of articles in the special issue.

Notes on one of the articles follow—all of which appear to be freely available, for which a big hat tip to IEEE. These aren't all techie articles. The first, for example, is all about money. I'm leaving the rest of them for your reading pleasure (or not). It's an interesting, broad look at the situation less than a year ago; I hope the special issue will remain available for years to come. (Am I *recommending* all of the articles? Certainly not, but who am I to say what's worth reading? You think I'm going to recommend an inane “manifesto” from a writer who I regard as having reached his peak as a second-rate *TV Guide* reviewer? Think again.)

The Revolution Will Not Be Monetized

Bob Garfield [argues](#) that “Stratospheric valuations for social media titans assume vast advertising revenue that will never arrive.” He begins with a remarkably fresh and humble paragraph:

First thing you do, tear this article out of the magazine and carefully set it on fire. It's about the jockeying for position and revenue among the big players in social media: Facebook, Twitter, and Google's YouTube. And the analysis isn't bad for—whaddyacallit—history. But it wasn't written in the past 12 minutes. So more likely than not it's already hilariously out of date. (“Google?” you may be asking, perplexed. In case the brand has in the interim disappeared from the scene, like Webvan and John Tesh, listen up: “Google” *was a search engine.*)

OK, you *really* need to read this one directly—Garfield's funny and to the point, and I think his point is strong. It's becoming clearer that, while online ads can be extremely targeted, they're also far more intrusive than print ads and may not be as effective. I don't *tolerate* magazine ads: I en-

joy some and ignore others, but they're always there as long as I'm reading the mag—I don't start up apps to prevent them from appearing.

When this article appeared, online ad revenue was about 15% of all U.S. ad revenue even though people supposedly spent 31% of their “media-consuming time” online—and a study of actual numbers suggests that online time was valued at one-tenth that of magazine time (with TV at more than twice online but one-quarter magazine time). [Update: The 15% appears low. According to reports for 2011 as a whole, online advertising was up 10% to \$32 billion in the U.S., but that made it 22% of overall U.S. advertising. Worldwide, online ads represented about 17% of all ad expenditures in 2011.]

Why is online advertising such a poor stepchild? Well, extremely delightful and informative books with pale-blue and white covers have been written on this subject, but let's reduce the problem to its essence: The endless supply of online content means an endless supply of places where ads could go, which by definition depresses demand and, with it, price. Period.

The second problem is more basic still. Ever click on a banner ad? Have you? Ever? Of course not, because why would you leave what you're doing—especially socializing—to go listen to a sales pitch? The click-through rate, industry-wide, is less than 1 percent—and chalk some of that up to mouse error and click fraud. Some advertisers deal with this problem by popping ads into your face, blaring audio, or subjecting you to “preroll” video messages before the video you actually wish to see. As Anderson sagely observed to a Madison Avenue audience, that was an acceptable quid pro quo in the days of passive TV viewing. Online, though, users are active and in control. “If you take control away from them,” he said, “they will hate you.” Or, put another way: Online, all advertising is spam. These two structural problems leave two possibilities: Either advertising will never be the force in new media that it was in the five predigital centuries (a theory to which I personally subscribe), or someone will crack the code.

Online's big advantage is personalization, until we find such personalization creepy (those of us who haven't already reached that point). Some true believers say personalization is *everything*—that social networks and specifically Facebook will conquer everything else. But I'm guessing this writer is with me:

On the other hand, that very lucrative targeted messaging has another undesirable effect: It gives us, the target, a condition that experts call the heebie-jeebies. A word about data mining: It is automated and essentially anonymous, but it engenders a creepy sense of privacy invasion and personal violation.

There's quite a bit more to this article. Go read it.

Pixie Dust & The Mountain of Mediocrity

How could I *not* cite an essay with a title like that? It was posted at *gapingvoid* on [June 7, 2011](#)—and it’s by “the world’s most famous ex-blogger,” Kathy Sierra.

We’re always searching for that secret formula, that magic pixie dust to sprinkle over our products, services, books, causes, brands, blogs to bring them to life and make them Super Successful. Most marketing-related buzz-words gain traction by promising pixie dust results if applied to whatever it is we make, do, sell. “Add more Social!” “Just need a Viral Video!” “It’s about the Story-telling!” “Be Authentic!”

Well, maybe not *all* of us, but never mind. Here’s Sierra’s version of “most Marketing 2.0”:

“If you can-not out-spend the competition, you can out-friend them!”

He who has the most Facebook fans, Twitter followers, and blog commenters Wins! It’s all about Social Capital now!

She doesn’t think this makes sense—and notes that “social media rock stars” can’t necessarily turn their followers into paying customers unless they had great products. And now she gets to the heart of it: Social media won’t help if the product’s terrible—and it’s not needed if the product’s great.

And then someone I trust said this: these [insert favorite new buzzword] approaches are not about saving a crap product or marketing an awesome one... where these tools really DO make a difference for a brand is when the brand has little or no other compelling benefit over the competition. If the product is mediocre, or even really good but with too many equally good competitors, these things can make a difference. If you have little else to compete on, then out-friending/out-viraling/out-gamifying can work.

Until a competitor out-networks you, that is. Sierra discusses that more...and then gets to her real target, the latest buzzword (last June): Gamification. She’s not wild about using it as a way to gain brand recognition. Instead, she says, “Just make people better at something they want to be better at.” What a notion! (From what I’m seeing, “curation” may be the new buzzword, but it doesn’t brandify as well as “gamification.”)

Bubble Trouble

That title for Jacob Weisberg’s [June 10, 2011 piece](#) at *Slate* is humdrum, but the tease is great: “Is Web personalization turning us into solipsistic twits?” He recounts a conversation with Robert Wright at *The New Republic* from 1993—one in which Wright offered some possible negative aspects of the growing use of the net (remember 1993?):

One was that it was going to empower crazies, since geographically diffuse nut jobs of all sorts would be able to find each other online. Another was that it could hurt democratic culture by encouraging narrow-minded folk to burrow deeper into their holes.

Weisberg links to [the article that spells out these concerns](#)—and while that link doesn't take you to digitized 19-year-old magazine pages, it does take you to a fascinating 4,500-word essay. (The .txt file you get is almost 5,700 words because Wright's essay is followed by a brief and amusing discourse on emoticons by Neal Stephenson of *Snow Crash* fame.)

That link alone is reason enough to cite this article, but I'm not going to comment directly on the 19-year-old piece. Weisberg thinks Wright's first concern has been borne out but the second ("about the Internet fostering mental rabbit warrens") remains an open issue. This leads him to Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble*, which argues the solipsistic case.

The dark side to personalization has special relevance to those of us working at the intersection of journalism and technology. While the Web has provided consumers with a means to individualize their commerce and entertainment choices, it hasn't, until recently, done so with news per se. But investment is now flowing into just this kind of personalization filter.... [Examples offered.]

Extrapolating from all this activity, and from expanding efforts to customize search and social media experiences online, it's now possible to imagine a world in which every person creates his own mental fortress and apprehends the outside world through digital arrow-slits.

Pariser thinks that's happening. I think it *can* happen, especially if you're a true believer who's jettisoned boring old print newspapers and other broadening media in favor of your customized feeds and customized Google searches (whether you intended to customize them or not, most folks won't bother to go to Settings and disable personalized searching).

Weisberg did an anecdotal experiment: Taking five friends and followers, from a wide variety of political viewpoints, and asking each of them to search on four ideological terms and send him screenshots of the results.

There were only minor discrepancies in the screen shots they sent back for these queries. The [independent] insurance consultant from Dubuque got Wikipedia entries for the two congressmen ahead of their own official websites, while all the others got the official sites first. But none of the minor variations aligned in any apparent way with anyone's political views. For Boehner, for instance, all of the testers—and I—got the same hostile site as the fifth return.

Google says that's *not* surprising:

“We actually have algorithms in place designed specifically to limit personalization and promote variety in the results page,” a spokesman emailed me. Independent analysts aren’t seeing a problem, either. Jonathan Zittrain, a professor of law and computer science at Harvard, who studies Web censorship, agrees that Google isn’t doing what Pariser says it is. “In my experience, the effects of search personalization have been light,” he told me.

Not to take sides here, but if Zittrain says “not much of a problem,” my instinct is to think there may not be much of a problem. Weisberg thinks that’s partly because really effective personalization is damn hard to do algorithmically. I’m generous enough to believe it’s also partly due to deliberate limits such as those Google claims to use.

Pariser is also dead wrong, it seems to me, in assuming that personalization narrows our perspectives rather than broadening them. Through most of history, bubbles have been imposed involuntarily. Not so long ago, most Americans got their news primarily through three like-minded networks and local newspapers that reflected a narrow consensus. With something approaching the infinite choices on the Web, no one has to be limited in this way.

There are studies suggesting that conservative and liberal bloggers cross-link to surprising degrees. Weisberg thinks *good* personalization can mean *more* diversity of views. What starts out as a possibly negative story turns out, I think, to be reasonably positive. After all, those who want a nicely walled right-wing garden can watch Fox News and subscribe to *The Weekly Standard* and any number of “news”papers; they don’t need the web to do it for them. (I didn’t use *National Review*; in my limited experience, that magazine isn’t narrow enough for the Beck/Limbaugh crowd.)

I only looked at the first few comments, a mixed bag, but find this one from George Arndt both telling and a little worrisome, although it’s probably even more true of traditional media than of the web:

Most people who live in the real world have to work with people with different politics. But, if someone is unemployed for a long time and or, doesn’t have an active social life, the echo chamber effect is a real issue.

Tumblr is Killing WordPress

Now for a little comic relief, one of those items that fairly screams *CONSIDER THE SOURCE*—in this case *Smedio*, the “digital marketing guide for businesses and entrepreneurs.” The [piece itself](#) appeared June 21, 2011, written by Douglas Idugboe, a “Canadian bestselling author” who’s founder and chief editor of *Smedio*.

The story, once you get past that Ellison-style headline (“For us to win, everyone else must lose”)?

In this fast-paced environment influenced by 140 character tweets, unless a social media platform uses the word “micro,” it’s no longer cool. The fast-growing micro-blogging platform Tumblr is the latest example of the “micro” craze. Tumblr has now surpassed WordPress, the archetype open source blogging platform that hosts some of the largest blogs on the Web. As of this writing, Tumblr is hosting 20,873,182 blogs compared to WordPress’ paltry 20,787,904. This is an amazing turn of events, considering the fact that WordPress has been in existence four-years longer than the upstart Tumblr.

Well, hot damn. If you ignore the *millions*, probably tens of millions, of WordPress blogs that are *not* hosted at Wordpress.com (I’m guessing more than a hundred just at LIShost), Tumblr had 0.4% more blogs: Clearly, WordPress is *doomed*, since there can only be one of whatever. I assume y’all have long since abandoned those doomed WordPress blogs and moved to Tumblr, right?

This being Social Media marketing, the next subhead should be obvious: “Everyone is Tumblelogging now.” Not only is Tumblr hot shit, “all signs point to continued growth,” since we have such short attention spans and have embraced “short texts and tweets as our primary means of social communication.” Oh, and it’s easy: “blogging but without the commitment.” The message is straightforward: Your business has to be on Tumblr, and that means it needs “video and colorful photos, in other words, eye candy.” To do otherwise is certain doom—after all, WordPress is already dead.

In amongst the “you’re right, high-five, wonderful article” comments—and SEO spammers—are gems like this one from Kim Vigbo: “Trying to compare Tumblr with WordPress does none of them any justice. I can’t wait to see what you will be comparing next? Maybe rocks and the color yellow?”

Reality check in April 2012: Wordpress.org says there are about 72.767 million Wordpress blogs, *about half of them* on Wordpress.com. There are about 46 million Tumblr blogs. As for visitors and the like, Alexia shows Wordpress.com as #18, Tumblr at #38—oh, and Blogspot at #10. Quantcast shows 54 million unique visitors in the last checked month for Wordpress.com (again, leaving out some 36 million *other* WordPress blogs), 45 million for Tumblr...and 57 million for Blogspot, which of course died long ago. Wordpress software is apparently now the most popular content management system for new web sites, not just blogs, being used for 22% of new sites. Too bad it was killed off by Tumblr, at least for those with short attention spans.

We Don't Need No Steenkin' Social Media Gurus

So says Professor Rob Kozinets (BBA, MBA, Ph.D.), “a globally-recognized expert on social media, marketing research, and branding” (according to his own description on his *Brandthrosophy* blog, at which [this appeared](#) on July 2, 2011. Hey, he's a *professor*—at York University's business school—and he's edited a book. Published by Elsevier. So we're talking serious credentials here. (I'm being snarky, but his About page makes it a little hard not to. And an academic who coins a grotesquerie like “brandthrosophy” deserves some snark.)

He spoke at a “Social Media Day gathering” in Toronto. After he spoke and “assumed a position within the audience, beer in hand,” a woman began talking to him, saying she just got involved with social media, that she'd driven all the way from Niagara Falls for this event, and [emphasis in the original]:

“I want to become a social media guru,” she said to me, with a big, winning, business-y smile.

To which he responds (in this post):

Gotta tell ya, Jennifer. That's just about the last thing the world needs. That, another horndog politician, and four bucks will get you a Starbucks latte.

He continues in a similar vein, discussing Bhagwan Shree Rhagneesh and concluding:

I mean, come on. “Guru?” Guru? Really? In the West? In 2011? Without irony?

If he'd stopped right there, I'd applaud, say “Good on you,” and go on. But he doesn't. Because, well, he's definitely *not* a social media guru. Oh, no, not him. Let him explain:

Me, I am a Ph.D who studied social media in my dissertation and a Full Professor now, and I have had a strong social media component to my classes since 1999. That's twelve years ago, for those who are counting. I began teaching the first social media course in Canada, and one of the first in the world, in 2007, calling it “Word of Mouth Marketing.” I have developed multiple courses at undergraduate, graduate, and PhD levels to teach Social Media Marketing and Management. Those course outlines are being used by dozens of other professors around the world right now.

He tells us he's definitely *not* a social media guru. “I much prefer to be known as a Still-Learning Social Media Expert-in-Progress. Or a Social Media Researcher. Social Media Pioneer? I think I have probably earned that one.” and so on for another paragraph about this True Expert's Credentials. Hey, he's been studying “social media” for *16 years!* So he's “more than a little ticked off” by all these wannabes.

The rest of the post could be cute, except that his “expert-in-progress” sure sounds a lot like Mitch Joel’s “humility” about being only between #20 and #30 on some worldwide list...and, of course, this professor believes Social Media is a meaningful term. Not me. It is always good to see a multi-degreed faculty member providing a one-fingered salute to those who are less credentialed and use terms he finds silly, though: Warms my heart, that does.

6 Scientific Reasons Social Networks Are Bad for Society

I have mixed feelings about linking to *Cracked.com*. Its brand of snark frequently reminds me of Walt Crawford at his worst (that’s not a compliment), albeit with better writing. But this one, [posted July 18, 2011](#) by Luke McKinney, is a gem: For each of six statements he links to a scholarly article, which he then summarizes or excerpts. You’ll have to go to the link to see the articles and McKinney’s commentary; here are the six “scientific reasons”:

- #6 Everyone (Correctly) Assumes You’re an Egocentric Asshole
- #5 Thousands of Friends Means None
- #4 They’re Reinstalling Sexism
- #3 They’re Full of Psychos
- #2 Social Networks Are Full of Whiners
- #1 Social Networks Prevent People From Being Social and Networking

There are 641 comments. I did not read them. That would take too much time away from Friendfeed. And Google+. And Facebook. And Twitter...

My Online Social Profile, 2011

Interesting mostly because it’s thoughtful and a somewhat special case: John Scalzi, [writing August 4, 2011](#) at *Whatever*. Scalzi’s no social marketing guru or SEO; he’s an award-winning science fiction (and blog-related nonfiction) writer with an outstanding blog that gets thoughtful comments. So, y’know, worth considering.

It’s a ranked list, starting with *Whatever* itself, since it’s “the largest repository of Scalzi Being Scalzi anywhere online.” He agrees with the general belief that “the Blog Moment has passed,” since for *most* people Facebook, Twitter and the like do what they need done better and more efficiently. But “for most people” isn’t for everybody, which is why there are still millions of active blogs, even as many blogs have become ghost towns. Also,

The site has also been around long enough that it has its own community of people, evident in the comments section, where there is (as the masthead of *Mad* magazine would put it) “the usual gang of idi-

ots” who talk amongst each other on a usual basis. The composition of that gang changes slowly over the years — people come and go, depending on their own interests, time commitments and whether I’ve pissed them off sufficiently that they decide to stop talking to me and others — but overall there’s a day-to-day consistency which for me as the proprietor is both nice and useful. Nice because a gang of regulars means we’ve gotten out sitcom-like timing down, useful because by and large everyone understands the community standards and are willing and able to impart the knowledge to newcomers. It’s why *Whatever* gets noted elsewhere online as a place where people actually have conversations about contentious topics, rather than just yelling past each other as they bellow cue card talking points out into the cloud. It makes my job as Malleeteer much easier.

It’s one of two reasons I look at *Whatever* whenever there’s a new post, the other being Scalzi himself.

Second is Twitter:

I really like Twitter now but I didn’t really get it when I first started using it, which I chalk up to blog tunnel vision, i.e., “if I want to post something short, I can just do it on my blog.” But the fact is I hardly ever post anything that short on my blog, other than to say something like “I’m not here today; see you tomorrow.” So it actually addresses an entirely different way for me to be online...

As he notes, it’s also mostly a different audience, currently a little over 26 thousand strong in his case. (He doesn’t push the blog on Twitter but has a separate “@blogwhatever” Twitter account for that purpose, with 999 followers.)

Third? This one’s interesting, especially in August 2011: Google+

This particular social network has been around, what? Less than a month? But even so it very rapidly became my preferred non-Twitter social network because of its esthetic, its functionality, and because (at least for now) it doesn’t do all the annoying things that Facebook does. Google+ is definitely getting some mileage out of the fact that it’s not Facebook, but, hey, you go with what works, and it’s Facebook’s fault that its product is go aggressively mediocre that Google could come along, do what it does slightly less obnoxiously, and have people fall over themselves rushing to get to it.

He’s not wild about Google+’s policy on pseudonyms (which I believe has changed somewhat), but he finds that Google+ works well “in between *Whatever* and Twitter” for casual socializing with friends and fans. 12,553 have Scalzi in circles.

Then there’s Facebook, where he now has a page to avoid all that Friending nonsense (since then, to be sure, simple Following handles this). 6,252 Like his page. And then there’s “everything else”—accounts at LinkedIn, Goodreads and elsewhere where he’s basically inactive. He

does note pretty much everywhere that if people really want to talk to him they should visit *Whatever* or send him “actual e-mail.”

Good self-analysis. Thirty-one comments. It’s *Whatever*, so they’re mostly worthwhile. As sometimes happens, one commenter doesn’t read the post very carefully:

I’m fascinated by this idea that blogs are passé, and have been replaced with Twitter and FB/G+. More specifically, you stated that you largely agree with this premise, then go on to detail exactly why it’s completely wrong (IMO): blogs work for longer thoughts/essays/screeds, while Twitter and social sites do not.... [another paragraph about why Twitter and Facebook don’t replace blogs]

Ummm...but saying “the Blog Moment has passed” is *not* saying blogs are passé. It’s saying they’re no longer the Big Thing That Everybody Must Have. Most folks have neither the need nor the focus to write long, thoughtful essays, the kinds of things blogs do best; their needs really are better served by social networks.

But applause for this from “htom”:

I must most strenuously protest our being labeled “*the usual gang of idiots*”; we are, in fact a most unusual gang of idiots. Look at our behavior, I beg of you!

Duly noted.

Holiday

Two related items on a recurring theme: The virtues of taking an offline holiday—either a partial one (just avoiding social networks) or a full one (staying offline). The first, with the one-word title above, [posted October 2, 2011](#) at *Llordllama’s Llibarian Lleanings*. LL, as we’ll call this readily identifiable blogger who chooses to remain pseudonymous, took “a bit of a holiday.” For a week, they avoided social networking. Actually a bit more than that: They describe it as taking “a break from all things social and online” to “refocus on the things around me.”

There’s a day-by-day summary, and it makes clear that “things around me” doesn’t necessarily mean the real world: On the first evening, they watched TV instead of being online. And on the second day they were on “the Beeb’s news pages,” so I guess “social and online” is the Boolean AND, which I wouldn’t normally assume about normal English usage. Or is it? They say they “slightly broke my rules” by uploading something to YouTube (ah, but I guess some consider YouTube to be part of social something-or-other). And did a “quick sneaky look at Twitter,” so the rules by day three are apparently “don’t *actively* participate.”

By Day 4, the rules seem to be pretty threadbare: They’re not only glancing at Facebook but also sending email to people. So email isn’t social (but is online) even though it’s person-to-person, while YouTube is

social even though it's mostly publishing-and-viewing...man, I'm getting more confused by the minute. And, of course, Day 7 includes scanning Facebook, since it's now clear that the "vacation" is a lurker's vacation, not a real focus on, you know, the real world.

This odd experiment yielded six lessons for Llordllama—and you should check the original for those lessons.

Jake Reilly's 'Amish Project:' 90 Days Without a Cell Phone, Email and Social Media

Here's a whole different animal, as written up by Brad Sylvester [on January 31, 2012](#) on the Yahoo! Contributor Network (you may have to try the link a couple of times to actually be able to read the story, as Yahoo! seems intent on getting in your way). A 24-year-old college student did something radical for the last three months of 2011:

From October to December, he unplugged from social media, email, texts, and cell phones because he felt that we spend more quality time with gadgets and keyboards than we do with the people we really care about.

He was serious about it. He suspended his cell phone service, deactivated Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Spotify "and anything where there was a social component" and put not-available messages on his email accounts. Other than bank verifications via email, he says he didn't cheat at all. This person was a heavy social networker. Before the break,

It was pretty bad. I was reading every single Tweet and I follow 250 people. Then, I would waste a good hour and a half on Facebook. I was sending more than 1,500 texts a month. I never really counted minutes on the phone, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was 600 to 900.

Initially, he was only going to turn off his phone, but he knew that would just lead to more email and Facebook messages:

It's kind of a hard thing, because we're getting to the point where if you're not responding to people's text messages within an hour of when they send them, or within a day for emails, it's just socially unacceptable. It's been hard for me since I've been back. I've been bad with my phone and people are, like, "What the hell? I text messaged you..." So I haven't been up to social standards in terms of responding and people don't really understand that, I guess.

He was inspired by going to a college basketball game with friends he only sees a couple of times a year—and noticing that "every single person had either a laptop or a cell phone" and they were all *doing stuff online* instead of focusing on the game.

That's the thing that drives me crazy. People go out to dinner with a crowd and everyone's on their phone. I mean, what else are you looking for?

He started the experiment without having a landline, and I'm not surprised that his mom got a little freaked out. He added a landline. He also started leaving *chalked messages* for people on their sidewalks...

In this student's case, he really was offline almost entirely, not even watching TV, with interesting results:

I had so much free time on my hands. I also wasn't watching TV, because that felt sort of counter-productive. I would go to school, and then there was really nothing for me to do at home, so I would just ride my bike to people's houses, all these people that I would usually text or just see on the weekends or whatever. I would just ride by and chat with them, face to face. So, that was really cool, reconnecting, doing things you'd never normally do like having breakfast with someone's parents.

[I guess college, or at least certain colleges, must be a lot easier these days. Having "nothing to do at home" after a day's classes was never an issue back when I was at Cal, and in 1962-68 spending time online or texting wasn't an option.]

There's a lot more to this fairly lengthy interview, and it's worth reading. I may be a bit snarky here, but it sounds like Reilly found the experience quite positive. He reconnected with a girlfriend he'd sort of fallen out with, he read more books, he started meditating, he "did a lot of things that I don't know...other people would say they want to do. But I think, if they actually did them, they'd be of incredible value." All in all, an interesting discussion—including the older relative who noted that he's been living that way for 69 years.

More than four thousand comments, some as recent as yesterday. The most recent few (all I read) were mostly either from old farts like me noting that we all lived that way until recently, or otherwise approving—with one noting the irony that we had to read about this online.

If Your Website's Full of Assholes, It's Your Fault

Another case where the title alone may be reason enough to cite this—written by Anil Dash [and posted July 20, 2011](#) at his eponymous blog. Dash is a pioneer of sorts: he's been blogging since 1989. He notes classic examples of asshattery:

We can post a harmless video of a child's birthday party and be treated to profoundly racist non-sequiturs in the comments. We can read about a minor local traffic accident on a newspaper's website and see vicious personal attacks on the parties involved. A popular blog can

write about harmless topics like real estate, restaurants or sports and see dozens of vitriolic, hate-filled spewings within just a few hours.

But that's just the web, right? Shouldn't we just keep shrugging our shoulders and shaking our heads and being disappointed in how terrible our fellow humans are?

Wrong, says Dash: "This is a solved problem."

As it turns out, we have a way to prevent gangs of humans from acting like savage packs of animals. In fact, we've developed entire disciplines based around this goal over thousands of years. We just ignore most of the lessons that have been learned when we create our communities online. But, by simply learning from disciplines like urban planning, zoning regulations, crowd control, effective and humane policing, and the simple practices it takes to stage an effective public event, we can come up with a set of principles to prevent the overwhelming majority of the worst behaviors on the Internet.

If you run a website, you need to follow these steps. If you don't, you're making the web, and the world, a worse place. And it's your fault. Put another way, take some goddamn responsibility for what you unleash on the world.

Dash says website owners have *moral* obligations for what appears on their sites:

Hell yes, you are responsible. You absolutely are. When people are saying ruinously cruel things about each other, and you're the person who made it possible, it's 100% your fault. If you aren't willing to be a grown-up about that, then that's okay, but you're not ready to have a web business. Businesses that run cruise ships have to buy life preservers. Companies that sell alcohol have to keep it away from kids. And people who make communities on the web have to moderate them.

So what should you (you blogger, you library, you company, you Personal Brand) do? The topic sentences:

You should have real humans dedicated to monitoring and responding to your community.

You should have real humans dedicated to monitoring and responding to your community.

Your site should have accountable identities. [By which Dash does *not* mean forcing real names; he thinks "persistent pseudonyms" are fine.]

You should have the technology to easily identify and stop bad behaviors.

You should make a budget that supports having a good community, or you should find another line of work.

He notes reasons some people are cynical about the possibility of real, relevant, worthwhile conversations on the web:

Because a company like Google thinks it's okay to sell video ads on YouTube above conversations that are filled with vile, anonymous comments. Because almost every great newspaper in America believes that it's more important to get a few more page views on their website than to encourage meaningful discourse about current events within their community, even if many of those page views will be off-putting to the good people who are offended by the content of the comments. And because lots of publishers think that *any* conversation is good if it boosts traffic stats.

There are exceptions—lots of them. They should be in the majority. I'll quote the last two paragraphs:

So, I beseech you: Fix your communities. Stop allowing and excusing destructive and pointless conversations to be the fuel for your business. Advertisers, hold sites accountable if your advertising appears next to this hateful stuff. Take accountability for this medium so we can save it from the vilification that it still faces in our culture.

Because if your website is full of assholes, it's your fault. And if you have the power to fix it and don't do something about it, you're one of them.

More than 200 comments—and I'm guessing they're free of assbattery, since Dash must follow his own rules. One poor fool objects to the "obscene" title (really?). A number of people make useful additions. One pseudonymous commenter thinks it's hopeless because of dynamic IPs (Dash writes a quick response). A lot of people cite past experiences with online communities made up of literate adults. A few, um, idiots, and one case whose solution is that sites shouldn't have comments at all (just like good newspapers never publish letters, right?) and basically says comments just don't ever work (saying so in a comment). A couple of jerks completely misread the post and pile on him for saying "delete any comments that don't agree with you," which Dash never says (and doesn't believe). One blogger says "but I can't afford moderators!"—which gets the only appropriate response, namely "do it yourself." Yes, I did read the whole stream—including Dash's comment that he hadn't deleted anything.

A Survival Guide for Beating Information Addiction

To end this ramble, here's one by Leo Babauta at *Zen Habits*, [posted March 9, 2012](#). I have mixed feelings about using "addiction" broadly, but never mind. Babauta's definition has seven bulleted items, and while I'd agree that showing signs of *all* of them means you have a problem, I'm not sure I'd say the same for showing signs of one. The one that *might* be

most innocent is the first “You know you’re an information addict if you:” bullet:

Check email, Facebook, news, or some other social network first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

If Babauta adopted Jeff Foxworthy’s wording and said “You *might* be an information addict if you...” I’d withdraw my caveat. He redeems himself somewhat:

Now, if none of these seems like a problem for you, even if you do them, then they probably aren’t a problem. But if you see yourself in one or more of these and want to change, this guide is for you.

If you don’t think it’s a problem (and if those around you don’t think it’s a problem), then maybe it isn’t.

He offers three first steps—assess your habits, introduce “the pause,” take a break every hour—and four ways to change habits. They strike me as plausible. In brief: Start with your biggest trigger; pick a replacement habit; do the new habit after the trigger, every time; use positive public pressure. (Go read the explanations [in the actual article](#).)

The crucial addition here is his discussion of “a balanced life,” since he’s not saying “stop using social networks.” Again, I’ll cite the topic sentences and suggest that you read the full discussions

- The goal isn’t to eliminate all information sources.
- Schedule time for non-Internet and non-media activities.
- Work without distractions.
- Schedule a limited time for your information sources.
- Choose your sources wisely.
- Get some sleep.

Masthead

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