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Libraries

Public Library Closures: 2010 Update

When I researched apparent public library closures, first as reported in the 2008 and 2009 IMLS tables ([Cites & Insights April 2012](#)), then (with Will Kurt's assistance) for 1998 through 2009 ([Cites & Insights May 2012](#)), I was pleased to find that *very few* public libraries actually closed and stayed closed.

But I was nervous about FY2010, which for most of the country should have been the year that the recession hit the hardest (in terms of tax revenue and other issues). Would there be a wave of public library closures in FY2010?

The Institute for Museum and Library Studies (IMLS) released the FY2010 public library databases near the end of July 2012. I'm pleased to say that the answer is No. In all, eight libraries (not branches) and agencies reported closure (and one reported temporary closure), while there were 18 new libraries and agencies—and eleven libraries and agencies not previously reported.

What about the eight closed libraries and agencies? Here's a quick look at each of them and what I was able to find in cursory research.

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Mattawamkeag Public Library, Mattawamkeag, Maine

This library had a service area population of 790 in FY2009—but it did not report statistics for that year. Imputed circulation was only 208. No further information found.

Sargentville Library Association, Sedgwick, Maine

In FY2009, this library potentially served 1,021 people—but was only open 100 hours (two hours per week) and showed a total circulation of 50. It has an active website, currently showing four hours per week summer hours. Its status is unclear.

Faribault County Library, Blue Earth, Minnesota

This library system served 7,844 people in FY2009 with 1,504 open hours and 7,875 circulation. In this case, the system actually served smaller community “station libraries” in Faribault County but had no library building of its own, which turns out to violate Minnesota law. While the county library has closed, nobody (apparently) lost library service: The county library budget is now used so that the city libraries can provide materials and staffing for the smaller station libraries. Thus, there’s no *effective* closure here—no library outlets actually closed.

Flasher Public Library, Flasher, North Dakota

Flasher Public Library served 285 people in FY2009 and circulated 6,727 items in 416 open hours. Total staff at the time was 0.2FTE—that is, 8 hours per week. The 2010 census shows 235 people in Flasher. This may be a case where the community could no longer afford even part-time staff.

Ruskin Public Library, Ruskin, Nebraska

This library potentially served 195 people in FY2009—but reported no paid staff, although it circulated 1,861 items in 260 open hours. The population is down to 123 in the 2010 census. No further information.

Stark Public Library, Stark, New Hampshire

In FY2009, this library potentially served 516 people and was open nearly 1,000 hours—but reported no circulation and had no paid staff. This may be another case where a volunteer-run library or reading room simply doesn’t qualify for inclusion in IMLS.

Berks County Public Libraries, Leesport, Pennsylvania

In 2009, this system served 39,430 people and circulated 50,553 items in 4,355 hours. There’s an active website for Berks County Public Libraries that indicates that it’s a system of 23 independent libraries. Looking more closely, the 2009 figures are for two bookmobiles. Budget cuts eliminated those bookmobiles, presumably also eliminating separate reporting for the county system.

Jefferson County Library, Beaumont, Texas

This system served 33,628 people and had 42,463 circulation in 1,064 hours in FY2009. In this case, an [August 13, 2010 story](#) in *Library Journal* spells it out. The county library, consisting of a “small walk-in library” and a bookmobile, and serving unincorporated areas of the county (Beaumont has its own library system), was closed “for good” because the county couldn’t afford the \$300,000 budget. The story says interlocal agreements might allow continued library service to those who live outside city limits. (Beaumont sells non-resident library cards at \$25 or \$40 per year.)

Summing Up

Yes, money issues did result in some closures, mostly affecting very small communities and people in unincorporated areas of counties. Effectively, there were seven actual library/bookmobile closures (or conversions to volunteer status) and one purely administrative change. Nontrivial losses, especially for the rural areas of Jefferson County and possibly Berks County, but not a wave of closures.

Words

Thinking About Blogging, Part 1

Bloggng has been largely absent from *Cites & Insights* since January 2011 and the flameout of my liblogging series—and the last major article about blogging in general was in April 2010. (There was a ZEITGEIST piece in November 2010, but that related to a specific issue.) So it’s time to think about blogging again, with more than two years of interesting items covering a wide range of topics.

Most of the topics in Part 1 relate to blogging in general (although librarians are frequently well represented). Part 2, in the October issue deals with starting, stopping and continuing (almost entirely among libloggers) and with library and librarian posts and issues. It’s accompanied by a brief update on the status of liblogs—or at least the 1,300+ liblogs that had visible posts in mid-2010.

Names

A few items on the significance of “real” names in blogging.

Expertise, authorship, and “real” names

That’s Christina Pikas [on May 15, 2010](#) at *Christina’s LIS Rant*. She’s commenting on “Blog matters: who is ‘revere’?”—[a May 15, 2010 post](#) by “revere” at *Effect Measure*.

The latter blog was by one or more people, never named or specifically counted, and the post said “Our self-description in the masthead is exactly correct. No embellishment or false information.” Not that there was a masthead that I could find... But what Revere had to say is interesting:

The “problem” of the identity of “revere” is a curiously substantive issue that interests us. One of the things at issue here is the question of “authorship,” i.e., what does it mean to be an author. Revere is different than most reporters or journalists as we are our own publishers and our own editors. No one stands between the words we draft and the words you read. Newspapers have editors and publishers who to some extent interpose themselves in that space. Even great authors have editors whom they thank effusively in the acknowledgements of their books (if the author is honest and generous). Talented editors don’t just copy edit. They make suggestions about what to put in, what to take out, what order to put things in and whether the book or article should go to press at all. And having been interviewed more times than I can count by journalists and reporters both good and bad and complained on more than one occasion about significant omissions that changed the meaning of what I said, at least half the time the blame is deflected onto the reporter’s “editor.” About half of those times I actually believe it. But there is no editor here. The reveres or revere writes what he/she/it/they want to write. No permissions needed and it all goes up as soon as we push the “Publish” button.

Revere says the blog itself provides evidence of the writers’ expertise:

Are we accurate reporters of the science we talk about? You can judge for yourself, but I can tell you honestly we have had many nice emails from fellow scientists whose work we have taken the time to explain. I don’t think we have ever had one tell us we got it all wrong, although on occasion we have had additions or clarifications and once or twice we’ve made mistakes which we promptly corrected in the post, including indicating it is a correction. It’s true good science reporters do things we don’t. For example, they will get in touch with the authors for additional explanations. We don’t do that because we don’t have to. We report on things we understand and that don’t need to be explained to us. And we give alternative views when we think we should, again because we understand the context. What we don’t do is go hunting for someone with a different view for the sake of “balance.” How are you as a reader to know if the alternative views are

well founded, prevalent or are serving special interests? You don't, to put it bluntly. At least in our case you know whom you are trusting or not. Us. And as noted, you have a lot of evidence to help you form that judgment.

Then there's authority—and in most cases, unless you personally know the writer, having a name doesn't say much about authority anyway.

Which brings us back to the strange idea of "authorship." Compared to book writers and reporters, most of whom have editors and publishers, we have much more claim to be the author of this blog. But even that claim is pretty weak. We use and in many cases depend upon news articles or reports or scientific publications done by others, and we, too, have to take most of the things we read on faith. Unless we know a field unusually intimately in a way that is impossible for most topics of general interest, we haven't read all the citations in a paper and aren't likely to go read them to check the veracity of the author's claims about them—unless we have good reason or prior knowledge that it is wrong. Nor do we have the raw data the work is based on, and if we did, we aren't likely to re-run the analyses. Life is short. There are things we must take on faith, which is why scientific misconduct is such a serious offense. It loosens the glue that keeps the system together. Add to this the fact that so much science today is done in teams, sometimes numbering in the many dozens or hundreds, and the idea of authorship seems to be a mirage. Even as a sole author, my words are enmeshed in a web of interlocking and connecting ideas, many depending upon faith for their coherence and force. Which are the ideas of the author and which of others. All I can claim is to have strung the words together in a way I think unique to me. Big deal. That doesn't make me an author. At most it makes me a paraphraser. I try to set down new ideas, to add value. But I am using raw materials provided my many people unnamed but with some claim to be co-authors.

I'm not sure I buy that part, or that I accept that being edited (in most of my earlier columns and articles and in most of my books) makes me less of an author. But writing under a single or group pseudonym doesn't deny authorship.

In this case, whatever Effect Measure was doing, it was just about done. The very next day, "We bid you farewell" announced the end of the blog. That end didn't seem to have much to do with authorship or names.

Pikas offered a quick gloss on Revere's moderately long post:

At this point, after years and years of blogs it's a shame this has to be said explicitly. The general points go like this:

there are many legitimate reasons to be pseudonymous in authoring a blog. I describe some of these in my 2007 post but another one is to

let your words speak for themselves instead of bolstering them by using your professional reputation, that of your institution, or that of your publication venue.

even if you had his name, would that alone allow you trust what he's saying (Mertonian organized skepticism)?

people have multiple social identities – the persona of Revere != the identity the person has when writing peer-reviewed journal articles for others in his field

Some of my earliest posts on my blog complained about overly simplistic heuristics that teachers and some librarians teach for evaluating web sources. These really don't work at all for most social computing technologies...

I think that's right. While the highest-profile pseudonymous liblog is a sad affair most of the time, there are and have been first-rate blogs written under assumed names or group names. For that matter, can you be sure that the "Walt Crawford" who writes [Walt at Random](#) and claims to write *Cites & Insights* is the same "Walt Crawford" you may have met at a conference or chatted with on Friendfeed? Hmm?

The Problem with Pseudonyms

This post by (someone claiming to be) Bobbi Newman appeared [August 3, 2010](#) on *Librarian by Day*. Among other things, Newman coordinates "[Library Day in the Life](#)," a semiannual project to have library folks "share a day (or week) in their life through blog posts, photos, videos and Twitter updates." (The most recent version seems to have 362 participants, which is impressive.)

Newman thinks she could be more open and helpful if she blogged under a pseudonym:

I think of all the things I could reveal if I didn't blog as "me". Things that might help others. Things that might show a better perspective of what I do all day. But because I'm me there are secrets I must keep. I must guard the privacy of patrons and staff. I'd also like to still have a job when I show up for work in the morning. Oh the lure of anonymity.

But Newman—who seems to confuse anonymity with pseudonymity—says flatly that accountability *requires* real names, that without it you don't own your own words:

When you don't own your words you aren't accountable. Sure you can share so much more freely, but there is the dark side too. Unfortunately those who don't own their words seem to always go over to the dark side.

That last is an overbroad generalization, not helped by the final two brief paragraphs:

It's easy to talk crap when you aren't held accountable. It takes courage and wisdom to own your words

It would be great to see an anonymous account dealing with real issues, objectively and intelligently. Instead pseudonyms just seem to bring out the worst in people.

The post has 37 comments and backlinks (including Newman's responses). The first—from a *pseudonymous* blogger (but it's a transparent pseudonym, with a link on the home page to a real name)—backs her completely. The second notes the reality for some people (while, oddly, agreeing with her):

For a long time, I couldn't use my real name online at all because I had a stalker. I'm still wary of putting my name to things that might give people too much information about my real life.

Newman's response *completely undermines her post!* In part:

When I started LBD I didn't have my name or my face on it, mostly because I've had stalkers in the past than any other reason. I also have accounts under other names, I like my privacy and my private life, I definitely see good reasons for anonymity

But I used those pseudonyms to protect my privacy not to spread hate or misinformation which is what this post is aimed at. There are perfectly good reason to not disclosure your identity online, including your love of the work "fuck". My problem is when you do this AND represent yourself as a professional AND you use your anonymity to spread unhappiness.

So it's fine to be anonymous or pseudonymous as long as it's for the right reasons...which is *simply not what the post says*. Will Manley comes in with a comment that's a little shocking for even a retired librarian, given the usual library support of intellectual freedom:

Bobbi, you have written a very important post. If anonymity provides a sense of security for librarians who have something important to say, then I think it is a good thing. Our profession is all about freedom of expression, and anonymity can further that cause. However, if it becomes a tool of personal attack or abuse, it should not be tolerated. Anonymity for civil discourse...yes; anonymity for uncivil discourse...no!

It should not be tolerated. Of course, that's not what her post said. I'm bemused by the idea that freedom of expression is only to be tolerated if it's not for "uncivil discourse." (The ACLU has defended neo-Nazi groups. That organization, which I belong to, believes that freedom of speech *requires* freedom of speech you find unseemly.) Newman's response? "Thank you, Will. Well said!"

At one point in the comments, Newman asked for examples of pseudonymous bloggers who weren't hateful. She got one example. There cer-

tainly could have been quite a few others, including one (more recent than the post) appearing later in this section. In practice, the post is simply disappointing—not only because it fails to separate anonymity from pseudonymity but also because it paints with far too broad a brush.

Where Anonymity Breeds Contempt

Or “Online, Anonymity Breeds Contempt.” In either case, a piece by Julie Zhuo [published November 29, 2010](#) in the *New York Times Opinion Pages*.

Zhuo sets a scene: You’ve read a thought-provoking article or viewed a thought-provoking video on the internet and scroll down to the comments:

And there, lurking among dozens of well-intentioned opinions, is a troll.

“How much longer is the media going to milk this beyond tired story?” “These guys are frauds.” “Your idiocy is disturbing.” “We’re just trying to make the world a better place one brainwashed, ignorant idiot at a time.” These are the trollish comments, all from anonymous sources, that you could have found after reading a CNN article on the rescue of the Chilean miners.

Zhuo offers other examples and notes that trolling goes back to the fourth century BC. She offers a link (to a paywalled site) with the claim “Psychological research has proven again and again that anonymity increases unethical behavior” and notes various attempts to deal with the problem, including legislation. Then there’s this:

Some may argue that denying Internet users the ability to post anonymously is a breach of their privacy and freedom of expression. But until the age of the Internet, anonymity was a rare thing. When someone spoke in public, his audience would naturally be able to see who was talking.

Since there were no such things as flyers or leaflets or handbills before the internet, I guess that must be true.

Zhuo praises various efforts to clean up comments, including those done by *Gizmodo* and the Disqus comment platform. Then there’s Facebook, where Zhuo works. She makes a big thing of Facebook’s insistence on real names, pictures and brief biographies. The closing paragraphs pretty clearly call for disallowing anonymity:

Instead of waiting around for human nature to change, let’s start to rein in bad behavior by promoting accountability. Content providers, stop allowing anonymous comments. Moderate your comments and forums. Look into using comment services to improve the quality of engagement on your site. Ask your users to report trolls and call them out for polluting the conversation.

In slowly lifting the veil of anonymity, perhaps we can see the troll not as the frightening monster of lore, but as what we all really are: human.

Gee, maybe if we step on people's privacy from time to time we'll make them even *more* civil... Not that Facebook has ever acted in a manner that's contemptuous of its users, but...well, yes, it has.

To be or not to be a pseudonymous blogger

This [December 13, 2010 post](#) at *Science of Blogging* was placed there by Peter Janiszewski—but it's a guest post by Scicurious, a PhD in Physiology who blogs at *Neurotic Physiology*. Key excerpts—noting *especially* the first excerpt, which gets a differentiation that other people seem unable to understand:

Keep in mind that pseudonymity and anonymity are different things. While anyone can be “anonymous” and their voices will change all the time, a pseudonym is a fake name that is constant through time as one or more specific people with specific voices. This means that you can, over time and with quality work, build up the trust of people who read you, and develop a reputation online as your pseudonym.

Lumping anonymity and pseudonymity together is wrong, lazy and intellectually dishonest. In any case:

There are often good reasons for being a pseud. Many people assume that those writing under a pseudonym must be cowards, trolls, or otherwise untrustworthy. While this is true for some pseudos, not all pseudonyms are equal, and with time you can recognize those who work to build up reputations under their pseudonym. The reality is that there are lots of good reasons to be pseudonymous, from worries about people not taking you seriously, to professional considerations. Sci is a pseud because I don't want animal rights activists coming after the real life work I do, not to mention the work of my colleagues, just because I'm supportive of carefully performed animal research (yes, I've gotten death threats, and I'm by no means the only one).

But, as she notes, it's *hard* to be a pseud.—and it means you can't claim credit for your writing. Blogging in your real name can be more useful—but it also has consequences, and, sigh, if you happen to be a woman, it has more (and more regrettable) consequences than if you're a man.

Interesting comments, some from others who find it either useful or necessary to write under a pseudonym.

The Effect of Pseudonymity on Blogger Credibility

This post by Colin Schultz [appeared February 23, 2011](#) at CMBR. It goes back to the ScienceBlogs flap I discussed in THE ZEITGEIST: BLOGGING GROUPS AND ETHICS ([C&I 10:11, November 2011](#)). SEED Media Group, then-owner of ScienceBlogs, allowed a team of writers from PepsiCo to

start a blog about nutrition and global health. Schultz discusses the ramifications of that move (later reversed—and it’s worth noting that ScienceBlogs is now part of National Geographic) and tries to connect it to broader issues:

The fiasco—dubbed [Pepsigate](#) as the saga unfurled—revolved around two major issues: [traditional notions of the advertising-editorial divide](#) that have plagued publishing for ages, but also a new struggle stemming from a lack of understanding of how readers assess the credibility of blogs. Knowing how readers decide to believe a blog post could help make sense of Pepsigate, and whether or not giving a clearer biography of the Pepsi blog’s authors would have made any difference.

This leads to discussion of an odd study—”[The impact of anonymity on weblog credibility](#)“ by Thomas Chesney and Daniel K. S. Su. The title says “anonymity” but the study was about *pseudonymity*. Undergrads were offered a fake story that had either a pseudonym at the top, a pseudonym with age and sex, or a “real name,” age, sex, email address and photograph.

It turned out, much to the surprise of the researchers, that having a full set of biographical information, or having nothing but a nickname (KrystalKidd, or another similarly creative pseud) made absolutely no difference on how credible the students thought the blogger was.

Schultz—who also confuses anonymity with pseudonymity—says:

But in my mind, this is only one possible way of looking at the results. Yes, it could be that people are sympathetic to anonymous bloggers. Or, maybe it’s just that the level of trust for blogs isn’t up for discussion. So it might not be that bloggers aren’t *losing* credibility by being anonymous, but rather that even by having a photo, an email address and all the rest, bloggers just aren’t capable of *gaining* any points.

At this point, it may be worth noting that the study (involving 269 students total, 182 in the UK and 87 in Malaysia) took place in 2006. Does that matter?

I’m not sure I buy the final paragraph or the post in general:

With the default credibility of blogs running so low, and there being little a blogger can do to improve it, they need to be especially protective of any gains they manage to make—a lesson SEED may have learned just a little too late.

So the presence of one sketchy blog at Scienceblogs undermined the credibility of other blogs there? Maybe—and by that standard, the first-rate writers who blog at *Library Journal* should run like the wind, which they clearly have not.

On pseudonyms, fear, and responsibility

How better to wind up this section than with a post from one of the most meritorious pseudonymous libloggers, LibraryLoon, who posted this [on January 12, 2012](#) at *Gavia Libraria*? This post is superb throughout, and I'm torn between quoting the whole thing, just pointing you to it and saying "There. Go. Read." and doing something in between.

If I had any idea who the LibraryLoon's Boring Alter Ego actually is, I wouldn't tell you; fortunately, I'm extremely bad at that sort of guessing game and choose not to indulge. (At one point, I was nearly certain that I knew who the most irritating pseudonymous liblogger actually was. I was either wrong, or the pseudonym passed to another group of much more irritating people, or the real person/people in question developed multiple personalities. So I'm happier *not* having the vaguest notion who the LibraryLoon's BAE is. Not my concern: She (he, it) speaks with authority and obvious experience, and speaks well.)

I'll take a middle course, offering a couple of excerpts:

Funny thing about the style of cowardice that expresses itself via pseudonymity, though: it's often capable of braver stances than the style of bravery that writes everything in the open under its legal name. Legal names have reputations, untrustworthy co-workers, mortgages, dependents—all the risk-enhancers that make taking unpopular positions, well, risky.

Even when they're ethically-defensible positions. Even when they're the right positions. Ask any whistleblower, anywhere, at any time. Ask any organization that's installed an anonymous employee-feedback mechanism. Ethics don't invariably lead to fair treatment.

The Loon cares a *lot* about ethical treatment; that's clear from her (his, its, their) blogging. She carries out her beliefs: Unless it can't be avoided, she doesn't name names when she's being critical. (I've found that *not* naming names opens one to all sorts of nonsense also—"strawman" and "nobody ever said that" get bandied about with astonishing ease—but that's a different can of worms.) She mentions two exceptions and notes why each exception was needed—and why her shield of pseudonymity was useful in each case.

It's an excellent discussion. I think you should [read the whole thing](#). I'm guessing that the person or group behind the LibraryLoon is one of those who I wouldn't always agree with (and would probably frequently disagree and argue with) but probably always respect. My favorite people in the field, in other words.

Comments

You can *certainly* have a blog without comments—but comments can also add immeasurably to the life of a blog. Or to the heartburn of the blogger, depending.

Proposal: A new kind of blog comment system

That's from Dave Winer, [posting August 22, 2010](#) at *Scripting News*—and you *know* Winer's going to make a point of his longevity as a blogger (and in this case it's relevant):

I'm almost 100 percent sure that *scripting.com* was the first blog to have comments. And I'm equally sure that it was the first to have its comments flame out. The flameout was a good thing, although it didn't feel like it at the time, because it created the first wave of blogs. And when *their* comments flamed out, there were subsequent waves of new blogs.

Later, Winer brought comments back and has been “mostly satisfied” with them. He lists his guidelines for commenters and moderation:

1. Keep your responses focused on the piece you're responding to.
2. No ad hominem attacks.
3. Add value, a new idea, perspective, point of view. Simply saying “I disagree” is not helpful and likely won't get approved.
4. When moderating I'm always mindful of whether the comment needs to be tacked onto my post or if it would do better as a post of its own on the author's blog. I think a lot of people post comments just to get attention. If I get the idea that's what's going on, I don't approve the comment. That's a misuse of the comments, and disrespectful of the community, and of the blog's author.

So far so good—but then we get Winer's proposed *rules* for comments:

1. A fixed commenting period for each post of 24 hours.
2. Until the period expires, none of the comments would be visible to other commenters. (But they would be visible to the author of the post, in case a commenter spots a typo or a factual error, or has an answer to a question that's posed by the piece.)
3. You could edit and refine your comments during the period.
4. There would be a length limit of 1000 characters to keep people from using comments in place of a blog post. No one is going to read a blog post in a comment. (Many people don't read the blog posts they're commenting on either. :()
5. After the commenting period is over, the comments would become visible, and no further comments would be permitted.

Say what? Well, you see, Dave Winer knows better than you do:

I know some people think that blogs are conversations, but I don't. I think they're publications. And I think the role of comments is to add value to the posts. If you want to rebut a post, then you can create your own blog and post your rebuttal there.

He also doesn't think Twitter is a conversational medium. I'm a *little* more sympathetic to that view. Mostly, though, I believe Winer's globalizing his own preferences. Maybe for Winer a post is entirely a publication (making a blog an irregular serial). For many bloggers, some posts are *intended* to start conversations, and for some blogs, most posts *become* conversations. If comments add value to the post at all, part of that value can certainly be serial in nature—that is, Commenter B can add value by commenting on both the post and on what Commenter A said. Which wouldn't be possible given his rules. Basically, Winer wants comments to be Letters to the Editor (but with a 200-word limit).

There are no comments—because he intentionally disabled them “to give a brief demo of what it might feel like to find other outlets for your ideas, or to allow you more time to consider your response.”

I did a phrase search for Winer's post title in Google, yielding 63 results. Ignoring multiple versions of the post itself, items that are nothing but links, aggregators, tweets that say little or nothing and repeats, here's some of what I found:

lotect agreed that commenting “needs to be overhauled” but disagreed with “some of his ideas.”

Point 1 presumes everyone boxes his blog and immediately goes over to his blog to comment on any new post. It goes against the very nature of RSS itself in that people sometimes don't read these posts until much, later on the order of a week or maybe even month. Perhaps this could be determined via analytics for your particular blog. Also someone may run across his post after a search years later and have something new or relevant to add.

Point 2 Limiting information is so unhelpful...

Point 4 This is the guy who's striving for unrestricted twitter message length!!! Yes many comments could be revised and distilled and still get their point across but hey correcting peoples english is best left to others. What if your blog were a force for freedom or emergency messages—capping an extremely important message could have consequences.

Point 5 What??? This is the guy who's all about the users. Where are the users here—lost in a footnote of history. Shouldn't he relish constrictive criticism and feedback. Honest feedback is the best thing you can get according to some. I'll leave it to my commenters to provide the reference.

Sue Anne Reed just quoted the three sentences beginning “I know some people...” and responded, in full, “I can't disagree with him more. Espe-

cially if you're just starting out, comments are a huge part of building community. They are and should be part of the blog conversation."

Theoblogical has a post disagreeing with some of the suggestions but agreeing that something needs to be done. Fred Oliveira offers mostly critical comments in [an August 22, 2010 post](#) at *Helloform*, mostly objecting to the general removal of conversation from blogging—and Oliveira goes to the other extreme, saying "Blogging is about discussion and conversation." That's no more universally and necessarily true than Winer's statement that blogs aren't (ever) conversations. The first commenter, Michael Donohue, is even more extreme than Winer:

Your assumptions are wrong. Commenting is not a "conversation" and blogging is not "about discussion and conversation".

Yes, they've been used that way, but that was more of people hacking or repurposing the platform. That was not the original intention.

However you are right in one regard, people want a conversation and they want to comment on the story and the comments the went with it. The problem has never been addressed ('threaded comments' come close).

What we need to do is kill comments. In it's place build the proper replacement tool for people to converse (preferably with ways to ensure it's civil) and move to that instead.

Right. Because weblogs were originally primarily links, therefore blogs must never be anything else: *That was not the original intention*, and nothing must ever be used for anything other than its first use. (I should note that the quoted paragraphs are cut-and-pasted with no modifications.) Oliveira's response is excellent (even though his post overgeneralizes):

Michael: while I do understand where you're going, I feel like I need to point out that if things were always used the way they were originally intended, we'd never see any innovation. The fact that blogs did evolve towards what they are today means that people did in fact need something like blogging and comments in blogs.

There's a pretty good conversation in the set of comments on this post, one reason I linked to it.

There are maybe three or four more actual responses, a relatively small number—and if you take out Social Media Professionals and other Gurus, there are *very* few comments—partly, I think, because distributed commenting (that is, writing your own post that links to the original) is more cumbersome and less conversational than commenting directly. And requires that you also have a blog.

Three from Scalzi

John Scalzi thinks about comments a fair amount, possibly because *Whatever* gets a *lot* of comments and a lot of thoughtful, worthwhile,

conversational comments—along with some others, which frequently disappear under Scalzi’s Mallet of Loving Correction. It may be noteworthy that Scalzi is not a professional blogger (whatever that means), is not a Social Media Guru or a Search Engine Optimizer, and doesn’t fit into any of the neat know-it-all categories of blogging blatherers. He’s a science fiction writer (from Fairfield, California, about 40 miles from here, but he lives in Ohio)—who won a Hugo award for a collection of blog entries and comments, *Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded*.

“Comments Are a Lot of Work” appeared [on November 22, 2010](#) and has 73 comments. Scalzi notes an experiment by another blogger who’s turning off comments for at least a couple of months because the blogger has better uses for his time and psychic energy. Selections:

I say: Good on Toby. Not that he needs my endorsement, but I fully support his decision to trim off the comments and give himself a break. Why? Because:

1. It’s his blog, and he should do whatever the hell he wants with it. I do think that people forget that personal blogs are personal, and that the person who owns it gets to decide how it’s run. Arguments of “well, most blogs do [x]” are in fact null arguments; if most people running a blog decided to jump off a cliff, I would not be obliged to follow them, and neither would Toby, nor anyone else. Comments can be part of a blog, but then again there are any number of successful blogs that don’t have them, too.

The first five years of Whatever, there was no direct commenting here, either...

2. Managing comments is a lot of work. If you don’t want your comment threads to turn into a pointless morass of trolls and spammers, you have to put work into keeping them readable, and it is a lot of work, particularly when you feel free to comment on controversial subjects—which, this being the Internet, could be any subject at all. Call it Rule 34 and a half: If a topic exists, someone will be an asshole about it in a comment thread...

3. Lots of commenters are a drag. We’re not even talking about the out and out trolls and spammers. There’s also the single-issue tubthumpers, the condescending rhetoricians, the “devil’s advocates,” the concern trolls, the unintentional derailers, the grievously offended, the eager self-promoters, the cluelessly “helpish,” the ignorant who think they’re not, and so on and so forth...

4. Sometimes the amount of work required to manage a comment thread has an impact on what gets written. I quite obviously don’t shy away from subjects here that can garner hundreds of comments and/or require a fair amount of my attention in the moderation thread, but what’s not so obvious is that before I post about something

I know will be controversial or likely to garner comments, I'll ask myself if I actually have the time to deal with it...

It is a lot of work (if you're successful enough to get a lot of non-spam comments) and it's reasonable to take a commenting break.

If by giving himself a break on comments, Toby finds he's more interested in writing his own blog and sharing his own thoughts there, then I think both he and his readers are going to benefit. I'm one of his readers. I know I like it when he blogs. If this means more, I'm willing to forgo the comments. Lord knows I (and others) have other ways to make our thoughts on what he writes heard.

The comments are, *of course*, worth reading—this is *Whatever*, and they wouldn't be there if they weren't. Including this gem:

Come on people we all know what is really important here! We must return to the gold standard. It is the only thing that can save us, That said, I did not reread all 75 comments. That's also a lot of work.

"Politics and Comment Threads: You Should Read" appeared [on August 12, 2011](#) and has 155 comments. It begins with this boldface paragraph:

Allow me to put on my "community manager and mallet owner" hat for a second:

Followed by this lament (the first paragraph of several, followed by his new rules for dealing with "this stuff"):

Guys, I'm getting to the point where I'm dreading posting just about anything here because there is a small class of commenters for whom everything is fertile ground for politics, and an additional, overlapping class of people for whom any discussion of politics is an excuse to go full, foaming firehose in response, with a third and again overlapping group of people who have a hard time having a discussion with people of non-parallel political views without implying, usually sooner than later, that all those who hold views not their own enjoy frottage with infant monkeys and regularly set fire to the infirm. And it's August of 2011, which means it's only going to get worse over the next sixteen months at least.

You'll enjoy the following paragraph much more, and the language is so eloquent (and down to earth) that I'll suggest you go read the original—heck, you'll need to on your way to the long set of comments!

How's he dealing with the excess of political comments? If a post isn't explicitly about comments, he'll be a "lot quicker on the mallet" to whack down political comments that aren't directly on point. The same will be true for irrelevant *responses* to the political comments he lets stand. He'll be *very* quick to beat down any comment that he sees attacking another commenter rather than what they're saying. He also offers four guidelines, the fourth of which should be mandatory reading, daily, for some people between now and the election (any election). The se-

cond and less direct sentence in that paragraph: “If you are one of those people for whom everything *does* have to be about politics, consider a hobby.” Maybe a hobby other than watching Fox News? (No, Scalzi didn’t say that.)

The first comment sets the tone for a lovely, lively, *long* conversation (it’s worth noting that Scalzi *does* do political posts and welcomes sane disagreement in comments on those posts):

I’d like to raise the issue of the clear vote fraud in Florida. The record clearly shows that the Tilden camp was robbed of a fair win by Hayes and this shall not stand sir! It shall not stand!

I did skim through the entire comment thread (highly recommended), and realize that a sentence quoted earlier here may be one of the great statements of the internet and deserves requoting:

If you are one of those people for whom everything *does* have to be about politics, consider a hobby.

Finally for this go-round (there are other Scalzi blogging-related and comment-related posts certainly worth reading), there’s “What to Do About the Dickheads,” [posted September 2, 2011](#), this one drawing a paltry 63 comments.

Here, Scalzi begins with a quote from a comment at *another* post:

What can we as blog readers and comment-leavers do about the entire issue of trolls and abusive commenters? Some of the science-based blogs I read have a stated minimal-moderation policy, and develop a troll infestation. With known trolls, this leads to lots of comments that say “Ignore the troll” or “Don’t feed the troll”, but what else can we do? Do resolutely on-topic comments help drown out trolls and indicate that the rest of the readers don’t care, or is it silent approval?

For *Whatever*, as Scalzi says, it’s simple: Leave it to him. “If you think someone is trolling, leave them to me. I have no problem malleting the schmucks into oblivion, and the trolls and abusive commenters are pretty obvious, particularly in contrast to the other commenters and the standard level of commenting here (yes, that’s a compliment to you all. Thank you).”

He doesn’t think it’s the responsibility of other commenters to take on trolls (and, indeed, that’s the heart of the advice “Don’t feed the trolls”). “It’s the responsibility of the site owner, and I think that it is a responsibility that’s not optional.” There’s a little more (part of which compares being a site owner to being a kindergarten teacher) and of course it’s good.

As are the comments. Which I leave to you.

My comment policy

We’ll close the section with a libraryland item—Jenica Rogers’ [September 12, 2011 post](#) at *Attempting Elegance*. It’s short and to the point, and since it has a CC license that’s reasonably appropriate I’m going to quote the whole thing.

It had to happen eventually: I am writing this for the record for this blog. I reserve the right to delete comments that I feel are inappropriate. I don't mean comments that disagree with me; debate is healthy, and discussion is good, and I will never intentionally stifle dissenting points of view presented civilly and in the spirit of debate. But spam will be deleted, as will vitriol, attacks, bullying, and general assholery.

If you'd like to see why I maintain this policy, here's an example, unedited:

I hate people like you. You have a job and you sit there and hate me for trying to get one. Fuck you, you make the world darker by not giving people a chance. You're a terrible person who has the power to make someone's day but you just say my way or the highway. I'm glad you got your little bit of power in this world and you use it to crush more souls. Fuck off.

As you might guess, that came from the cover letter post. I don't take it personally. While I'm sorry that some anonymous soul in Birmingham, Alabama is having a soul-crushing experience on the job hunt, I am not obligated to accept those kinds of insults in a space I call my own, nor does someone else's blind rage cause me to suddenly rethink my carefully considered professional opinions. I'm wise enough to know that this is an example of someone who is hurt and looking for a way to lash out at the injustice they perceive, but... no. Just no. That is not my responsibility, nor my burden to bear. This kind of "discourse" adds nothing to any discussion here, and I see no reason to let it stand. Anything similar will be deleted, and this post serves as notice of that policy. quote the whole thing:

The "cover letter post" is, I believe, "[the torment of terrible cover letters](#)" posted June 10, 2011; it got 84 comments and linkbacks (including one apparent spam), and the set of comments is quite remarkable in and of itself.

Science Blogging

A few items I thought others might find worthwhile, all related to science blogs, more than half from one of our own, the estimable John Dupuis.

Science blogs and public engagement with science

This one's by Coturnix, posted [March 8, 2010](#) at *A Blog Around the Clock*. It's a long post (more than 4,500 words or the equivalent of about six pages of *Cites & Insights*) and is primarily a fisking of an [article with the same title](#) by Inna Kouper that appeared in the [Journal of Science Communication](#), a Gold OA journal. Coturnix serves on the journal's editorial board and reviewed this particular article—and "was somewhat dismayed

that the paper was published despite not being revised in any way that reflects a response to any of my criticisms I voiced in my review.”

I find it interesting as a form of post-publication review. I guess I also find it interesting that the criticisms were apparently ignored; that has not been my experience as either a reviewer or reviewee (on the rare occasions that I've done formal papers).

Here's part of the quotations and Coturnix' critiques. (Double-indented paragraphs are from the paper; single-indented are Coturnix' comments.)

Digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) are novelty tools that can be used to facilitate broader involvement of citizens in the discussions about science. The same tools can be used to reinforce the traditional top-down model of science communication. Empirical investigations of particular technologies can help to understand how these tools are used in the dissemination of information and knowledge as well as stimulate a dialog about better models and practices of science communication.

With the Internet being over 26 years old, the World Wide Web 19 years, and blogs 12 years, I don't think it is correct to still, at this day and age, call ICTs “novel”.

This study focuses on one of the ICTs that have already been adopted in science communication, on science blogging. The findings from the analysis of content and comments on eleven blogs are presented in an attempt to understand current practices of science blogging and to provide insight into the role of blogging in the promotion of more interactive forms of science communication.

Analysis of blogs has been done before, so this article needs to focus on what new it brings to the literature – the analysis of comments...

The paper claims directly that it's the *first* attempt to analyze current science blogging practice, a claim that Coturnix finds questionable, although previous papers didn't focus on comments.

The data for this study consist of posts and comments from eleven blogs that write about science and technology. The blogs were sampled via the Internet search for “science blogs” and “blogs about science” and by following scientific news on the moment of data collection in Spring, 2008. Below is the list of blogs with their titles and URLs from which the posts and comments were sampled:

This needs to be clarified. Internet search for “science blogs” and “blogs about science” brings up thousands of blogs (some of which are not science blogs at all). How were these particular 11 chosen? What search method was used: Google Blogsearch, Google Web Search, Technorati, other?...

This is an interesting collection... It is, first, very small, thus missing some important subsets of the science blogosphere (medblogs, nature blogs, skeptical blogs and, importantly due to cluster analysis by Christina Pikas, the female science bloggers which have a very different pattern of both posts and comments). All or most of the authors of these 11 blogs are white males, which also affects the analysis. A number of these blogs are multi-author, with each author having a different style and blogging mode...

Before sampling blogs were examined for posting activity. As it was determined that some blogs posted one or two messages per week and others posted several messages per day, it was decided to save 30 days of activity from less active blogs and five days of activity from very active blogs. For feasibility of qualitative analysis, the number of comments was limited to 15 comments per post. Overall, 174 posts and 1409 comments from 11 blogs were saved and analyzed.

Please justify the cut-off at 15 comments. On busy blogs like Pharyngula, the first 15 comments are likely to be quick one-liners while deeper discussions happen later, once readers had sufficient time to read and digest the content of the post, often with long, well-informed comment threads that go on for hundreds of comments per post...

The findings suggest that science blogs are too heterogeneous to be understood as an emerging genre of science communication. The blogs employ a variety of writing and authoring models, and no signs of emerging or stabilizing genre conventions could be observed. Even though all blogs mentioned science or a particular scientific discipline in their descriptions, they differed in their voice representations, points of view, and content orientation. Some bloggers emphasized the first person perspective and presented themselves through religious and political affiliation (e.g., “The blog is about whatever we find interesting” at Cosmic Variance or “Evolution, development, and random biological ejaculations from a godless liberal” at Pharyngula). Others shifted the focus from their personalities to the content and featured more neutral forms of presentation (e.g., “... the latest news about microbiology” at MycrobiologyBytes or “... your source for news and commentary on science” at The Scientific Activist). Differences in sources, topics, and modes of participation among blogs are discussed below.

The small and thematically narrow sample of blogs limits the value of this paragraph. What is in an “About Us” section may have been written years ago and never revisited although a blog has evolved in a different direction in the meantime?

I'd probably be a little harsher, but I'm neither a scientist nor (any more!) a blog researcher. If homogeneity is required in order to establish a “genre of... communications,” we're all in serious trouble, as the best genres are typically wildly heterogeneous. Should science-related blogs all be

written similarly and in the same tone? Really? What a sad limitation that would be.

The article also comments about non-science-related posts in science-related blogs (with some errors in the examples) and discusses the scientific topics, a discussion that's fatally flawed by the tiny universe studied. Eleven blogs within any broad field will say almost nothing about the field in general. (Coturnix' comment: "The range of topics seen suffers from the small sample of blogs. A different sample (e.g., if all the blogs were sampled from Nature Network) would result in a completely different word cloud.")

Each larger group of participation modes was equally noticeable in the sample, therefore it is difficult to claim that one form of communication or the other is more common for science blogs. Being a more fluid and personal genre of communication, blogs allow for greater variability of expression, and it seems that the authors of science blogs eagerly utilize this fluidity and variability. It was observed though, that certain blogs favored one mode of participation more than others.

Do you have numbers, percentages? Can you provide a complete dataset of raw data so others can reanalyze?

What I hear in Coturnix' comment is "Is this an actual study as opposed to a set of personal observations?" Maybe that's unfair.

The paper then turns to discussion of specific posts, a problematic discussion because the likely audiences for science blogs are no more homogeneous than the blogs themselves. *Wired Science* is going to reach a far different audience than a blog devoted to particle physics, and *should* be written at a different level.

Emotional and often insulting evaluations are very common for this and some other blogs that seem to be eager to demonstrate not only their rightness, but also to distinguish their group of reasonable and worthy individuals from others, who are wrong, unintelligent, and overall worthless. The frequency of such evaluations and mockery undermines the goals of rational debate and criticism. Such activities can foster solidarity among the like-minded individuals, yet at the same time, they may spur hostility in those who are undecided or hold a different opinion.

This statement (last 2 sentences) is often repeated but has never been studied and does not have, thus, empirical support. While alienation of the 'opposing side' is likely, it does not make a difference as the 'opposing side' is regarded as 'unmoveable' and is not the target audience. The undecided, on the other hand are a big unknown and there are some indications that they are likely NOT to want to join the side that is mocked...

Readers of science blogs also had some relationship with science, i.e., they were not exactly non-scientists or lay persons. One author posted a message titled "Who are you?" and asked his readers for information

about themselves and their background. The answers to this post as well as the overall analysis of readers' comments demonstrate that the readers are almost always associated with science one way or another. They are graduate students, postdoctoral associates, faculty members, and researchers from a variety of scientific and research fields including biology, physics, neuroscience, and medicine. Wired Science was probably the only blog in the sample where non-scientists formed a considerable portion of the audience. Nevertheless, even in this blog commenters often took the position of authority and talked as experts who are quite knowledgeable about the subject.

Remember again that Wired bloggers are journalists.

Here again, the fundamental problem is that the author seems to want something from “science blogs” as a genre that makes no sense: a homogeneous approach to homogeneous readers.

I've omitted a section on blog comments—a section where the fundamental problem is a conflation of blogs *by* scientists with “blogs” *about* science from mainstream media. Coturnix' explanation of the difference is sound.

Science blogs examined in this study are very heterogeneous. They provide information and explain complicated matters, but their evaluations are often trivial and they rarely provide extensive critique or articulate positions on controversial issues. Kenix (2009) analyzed political news blogs as alternative news sources and found that the blogs offered binary, reductive analysis and dependent reporting. She also found that readers often provided caustic commentary and argued that comments can be considered a separate communicative sphere more akin to a neighborhood bar than to the Habermasian public sphere. It appears that science blogging can also be characterized as relying on reductive analysis and dependent reporting and drawing caustic and petty commentary.

Small sample, omission of blogs that almost entirely write posts for ResearchBlogging.org aggregation (eg, Not Exactly Rocket Science, Tetrapod Zoology, Neurotopia, Neurophilosophy), omission of highly technical blogs which are a center of that discipline's online community (e.g., Sauropod Vertebra Picture Of The Week, or Deep Sea News) and omission of some of the blogs with the most developed feelings of community—the female scientist blogs and Nature Network blogs, makes these points moot. This is akin to analysis of political blogs and omitting Firedoglake, Talking Points Memo, Huffington Post and Hullabaloo—the blogs that do heavy lifting, independent reporting, expert analysis, etc. Many such blogs exist in the science blogosphere but they were not included in this paper.

In their current multiplicity of forms and contents science blogs present a challenge rather than an opportunity for public engagement with science. Lack of genre conventions, which for the audience translates into broken

expectations and uncertainty, impedes the development of stable readership and participation from the larger public. The “neighborhood bar” or “water cooler” commentary creates a sense of community with shared context and culture, but at the same time it creates a barrier that prevents strangers and outsiders from joining the conversation. As a community of scientists or individuals close to science, the existing readers may enjoy the entertaining nature of science blogs and not need science blogs to serve as a place for discussion and rational debate. Relying on such community of readers, bloggers may reduce their interpretive activities and resort to copying, re-distributing, and re-packaging of the existing information, which is still quite rewarding given the background of the majority of current readers and yet requires much less time and effort.

Blogs are technological tools, platforms. They can be used by corporations and organization for PR and news delivery, but that kind of blog does not attract much audience. Most blogs are personal blogs. It is the personality of the owner, combined with her/his expertise, that draws in the audience. A personal blog is a personal space for personal expression. Bloggers are likely to strongly resist any attempts by any group to influence the way they spend their free time conversing with friends online. In other words, they are not meant to be vehicles for science engagement with the public by design, but they serve that function very well precisely because of the personality of the blogger, (often self-deprecating) humor, often juicy language, and strong opinions. Scientists are supposed to be cool-headed, anti-social recluses—blogs show they are anything but, break the stereotypes and show the humanity of scientists. With this, comes the trust. And science engagement is all about trust—not the memorization of knowledge of scientific trivia.

The apparent suggestion that *any* medium should have a single form and content level is so bizarre (in my opinion) as to beggar discussion. That’s particularly the case with an open medium (or, rather, complex set of media) like blogs.

So, this article was supposed to be the analysis of comments on science blogs, but did not actually study comments— it studied a tiny and unrepresentative sample of blogs, one of which is dead (Pure Pedantry) and thus slowly accuulating unmoderated spam comments....

Five years ago, I read every science blog in English language. I could, as there were only dozens of us. The science blogosphere was small and tight at the time. But remember where these blogs came from—they evolved out of political, atheist and skeptical blogs. There was ‘Intersection’ where Chris Mooney was collecting material for “Republican War on Science”, there was ‘Deltoid’ fiercely fighting against Global Warning denialism, there was ‘Pharyngula’ providing a voice

for atheists who until then thought they were alone (and who were then, after a series of anti-religious rants, delivered to some of the best written science posts ever, over and over again), there was my blog ‘Science and Politics’ where politics posts outnumbered the science posts at least 9:1. Not much more. Most science blogs were primarily focused on something else – politics, religion, skepticism, etc. – than on science. In many ways, early science blogs were really political blogs with a scientific twist.

Today, there are thousands of science blogs. Most of them are really science blogs – covering science in every, or almost every post. The ratio of science:other topics is much, much higher today than it was then...

There’s more in the post, including links to other comments and a set of “ancient” posts (between two and four years old) that directly addressed the questions raised in the article.

In the comments (an interesting set), it emerges that Coturnix wasn’t actually expected to review the paper (he was asked to suggest names of reviewers), so his review is “unofficial” and really a good example of post-publication reviewing. (A comment from the journal’s editor explicitly says they ignored his comments because they weren’t double-blind: He knew the name of the author.) If you do read the comments, you need to ignore quite a few of them that are pretty much wholly off-topic, basically assailing Coturnix because his idea of comment moderation isn’t the same as theirs. Or, actually, looking for an excuse to attack Coturnix himself, as in direct quotation from one of the comments: “Of course, you’re about as unfit to judge clarity or intellectual honesty as a person could possibly be, so I expect no better from you, and won’t be responding to you further.” Whew.

Coturnix—Bora Zivkovic, but I’m generally using whatever name actually appears on a post—links to several other commentaries on the article (or on his fisking of the article). One great comment [comes from](#) a nonscientist, David Wescott:

To me, criticizing science bloggers for not being accommodating enough toward non-scientists on their blogs is a bit like turning down a dish of homemade apple pie because it didn’t come with ice cream.

A fascinating discussion on a paper that I doubt should have been published. The author did not choose to respond.

A blog of substance...

This one’s *much* shorter, from John Dupuis [on August 5, 2010](#) at *Confessions of a Science Librarian*. He was tagged with a meme: “Sum up your blogging motivation, philosophy and experience in exactly 10 words.” (As with most blogging memes, he was then asked to tag 10 other blogs.)

His response:

Bring the world of scientists to librarians and vice versa.

And his commentary:

That was strangely easy to formulate and I'm not sure if that's a good thing. Similarly, I think it's an overall mission statement rather than something that needs to be implemented with each post I make. Over the long view, nearly eight years of blogging, I think it's going pretty well.

I think he's right on both counts. There were no comments.

Blogging: What's new?

This [November 21, 2010 post](#) at *A Blog Around the Clock* is signed by Bora Zivkovic, so I'll use that name rather than Coturnix. An update at the top says it's greatly expanded in an article [posted December 20, 2010](#) on the *Scientific American* "Observations" blog, "The line between science and journalism is getting blurry...again." That article is probably worth reading, but it's also *long*, and I can only deal with one long Zivkovic piece per day. So, returning to the somewhat shorter November post...

Zivkovic asked about "bloggers and Twitterers from before the web" and got an interesting set of responses from Samuel Pepys to Albert Camus, with stops at Mark Twain, Plato and others. He suggests that ship captain's logs were "essentially tweets" with geolocation—that, in essence, blogs and tweets are old forms with new technology to make them faster, easier and more widely available. And that, to some extent, the emergence of these media is a healthy response to the 20th century phenomenon of mass media with conglomerate ownership as a dominant form of communications.

All we are doing now is returning to... a more natural, straightforward and honest way of sharing information, but using much more efficient ways of doing it. And not even that—where technology is scarce, the [analog blogging](#) is live and well.

What about trustworthiness of all that online stuff? Some is and some isn't to be trusted. It's up to you to figure out your own filters and criteria, look for additional sources.

But that is not new, either. The only thing that was really wrong is the way so many people unquestioningly accepted what 20th-century style broadcast media served them. Just because articles were under the banners of big companies did not make them any more trustworthy by definition. In the 20th century we lost the ability to read everything critically, awed by the big names like NYT and BBC and CNN.

We didn't *all* lose that ability, but the point is well taken.

With the return of a more natural system of communication, we got to see additional opinions, fact-checks on the media by experts on the topic, and realized that the mainstream media is not to be trusted.

With the return of a more natural system of communication, we will

all have to re-learn how to read critically, find second opinions, evaluate sources. Nothing new there either—that is what people have been doing for millennia—the 20th century is the exception.

An interesting perspective discussed at *much* greater length in the December article.

The Science of Blogging

That's from John Dupuis again at *Confessions of a Science Librarian*, this time on November 29, 2010, and the title is also the name of a "[new blog in town](#)"—this one devoted to the joys of scientists blogging to advance their work." (I've already cited *Science of Blogging* in an earlier section.)

Dupuis quotes the mission statement from SoB:

Social media provides a tremendous outlet by which to translate and promote scientific knowledge and engage the public discourse. All scientists, researchers, clinicians, government and not-for-profit organizations have much to gain by adopting an effective and viable social media strategy.

Science of Blogging will not only highlight the ways by which social media is changing the way science and research is communicated, but also will provide basic guidelines for those individuals or organizations who seek to use social media to increase the public understanding of scientific research.

I continue to be unfond of "social media" as a term used mostly by PR people and Gurus, and I think that may apply here. Dupuis excerpts some of the first posts on SoB, and when one post title is "Why all scientists should blog: a case study," I find that I want to stop. I don't think it's any more reasonable to say *all* scientists should blog than it is to say *all* librarians (or plumbers or physicians or college professors) should blog. Of course, this is one area where Dupuis and I may disagree.

In any case, I think you'll find this interesting.

The power of blogs, or #OccupyScholComm

Jumping ahead a year, we'll end this section with [this October 19, 2011 post](#) by John Dupuis at *Confessions of a Science Librarian*, and a somewhat ambitious post it is.

The rise of science blogs over the last few years has certainly demonstrated that. In librarianship as well, blogs are a powerful source of comment, theory and practical advice. I've always thought that the practical side of the library world was ripe to be the first field to truly leave journals behind and embrace blogging as a kind of replacement. It would be messy, sure, but it would be democratizing and reinvigorating.

Much as I love blogs, I don't think I buy into that idea (that is, wholly replacing journals with blogs)—but of course I'm *not* a practicing librarian and Dupuis is. He continues:

The kinds of discussions we see in the best of the library blogosphere are as good as anything we see in the formal literature. [In the Library with the Lead Pipe](#) is a great example of one of the ways it could work, with [Research Blogging](#) or [PLOS Blogs](#) as an example of how meaningful aggregation or community could arise.

Just to contradict myself, [I'm on record](#) as saying that “the most compelling and worthwhile literature in the library field” is the gray literature, which includes blogs as well as odd creatures like *Cites & Insights*. I said that in 2007; I still believe it to be true. Which doesn't mean I'm quite ready to abandon journals (even though I almost never publish in them).

Dupuis quotes Paul Krugman on economics blogs and Nigel Thrift on speculative realism, and both quotes are interesting. In practice, taking this Dupuis sentence into account, I'm not sure I disagree with him all that much: “And it's unlikely that we'll ever have a scholarly communications landscape that is only or even primarily populated by blogs.”

It's unlikely and I'm not sure it would be a good thing. No comments, but that's not unusual for liblogs.

Brilliant Statements

That section heading is a modified form of a two-syllable eight-letter word, often abbreviated to the two initial letters of the section heading—a word I believe applies to some of these items directly but is the topic of others. You judge which is which.

Do You Make These 10 Mistakes When You Blog?

As I link to [this Michael Hyatt post](#) from two years ago (it's not dated) at his eponymous blog, the nature of the blog becomes clear as I'm hit with a popup: “Are you ready to live your life on purpose? Creating a personal life plan.” I see no way to get rid of the ad, which covers the bottom quarter of the screen. Hyatt's theme is “intentional leadership” and he has a sidebar showing the “community leaders” who “help moderate my comments and provide leadership to our growing community.” The very first Leader is active in Focus on the Family, one of the worst of the “family” groups that define “family” very narrowly, and the rest are mostly directly involved in ministries. So I'm strongly biased against this post even before I start reading (I note that there's a BIG NUMBER “235,583” blaring out the blog's total subscribers, and that doesn't help), and the first paragraph clarifies what Hyatt thinks blogging is all about:

Assuming you want to increase your blog traffic, there are certain mistakes you must avoid to be successful. If you commit these mistakes,

your traffic will never gain momentum. Worse, it may plateau or begin to decrease.

It's all about market share, folks: First, last and pretty much entirely. The mistakes? You don't post enough. You post too much. (He says you need to find your "frequency sweet spot," which for him is four to five posts a week.) Your post is too long—and here he praises Seth Godin. He aims for 500 words (the post is around 880 words, but never mind...). You don't invite engagement (this just after he's touted Seth Godin, who doesn't allow comments). Ah, but his definition of engagement is "a combination of page views, reader comments, and social media mentions," and I guess Godin scores well enough on the first and third to make up for a zero on the second. You don't participate in the conversation. You don't make your content accessible. (He calls for short posts with short paragraphs with, I suspect, short words—oh, and lots of bullets and subheads.) You don't create catchy headlines. Your first paragraph is weak. Your post is off-brand (that is, *all of your posts must be on a specific focus*)—although "hobby bloggers," who are clearly anathema to Hyatt, can "get away" with an occasional post that's not laser-focused. Finally: Your post is about YOU.

Can I say that this list is all wrong? Not really...although I'm not the only one who's noticed an *increase* in traffic when we post less, and of course I'm one of those despised "hobby bloggers." In any case, while some of this may be right, it sure has that Brilliant Statement feel to me: It's all about traffic, never mind the meaning. And, of course, personal branding. I am impressed that Hyatt includes a disclosure of material connection—in the smallest type I have ever encountered on a web page, type that's not only tiny but also rendered in light grey. (Looking at the source, it's 10 pixels and color #999999, which is indeed a light grey: the text is apparently designed to be unreadable. Draw your own conclusions.)

Lots'o'comments (280 of them), and given the nature of the blog and the size of the audience, it's no surprise that the first few dozen are all high-fives and mutual congratulations on the wonderfulness of this all.

How to not build a science blog network

In this case—an unsigned post at the idea.org blog [on February 24, 2011](#), the Brilliant Statement (or Brilliant Solution) label applies not to the post itself but to the object of discussion, an attempt by E.W. Scripps to start up a space science blog network. It starts with a rousing affirmation of blog networks:

Blog networks provide readers an interesting place to read a variety of interesting articles, or other media. They can be win-win for everyone. Technically, they are relatively easy to make with the current generation of blog authoring software. It's the human side that takes time and work.

Then we get to the example. As with many media conglomerates that publish newspapers (and in some cases overpaid for those newspapers because they used to be profit machines), Scripps is seeing profit from newspapers drop. So they're pushing more heavily into the web.

John Wilpers, the Global Blog Coordinator for Scripps, offered his approach to finding and recruiting bloggers for the new network:

I have a team of 25 interns and associates who scour the web looking for the very best bloggers in the world blogging about a topic, in this case space. We have a range of criteria we use to narrow the hundreds or thousands of blogs down to roughly 200 semi-finalists. Then myself and my deputy blog coordinator dig deeply into each of those semi-finalists to deliver to the editors of a particular project, in this case the space team, two to four dozen of the very, very best blogs.

Once the editors of the team have had a chance to review those recommendations and give us their first choices, we do even more research to be able to write a very personal, unique invitation to each blogger so that he or she knows we really do admire what they are doing and want to give them and their "brand" exposure on a major media website. (The best bloggers often get blast requests to allow sites to scrape their blogs and they almost always reject those requests.) What we offer in exchange for their content is massive exposure to a new and qualified audience to get their thoughts and work out there in a big way.

Sounds good, right? So here's what David Dickinson of [AstroGuyz](#) got two days before the network was to launch—as a *1,500-word comment* at his blog:

Some good news for you, I think.

At Scripps Newspapers, we have spent a long time looking for the best astronomy and space blogs in the world, and your "AstroGuyz" blog is one of the most thorough, intelligent, wide-ranging and engaging blogs about popular astronomy that we have ever read, and we've reviewed thousands of blogs!

But what really makes "AstroGuyz" stand out from the bazillion space and astronomy blogs we've read is a combination of several unique strengths working together...

Here is what our primary researcher had to say in his initial assessment of your blog:

"David is a delightful spirit writing creatively and excitedly about all things space, but focusing especially on astronomy and telescopes and discoveries. His categories are great: Do It Yourself Astronomy, Observational Astronomy, Real Science, Astro News, and Astro Culture. He writes regularly and very well. An undoubtedly wonderful blog."

You also “talk” to your readers in a smart, friendly, comfortable style. Reading your blog is like having a conversation with a real space pro who’s sharing his insider knowledge with us over a cup of coffee...

You and the 19 other Space bloggers we are approaching are the first non-Scripps employees to see it! We are officially launching it on Thursday, the 24th [of February, today].

That’s just the first 213 words; I’ll take this post’s word for the rest of it, including a clause that would effectively license the blog’s copyright and allow Scripps to rewrite (“enhance”) post headlines “for SEO purposes.”

Another space science blogger got an exceedingly similar solicitation, differing only in a few adjectives in the second paragraph and a different assessment paragraph. So how did this all work out?

The last minute, shotgun approach to attracting talent was unsuccessful. The 19 solicitations Mr. Wilpers mentioned, including these two solicitations sent just short two days before launch, were unproductive. As a of the day after launch, no bloggers were willing to have their content syndicated in full. Perhaps the interns Mr. Wilpers used to craft the flattering, personalized messages may not have hit the right chord. Perhaps the flattery seemed insincere. Perhaps the two-day timing was too tight. — So at launch, Space Times News is repurposing public domain content from NASA, and posting short excerpts that link to other blogs.

Building a serious blog network involves soliciting many potential bloggers, with subtlety, research, and authentic outreach.

There’s only one comment, which reminds me just how small potatoes *Walt at Random* is: The commenter says many bloggers receive “a dozen similar solicitations every week” (and a little more).

What of *Space Times News*? It took a couple of tries, but I eventually got through. The most recent story—*the most recent story* as of July 17, 2012—is dated July 14, 2011. A Blogs link eventually does go to a group of blogs (including AstroGuyz), none of which seem to have any posts more recent than September 2011. The “About Us” page consists entirely of histories of different Scripps papers, with not a word that I could find about what appears to be a defunct network that lasted just a few months.

The Cult of Monetization

The target of this [July 24, 2011 post](#) by Mitch Ditkoff at *The Heart of Innovation* is sketchy enough. Excerpts:

I wish I had a nickel for every time someone has asked me if I make money from my blog—and a dollar for every time one of these people used the “M” word, asking me if I’ve found a way to “monetize” the effort...

The word “monetize” completely repels me. If there is one word in the English language I could live without it would be that word.

What? “Leverage,” “incentivize,” and “maximize” aren’t enough? Now we need “monetize?”

Ditkoff goes on to say, in a terse, lively manner, that blogging no more needs to be “monetized” than do hugging your kids or watching a sunset. This next extract is one where I might look at Ditkoff oddly:

The weird thing is, whenever I’m asked by well-meaning friends if my blogging has helped me grow my business, my response is usually tinged with a subtle form of defensiveness, bravado, and hocus focus about “building a brand.”

I confess. My response has not always been authentic because I have bought into the assumptions, doubts, and “business acumen” of my inquisitors.

DING DING DING! Building a brand. Authentic. Oh, never mind...

We live in an age that is far too focused on money. People have confused it with a lot of other things: like happiness, for example... and meaning... and fulfillment... and the innate thirst to make a contribution to others.

I’ll buy that, and I’ll certainly agree “not every action needs to be monetized.”

And then the PR guy called me a “fucking bitch”. I can’t even make this shit up.

Pardon the language, taken unmodified (as is the UK-style punctuation) from the title of [this October 6, 2011 post](#) at *The Bloggress*—and once again you can assume the post is *about* Brilliant Statements rather than being an example of them.

“The Bloggress” got a form letter email pitch about a Kardashian sister being spotted in pantyhose, including this line:

The Kardashians once again show they are right on trend, and this is on (sic) Mommy’s are all going to want to follow.

She responded as she does with all “unsolicited form-letters about celebrities-doing-shit-no-one-cares-about,” namely “[And here’s a picture of Wil Wheaton collating](#).” (Yes, that’s what it is.) Which, frankly, strikes me as an entirely appropriate response. (The actual link has some good text, including reasons someone might be linked there and why this kind of PR is stupid, but it’s mostly a picture of Wil Wheaton collating paper. If you’re a Wil Wheaton fan, by all means click through.)

The response from the person who’d sent the email pitch would have been fine, frankly, if not for the first sentence:

Hi there,

That wasn't very nice. We send certain pitches out to people so they have the chance of getting more hits on their page. We'll make note of this email in moving forward and remember if we have any advertising opportunities with any of our clients not to go through you.

Best of luck to you.

Best,

Erica

That wasn't very nice? Really? And the pitch is sent out so the recipients will get more hits? *Sure* it was.

Anyway, the exchange should have ended there...but Jose, a VP at the PR firm, hit reply-all on a comment back to Erica—and the reply-all reached the Bloggess, as it would of course. Here's the message:

Jose: "What a fucking bitch!"

Things go on from there—with a reasonably polite (under the circumstances) response to Jose and, quite remarkably, a reply from Jose calling her "rude and unprofessional," that she should be flattered that she's seen as relevant enough to get PR pitches and that *she* started "the cursing game." At which point, she chose to spread the love around—and with more than 150,000 followers on her Twitter account, she could do that.

Later, of course, the people in charge apologized, as did Jose. Still, quite a story.

There are 43 trackbacks...and, gulp, 1,302 comments. I didn't even try to read all of them, but the first few dozen were fun and interesting. Maybe you have the time.

BrandLink Communications Has the Internet Drop on its Head

Except that I didn't see *The Bloggess* post directly—it's not in my Google Reader library. I saw it because John Scalzi wrote [this October 7, 2011 post](#) at *Whatever* that points to her post. He also links to [his own little PR contretemps](#) from 2006, and that post is so good that you just have to read it on your own. (It's not anti-PR: he contrasts a bad PR pitch with a good one.)

To be clear, and as someone who both gets rather a lot of PR pitches *and* who is also from time to time the subject of PR pitches himself, the very large majority of PR people are perfectly decent people who are doing a particular and peculiar job as well as they can, namely, trying to raise awareness of their clients and their products to outlets that have a large or very specific audience. I don't mind getting PR pitches in my e-mail; [I even have publicity guidelines](#). When there's something I'm interested in, I follow up and then both the PR person and I try to see if there's some way to make both of us happy with the arrangement. If I'm not interested in something, I'll just delete it and

carry on. I suspect that's how most people in this situation work. It's usually a congenial thing.

What I find interesting about spit fight between Bloggess and Brand-Link Communications is that the folks at BrandLink appear to have an inverted view of the relationship between their PR firm and the people they are pitching—which is evident when a vice president of the company, the one who called Bloggess a “fucking bitch,” also informed her that “you should be flattered that you are even viewed relevant enough to be pitched at all.” In other words, it's the PR firm doing Bloggess a favor by spamming her inbox with a press release that's entirely irrelevant to her or her blog, rather than hoping she will do them a favor by mentioning whatever thing they are pitching (in this case, something to do with the Kardashians).

Scalzi offers some pointed comments on that attitude and notes that by now PR companies should know that “the Internet is looking for an excuse to drop on your head.” He offers some useful lessons (starting with “Most PR people are nice folks just doing their jobs” and proceeds to more specific lessons).

Some 65 comments—and it being *Whatever*, they're longer and more interesting (and less flameish) than you might find elsewhere. Well, except for one jackass who seems to assume there are sexual hijinks involved at the PR firm.

I get the occasional PR notice—used to get quite a few, but some firms have *working* unsubscribe links. None of the notices I've received have been as error-filled or offtopic as the one in this situation. So far, I've never felt the need for a curt response. But that's me...and I'm, fortunately, not “relevant” for celebrity PR.

This Blog Sucks (And You're Probably Not Reading This)

That's the striking headline for [a May 10, 2012 post](#) at *Six Pixels of Separation* by Mitch Joel. The lead paragraph (emphasis in the original):

I don't mind that I'm becoming a dinosaur. See, he read an article in the PR media saying “with the rise of social media, businesses are blogging less”—as are agencies. And a hotshot at one digital marketing agency lays it out: “Nobody reads agency blogs, and there are so many out there it's impossible for people to keep up anyway. We put ours on hiatus while we figure out what we want to do with it. We do use Facebook and Twitter. We've figured out what works for us there.”

Joel offers a “corrected” version of that quote:

“Nobody reads agency blogs”... THAT ARE BORING AND SELF-SERVING. This is what the Internet brought: just because everyone can publish content, it doesn't mean that they should. Let's argue and say that I'm wrong and that anybody and everybody should be pub-

lishing content... fine. Then just because everyone can publish content, it doesn't mean that anyone will care. What advertising agencies are learning is that publishing content on a frequent and consistent basis with a compelling voice is not only a commitment, but it is very difficult. Nothing new here. We've been saying this for close to a decade. It has only become more complicated because there are many other, faster and quicker and different ways to create and share content...

Joel proclaims that blogging is about writing and that more agencies should *stop* blogging because they're doing it badly. He lists six reasons given for blogging, very much "brand building" reasons, and says they're the wrong reasons. His *right* reasons to blog?

Because you have something to say.

Because you are passionate about your industry.

Because you are seeing things that not many people are talking about.

Because it helps you to think critically about the changes that your industry faces.

Because you love to write.

Because you have to write.

Because if you had more time, you would write even more.

Because you feel that others out there might connect with the content and the connect to you.

Because you're not blogging for work. Your working hard to make your blog work.

Certainly a better set of reasons, even with the occasional typo (cut & pasted unchanged). His *real* reason business bloggers stop blogging: "the world is not caring all that much." I suspect that's true for most blogs created and maintained to Build Brands or Gain Readers: They eventually fade. (And yes, it's a little unfair to put this post in this section...)

Be a Communications Consequentialist

This post, by Jesse Galet [on June 11, 2012](#) at *Measure of Doubt*, "Possibly the world's #1 brother-sister blog about rationality, science, and philosophy," might not belong in this section either—but I just can't get past that title. "Communications consequentialist"? Really? In a post that offers "ways to help readers" understand your posts (shorten posts, "write for human brains," break up large blocks of text, etc.) including this one "~~Es-~~ ~~chew~~ Avoid obscure Words."

But presumably not phrases that are not so much obscure as gobble-dygoon. At least to this poor semiliterate rhetoric major who doesn't know enough about clear writing to have 15 books published by major library publishers, including one on writing. Oh, wait...

Gengen

What better to follow a group of Brilliant Statements (and blogging about Brilliant Statements) than with gengen, blogging about generational generalizations? Just four items, all from a few days in February 2010.

Blogging: a great pastime for the elderly

Nicholas Carr posted this [on February 4, 2010](#) at *Rough Type*.

I remember when it was kind of cool to be a blogger. You'd walk around with a swagger in your step, a twinkle in your eye. Now it's just humiliating. Blogging has become like mahjong or needlepoint or clipping coupons out of Walgreens circulars: something old folks do while waiting to croak.

He's referring to a Pew Internet [study on social media and young adults](#) as part of Pew Internet's major program of generational generalization and labeling, just part of the overall Pew Internet "praise what we consider praiseworthy and denigrate the rest" program. The study (based on 800 telephone surveys) shows a significant drop in teen blogging from 2006 to 2009, and since I regard the 2006 figures—28% of teens and young adults *actively* blogging?—as absurdly high, it's hard to know what to say about the 14%/15% figures for 2009. One out of seven teens/young adults actually blogging in 2009? *Still* seems high, unless blogging is defined as "at some point having had a blog." Oh, but nearly three-quarters of "online teens" and young adults use social networks—and given the limit to "online teens," 73% seems *way* too low.

That's as much time as I'll spend on the "study" itself, and by now my bias against Pew Internet is probably well known to regular readers. Let's get back to Carr. Never one to understate a case, he says that a report saying one out of seven teens and young adults still blogs puts "a big fat exclamation point on what a lot of us have come to realize recently: blogging is now the uncoolest thing you can do on the Internet."

Carr carries on in his vein of "geezers" (those over 30) who blog. You might find the post amusing. You might not. He makes it clear in the comment that he was writing (and frequently writes) tongue in cheek. If only he was better at it...

In Other News, I'm Old

There *are* people who are very good at writing with tongue in cheek, such as John Scalzi in [this February 6, 2010 post](#) at *Whatever*. The lead sentence in the post says a lot about who reads what: Scalzi picked it up from Andrew Sullivan posting at *The Atlantic's* "Daily Dish"—but that post is nothing more than an excerpt from Carr's post. In any case, here's Scalzi's take on the "news" that blogging is "increasingly the purview of the ancients, they being defined as people over the age of 30":

This doesn't surprise me terribly. For the vast majority of what people (not just teens, but teens also) used blogs for—quick updates on line to friends and family—Facebook and Twitter offer an easier, friendlier and therefore better solution than starting up a blog. If you're starting out in social media, for most folks it makes sense to go there. Later, if you want the ability for customization and a format beyond 140-character tweets and status updates, you can always start a blog. But I suspect most people don't need to get to that point, and certainly not most younger users of social media.

Also, you know. Blogs have been social media's Last Year's Model for a spell now; heck, they were Last Year's Model when Friendster hit. And it's certainly true that when I note that I've been blogging since 1998, certain younger folks get that look in their eye that says *No! No one was even alive then!* That's when I hit them with the concept of “newsgroups.” Good times, good times.

OMG! A sensible interpretation of Pew's “study!” (Should that be “ZOMG”? As a Certified Neandertal, or whatever Pew's calling people like me this week, I'm not hip to the webjive.)

Eighty-six comments, a whole bunch more text in total than the short post. When a stream begins with “Crank and trolls were *better* back in the usenet days, dammit!” you know you're in for some fun. Just a bit later: “Hmph. I bet you weren't even around when Fidonet was active. Now get off my lawn.” Some commenters fall prey to real gengen (primarily saying that kids have short attention spans), but in other cases it's an interesting and amusing set of riffs.

Why don't young people blog?

This post by Arikia [on February 12, 2010](#) at *The Millikan Daily* also points indirectly to the Pew study and directly to a Bora Zivkovic post (“the famous Bora Zivkovic”) following an experiment in which a biology professor had his students create science blogs—in other words, *forced blogs*. Zivkovic says the student blogs had “wonderful writing on all of them, good stuff”—but one of the blogs has been deleted, others stopped posting “probably at the time the course ended” and only one blog is still active. Zivkovic asks “Why did they stop?” He notes similar experiences in other forced-blogging studies: Students tend to stop blogging when they're no longer required to.

In this case, I don't think gengen has anything to do with it. For most people of any age, maintaining a blog is a bad use of time and energy, especially with Facebook reaching so many more people and Twitter being so easy. I think one out of seven teens and young adults actively blogging in 2009 is probably unrealistically high; that students stop doing something after it's no longer part of assigned coursework should surprise *nobody*.

This blogger (who graduated college in 2008, so falls into the “young adult” category) sees different lessons. She sees people who had Facebook throughout college, who learned “way too much about people after only meeting them once,” who saw examples of what not to do online—and who have learned “to not post anything they wouldn’t want a potential employer to see.” Which would be more convincing were it not that three-quarters of young adults and teens (again, if you believe Pew) *do* use Facebook actively (or did in 2009). Indeed, this post is mostly whining about the possibility that being stupid online could cost you in the job market. Consider the final two paragraphs:

So I think that if we want kids to get engaged with blogging, even science blogging at an early age, they have to hear messages from their elders that their any future employer who would judge them for expressing themselves isn’t someone they really want to work for anyway. And then we, as their potential future employers, need to follow through.

While we’re at it, I want to see older people post the remnants of their college debauchery on the facebook. I mean it, bust out the photo albums, scan those pics and post em. You all have job security! You really have no excuse to deny your students this joy.

Let’s talk about job security... No, never mind. I might say more about this post, but the blog uses thin white or off-white type on a black background, and it’s so uncomfortable to read that I’ll stop here. Well, except that the very first comment nails it: “Job security? What’s that?”

The Future of Blogging

Finally, for this section, here’s a piece by Dorian ‘Paisano’ Carta that appeared on *Web Worker Daily* [on March 3, 2010](#)—but *Web Worker Daily* has now apparently been absorbed into *GigaOm*. Carta links to the Pew “study,” has the audacity to say it “wasn’t an exhaustive study” and says it reveals a trend showing that “blogging is losing its luster with today’s younger generation.” Which I don’t disagree with: As I said some time back, blogging is no longer The Shiny, but it continues to be a useful tool for some people.

But Carta seems to feel that there’s a *problem* and knows what it is:

I think part of the problem with blogs is that they are too static and dull. We need to infuse new life into blogs and make them more dynamic. Just as Flash added a freshness to web sites when it first appeared on the scene, we need to do something that will change the game for blogging.

The other part of the problem involves the incredible shrinking attention span of readers/viewers. Hollywood learned long ago that motion pictures need to reach out and grab the audience right away within

the first 10 minutes or else its opening weekend will be its last. That's why most movies look and feel like music videos these days. Quick cut editing and special effects reign supreme. Even the publishing industry has taken its queue from the movie industry and insist that its authors write tighter and more exciting stories.

Gengen incarnate, although freed from one generation—the “incredible shrinking attention spans.” Which is why there are no more long books (you just imagined *Harry Potter*). And Carta has The Answer:

I believe the answer could be the same one that's being touted as the potential savior of newspapers and magazines: The Apple iPad and similar devices, plus the new digital newsstand that it will usher in. Yes, I am suggesting that we look at blogs the same way we look at newspapers and magazines. It's not a coincidence that many blogs have experienced increased subscriptions after changing to a more magazine-styled theme. Imagine providing your content in a more dynamic and exciting manner, like Wired's demo iPad app:

Ah, but then we get to the heart of the article—and why the link to Pew is irrelevant: It's about *blogging professionals*, that oxymoronic term that treats blogs as traditional media. Gotta make your blog available as an app—its own app, of course! Gotta have flash! Gotta make your blog look like a magazine!

Carta then claims that he or she believes content “will always remain the most important aspect of any blog, newspaper or magazine” but it sure doesn't sound that way.

Technology and Philosophy of Blogging

Does this section combine three different topics? Probably. Some of these are items about blogging technology that bloggers out there might want to catch up on; others are about tech blogging; some are about philosophical aspects of blogging and whether it's worth doing. Maybe this is the “miscellany” section.

Full-content RSS feeds harm page views, but not viewership

That's Bob Beschizza writing [on March 6, 2010](#) at *boingboing*—and while I'd say “readership” rather than “viewership,” he's not wrong. I think you could word it more strongly: Full-content RSS feeds should *improve* readership—but at the expense of direct page views (and, thus, potential ad revenues—unless you add ads to the feed).

It's an odd discussion because it's aimed squarely at the real reason some blogs exist: Money money money. The background is a call by one high-profile blogger for blogs to offer “free, full-text RSS feeds” (if a blog *charges* for RSS feeds and gets away with it, it's an online newsletter in my opinion)—and a response that agrees but wonders whether full-text feeds will harm traffic.

The word “traffic” is a tipoff. “Amateur” bloggers don’t necessarily think in terms of traffic. We’re more likely to think in terms of engagement, community, readers. The money quote (I use that term advisedly) is from a *really* high-profile blogger who saw stagnant pageviews after switching to full-content feeds, but growing readership. That blog is up to “a little over two million” pageviews per month. You can find the link in the *boingboing* post; this other blog clearly doesn’t need my linklove!

World’s Biggest Blogging Platform Adds Curation Feature

Marshall Kirkpatrick posted this [on June 1, 2010](#) at *ReadWriteWeb*—and just so there’s no misunderstanding, that biggest platform is WordPress. Or, rather, WordPress.com, a large subset of blogs that use WordPress software. (In fact, as one commenter notes, WordPress.com probably isn’t the biggest blogging platform, or at least wasn’t in 2010—that was still Blogger. Adding WordPress blogs hosted elsewhere might push WP over the top.) The feature discussed—and discussed [in more detail](#) at WordPress’ own blog—is “reblogging,” a Like function through a floating toolbar when you’re logged in at Wordpress.com (don’t you *love* having various floating toolbars while we’re on the web?)—with a drop-down menu so you can “Reblog this post” with a quick-n-easy way to add your own comments and create your own blog post.

I will refrain from commenting about “curate” used in this context. Kirkpatrick calls it “another chapter in the race to decrease friction in sharing your favorite Web content with friends” and discusses “the popularization of curation.” He also asks “Can Curation Catch On?” and whether it is “capable of sustaining itself.” I’ve never seen a shortage of people sharing stuff about their meals, their stops on trips and, certainly, their links—but for most people, I think, blogs aren’t where that happens these days. Is throwing links at people on Twitter (or Facebook or Friendfeed) really curation? See the first sentence of this paragraph.

WordPress Makes it Easier to Switch to Your Own Hosting

It’s old news, but in case you didn’t already know, this Stan Schroeder item [on October 5, 2010](#) at *Mashable* spells it out (if you can get to the text through the maze of ads). Namely, if you have a WordPress.com blog, decide to move it to your own domain (still using WordPress) and don’t mind paying \$12/year, WordPress.com has an Offsite Redirect feature, which will permanently redirect people from the WordPress.com blog to whatever URL you specify. You can even change the redirect.

The comments seem to mostly be attacks on WordPress.com, some of them for having the audacity to ask for money for value-added services.

No, blogs are not dead, they are on summer vacation

So says Coturnix in [this June 20, 2010 post](#) at *A Blog Around The Clock*.

It is always funny to hear how “blogs are dying”, being abandoned in droves as bloggers are all moving to Twitter. It’s funny how that works – you see fewer posts on a blog, or a couple of bloggers going on a summer hiatus, and the sky is falling!

Coturnix says there’s been a summer slump in blogging every summer since blogging started, for the usual summer reasons. But it’s not just the summertime lull:

Today, there is a plethora of different platforms that are more suitable for various activities that in the past had to be done on a blog. Quick links or brief statements can be placed on microblogging platforms like Twitter, FriendFeed and Facebook. Some things that are a little longer, or a little different (photos, videos, quotes) are best posted on mesoblogging platforms like Tumblr and Posterous. The good ol’ blog is now free from all that small stuff and remains the platform for long form essays only, at least for some bloggers.

So, what a blogger used to do only on a blog is now distributed across several platforms. It is pretty short-sighted to judge a blogger’s output by the blog alone—one needs to evaluate the activity of the person across all the platforms: short form on microblogging services, medium form on mesoblogging services, and long form on macroblogging services.

Then Coturnix talks about “mindcasting” as a coordinated and systematic use of multiple platforms towards development of a single idea. There’s a bit more about it in the post. I’m not convinced there’s a need for a new term or that “mindcasting” does it for me, but I’m frequently wrong, especially where snazzy neologisms are concerned.

Of the handful of comments, one by John McKay stands out (and Coturnix does indeed occasionally write longish posts):

No. It’s true. Twitter has completely replaced blogs. I always publish my 7000 word plus illustration pieces via Twitter and I’m sure you do your 20,000 word manifestos on Twitter.

Is It Time to Stop Blogging and Start an Email Newsletter?

Matthew Ingram asks that (to me) bizarre question in a July 7, 2010 post at *GigaOm*—and he means a *subscription-only* newsletter, of course, as in \$\$profit\$\$!!! Jason Calacanis did exactly that in 2008, but now Sam Lessin’s done it—and since Lessin is one of *GigaOm*’s type of people (a serial entrepreneur), he *also* started a subscription-newsletter service.

Lessin says he started blogging (in 2008—he wasn’t exactly a pioneer in the field) with a “defined set of goals”: Understanding the medium, protecting online identity, intellectual rigor and being taken seriously. Ah, but after two years he’s done all that—”but added that he felt writing a public blog that was available for free to readers was ‘exceedingly disingenuous if not straight hypocritical given my strong belief in the value of infor-

mation.” I like that (for a certain value of “like”): it’s hypocritical to *ever* give away “information” if you believe it has value. Why didn’t somebody tell me back in 2000, when I started *Cites & Insights* (or in 1989, when I agreed to serve on the editorial board of, and write for, *Public Access Computer Systems Review*, an early Gold OA journal)?

And others are doing it! Nate Westheimer (another entrepreneur) will keep blogging but “will share in-depth startup tips and other thoughts through his premium newsletter.” Michael Galpert (another...oh, the hell with it) started a fee newsletter.

Not everyone agrees that moving from a blog to a subscription newsletter is a good move, however, particularly for startups and entrepreneurs—since sharing your ideas with a broader audience can have its own value, especially when you aren’t well-known. Former investment banker-turned-entrepreneur Steve Cheney recently described how he asked Hunch co-founder and angel investor Chris Dixon for advice on what he should do to raise his profile, and Dixon responded: “Start a blog.” It’s worth noting that.

Seventy-three comments starting with this one:

Seriously? But the web 2.0 movement taught us that the value of the web was connecting people to people... seems like a bunch of guys with huge egos listened to the lesser half of their own personality.

Others with subtler points to make. The question’s silly enough as a general question to deserve silly responses, I’d say.

Blogging. This is about blogging.

This post appeared [November 1, 2010](#) at *Traversing the Razor*—and it’s a little mysterious because it began with a link to a post elsewhere, a post that has since been taken down. Excerpts:

Blogging will not replace other forms of media. This is not its goal anyway. Certainly for me, it was a way of practicing and practising writing. Doing this in a public way was designed for me to ‘commit’ to the task. Feedback would be an additional benefit. Blogs, do, on the other hand, provide a good analysis of various issues, and in many cases in the scientific blogosphere anyway, they are highly accurate and treat the subject in greater depth than any of the traditional media. So we can agree that they are valuable. Perhaps more valuable than they appear to most people, as Scott Rosenberg discusses in this fascinating piece on [blogging, empowerment and the ‘adjacent possible’](#). I am certain I will return to that post again and the intriguing ideas therein.

The blogger then responds to assertions made at the now-gone post about the difficulties of blogging: Easy to start, hard to maintain; Need to keep it constant[ly] updated; otherwise you lose potential followers; [Difficulty of putting] thoughts into words; Credibility and the ol’ anonymity chestnut.

It's an interesting set of comments, perhaps best read in the original.

Maggie's 8...

This [December 14, 2010 post](#) by Abigail Gobin, the *Hedgehog Librarian*, is another one best read in the original—and it's short. Noting it violates one of my rules for *Cites & Insights*: It's based on somebody else's conference speech, a speech (by Maggie Stiefvater) at KidLitCon. (As a rule, I don't comment on second-hand conference reporting: Once burned, forever shy.) But in this case Gobin's taking eight points about blogging and appending her own thoughts.

Some points are old (or newer) standbys: The world does not need another blog, for example. Others are questionable generalizations (Blogging is a conversation). Some may not get said often enough (Blog writers should be blog readers). And at least one is real food for thought: Boring people offline = Boring people online. And sometimes, interesting people offline = Boring people online.

In any case, go read the post. Gobin's comments are brief and to the point. She closes with "What are your blogging points?" but, as is true with many of us, got few takers. Well, one, actually.

If You Didn't Blog It, It Didn't Happen

That's Anil Dash [on January 4, 2011](#) at his eponymous blog "about making culture." He links to a [Clive Thompson piece](#) arguing that short-form messages encourage longer-form meditations elsewhere (one I discussed in April 2011). Dash is the kind of high-profile blogger who gets called by Clive Thompson, resulting in this quote from Thompson's column:

"I save the little stuff for Twitter and blog only when I have something big to say," as blogger Anil Dash put it. It turns out readers prefer this: One survey found that the most popular blog posts today are the longest ones, 1,600 words on average.

Dash says here that "big" doesn't necessarily mean important; it means ideas that are "just bigger than 140 characters," which he says "most good ideas are." And there's this:

More importantly, our ideas often need to gain traction and meaning over time. Blog posts often age into something more substantial than they are at their conception, through the weight of time and perspective and response.

And blogs afford that sort of maturation of an idea uniquely well amongst online media, due to their use of the permalink (permanent link), which gives each idea a place to live and thrive. While Facebook and Twitter nominally provide permalinks as well, the truth is that individual ideas in those flow-based media don't have enough substance for a meaningful conversation to accrete around them.

I'm not much of a tweeter, but tweets seem *very* ephemeral to me. Friend-feed discussions, which tend to be longer than tweets but shorter than posts, feel more sustained than tweets but more ephemeral than posts. This all makes sense—different media for different uses—and fits right in with the idea that fewer people are blogging, because most of what most people want to say is ephemeral, and now there's a much broader toolkit to say those things.

That's just a piece of a longer discussion. Dash's title means just what it says: He believes it's much more difficult to find ideas raised on older tweets or status updates—if you didn't blog it, it didn't happen (for the long term). Here's a segment that includes an idea I hadn't really thought about (one that belongs in a Twitter-focused essay), under the heading “The Perils of a Low Stress Environment” [emphasis added]:

Now, Twitter and other stream-based flows of information provide an important role in the ecosystem. Perhaps the most important psychological innovation of Twitter is that it assumes you won't see every message that comes along. There's no count of unread items, and very little social cost to telling a friend that you missed their tweet. That convenience and social accommodation is incredibly valuable and an important contribution to the web.

However, by creating a lossy environment where individual tweets are disposable, there's also an environment where few will build the infrastructure to support broader, more meaningful conversations that could be catalyzed by a tweet. In many ways, this means the best tweets for advancing an idea are those that contain links to more permanent media.

Interesting stuff, and one reason I believe blogging *as a whole* is no more likely to disappear than, well, print books and magazines.

Also an interesting comment stream, if occasionally self-serving (as when a Vox person says you should really be saving audio messages rather than blogging and “talking > typing”).

Blogging is Dead, Long Live Blogging

That's a perennial title with its many deathwatch variations (I'm saving most deathwatch items for another time, probably in THE BACK). In this case it's Joe Coscarelli writing [on February 2, 2011](#) in the *Village Voice* blogs. He starts by noting “The End of Blogging,” a [February 1, 2011 piece](#) by Dan Duray in *The New York Observer*. That piece is...well, I'm not sure what to say, but what can you do with an overreaching paragraph like this one:

Whatever blogs have become, there seems to be universal agreement that the format that made them ubiquitous—the reverse-chronological aggregation accompanied by commentary—is not long for this world, and Mr. Denton's scoop-friendly redesign would seem to be the best

evidence of that. In fact, the decline of the blog has come so quickly, one has to wonder whether we ever really liked the medium at all. Universal agreement in 2011 that blogs are doomed? And some incredible rapid decline? Give me a break. Unless “universal” means “two or three hotshots I happened to call,” this is just plain nonsense. And, it turns out, it’s not even unadulterated nonsense. The article is about *blogs as businesses* and mostly features entrepreneurs who have Better Ways to Monetize Writing. It all seems to come back to that Überauthority Nick Denton and his Better Idea for *Gawker*.

Coscarelli’s first paragraph may say all that needs to be said about the Duray article:

As a blogger working on a blog—blogging, really—it only feels appropriate to devote today’s media column, Press Clips, to “The End of Blogging” in this week’s New York Observer. In the provocative, narrow and winding feature, the Observer sets out to prove—well, what, really? The “nut graph,” as newspapers call “the point, summed up neatly,” reads: “Whatever blogs have become, there seems to be universal agreement that the format that made them ubiquitous—the reverse-chronological aggregation accompanied by commentary—is not long for this world, and Mr. Denton’s scoop-friendly redesign would seem to be the best evidence of that.” Like we said yesterday, Gawker Media is rolling out a redesign. Are redesigns, grouped with Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook, murderous?

He responds to his own question:

No. Nothing is “dead” or even “dying.” The *Observer*’s editors, who write the headlines, know that, just like every editor has known that before them, but “dead”—any finality or bold proclamation, really—is a lightning rod. But it does the work a disservice too.

I think Coscarelli nails the nature of Duray’s journalism as well: He “relies on a jaded, heard-from army of New York City men, quoting just seven of them, zero of whom have more than one degree of separation from any other.” Yep. Same old, same old. For that matter, it’s bemusing that one “blogs are dead” person switched to Tumblr—which most people would consider a blogging platform. There’s a lovely paragraph in Coscarelli’s article summing up what the *Observer* article actually seems to be saying about blogs:

To recap: blogs are both short and long, except when they’re both; they rely on original content, and “scoops,” except when they can’t; and they are in reverse-chronological order, but not when they’re formatted like magazines, in which case they’re Mediaite.

I used a terse definition of blogs years and years ago: Websites consisting primarily of stories displayed in reverse chronological order. (Those may not be the exact words.) Try to add to that definition and you run into

trouble—although if you're intent on showing the death of a medium, narrowing the definition of that medium is always a good idea.

Tips for being a great blogger (and good person)

Meredith Farkas posted this [on July 19, 2011](#) at *Information Wants To Be Free*. She blogs less since becoming a mother—but she's still thinking about blogging. As for Twitter as a substitute, she asks a question I also wonder about:

I wish I could be more of a Tweeter, but I find it even more difficult to find my rhythm in that medium. I can't just sit all day at work with Tweetdeck open because it distracts me from the work I'm doing (how do people do that and actually get anything done? I'm really curious!).

But this really boils down to Farkas' being a blogger:

Let's face it: I'm a blogger. I like the asynchronicity of it. I like not missing things (my RSS reader will hold everything until I have time to take a peek). I like long-form writing (both my own and others'). I like being able to really process my thoughts about something rather than blurting out my first impression. I like easily being able to see other people's reactions to blog posts in a single space. I know so many people who have given up blogging for Twitter and I totally understand why they like it. The immediacy. The ease of commenting. The fact that it's a social world and not just one person's blog. I get it and had Twitter come out two years earlier, I probably would have integrated it into my information diet and online social world much more easily. I often feel sad because I know I feel like I'm losing touch with many dear friends in our profession by not being on Twitter or Google+ or Facebook more often, but I have come to accept that multitasking just doesn't work for me.

Then come her tips, and they're good ones. She offers a good-size paragraph on each tip (Farkas *likes* longer posts and does them extremely well); I'm just quoting the boldface leads, sometimes with my own note in (parentheses):

- **Be authentic.** (By which Farkas actually *means* authentic, as in having your own voice, not Authentic as in *Convincing Us Your Brand Is Really You*.)
- **Sometimes you have to ignore your inner critic.** ([Go read this paragraph. Now](#). Some of the most important and well-read essays in *Cites & Insights* almost didn't get published because of my inner critic.)
- **I appreciate longer, more thoughtful posts.**
- **Self-disclosure is great and also can be terrible.** (Another one you just have to read.)

- **Accept criticism gracefully.** (Farkas is doubtless better at this than I am, but I keep trying.)
- **Engage in conversations.**

Seriously good stuff. Entirely relevant. And while Farkas still doesn't blog as much as she once did (typically one to three posts a month), her blog remains important because she's a good, thoughtful blogger and writer.

The Golden Age of Tech Blogging is Over. Not a Chance.

Another case where one blogger is discussing another writer, the other writer having just issued some sort of elegy for blogging. In this case, Mark Evans posted this [on December 28, 2011](#) at *Mark Evans Tech*, commenting on “End of an Era: The Golden Age of Tech Blogging is Over,” posted [December 27, 2011](#) by Jeremiah Owyang at his eponymous blog.

These two are both discussing what they seem to define as a specific field: Tech blogging. And Owyang leaves no doubt in his opening paragraph:

That's right. We're at the end of an important period. The tech blogosphere as we know it, is over.

Why? Because corporate acquisitions stymie innovation (and a handful of tech blogs were sold), “tech blogs are experiencing major talent turnover” (with *three examples!*, certainly proof of a universal trend—and I guess we're talking problogs here); “the audience” wants “faster, smaller and social” (and, of course, *there is only one audience*) and “as space matures, business models solidify—giving room for new disruptors.” Honest to Gaia, I can't figure out that sentence either before or after reading the paragraph, although it becomes clear that Owyang regards *making a living at blogging* as essential to blogging being successful. That's followed by blather about new forms and new media. Reading just a few of the 96 comments, I see that Owyang will shift his definition of “blog” as needed to suit his argument.

I'll admit that I had no idea who Jeremiah Owyang was. Turns out he's a *Web Strategist*—and his “about” page features him in Speaking Guru mode, mounted mike and all. What does he do? “I strive to deliver insight on disruptive technologies and their impact on how large companies communicate with their customers.” Oh, well, now that *that's* cleared up...

Back to Mark Evans. He says:

You have to give Owyang credit for publishing a post with a catchy headline during a slow news week, but I'll politely take issue with his thesis. While it has been amazing to see such vibrant and extensive coverage of technology over the past years, how does Owyang know it was the “golden age”?

I don't give Owyang credit. Deathwatch headlines are lazy and easy—and unlike Duray (earlier), Owyang can't blame an editor. In any case, Evans doesn't see a few corporate acquisitions and a few people moving on as indicating some End of an Era.

The reality about technology is change is constant. Nothing stays the same or lasts forever. Companies come and go, blogs emerge out of nowhere and then disappear. Tech analysts become big stars, and then fade in the background. It's the nature of the beast.

Rather than buying into the idea, the “golden age” has come to an end, I think the tech blogging market is evolving after a terrific run. It's natural to see some more large blogs be acquired because success attracts higher valuations, which rewards entrepreneurs for all their hard work.

There's more, including this heretical statement [emphasis added]:

And shouldn't be surprising to see business models evolve but, truth be told, most bloggers don't blog to make money, and those who do will find new ways to generate revenue.

It's a good brief takedown, but Mark Evans clearly isn't as High Profile as Owyang: There are no comments. (Looking back at Owyang's post, I think he's drawing parallels to the supposed “Golden Age” of Hollywood. That “age” was from 1927 to the early 1960s. Yes, there were many great films made during that period; yes, it was easier to experiment with medium-budget flicks rather than blockbusters—but if you've looked back at movies from that era, most of them were pretty bad.

The Power of Blogging as...

...scholarship, essays, journalism. Items about the importance of blog posts (and a few related items).

Defining the Journalism vs. Blogging Debate, with a Science Reporting Angle

That's Coturnix, posting [on March 30, 2009](#) at *A Blog Around the Clock*. As happens not infrequently when Bora Z. turns his mind to blogs, it's a long post—a little over 10,000 words (say 12 to 14 pages of *Cites & Insights*, more or less). A few excerpts:

You know I have been following the “[death of newspapers](#)” debate, as well as “[bloggers vs. journalists](#)” debate, and “do we need science reporters” debate for a long time now. What I have found—and it is frustrating to watch—is that different people use different definitions for the same set of words and phrases. “News”, “reporting”, “media”, “press”, “journalism”, “Web”, “Internet”, “blog”, “citizen journalist”, “newspapers”, “communication”, etc. are defined differently by different people. Usually they do not explicitly define the terms, but it is

possible to grasp their definition from context. Sometimes, people use one definition in their initial article, but once the debate heats up, they switch the definitions. Some define terms too broadly, others too narrowly, depending on their own background, biases or agendas. Some make the error of using several of those terms interchangeably, where a clear distinction exists. Thus, in many of the debates, it is a conversation of the deaf—the opponents do not understand that they actually agree (or allies don't see that they actually disagree) because they do not use the terms the same way.

So he's decided to provide his own definitions (and add to several other discussions).

First, there's breaking news as a category:

Something (Event A) happens at Time X. Nobody could have expected or predicted that A would happen at all, or at least that it would happen at the particular time X. It is a new data point. Not 'information' yet, just data. It may be interesting or important enough to notify the world that A happened.

The key to breaking news is speed. It needs to be relayed as close to Real Time as possible...

Twitter works well for breaking news: Most bits of breaking news are 140 characters or less. He figures traditional media (he's somewhat dismissive of newspapers) show up about 12 minutes later...

How about accuracy? As the premium is on speed, accuracy check has to come later. How many times have you noticed breaking news on CNN saying there are 6 dead, then 30 minutes later changing that to 9 dead, then another hour later changing that to 15 dead, etc. The mainstream media also have to make corrections if their initial reports were inaccurate. There is nothing new about that.

Breaking news is only the What, Where and When, not the How and Why—typically provided by professional journalists, and in some ways more difficult for "Citizen Journalists." But sometimes...

Remember when the bridge fell down in Minnesota about a year ago? Who did the best reporting? The guy who lives in the first house next to the bridge. He was there at the moment of the event. He ran down and took pictures. He talked to the passers-by and neighbors. Many knew him and trusted him. He got involved in the rescue and interviewed the people he rescued. And he posted all of that on his blog in as close to Real Time as was humanely possible.

Given that local media didn't do all that well, he says this blogger was "for a time, an Accidental Journalist." There are lots of those.

So, my definition of Breaking News: Informing the world about novel, unpredicted data about the world in as close to Real Time as possible.

What is the difference between Breaking News and Reporting News? I think an important difference is in predictability. If we know that something newsworthy will happen at a particular time and place, we can have whatever infrastructure and equipment is needed in place to capture and broadcast that information in real time. We can send camera crews and reporters to a football game or horse races, or to a meeting of the City Council, or to Congress when it is in session, or to New Orleans as Katrina is approaching, or to an event which started as 'breaking news' but is now 'ongoing news' (think of the Tsunami in Indonesia a couple of years ago). We can even automate some of that stuff, e.g., weather, stock market ticker-tape, Racing Form, just off the top of my head. Do we need the Turing test? Who cares, as long as the data are made readily available...

You can read the original for discussion of the internet's big advantage over traditional media, mostly "lack of limits."

So, my definition of Reporting News: Informing the world about novel, yet predictable data about the world in as close to Real Time as possible, using either personal or automated reporting systems.

But science is really Coturnix' area, even though he seems more concerned with blogging on some days. Here, I think, I can add nothing more to his own discussion of science journalism.

He distinguishes Reporting News from News Analysis (a fuzzy distinction these days, given that the local daily newspaper around here is *deliberately* more devoted to analysis than to reporting as such). And, as you'd expect, he finds the same "killer advantage" for the web over traditional media when it comes to news analysis. Since Coturnix seems to celebrate the bankruptcy of traditional media, I guess that's important.

So, my definition of News Analysis: Turning a data-set into Information by connecting it to other related data-sets and providing meaningful context and explanation.

That's followed by a discussion of science news analysis.

I rather like his definition of investigative reporting: Investigative reporting is uncovering data and information that does not want to be uncovered.

Coturnix continues his celebration of the web killing off everything else as he discusses other aspects of media, and he's very clear: "It already killed the music industry, it is now killing the newspaper as well." Of course, the music industry is nowhere near dead (and the newspaper industry is considerably larger), but when you're on a roll... And how "we are all journalists. And the world is our editor."

So, indeed, "science bloggers are all science journalists as well." Maybe.

Then it starts to get offensive. He defines newspapers thusly: "Newspaper is a bunch of loose pieces of paper with stuff printed on them."

And continues with the reasons newspapers *must* die. He doesn't acknowledge the packaging aspect of a newspaper, the choices involved; I don't think he regards it as significant—which, given his tendency toward verbosity and constant assurance that more is better, is hardly surprising.

Sometimes, in his ongoing discussion or denigration of newspapers, it's just silly:

If you are not in Manhattan, go out and buy USA Today and your local metro. Take a good look at both. Which one do you like better? Which one of the two do you think will survive? Which one of the two you wish will survive? I bet that, almost everywhere in the USA you may be (and I guess there are equivalent examples in other countries), the answer to all those questions is: USA Today. Why?

No, not at all. I like the San Francisco *Chronicle* much better than *USA Today*. I hope it survives. His description of local metros is insulting:

Your local metro will consist mostly of advertising, AP stories, syndicated columnists and comic strips, horoscope, a local mouthbreathing op-ed writer spouting rushlimbaughisms and, if you are lucky, a reprint of a two-days-old Krugman editorial. How many locally produced news? Very little. Reports from the meetings of the City Council or School Board? Nope. Investigative reporting? Zero. I hope you have a birdcage that needs lining or own a fish store that needs cheap wrapping paper.

I am amazed by Coturnix' omniscience, how he manages to know that these false statements are true of *every local metro paper*. (Unless "metro" is a special word that excludes newspapers with local reporting, investigative reporting and other stuff like that.) Oh, he thinks "hyperlocal" newspapers will survive. He cites *USA Today* as a "big, international, good paper" (which overstates the quality in my opinion). He dismisses the rest as worthless. Of course, he mentions science reporting in newspapers and says this:

Science reporting in newspapers? Dead. Because the newspapers are dead. The few mega-big papers that survive will have good science coverage by a stable of excellent freelance journalists, each covering a different area of science and bringing in decades of expertise on the topic. The hyperlocals, if they have a scientific community locally (as the Triangle does), will have good locally-relevant science coverage. Otherwise, they will have none. Most science beat reporters will, like their colleagues covering other beats, have to find new jobs. It hurts, but it is a fact of life. There is no going back now.

I can only speak for the *Chronicle* and David Perlman (and other reporters he's mentoring) and say this is *just not true*. (It is true that our local weekly, the *Independent*, has strong local science coverage—and given that Law-

rence Livermore Lab is so important locally, that's scarcely surprising. Still, Perlman is a *far* better science writer than those on the local weekly.)

As for blogs, he maintains the same simplicity I would:

Bloggers are people who use blogging software. Blogging is using the blogging software. Period.

Actually, now that I think of it, that's wrong. A blog doesn't have to use blogging software. Drupal isn't blogging software, but there are blogs that use it. He's right to say that tarnishing all blogs because 90% of them are crap is absurd, but he's wrong on the direct definition. (Odd: He's only too happy to trash all newspapers because some, maybe most, of them have problems. I guess it only works one way.)

There follows lots of philosophical discussion of what happens as newspapers finish dying (none too soon for Coturnix, apparently); if you have the patience, you can read that in the original.

I probably gave this post too much space. While some of his definitions are sound, the piece as a whole is affected by such a powerful "Web good, traditional media worthless" and "the longer the better" bias that it's difficult to deal with. Maybe that's *my* bias. I agree that "blogging vs. journalism" is a bad way to frame the discussion. I do *not* agree that newspapers are or ought to be dead, that there is no good science reporting in newspapers or, frankly, that unlimited space is inherently a great thing.

Do bloggers need editors?

This post by "MK" [appeared April 2, 2009](#) at ABSW (the blog of the Association of British Science Writers)—and yes, it's at least partly a response to the essay just discussed. The opening paragraph is a bit nose-in-the-air as it refers to "a recent post on something called A Blog Around The Clock." Then this post, on something called ABSW, continues with regard to Coturnix' essay:

This raises an issue that does not seem to enter into the ruminations of the bloggers. They rattle on about accuracy, timeliness and stuff, but rarely get into things like the choice of a story and practical things like readability and length.

The bloggers—not one blogger, but *The bloggers*. Followed by this paragraph, which is noteworthy *because* this is a blog about the need for editors and editorial standards:

My software tells me that this piece is more than 10,000 words long. That may be an inaccurate, life is too short to read the piece carefully, let alone to count the words.

"That may be an inaccurate" indeed! I guarantee you Word's flagging that as wrong, and it's hard to see how even the clumsiest editor could miss an error like that in a five-word (which should be a four-word) clause. (I think the comma after "inaccurate" should be a semicolon, but I'm no editor, so...)

MK thinks 10,000 words is too long and adds (in a paragraph that probably reads differently in the UK than it does in the US):

It is just too easy to write too much when you don't have an editor shouting at you. That is one reason why it is harder to write science for tabloid newspapers than for broadsheets. The editors are less tolerant on the tabloids.

There *must* be respectable tabloids in the U.S. (other than some local weeklies). I just don't happen to know of any. And, frankly, I doubt that the unwillingness to explore a story at sufficient length is inherently a good thing. Some stories in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, including some science stories, run to several thousand words—because they need that much space.

What point is MK making? That an editor would have told “our expert” to focus on one or two points, make them clearly and concisely, and, by the way, who's the audience? (Is it possible that the self-selecting audience for Coturnix' blog *likes* prolix posts?) Here comes another generalization about (all?) bloggers:

Unlike bloggers, professional writers see little point in writing for their own consumption. Ideally, they want to reach people who would normally avoid the subject. You don't do that by writing too much.

To be honest (and ignoring the spelling by this professional editor), I doubt that most professional writers “want to reach people who would normally avoid the subject.” Really? That's why writers for *Stereophile* write so many stories about cancer research... And here's the penultimate paragraph:

A paradox here is that the web is supposed to be a very different medium: writers have to “screen at a time” reading. This guy witters on for screen after screen.

“Writers have to ‘screen at a time’ reading.” Say what?

There are no comments; it doesn't look as though they're allowed. (Going to the article via a different route, I see that only ABSW members are allowed to comment.)

Am I holding this blogger to a higher standard for spelling, grammar and simple proofreading than I would some other blogger? Damn right I am! If you call yourself a professional writer, you should *write professionally*—and that includes at least a casual read of your own work. The number of obvious errors (at least in American English, and I don't think that last verbless sentence works in British English either) in a very short post is simply unprofessional, and does *nothing* to make the writer's point.

Would some bloggers benefit from good editing? Sure. Some wouldn't, at least not much (I can point you to blogs where I don't think professional editing would make much different). Do professional writers always get quality editing that improves their work? Not so much. And in this case the writer undermines his or her own case pretty severely.

Ten Reasons Why Grad Students Should Blog

This piece by Drew Conway [on June 8, 2010](#) at *Zero Intelligence Agents* is an evergreen, an example of a kind of post (and article) that pops up from time to time in different areas. Numbered list, universal advice, possibly a questionable basis in fact—in this case, Conway’s assertion that very few grad students blog, that it’s mostly faculty who blog. (Conway is or was a PhD student in political science, studying terrorism and armed conflict.)

He *admits* that he’s only looking at his own discipline, but he thinks it’s more generally true—and he thinks “more grad students should be publishing online.” He thinks it could be because they don’t know how great blogging is. Thus, his ten reasons, each the usual numbered boldface assertion or phrase with a paragraph of background. Here are the assertions and phrases, combined into a single paragraph:

You actually have something to say. Honing your craft. Establishing an identity. Extending your network outside of academia. The faculty in your department will not think less of you. Instant and broad criticism of your work. Sharpening your own critical eye. Oh, the places you’ll go. Building technical expertise. It is just plain fun.

Since Conway’s a poli sci student, I’ll just note in passing that the list would be easier to read if he’d made a little effort toward consistency—say by changing the first item to “Having something to say” and similarly changing the fifth, eighth and tenth items (the eighth and tenth are easy: Drop “Oh,” in one case and “It is” in the other.)

Editorial considerations aside, what about his points? The first one might be better if he didn’t feel the need to put down most blogs by referring to an “inherent infinitesimal signal-to-noise ratio,” I guess because we’re not all people “deemed qualified to participate in the discussion at a very high level by a panel of distinguished scholars, i.e., the admission committee.” Whew: That nose is stuck pretty high in the air, and it appears that by “grad students” Conway really means “PhD candidates at distinguished universities.” There are, I am afraid to say, tens of thousands of grad students who have a lot less to say than uneducated peasants like me.

As to “The faculty...”—it would be nice to think that’s universally true, but I have my doubts. As to “Oh, the places”—where he says “you will be given the opportunity to travel all over the world and participate in many conferences, seminars, panels, etc” if you blog: well, maybe. Maybe not. The ninth point is strange, because he’s talking about the skills of *building the blog site*. Really? The post appears on a Wordpress blog, and I was never impressed that you needed advanced technical skills to run a WP blog. (Conway apparently lacked the skills to realize that he should switch to WP’s textual-URL option: the URL for this post ends “?p=2174”)

I like much of this, and that's not surprising: This kind of post is an evergreen for a reason.

Thirty-five comments—starting with one that's a trifle negative:

One assumption underlying some of the benefits is that relevant people in your field and in others will find your blog if you start blogging.

A great many blogs are created. Very few are viewed.

Indeed, Conway links to *Field of Dreams* as a basis for believing that, if you post it, they will read.

Blogging as Scholarship

Molly Keener posted this [on July 6, 2010](#) at *the future of*, a blog at Wake Forest's Z. Smith Reynolds Library.

Blogging. For many, the term evokes thoughts of cringe-worthy diary-esque posts by angry teenagers, or bland breakfast tweets by bored acquaintances. But in many fields, including the sciences, law and librarianship, blogging has become vital to the advancement of scholarship. Blogs provide outlets for scholarly exchanges and expression of ideas that might otherwise be lost among the cacophony of hallway conversations and hastily-jotted margin notes. Blogs expand the conversation beyond a handful of colleagues gathered in the same physical space to an online intersection of scholars, students and interested individuals who are able to share insights in a more real-time manner than traditional exchanges via letters and rebuttal articles in journals. Blogging advances an idea or argument, and that is the ultimate goal of scholarship.

That's the first paragraph, and what a solid opening it is. Keener then remembers the Bad Old Days, the idiot attacks on scholarly blogging in 2005 in both *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Slate*. Since then, as she points out, there have been more “vetted blogs” (which may or may not be good things) and blogging communities.

Despite such projects, written scholarly output in many fields is still expected to appear in a journal or monograph, vetted by pre-publication blind peer review. To engage in written discourse that does not have the peer review stamp of approval prior to distribution seems folly to many. Even fields with a healthy culture of sharing articles pre-peer review via repositories such as arXiv or SSRN eventually feed that scholarship into traditional publication structures.

The rest of the post offers reasons that blogging *should* count as scholarship and closes with a question: “Do you believe it is time for blogging to be validated by the academy as a means of scholarly discourse?” The few comments are varied, including one remarkably jaundiced view from a grad student, who offers a caricature of self-publishing (cited as a “new phenomenon,” which is off by several centuries, and in scare quotes),

seems to suggest that whoring for ad dollars “horribly undermines academic and journalistic integrity” in (all?) blogs and concludes with this:

Truly, however, blogs are nothing more than a fancy GUI applied to a message board, and in most instances you can start one for free versus the formerly paid model. If it were to cost \$500 a year to start a blog, they would not be nearly as prevalent now as they were five years ago.

So?

Transformation of blogging has been amazing

You can probably guess Kevin O’Keefe’s opinion by the title of the blog on which this post appeared [September 30, 2010: Real Lawyers Have Blogs](#).

Blogs, once considered a fad by many, aren’t going anywhere. They’re being read by almost half of Americans. They’re becoming one in the same with mainstream media. And we can only expect the popularity of blogs to rise.

Proof? A report from *eMarketer* (with a link that no longer works) that doesn’t even say what O’Keefe says (as I found by going back to the post discussing the report directly). The first graph claims (based on whatever tools *eMarketer* uses) that in 2010 some 113 million Americans read a blog at least monthly—but while that was half of Internet users (at the time), it assuredly wasn’t half of all Americans. Most of the graph is pure speculation: starting with 2008, readership is apparently assumed to grow in a smoothly increasing function, because, y’know, *that’s how it works*. Until it doesn’t. Which is also how we get the next graph: 28.1 million Americans would update blogs “at least monthly” in 2011...and that would grow to 33.4 million in 2014.

Raise your hands if you believe 33.4 million Americans are likely to be updating blogs in 2014. I suppose it’s possible, but with The Shiny worn off, it seems *highly* unlikely. But no. O’Keefe quotes “journalist and author” Mitch Joel (who’s more of an online PR person) and misinterprets what Joel says—namely that blogs have become mainstream media, they’re becoming “almost indecipherable from a mass media news website,” their “transformation” has been “astounding” and that the *true growth* of blogging isn’t from individuals but from mainstream media.

In other words, personal blogs don’t count. Blogs as online publications are what counts. And, in fact, the first of the four discussions is at odds with the others. In the first, we read:

A blog is the glory of a personal voice—warts and all. That is why people are gravitating toward them. Deep down, we want companies to speak our language. We’re tired of jargon. We’re zoning out when we hear phrases like ‘best of breed’ or ‘end to end solution.’ We want to know that business cares about us and treasures our loyalty. We

want more... and we're starting with a conversation that has a human voice behind it ... warts and all.

But the other three points are all about corporate and media blogging—which are frequently full of jargon and rarely true personal voices, “warts and all.” But O’Keefe has a simple message—from the title of the blog on down.

Lawyers and law firms who believe social media success lies in the use of Facebook, Twitter, and social networking sites may want to reconsider. Blogs, which gave rise to social media, remain an integral, if not the leading form of social media for professionals looking for their insight and commentary to become part of and disseminated via media channels.

Maybe. Maybe not. Are blogs in fact “becoming indistinguishable from mainstream media” (as he says again in the final paragraph)? I think not, at least not as a generalization. But what do I know? I’m just a blogger.

Is Kevin O’Keefe a real lawyer? He was, for quite some time—but now he runs LexBlog “to provide lawyers and law firms a custom blog and social media solution unavailable anywhere else. Armed with LexBlog’s solutions providing strategic consulting, social media coaching, blog and custom social media site design and development, SEO, hosting, and on-going support, over 7,000 lawyers around the world are blogging and networking on the LexBlog Network.” So, yes, it makes sense that O’Keefe would assert that real lawyers blog—and the more the merrier, especially for LexBlog.

Article Note: Are blogs written by academic librarians scholarly?

The post is by Angel Rivera, [on October 1, 2010](#) at *The Gypsy Librarian*, commenting on Arthur Hendricks’ “Bloggership, or is Publishing a Blog Scholarship? A Survey of Academic Librarians.” Since that article is behind a paywall at *Library Hi Tech*, I can’t comment on it directly.

As Rivera notes, the survey itself had 67 respondents. Thus, the article is reporting on anecdotal data, with no reasonable expectation that its results can be generalized. (I guess Hendricks did the work and felt the need to salvage something out of it.) And, of course, we get absurd results such as this regarding a question as to whether a blog had the same weight as publishing in a peer-reviewed article: “about 53.7 percent indicated no, while only 1.5 percent stated yes.” Really? *About 53.7% of a non-randomized sample of 67 people?* In other words, “36 people said no and one person said yes.” Or, if that’s too crude, “just over half said no”—a surprisingly low percentage, if you ask me.

I know how I’d answer. Few blog posts by librarians that I know of are the equivalent of peer-reviewed scholarly articles *or intend to be*, with one or two possible exceptions. But a good blog *can be* professional ser-

vice and is regarded as such in some institutions. Rivera's concluding paragraph:

The article's conclusion: "it is clear from the survey responses that this point in time, most academic library promotion and tenure committees do not weigh publishing a blog the same as publishing a peer-reviewed article. Some recognize it as service toward the profession, especially if it is related to the scholar's library" (477). My two cents? I think there are a few, a very select few, academic librarian blogs that could qualify as scholarly. They are probably as good as some of the opinion or essay pieces you do see in some of the peer reviewed journals.

With that qualifier in the final sentence, I'd agree.

Are Blogs Given Any Weight in Library Tenure and Promotion Cases? Eric Schnell looks at the same Hendricks article in this [November 9, 2010](#) post at *The Medium is the Message*—and Schnell has for some time argued that they should be, and that "blogging is a valid form of scholarly communication in the discipline of academic librarianship."

After some discussion of the article, Schnell offers this excellent distinction:

From the information provided in the paper, it appears that many of the respondents equate research with scholarship, when in fact research is a subset of scholarship. Scholarship is the creation of new knowledge or organization of knowledge within a new framework or presentation. Scholarship can take the form of a peer-review publication, but it can also be evidenced in other ways such as exhibits, public performances, digital resources, and papers at professional meetings. So, if a blog communicates some sort of new knowledge or the organization of knowledge within a new framework or presentation, or is even seen as a equivalent of a conference presentation, it is indeed scholarship.

Given that broader view, it's hard to argue that the best blogs aren't part of library scholarship.

I would argue that blogs may be having a greater impact in the practice of librarianship than are traditional publications. Blogs have invigorated the exchange of ideas within librarianship and have enabled academics to connect with a larger general readership for their insight and expertise.

He concludes by finding it "interesting" that an article discussing scholarly blogging *did not include one reference from a blog*.

If blogs are to be recognized as scholarly contributions, then they should also be viewed as such.

Yep. I'm pretty sure I've had posts cited in articles; I *know for sure* that *Cites & Insights* (which has the same scholarly formality as a blog, although it's not one) has been cited in peer-reviewed articles (*Cites & Insights* shows up 87 times in Google Scholar; "Walt at Random" a dozen, but most of those aren't peer-reviewed articles).

Blogs and journalism, again

In this [January 19, 2011](#) post by Christina Pikas at *Christina's LIS Rant*, Pikas discusses an apparent tension between bloggers and mainstream media almost since blogging began.

Some bloggers have always seen themselves as local journalists or journalists who are faster or something. There have always been discussions of blogging ethics and blogging methods. There have been discussions of how bloggers are better than journalists and vice versa.

But really, this is a very narrow and really myopic view. At the same time journalists were starting to use blogs, and non-journalists were starting to use blogs for journalism, knitters were starting to use blogs to describe their projects and build their communities. Mommy bloggers were starting to use blogs to describe their daily lives. Food bloggers—in my memory—might have been slightly later. The biblioblogosphere—the group of librarians using blogs—started well before I started blogging. I learned how to blog at a conference in 2003 from other librarians (put on by SLA, of course!). Librarians have always discussed technology in the library, service to patrons, and innovation. That's not new. That's not something someone had to tell us to do!

In other words: blogging isn't a single thing. Many bloggers don't wish to be journalists. Some do.

Now, am I saying there are no best practices? That some people don't write better than others or that some people (like yours truly) can't use some help in writing better? Of course not. Don't be silly. The truth is and has always been that you need to communicate in a way that is appropriate for your desired audience. If you want to be picked up and quoted by major media outlets, it would probably help to follow those journalism standards. If you are writing to keep track of articles you've read so you can find them later—do whatever makes you happy. If you want to communicate within science, then do your fancy scientist thing. If you want to communicate to a broader audience, there are tips to be had for this.

And no, my twitter friends and fellow ischool grad students—blogging is not journalism.

I might add "necessarily" to that "not," but that's OK. Some blogging is journalism. Most is not.

The measure of blogging: the use of different media in academic publishing

Here's an article about blogging and academic publishing appearing in a blog on a newspaper's website: Leonard Cassuto on [August 31, 2011](#) at *The Guardian*. There was [a live chat](#) on how to get ahead in academic publishing, during which Cassuto said he didn't read blogs "because I don't have time for them." His comment in full as recounted [in another post](#) that takes him to task:

Another thing about blogging: lots of people with certain reading habits don't read blogs. I have nothing against them, but I don't read them, either. This is as much a function of available time as anything else. By restricting myself to published writing (whether digital or print), I am in effect ascribing value to the gatekeeping function of editors. I don't do this because I'm a snob, but rather because there are only so many hours in a day.

Cassuto objects to blogging being taken seriously because of authority and visibility. Cassuto says that you only gain authority in writing through some sort of "external vetting and approval," which is only true if comments on blog posts count as such—which he accepts, thus undermining his case. Except that he thinks the most important form of authority comes from editors. Really? As for visibility, that's simply nonsense: Some blogs are far more visible than most scholarly journals.

Cassuto continues to argue that academics shouldn't blog until they have tenure:

Graduate students and junior faculty need to make room for themselves in specific kinds of conversations. If a graduate student asks me, "Should I blog?" my answer, at least right now, would still be, "Probably not."

That seems sad. A relatively small number of generally long and thoughtful comments follows.

What Is a Blog Post?

This piece, by Rob Jenkins [on June 5, 2012](#) on *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* "On Hiring" blog, discusses that odd question in a specific context—but there are more layers to the context than Jenkins may realize. The background is "The Riley Affair," which began with Naomi Schaefer Riley's [April 30, 2012 post](#) on another *Chronicle* blog, "The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations." (My link to that post does not constitute an endorsement; the link is necessary for context.) The pithy post—which assailed all Black Studies departments based on the *titles, and only the titles* of several dissertations—drew 1,508 comments (no, I didn't try to read the whole stream) and resulted in the *Chronicle* posting an editorial apology and asking Ri-

ley to leave the blog. (That editorial response drew even *more* comments—1,576 to date.)

Jenkins found that the incivility revealed during the Riley affair was leaking over into other areas, “affecting even those of us who were writing about other things entirely,” including his own post “[The Lump](#),” about college administrators who are “mostly just there,” not doing much of anything. “The Lump” is a clever, well-written post that doesn’t name names and almost certainly discusses a real phenomenon. There weren’t nearly as many comments, but one of them was this from “rescomp”:

This is the most asinine piece I have read in the CHE in a very long time. So, all administrators are authoritarians, libertarians, or lumps. And you, sir, are a pompous, arrogant fool who has to rely on convenient, catchy labels in order to deal with people in your neat little, narrow-minded world. You have a lazy mind and I suspect this is evident in the quality of your teaching and research. In short, you are a fool.

Um. Jenkins didn’t quite say that, although he chose to say “Pretty much” in response to the sentence beginning “So,” probably tongue in cheek (but maybe not). (It is clear that Jenkins believes the *majority* of higher ed administrators are worthless.) There was another brief comment with the same vitriol, ending with the question “What kind of contribution do you imagine yourself to be making to academe, in general, or to your readers?”

That last response got me thinking once again about a question I’ve been pondering off and on for some time, at least since I started blogging on this site over a year ago: As a blogger, what am I contributing? Or to put it another way, what exactly is a blog post?

That last question is silly, since there’s only one answer: A blog post is a post on a blog. The other question is a more open one. Jenkins says blogs shouldn’t be held to the same standards as peer-reviewed journals, that most bloggers don’t even list their posts on their CVs “because they know their colleagues won’t consider them to be of any value when making decisions about hiring, promotion, or tenure,” that blog posts are typically much shorter and less formal than articles, more likely to be subjective and opinionated.

I’m sure Jenkins is right that few academic bloggers would list *posts* on their CVs; I’d like to think that some would include *blogs* and that such blogs might, in some cases, be considered to be of value. Jenkins apparently thinks otherwise. He thinks of posts as riffs, as not-fully-thought-out pieces, whatever. And “more than anything else, a blog post is intended to be a conversation starter.” Nope. Wrong. *Some* posts are intended to be conversation starters. But not to Jenkins—I take it he’s one of those who regards a blog without comments as not being a blog at all, as in this conclusion:

My purpose here is not to defend Riley, what she said, or how she said it. Rather, the contribution I imagine myself to be making is to encourage readers of blog posts, in *The Chronicle* and elsewhere, to eschew personal attacks in favor of joining the conversation, even entering the fray, in the intellectual sense. Because another important characteristic of blog posts is that they are a uniquely interactive literary (or quasi-literary) form, which can only be considered together with the responses they elicit.

Overgeneralization. Blogs that don't allow comments are nonetheless blogs. Blogs consisting of 2,000 word or 10,000 word articles are nonetheless blogs.

Here's the other context: Paid blogs by invited writers attached to mainstream media (of which *The Chronicle* is one) are different from personal blogs. They *should* have higher standards. The fact that *The Chronicle* essentially fired Riley as a blogger because of what she said affirms that *The Chronicle* bears some responsibility for what appears on its blogs. I think that's true of any set of blogs paid for and appearing on a magazine or journal or corporate site, no matter how the sponsor may attempt to disclaim such responsibility.

The Blessay

Here, in [a May 24, 2012 post](#) by Dan Cohen on his eponymous blog, the writer attempts to define a specific kind of blog post (without, blessedly, attempting to define *all* blog posts):

It's not a tossed-off short blog post. It's not a long, involved essay. It's somewhere in between: it's a blessay.

The blessay is a manifestation of the convergence of journalism and scholarship in mid-length forms online.

He notes several sources of "blessays," such as *The Atlantic's* website. He characterizes blessays as follows:

- 1) Mid-length: more ambitious than a blog post, less comprehensive than an academic article. Written to the length that is necessary, but no more. If we need to put a number on it, generally 1,000-3,000 words.
- 2) Informed by academic knowledge and analysis, but doesn't rub your nose in it.
- 3) Uses the apparatus of the web more than the apparatus of the journal, e.g., links rather than footnotes. Where helpful, uses supplementary evidence from images, audio, and video—elements that are often missing or flattened in print.
- 4) Expresses expertise but also curiosity. Conclusive but also suggestive.

5) Written for both specialists and an intelligent general audience. Avoids academic jargon—not to be populist, but rather out of a feeling that avoiding jargon is part of writing well.

6) Wants to be Instapapered and Read Later.

7) Eschews simplistic formulations superficially borrowed from academic fields like history (no “The Puritans were like Wikipedians”).

It’s an interesting characterization. The length cited is typical of magazine articles. The discussion almost makes me want to check out Longform.org and Longreads.com, two aggregators of “blessays” (at least one of those features posts considerably longer than 3,000 words—when checked on July 23, 2012, the first three “Our Picks” at Longreads.com are respectively 4,710 words, 5,621 words, and a staggering—for a blog post—16,157 words long).

In updates, Cohen notes griping about “blessay” as a name on Twitter but feels the need to define such things as a genre. I’m less certain that there’s a there there, but it’s an interesting discussion (with some interesting comments).

Blogging is the New Persuasive Essay

That’s Shelley Wright, posting [on June 22, 2012](#) at Powerful Learning Practice—and if you changed “is” to “can be” I might be on board. Wright is a Canadian English teacher who’s “had numerous conversations with college professors who lament the writing skills of their first year students”—specifically, *persuasive* writing, not expository writing.

Part of the problem is that our current school systems—and not just in Canada—aren’t great at producing independent thinkers. Without this ability, it’s hard to create a great thesis statement, anticipate the arguments against it, and then compose your own argument in light of what you understand about the pros and cons of an issue.

Hard to argue with that. As Teaching to the Test grows more prevalent (almost of necessity in many U.S. states), independent thinking isn’t a high priority (and, in my long-ago experience, some teachers did their damndest to assure that such thinking didn’t take place).

Wright’s “come to question the point of much of this”—whether average people are likely to spend much time writing persuasive essays once they leave school. (I’d never heard of “the academic 5 paragraph essay,” so can’t comment on that form.)

And now Wright gets into trouble because she starts to overdefine blogging as an alternative form to essays, saying it’s “an entirely different beast.”

For one, the paragraphing is different. The large, solid paragraphs of prose that can be found in a typical persuasive essay, can feel arduous and cumbersome to all but the most determined reader.

Instead, blog paragraphs tend to be shorter. It allows the piece to feel fluid and speeds up the rate at which your reader reads (often through the glare of a computer monitor or on a phone or tablet screen). And while the effective blogger still uses transition words, as many aren't necessary to provide the piece with a feeling of fluidity and coherence.

Sometimes a paragraph is one simple sentence, used for emphasis.

True of some blogs. Not true of all blogs. Oh, and “blogging also requires a different voice.” Nope. Blogging doesn't *require* anything: It's just a medium (or set of media). (Wright says she's now offering her thesis, “I think blogging is the new persuasive essay,” but that's nonsense: She provided her thesis in the title of the post, which is not unusual for either posts or academic essays.)

After more about the wonders of blogging, Wright concludes that teachers need to *teach blogging*—as early as kindergarten. Which, frankly, should finally do a good job of killing off blogging, if that's possible. Or, rather, she wants “blog components” for language arts and similar courses. And she wants teachers to *indoctrinate students* (oh, sorry, “teach” them) that blogging *has to be* different from regular essays. So, you know, they'll learn to think independently... She finishes:

If you don't currently teach your students to blog, please start. Our students need you to. And if you already teach your students to blog, keep it up. Because blogging is an important 21st century skill. It's the new persuasive essay.

Maybe. And maybe not, if it's taught as prescriptively and single-mindedly as Wright calls for.

A couple dozen comments, mostly high-fives, including such gems of teacher literacy as “It seems after fourth grade the writing drops to a minimal until it is tested again in 7th grade.” A minimal what? One commenter *does* nail the post as creating a false dichotomy:

Certainly, students should consider form and purpose when they write, but they shouldn't learn, and we shouldn't teach, that blogs are all short paragraphs richly voiced. Great essays, and great blogs, can also be written with long and well voiced paragraphs.

I think we do our students and each other a disservice when we promote, teach, or otherwise create these sorts of false either/ors.

Wright claims (in response) that “you have to be a great writer” to pull off long paragraphs in a blog. And, of course, another teacher chimes in with solid prescriptive advice: “I agree that paragraphs must be short for continuity, ease of flow and for referring back.” *Must be short*: Good indoctrination, in his case at the 12th grade level.

That's it for Part 1. Part 2 will follow in the next issue.

The CD-ROM Project

Music Music Music

No, the CD-ROM PROJECT didn't halt prematurely. It just took a long break. This time around, let's look at some music-related title CD-ROMs. Can they even be installed under Windows 7? Do they work? Are they worthwhile? Are there replacements?

Forrest Gump: Music, Artists and Times

This three-disc set dates from 1995 and was published by GTE Entertainment. It's organized around the music in the movie—two dozen of the pop and rock songs on the soundtrack. Each song is a chapter and you can navigate to chapters directly, through a timeline or through the movie script. Each chapter combines some pop-culture history with contemporary oral history as well as the clip from *Forrest Gump* that used the song, a video clip of a partial performance (usually from a TV show), part of the song played while showing lyrics and credits, and a textual description of the song and the related album. There are also lengthy interviews with artists and songwriters, sometimes with brief video clips as well.

I thought it was an excellent package (and a good value at \$30) when I reviewed it in the September 1997 *Library Hi Tech News*. I gave it a 91: an Excellent rating. It's supposed to run under Windows 3.1 or later (Windows 95 recommended) or Macintosh System 7.1 or higher.

But it also *absolutely, positively, unquestionably* required (for Windows) Quicktime for Windows 2.0.3 (included on the discs). Not a later version. Not the ability to play Quicktime videos (which Windows Media Player has had for some time). Nope: One specific version—a version that causes a general protection fault when you attempt to install it on Windows 7. (That doesn't crash the computer, it just crashes the installation program.) No luck.

I think we've lost some worthwhile oral history of an interesting era in music and life. Three public libraries appear to own this set. I suspect it's of no use to any of them. Too bad.

Prokofiev for Dummies

This is one of a series of "X for Dummies" enhanced CDs published by EMI in cooperation with IDG Books. It's a CD with just over an hour of Prokofiev's music (the *Lieutenant Kije Suite* and seven other pieces), mostly performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under André Previn; I figured

that, at \$9.95 in 1997, it was worth it just for the music. (I reviewed it in the July/August 1997 *Library Hi Tech News* and gave it an 81—at the low end of very good.)

The enhancements? 38MB of CD-ROM data that provides a biography of the composer, a MIDI section with conductor's score for *one piece* on the disc—a neat function, since you could relate what you're hearing to what's going on—and a music center to play the pieces.

In 1995 enhanced CDs were the Next Big Thing. A few gurus claimed every new CD in 1997 and beyond would be an enhanced CD. Never happened: There were a few of them, mostly overpriced Sony greatest hits collections, but nobody much cared.

I didn't think this CD had a great control system and it had the nasty habit of installing itself every time you ran. Still, it was an interesting way to learn a little more about a composer.

Did I mention that it used Quicktime? No? Guess what happened when I tried to install it? A slightly different combination of errors than for *Forrest Gump* but the same result: No happiness. No great loss, frankly. (The music plays just fine.)

Worldcat.org shows 21 libraries holding this. It's fine as an audio disc. It's supposedly still available (at about the same price) on Amazon. There is, to be sure, no shortage of good information on Prokofiev and his music.

Total Joplin

“What do you get when long-term Microsoft employees with a love for music retire and apply their money, their skills and their interest to a new company? Sunhawk Corporation and its Solero technology in this case—here applied to all of the known music of Scott Joplin.”

That's how I introduced the January/February 1998 *Library Hi Tech* review of *Total Joplin*, which scored 88 (a high Very Good, just short of Excellent). The disc includes a five-screen foreword about ragtime, a fairly extensive biography of Scott Joplin in 13 chronological articles rich in hyperlinks—and the real heart of the disc: A list of every Joplin composition, arranged either alphabetically or chronologically. For any composition, you can see a description. For any but the lost pieces, you can see the cover of the score—and, more importantly, click on the Music icon to get to the Solero Music Viewer.

The viewer uses Windows menus and toolbars to present the musical score and offer MIDI playback. You can also print out the score (with excellent results, better than the published Joplin collection we have at home, although 8.5x11 is on the small side for piano scores). You can choose your MIDI instrument—anything from the standard “bright acoustic grand piano” to steel drums or flutes. You can alter the tempo and start, pause or stop—and a “bouncing ball” turns the notes being

played red (or another color of your choice), so you can follow right along.

The main interface is non-scaling and immobile (640x480 but centered on a black screen if your resolution is higher). The Solero Music Viewer is fully movable and scalable like any standard Windows window. The disc sold for \$30 in 1998; there were other Sunhawk discs, including Handel's *Messiah*.

That's all paraphrased from the 1998 review. How does the disc do in 2012? There's an install problem (one .dll file doesn't install properly)—but the disc nonetheless starts up with the main interface (non-movable). As far as I can tell, everything works (with the possible exception of automatic background music—but if you select a piece to have as background music, it *does* play). The Solero viewer works just fine. It still prints beautiful sheet music. It still runs in a proper resizable Windows window. And it offers what it says: *total* Joplin, including the entire *Treemonisha*, Joplin's opera.

All in all, fairly impressive, even with the slight (and apparently unimportant) installation glitch. The dozen libraries that appear to own this should still find it useful—and still, I think a bargain.

What happened to Sunhawk itself? The URL now redirects to OnlineSheetMusic, a Los Altos company that sells digital sheet music—using the Solero viewer.

103 of the best songs...

Back in the day—around 1997-2000—there was a company called mp3.com that was trying to make a go of free legal MP3-based music distribution, helping independent musicians distribute their work. Technically, the site still exists—but as a piece of CNet. You can still find a fair amount of free (legal) MP3 music there.

You can read the [mp3.com story](#) at Wikipedia. That story never mentions a series of free CD-ROMs that mp3.com sent to anybody who requested them, a series that usually carried the title *103 of the best songs you've never heard and lots more cool Internet stuff!* I requested the first few (which may have been all of them). Shortly before starting this article, I mailed the first disc in the series to a collector who'd lost his copy. Volume 2 has, I believe, disappeared—unless it's the oddball *The MP3.com music and technology tour CD*, distributed in the same manner as the others but not primarily song-oriented. I have here volume 3 and volume 4—and my sustaining interest in the series may be indicated by the fact that, until preparing this commentary, *I never even opened the CD mailers* they came in.

The idea made sense when broadband was rare and indie music hard to find: Mail people a bunch of selected songs in decent MP3 form, which will encourage them to buy more independent music. The discs

included other stuff as well—e.g., volume 3 has a videogame demo, a trailer for a movie, a “hot new PC DJ MP3 player” (in 1999, good music-handling software wasn’t built into Windows or the Mac) and some discount offers. The discs came in minimalist foldover cardboard mailers.

They’re mostly curious history. When I went through all of volume 1, I found very little music that did much for me...little enough, apparently, that I let volumes 3 and 4 sit unopened for more than a decade.

So how do the discs work in 2012—or do they work at all?

The MP3.com music and technology tour

It works. Fixed window (probably 640x480), not a Windows window, but no installation required, and *it works*. The songs play. I didn’t try the other stuff—and didn’t install the Pixelon video software or any other software.

The others

I decided to try out Volume 3. This time, it *does* open with a semi-proper Windows window, movable but not resizable.

The multicategory view of 103 MP3 songs worked, as did the songs themselves. After 12 or 13 years sitting in an unopened cardboard mailer, the disc worked just fine. Some of what little music I sampled was OK, and the sound quality was...OK. But, frankly, in an era of Pandora and all the others, I didn’t feel like exploring a hundred unknown quantities. Volume 4 is still sealed.

At Least *One* Worked

Not a great track record, to be sure—although it’s really not that bad. The MP3.com discs worked, albeit not entirely, but certainly including the actual music. *Total Joplin* continues to be fairly impressive. And enhanced CDs...well, after more than a quarter century, the *unenanced* audio CD still works just fine. A funny thing about progress...

Masthead

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