

# Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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## Making it Work

### Generations

I've frequently argued that generational differences and generalizations (what I call "gen-gen") are *generally* overstated and damaging. I'll continue to make that case—that focusing on generational differences gets in the way of treating people like people.

There's a difference between generalizing about generations and recognizing that age can make a difference, at least sometimes. The first portion of this essay deals with one such case—a case where, if I denied that age has anything to do with outlook, *I was wrong*.

*on age, technology, and culture.*

That's Jenica Rogers' title for an excellent commentary posted February 9, 2010 at *Attempting Elegance* ([www.attemptingelegance.com](http://www.attemptingelegance.com)). She starts by saying the issue isn't *just* age:

Of course there are librarians over 35, 40, 60 who are tech-savvy and have chosen to dive into online communication and the identity it creates. Of course there are librarians straight out of grad school who think Twitter is inane. Of course all teenagers don't know how to hack their iPhone or program their mom's Roomba or do more than post a cell-phone picture to Facebook. **Of course.**

But just because blanket generalizations are (usually) wrong and frequently damaging, some of us may go overboard in denouncing generational differences...to the extent that Rogers was warned she could be at risk of an age-discrimination suit for even offering *an opinion* about age within the library profession, based on her own experience, "even with caveats and generalizations."

And so I feel compelled, since it is such a hot-button issue that prompts such immediate ire and conflict from people, to state what I do believe, based on my own experiences and my perceptions of our profession and our professional culture.

What I believe is this: Because of cultural shifts, generational differences and the ongoing permeation of our culture by technology, we are thinking about technology differently as time moves forward, and as with anything that moves from being a novelty to being an integral part of daily life, where you were and what you were doing when that became true for you then serves to define how you interact with the thing at hand.

That may not be true for everybody, but it is a legitimate point.

I believe that there are real, measurable differences between the way that, in general, the leaders and holders of official and unofficial power in our libraries relate to technology, online communication, and online identity, and the ways that our up-and-coming users, say, the cohort that's currently at age 13, will relate to technology, online communication, and online identity in five years when they walk in the doors of my library.

I don't see that statement as discriminatory. I see it as cultural fact. Different generations, different experiences, different adoption models and behavior patterns that create different assumptions and different expectations.

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If that's true, what should it mean? "I long to see more library leadership trying to forge a path that's designed around the needs and wants and emerging culture of those young users, not around the needs and wants and established culture of libraries and librarianship."

What Rogers is arguing for, I believe, is to include library patrons as part of the decision-making process. That's not a generational issue, but—for academic libraries perhaps more than public libraries—it's one where the age of most users is an issue.

I would exhort all librarians, in a position of current power or not—young, old, or in between—to realize, acknowledge, and pay attention to the fact

that our internet—the internet we love, that we hate, that we use, that we teach—is not the internet that our young future users see and immerse themselves in and use and love and hate.

I would also exhort all librarians in a position of current power, be it leadership power, administrative power, or the power of longevity and respect, to support rather than belittle the colleagues at your institution who want to bridge the gap between us and them. To encourage rather than stifle those librarians and library staff who want to try to think like the user, who want to build systems and services to meet their needs. Because we are not them, and they are not us, and we mustn't build systems for ourselves. We must be sympathetic to their perspectives, and move ourselves toward being what they want and need us to be. We cannot build libraries that satisfy just us, because it's not about us. *It's about them.*

A point worth making and worth considering regardless of your age. If you belittle those who want to be sure patron needs and preferences are considered, you're undermining your credibility and your library. An interesting point emerges in the comments (and has been seconded by other research): Older librarians (Baby Boomers and those of us even older) have, by and large, never started reading blogs. Here's how I responded to that apparently-true note earlier: "If you're one of those—like this over-60 person—who believe that the most interesting ideas and discussions on professional issues are taking place on blogs, it's a startling statement." Startling and unfortunate.

### *Online Identity*

Rogers also posted "IOLUG speaker's notes on online identity" on January 5, 2010. She goes through her own online presence and how easy it is to determine what she's all about through a little Googling. Rogers is 33, among the younger academic library directors out there. She's active in quite a few social networking venues. She has a robust online identity and is aware that online identities tend to blur distinctions between professional and personal. And she's been warned that being open on the web could hurt her:

I was told, for example, by another library director, that I would never have a leadership position in an academic library if I continued blogging and sharing so much of my true thoughts about the profession and our daily work, and about my own daily life online. He seemed terribly threatened by the idea that librarians in leadership positions

would speak openly about their thoughts; he seemed to feel that it would threaten the power structure, challenge the status quo, and generally leave a leader vulnerable to...something.

That was three years ago. I'm proud to have proven that director wrong, because I think transparency and communication are the cornerstones of a strong information exchange, and I'm proud to continue contributing to that. But I did make changes to how I approached my online identity after the conversation because it was clear that the leadership of the profession was not ready for what I wanted to share. And it was clear to me that I was going to have to wait. I dug in my heels, made changes I wasn't happy with, and said to myself, "I can wait this out." Someday, one of three things will happen:

1. All of those cranky old bastards will retire
2. I will outgrow my youthful rebellion, or
3. The internet will change dramatically and rapidly and my stand on this issue will become irrelevant.

I suspect answer number 3.

She's learned lessons, some of which do have to do with generations—and some I'm going to include even though they probably belong in an essay about social networks and personal identity.

First, online identity is fluid: "Never assume you will end where you start...and plan accordingly." You may *need* some separation between personal and professional. Second, you *will* send "mixed messages" and need to be ready to defend them. Third, "find your voice and know your boundaries."

If your online voice and your real voice aren't compatible, you'll lose all credibility in your online presentation of yourself. Everybody hates a poser. ..

Here's one I'd stress: "Let your voice change over time—either naturally or because you need it to."

Using myself as a case in point: the Director of Libraries cannot talk about the work of the Libraries in the way that a librarian can.

The Director of Libraries cannot talk about conflicts with other staff in the way that a librarian can.

The Director of Libraries should not talk about a lot of things that might reflect on her institution in a way the institution would find unsettling.

So as much as I value being transparently and authentically myself, I cannot fully do that, and so my voice, in my professional spheres, has changed.

And you may discover that you yourself change as you write and talk. You may become a different person. You may join new communities. You may

find a different purpose. You might want to be a different kind of speaker and writer.

And here, generational issues do enter: “**We’re not ready for online identities as a profession.**” Rogers finds that most of her virtual colleagues are “a younger group, newer to the profession, much more comfortable with technology and the internet and all that it implies for our culture and our profession.” I can’t argue.

And while I work with and admire many librarians with careers far longer than mine for their work in these areas, we still have large numbers of us who are resistant to these changes.

Who won’t willingly put their photo on the library’s website. Who think Facebook is a timewaster and Twitter is idiotic. Who can’t understand why you would blog rather than write for a journal... Who tell eager young librarians to stop blogging because no director could retain her power if people knew what kind of person she really is.

And they are shaping our path as much as the technophiles are, because, another generalization here, the positions of power in our profession are not yet inhabited by people who have that comfort level that my tribe does. So if you want to have a transparent and vibrant online life, you may encounter pushback. **Strong pushback.** You may have to fight, and you may have to adapt, or wait.

Rogers says this is a problem because librarians are, by and large, old—and she regards 33 (her age) as old. Why? Because she’s an early adopter even among librarians in her age range—while most college library users are teenagers and early adults.

These people “are not us. They are not me. They are not you. They’ve had access to video games, computers, the internet and cell phones since birth... *They* will shape our information environment, starting any day now, but certainly within the next five years. So we need to catch up. We need to join in, and work harder to understand the implications of living in this blended, transparent, and ubiquitous online information environment.”

She urges librarians to build authentic online presences. I think that’s good advice, even if you’re less certain there will be dramatic, rapid change.

## Other Voices

Notes from other commentaries that are either about gengen or reek of gengen. Why do these go so far back? Because I was doing generation-related write-ups elsewhere.

## *The Language of the Millennials*

Wayne Bivens-Tatum grumps about the Beloit College Mindset List and other overstatements of generation gaps in this July 9, 2008 post at *Academic Librarian*.

I now declare to the world that I don’t want to hear any more librarians try to tell me that college students today are so vastly different from normal human beings that no one can communicate with them. Since when did adults become such anxious ninnies about college students? I hate to make generational generalizations, but is it a boomer thing? Were they obsessed with their self-proclaimed specialness as youths and are now obsessed with their children? Or is it librarians who themselves feel out of touch who then tell the rest of us that we’re the ones out of touch?

Recently I heard from a librarian that it was as if college students today were from another planet and that they knew much more about all this techie stuff than anyone in the room. Um, sure. Speak for yourself, buddy.

Bivens-Tatum attended an ALA Annual program on “speaking the language of the millennials.” An organizer started in with the Beloit list; Bivens-Tatum wondered whether professors were so anxious about presumed fundamental gaps when he started college in 1991. I’m pretty sure they weren’t back in 1962, when I started college.

It was with the first speaker that I knew I was in the wrong demographic for this talk. He started with a list of eight questions... [e.g.] How many of you have a cell phone? Use IM and/or text messaging? Have a digital camera? Post photos to Flickr or something similar? Watch Youtube? Post videos to Youtube? Have a Facebook/Myspace profile?... Almost everyone raised a hand at almost every question. Even me. An entire audience of tuned in, plugged in, socially networking, socially softwaring librarians coming apparently just to make sure they weren’t missing anything, anxious to learn how to speak like these millennial people. The speaker seemed taken aback. He paused for a moment, then said “Oh. Then you’re a lot like the college students I see coming in every year.” So much for difference. The first slide, and first statement after the questions, was something like, “the Internet is an important tool for modern communication.” At that point I walked out. I just couldn’t take it anymore.

Bivens-Tatum works with new college students all the time. “Somehow I never seem to have any problem communicating with them or speaking a

language they can understand. Where I work the language of the millennials is English (for the most part). Is that not the case elsewhere in the country?" He doesn't buy that librarians need to learn some special language—or that new college students are inherently more tech-savvy than "we benighted librarians."

Most commenters were on B-T's side (but then, most of them are older than Millennials). Steve Lawson noted, with reference to the Beloit list, that he suspected "many students come to college--particularly to Princeton or to private liberal arts colleges like the one I work for--with the expectation that their experience and interactions will transcend pop culture and technological fetishism." Very good point.

### *Talking about my generation*

That's the grammatically correct title Michelle McLean used for this August 11, 2008 post at *Connecting Librarian*—and it must be my "silent generation" fingers that want to type that as "talkin' 'bout my generation." (The Who: All but one of them part of the Silent Generation—and the one exception, Keith Moon, an early Boomer, is also the only one who died before he got old. But that's a digression—something us old farts do a lot of.)

McLean is either a young Boomer or an old GenXer, who's "always felt more affinity to Gen Xers and it always made me feel a little bit younger to label myself as such too."

But recently I have been feeling like I'm not much of a Gen X-er either, especially in relation to what others of my generation seemed to be focused on. Quite often I feel more of a digital native like my kids, I am soooo comfortable with most technology. I game like they do, although my regular gaming is more online board games (which is definitely in line with my demographic), although I do get with the kids and play X-Box or Nintendo DS on the odd occasion.

She thinks she's like the immigrant who goes overboard in embracing their new home. But she also thinks "the shine is going off the relationship a bit."

- "The development of Web 2.0 tools seems to have slowed down." She's hot for Twitter but finds FriendFeed "too chaotic." Nothing newer has caught her interest.
- Her coworkers, friends and family are *not* "well entrenched in Web 2.0" and she finds this frustrating. "They don't see these tools

and their potential the way that I do and I can't find the way to help them to do so."

She asked for feedback. The first commenter also found that early fans are dropping off and wondered "how do we rekindle the flame" as people lose interest. (I guess I'd wonder why it's *necessary* to rekindle the flame, but that's a Luddite attitude, I suppose.) A coworker says her enthusiasm is having an effect...and a GenXer admits to being "pushy" to shove friends and colleagues into the new tools. One person suggested that maybe it was time to back off the shiny new toys and consolidate, maybe even try to measure the impact of 2.0 services.

Is this an actual generational issue, or perhaps an issue of shiny toys that really didn't speak to people's needs? Is it necessary for *everybody* to use Twitter for it to be useful? (I'm convinced that FriendFeed works partly because it *hasn't* grown to gargantuan size.) If people have dropped off social media and social networks, could it be because they find their balance and their benefits elsewhere?

### *What'll we call the generations?*

That's Stephen Abram at *Stephen's Lighthouse* on August 22, 2008, quoting from a survey by Harris Interactive about different generations. The results seem scattered and in some cases contradictory—e.g., Boomers are "most widely viewed as having a positive effect on society," followed by GenX—but Silents and the "Greatest Generation" are "the most widely admired" and Silents and Boomers "the most generous." So it goes. (I wonder whether people over 83 are as tired of "Greatest" as those of us between 64 and 83 are of "Silent"? Maybe not: "Greatest" is at least a positive name.) I found it bizarre that most people—including GenY/Millennial respondents—thought Millennials (here called Generation Y) are "the most self-indulgent" (really? not Boomers?).

The fun part: GenY respondents dislike "Generation Y" and "Millennials"; 32% of them would like to be called "the Internet Generation." GenXers dislike "Generation X"; 25% of them would like "Generation Tech." (Note that, as reported here, in both cases it's "Gen Y would like to rename themselves" and "Gen X would choose to rename themselves"—although less than one-third of respondents chose that name. So generalizations are appropriate even when they're *clearly* less than one-third applicable: A rule to generalize by?) Boomers—well, **27% of them**—really like the name given to them." Really? The closest to a

majority renaming: 44% of Silents would prefer the “Responsible Generation.” To which, as one of them, I can only say “Oh puhlease.”

The discussion is amusing because, since it’s based on a poll *entirely* about absurd generalizations (people were only invited to rank *generations*, not people), it’s supposedly proof that America is *not* riddled with ageism (really? try getting a new job when you’re over 55) and younger people *do* have respect for older people.

As soon as something becomes a label many people reject it. It’s pretty funny actually. Then again, you have to get over it. If I spent as much time rejecting labels as some folks do and rejecting the label Boomer and trying to prove I am not a stereotype I’d never get anything done. Labels are useful in the moment for conversations and then we move on. Hopefully mature people recognize diversity in any cohort.

Useful for the moment? I disagree. Change “label” to “stereotype” and maybe it’s clearer why people reject them—and maybe not so funny.

### *Social Media vs. Knowledge Management: A Generational War*

This one’s such a startling example of generational stereotypes gone wild that I had to mention it—but you’ll have to go to Venkatash Rao’s full, 3,300-word, post on September 28, 2008 at *Enterprise 2.0 blog* for the full flavor.

You might not think that an opposition between social media and KM even makes sense—it might sound like a war between newspapers and waterfall development strategy or a war between lizards and lemons. But Rao sees an “industry-wide KM-SM shadow war” and he thinks the two “look very similar on the surface.” Not to me, they don’t—so maybe I don’t find it as “hilarious” as he does that “most of the combatants don’t even realize they *are* in a war” (for the “soul of Enterprise 2.0,” if you’re wondering).

Then Rao starts his wild stereotyping about this “cultural war”—which comes about because KM is “a top-down Boomer...management effort” and Social Media is “a Millennial/Gen Y movement.” Five salient points, each given in boldface and expounded on in the post: “Gen X is currently neutral” (and even though GenXers are “the leaders and mentors” of SM, “neither set of ideas” is due to GenXers to any degree!). “KM is about ideology; SM is about the fun of building”—oh, and just to write

off *three* generations, we’re informed that Millennials are “the first generation since the Greatest...that likes to build...social institutions.” Wow!

Third: “The Boomers don’t *really* get or like engineering and organizational complexity.” Right. He explains that Boomers didn’t *really* build personal computing or the IT infrastructure or...; that was all GenX. I should note here that Rao is a self-identified GenX person. #4: “The Millennials don’t *really* try to understand the world.” Nope, they don’t give a damn—their fundamental collaborative “cultural DNA” means they *cannot* think in terms of worldviews. Yes, he *does* say, in precisely these words, “Millennials fundamentally *cannot* think this way...” Oh, and as always in this GenXers view, GenX manages to hew the line blending adversaries... Finally: “Boomers speak with words, X’ers with numbers, Millennials with actions.” Followed by more stereotypical nonsense: “The best [Boomers] can do is talk to themselves.” And so on...

He continues with five “technological dimensions of the war” but I’ll spare you that. Let’s say the stereotypes just keep on coming. “Millennials just want to connect indiscriminately.” “Millennials are merrily tagging everything in sight with no larger end in view”—but the Semantic Web is a “Last-Gen” Boomer notion. And, of course, “the war” will end with the Millennials winning as the Boomers retire... He ends with this plaintive note:

The tragedy of Gen X is that we will not be remembered as a big-idea generation. We will likely be remembered, via a footnote (much like the Silents), as the generation which made the fateful decision to trust the creativity of the generation following it over the values of the generation that came before.

There are 60 trackbacks and comments. The first actual comment may be all that needs to be said, except for using this article-length post as an example of why generational stereotypes are not only useless but also actively harmful:

The technology stuff is reasonable, but the crude characterization by age group is nonsense. So-called Boomers are amongst the highest adopters of social computing... People do not have ideas and attitudes by age group ...

### *Teens Don’t Tweet...Or Do They?*

That’s the title of an August 6, 2009 post by danah boyd at *apophenia*, based on a Mashable report on some Nielsen numbers on Twitter headlined “Stats Confirm It: Teens Don’t Tweet.” boyd followed the

way this report played out on Twitter and was “astonished by the misinterpretations in every which direction.” For example:

- Nielsen’s methodology is open to question—and, even if the methodology is correct, Nielsen’s findings boil down to teens *not being proportionally heavier users of Twitter than older people*. “Don’t” means “don’t as much we expected they should, although they do as much as their elders do.” boyd says it better:

So, really, what Nielsen is saying is, “Everyone expects social media to be used primarily by the young but OMG OMG OMG old farts are just as likely to be using Twitter as young folks! Like OMG.”

- Mashable presented the results in a misleading manner—and, since Nielsen’s age bracket was 2-24, you *can’t* infer teen behavior from the results.
- *Most people* aren’t on Twitter regardless of age: “Those who use Twitter are not a representative percentage of the population.” Geeks, newshounds, and celebrity-lovers are way over-represented (boyd’s notes). “Age is not the right marker here.”
- “Saying that 16% of Twitter users are 24 and under is NOT the same as saying that 16% of teens are on Twitter. We don’t know what percentage of youth (or adults) are on Twitter.”
- “Teens Don’t Tweet” is simply *nonsense*. There are thousands, probably millions of teens on Twitter. But “the presence of teens on Twitter doesn’t mean that Twitter is a mainstream tool amongst teens. It’s not.”

boyd saw all this and thought the Nielsen report and Mashable post were irrelevant—and then it became a “trending topic.” So, since understanding this stuff is part of what boyd does, “I spent 6+ hours reading the messages of the people who added content to the trending topic, reading their posts about other things, going to their profiles on other sites, and simply trying to get a visceral understanding of what youth were engaged enough on Twitter to respond to the trending topic.” Whew. Some of her thoughts (her quantitative data wasn’t ready yet):

- Most teen responses were to the headline: “I’m a teen and I tweet. So there.” Many were responding to other tweets and had never actually seen the Mashable post. Lots weren’t from the U.S. or Canada.

- She found teens’ Twitter streams fitting into three categories: “1) geeky teens, tech teens, fandom teens, machinema teens; 2) teens who are in love with the Jonas Brothers/Miley Cyrus, musicians, or another category of celebs; 3) multi-lingual foreign teens with friends/followers around the world who seemed to participate in lots of online communities.”
- She doesn’t believe tweeting teens (at least those responding to this topic) are representative of teens as a whole—and also doesn’t think they’re dragging their friends into Twitter.

boyd points out that this post was not a report or a study—it’s *just a post*, to give you “a sense of what I’m seeing.” Looking at the comments, it’s interesting to see how easily people fall into stereotypes. A teen mentions “better things out there” such as Facebook and says “adults can’t be bothered with sites like these.” Yep: there’s nobody over 21 on Facebook, not a soul, at least nobody who actually *uses* it.

### *Memed Digital*

According to Rochelle Mazar (who posted this at [mazar.ca](http://mazar.ca) on May 28, 2009), she’s never liked the “digital immigrants/digital natives” divide, another form of gengen. She thinks it sells “digital immigrants” short and assumes today’s undergrads are wired differently and “way more adept at technology than me”—which is not her experience.

Mazar notes Don Tapscott, one of the great gengen purveyors, who’s given to using his own kids and their friends as anecdota: What he believes to be true of them must be true of the entire generation—and it’s fundamentally different. Not that Tapscott has actual evidence (as Mazar notes, even the brain chemistry evidence he cites doesn’t actually prove generational differences), but that’s never stopped him.

Different behaviours and activities can be more popular with certain age groups than others, which makes this “digital native” thing an issue of correlation, not causation. However: do we have evidence that more teenagers are interested in the digital life than any other generation? Gen X is small compared to the “millennials,” correct? In 1994 *Wired* predicted that by the year 2000 the average age of internet users would be 15. Then I wonder why, in 2008, the average age of internet users in the UK is 37.9? As of right now, NiteCo lists the average age of internet users as 28.3421. I’m not suggesting that

teens aren't interested in the internet and in digital life; it's just that it's not primarily or only them. It's not a factor of their age. This isn't even like Elvis, when the kids loved the rock'n'roll and the adults hated it; it's nowhere near that clear cut.

Mazar should be ashamed: Quoting an absolute *Wired* prediction that's more than two years old, and noting that it's turned out to be false, is as bad as, say, quoting predictions from Tapscott, Negroponte or any of the other Gurus and noting that they've been dead wrong. *They're always right*—no matter how often they're wrong.

Most of this post is about something other than age—she calls it a “cultural meme,” a series of metaphors. Thus, those who subscribe to a “digital culture” and want to be connected all the time are “digital natives”—regardless of their age.

### *Forget Gen Y: Gen X is Making Real Change*

Another piece of straightforward gengen, this time from a site that *loves* oversimplification—*ReadWriteWeb*, posted September 11, 2009 by Steven Walling. It's based on a Forrester survey of 2,000 “information workers.” According to Walling's take on the survey, “despite the hype, it's not Gen Y that's getting business to adopt collaborative technology. Gen X, those who are 30-43, are the ones leading the charge for social computing.” In some ways, that makes sense: those under 30 “don't yet have the clout within organizations to make real change.”

This survey is mildly interesting because those asked are supposedly employees, not management—but they're all employees of medium-sized and large companies, which is limiting. The survey also found that “Gen X” and “Gen Y” were roughly equivalent in use (and active use) of discussion fora, social networks, blogs and wikis. Does that undermine a “myth”? Maybe, but I thought the gengen was that Boomers couldn't cope with that social stuff, not that GenX (whoever that might be) was similarly incompetent at social networking.

I love the comments, which are mostly silly, since we get Gen Xers claiming to have built all the new technology GenY is using. What goes around comes around. One comment is, however, either stupid or badly misinformed:

Of course Gen-X and above are the “fastest-growing demographic” in social media. That's because all of Gen Y is already on it. Boomer/Gen X

usage is growing because their Gen Y kids are telling them about it.

Some other big believers in gengen say much the same thing.

### *The Millennial Muddle*

Eric Hoover offers this story (subtitled “How stereotyping students became a thriving industry and a bundle of contradictions”) in the October 11, 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education*. It's a lighthearted article, noting the number of Experts who “sell maps” to the maze that is the minds of college students.

Ask them to explain today's teenagers and twenty-somethings. Invite them to your campus to describe this generation's traits. Just make sure that they don't all show up at the same time. They would argue, contradict one another, and leave you more baffled than ever.

Figuring out young people has always been a chore, but today it's also an industry. Colleges and corporations pay experts big bucks to help them understand the fresh-faced hordes that pack the nation's dorms and office buildings. As in any business, there's variety as well as competition. One speaker will describe youngsters as the brightest bunch of do-gooders in modern history. Another will call them self-involved knuckleheads. Depending on the prediction, this generation either will save the planet, one soup kitchen at a time, or crash-land on a lonely moon where nobody ever reads.

Hoover “just for fun” stereotypes the Generation Gurus as “smart, successful, and full of unshakeable opinions”—and given to describing each others' work as “wrong,” “unempirical” and “wildly mistaken.” But they're all entrepreneurs engaged in feeding “a world with a bottomless craving for labels.”

It's useful to point out that one of the early Great Studies, Howe and Strauss's *Millennials Rising*, is based mostly on anecdota—and on studying high-school seniors in the wealthiest county in the nation, which could just possibly be faulted in terms of generalizability. (That book apparently coined the damnable Millennials term.) The authors aren't social scientists—but they had already established their ability to generalize generations, with the book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* and the concept that each “generation” represents a sharp break with the previous one. What's sad is that people have taken them seriously, leading to much of the gengen.

Strauss died; Howe has built a gengen industry, publishing Millennial books and getting fat con-

sulting and speaking fees. He's quick with a stereotype and influential—even though, the more you actually look at the gengen, the worse it looks. Here's how one director of admissions now sees it:

To accept generational thinking, one must find a way to swallow two large assumptions. That tens of millions of people, born over about 20 years, are fundamentally different from people of other age groups—and that those tens of millions of people are similar to each other in meaningful ways. This idea is the underpinning of Mr. Howe's conclusion that each generation turns a historical corner, breaking sharply with the previous generation's traits and values.

*Real* research, not limited to a highly unrepresentative group, shows the opposite—that change happens gradually, not abruptly, and that people are wildly varied within any “generation.”

I'm noting the first part of a *long* article (7,400 words). Clearly, Howe's not likely to change his stripes—he's making big bucks through gengen, and he's already labeled the next generation, the “Homeland Generation” (born 2005-2025), Americans who will fit “an artist archetype.” Right. He seems to believe he must be right *because* he's in such demand. It couldn't be that he's in demand because stereotyping your students and customers is a lot easier than dealing with their endless, individual complexity?

*Technologically conservative young scholars—you're surprised, really?*

In this February 7, 2010 post at *Christina's LIS Rant*, Christina Pikas notes a speaker being surprised by a finding “that young scholars were unwilling or unlikely to experiment with new scholarly communication (tools/practices/channels)” —and an audience question indicating that the questioner didn't believe the finding.

No matter how many times this myth is debunked, it remains firmly entrenched. Here are some variations on it:

When generation {x,y, millennial, etc} gets in {university, grad school, the workplace}, {collaboration, communication, search technologies} will all be different because they'll already know how to use all of that stuff and they'll be expert at it

All we need for {open access, open science, electronic journals, online communities, social computing technologies} to catch on, is for the next generation to grow up and join the workforce

No need to teach how to search to young folks today, they already know how to work Google

No need to teach younger workers how to collaborate effectively or use workplace collaboration technologies, they use Facebook.

Pikas finds this frustrating, for good reason. As she says, moving to new methods of scholarly communication almost certainly isn't just a matter of time—it requires changes in the culture that are *not* age-related. Innovations need to be compatible with the way the field currently does business or be so much better that people will make a disruptive change; “the young'uns get it” is not meaningful.

Pikas quotes one earlier version of this myth (after all, the “Nintendo generation” *should* handle all this new stuff just fine, right?), based on a study of doctoral students in 1995. The writer offers a version of the myth that assumes “electronic communication technologies will transform university research practices chiefly by the mechanism of doctoral students (presumably people of the younger generation) entering the profession who are more comfortable and skilled with technology than their advisors” and bases that on five subclaims: Students are more comfortable with and skilled in electronic communications; they have more incentive to transform work practices; they have more time to experiment with new ideas; they're less conditioned by working in established ways; and their move into faculty positions will transform disciplines as a result.

It didn't work out that way. Doctoral students were “still beholden to the existing values of what constituted a disciplinary contribution that did not change as quickly as new technologies became available.” In practice, new researchers *will* be conservative in their practices until they get tenure—for good reason. Thus, there's some reason to believe that older scholars (who have *freedom* to experiment) may be the ones who bring about change.

*From the mouths of babes...*

There was a video in late February or early March 2010 of a 3-year-old talking about what she wants from her library. Bobbi Newman had a quick comment on this in a March 2, 2010 post at *Librarian by Day*: “The Only Thing This Video Proves is 3 Year Olds Can Be Coached.” Maybe that's all that needs to be said.

I saw [the video] when it first started making the rounds and thought cute, but clearly that child



has been coached and so dismissed it. She isn't telling us what she wants, she telling us what the person behind the camera told her to say. She is three, she has no idea what she is saying.

What's the harm? None, until:

But then it started to be retweeted, and librarians started holding it up as proof of something. Of proof we need to adapt and change for digital natives. Then I started beating my head against my desk. Because please, anyone can see this child is coached and this, THIS is your proof? If you showed this to me as proof of your stance in an argument I would mock you. And you would deserve it.

Newman believes change is needed. She's strong on transliteracy (which I don't fully understand). There are issues that need to be discussed—and citing a 3-year-old “digital native” as proof of anything *gets in the way* of that discussion.

The comments are interesting. The first person says she “can't imagine anyone actually pointing to this as proof, and haven't heard that done”—but then says she *used the video* in a presentation attempting to help older librarians and volunteers “understand why migrating to dynamically-driven web-based content is so critical, and why it will become even more critical in order to stay relevant to younger patrons.” She says she pointed out that the video was clearly fabricated—but *she used the video*. And she says it got her audience thinking. Thinking about what? That three-year-olds can be coached? How could the video serve *any* useful purpose in demonstrating a need? (Newman responded that “the same points could have been made in another way that was not fabricated.”)

The next commenter is “in favor of this video just because I ‘see’ it as a marketing product...” which seems sad, and comes back later to defend the phony video. Finally, someone agreed with Newman (and noted that her thoughts included cursing and rants about child abuse). (Newman responds to the second defense of the video appropriately: “It makes me cringe to see us holding up something that can so easily be dismissed as fabricated. Which would allow the issues to then be dismissed as well.”)

That same day, “Andy” at *Agnostic, Maybe* belittled a number of librarians for being humorless—including those who objected to the coached 3-year-old's video.

As for those who are appalled by this (dare I say it?) cute video, if you are really taking this video

that seriously, you might be due for a little nonsense right about now. Because if you are considering this video as a real issue, then you are ignoring the hell out of actual serious issues such as reaching out to the community served, advocacy on issues of support and funding, and education as to the mission and materials of the library. And, quite honestly, articles and posts regarding what it means to be a serious librarian (or, apparently more importantly, what is not part of one) creates discussion that resembles a circular firing squad; it is to the benefit of no one.

The reason Bobbi Newman wrote her post is that *other librarians* were citing this video as being meaningful—“something we need to think about.” It would be hard to find those cites now; they've pretty much disappeared. Without them, the video would have been a harmless little piece of fluff (originally used at VALA, apparently), to be treated as silliness. With them, it became something else—not about seriousness, but about what's reasonable to cite as evidence of generational differences and what's not.

#### *The net generation, unplugged*

From the March 4, 2010 *Economist*, a nice little article taking aim at *Born Digital* and other “tomes about digital natives” and claims that this “generation” is so different—and the calls based on, mostly, anecdotal for total transformation of education and employment.

But does it really make sense to generalise about a whole generation in this way? Not everyone thinks it does. “This is essentially a wrong-headed argument that assumes that our kids have some special path to the witchcraft of ‘digital awareness’ and that they understand something that we, teachers, don't—and we have to catch up with them,” says Siva Vaidhyanathan, who teaches media studies at University of Virginia.

Anyone who's read *C&I* long enough will know I'm not automatically in love with everything Siva Vaidhyanathan says, but I think “wrong-headed” is exactly right here.

Michael Wesch, who pioneered the use of new media in his cultural anthropology classes at Kansas State University, is also sceptical, saying that many of his incoming students have only a superficial familiarity with the digital tools that they use regularly, especially when it comes to the tools' social and political potential. Only a small fraction of students may count as true digital natives, in other

words. The rest are no better or worse at using technology than the rest of the population.

Michael Wesch doesn't buy the "digital native" stereotype? That's compelling. The article also cites studies suggesting what's far more likely—that variations within a so-called generation are likely to be at least as large as between that and other generations. And, of course, generalizations are harmful *because* they generalize: they "fail to recognise cognitive differences in young people of different ages, and variation within age group." One comment, by "CA-Oxonian," is eloquent in its forthrightness:

With every new pervasive technology comes talk of a mysterious new generation that somehow "gets" it and will magically be different from all preceding human generations. Such nonsense is generally spouted by people older than the generation being described who largely fail to comprehend the actual details of the technology in question. And then, after all the tedious and predictable (but highly profitable) hype comes the boring reality: humans are humans. They use new technologies to accomplish old tasks. Fifty thousand years ago people drew lewd stick figures in the sand; today they download porn from a free website. Fifty thousand years ago they huddled in the shade of a tree and spun improbable yarns to impress each other; now they post on each other's Facebook Wall. In short, while technologies come and go people remain pretty much the same. And people will always have a propensity for hyping the next great technology that will ensure that our younger generation will be mysteriously (but indefinitely) different from all that have gone before. Plus ca change...

Don Tapscott also commented, saying his views have now been *proven* by a \$4 million study showing that Millennials' brains *really are different*. He made another best-seller out of that. So I'm clearly wrong; the issue has officially been settled...in 2009. If you believe Tapscott.

George Williams did a followup post on March 9, 2010 at *ProfHacker*: "Digital Natives? Naïve!" He cites one danger of educators buying into "digital natives": that educators will "assume levels of expertise and experience—among all of their students—that simply don't exist in such an evenly distributed way" and may lose opportunities to teach critical skills. Williams suggests asking students two questions as a simple experiment:

- How does the Google search engine work?
- Who owns the exclusive rights to the pictures you've uploaded to Facebook?

Williams guesses "a statistically insignificant percentage of your students will know the right answer[s]."

Maura Smale commented on the *Economist* article (and an article in *Sociological Inquiry* describing differences in internet skills among college students) in a March 14, 2010 post at *ACRLog*, "Not So Native?"

I have to admit that I've never been a fan of many of the generalizations about millennials and their technology skills. I'm fairly tech savvy despite being nowhere near college age, and many of my colleagues are, too. I also know many folks my age and younger who are reluctant (and less savvy) technology users. In my experience interest is a far more accurate predictor of technology adoption than age. Our students are familiar with the tech tools they use every day—cellphones, text messaging, social networking, etc.—in the same way anyone can grow comfortable with repeated use of common technologies.

Smale's not surprised to see reports that college students aren't as technology-savvy as "digital natives" should be. "I'm sure this is familiar to many of us from our interactions with students, whether at the reference desk, in instruction sessions or elsewhere in the library." She also makes an interesting point, one I don't see often enough from academic librarians. Yes, academic libraries should be (and are) adopting new technologies to improve services.

But I'd also caution that we can't let the new sweep away the old quite yet. They may be old-fashioned, but there's still a place in our libraries for posters and handouts alongside those newcomers Twitter and blogs.

## Conclusions

Sharp distinctions between generations—and even labels for specific generations—are mostly nonsense, and damaging nonsense at that. Sure, growing up with tools makes them less *apparent* as new tools—but it doesn't mean you understand them, just that you've used them. (And, with a few exceptions, it means you've used them if you're from a middle-class or wealthier family in a developed nation.) Gengen is stereotyping; stereotyping always saves time by allowing us to avoid dealing with people *as individuals*—and that's pretty much never a positive thing.

On the other hand...things do change, if not in bizarre generational leaps and gulfs, and those in

power need to be aware of change and supportive of younger (or older but more aware) people trying to make sense of that change. Things *don't* stay the same: That's not new.

I find it improbable that we'll see less gengen, less stereotyping. It's too profitable an activity for the Gurus of Gengen, and it's too easy for others to say "Oh, here's what X is all about, now I can stop thinking about it."

A substantial percentage of people in the generation *before* mine—the so-called Greatest Generation—were self-interested slackers who cared about nothing more than getting ahead and avoiding things like war and worldwide causes. A substantial percentage of those self-absorbed Boomers have worked to make a difference in the world, showing the kind of enlightened self-interest that's also called altruism and effective charity. How could it be otherwise?

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## Old Media/New Media

It's been almost two years since this heading showed up in *Cites & Insights*. That may account for some of the items noted below. Why pick up an apparently abandoned theme?

- It was never really abandoned, just quiet for too long—and I *have* dealt with old media/new media issues elsewhere.
- The distinction between "new media" for this section and Net Media has been a tricky one. I'm beginning to think "Net Media" is a silly heading—that I should split that into Social Media (as opposed to Social Networks, and that's *another* essay!) and Old Media/New Media. You may pick up bits of that here. Putting old media stuff on the internet doesn't turn it into net media, it turns it into a digital/streamed version of old media.
- The launch of the Apple iPad and several dozen other tablet devices *may* have some impact on the old media/new media situation (although I strongly expect neither death nor salvation from such devices), which makes this an indirect followup to the Spring 2010 *Cites & Insights*.

This essay is divided into three parts:

- Media in general, and specific media *other than* books, magazines and newspapers.

- Magazine-related issues.
- Newspaper-related issues.

Books and ebooks? They deserve separate treatment.

## And Not Or

A *lot* of what follows has to do with the exclusionary **Or** principle: Digital wholly displaces analog, new media wholly displace old ones, the new only wins because the old loses.

This is typically nonsense. Usually, new media complement and redefine old ones. **And** is the usual state of reality, except when the old has no redeeming merits for any significant portion of the population after the new appears—or when government mandate or corporate collusion forces the old off the market. Eight-tracks? Self-destructive, bad sound, primed for replacement—one of the worst sound reproduction media ever invented. Analog TV? Government mandate, pure and simple...and most cable systems still transmit analog TV channels. Vinyl? Pushed out of the mainstream by corporate collusion, the medium's market has been growing for several years.

Vinyl is a good example of the other aspect of **And** thinking: It will never again be the dominant audio medium (and had ceased to be the dominant audio medium *before* CDs came along, with audiocassettes taking its place)—but it can be a healthy niche market, profitable for some companies. Some niche markets are bigger than others: Newspapers can lose 2/3 of their revenue and *still* bring in more than \$10 billion a year in the U.S.

The problem, here as in other areas, is that **And** thinking is neither startling nor likely to make a writer or speaker into a guru. Simple messages, simple "X will win, therefore Y will lose" approaches, get the headlines and attention. **Or** thinking is far more rewarding to those doing it—and some of them have figured out that most people never notice that they're wrong most of the time. Once a guru, always a guru: It's one of the odd truths of writing, speaking and futurism. Complexity and multiplicity may be the most likely future, but simplicity and generality get more attention.

## Digital Doesn't Exclude Physical

Here's a silly headline, from *Ars Technica* on August 14, 2009: "US digital music sales to eclipse CDs by 2010." It's silly for three reasons:

- That's not *at all* what the U.S. chart says. It says sales of music not sold in physical form *might* exceed 50% of all U.S. music sales in 2010. Turning "slightly outsell" into "eclipse" may make a great headline but it's an extreme reading of "eclipse."
- This is only major label revenue—RIAA figures, leaving out thousands of independent labels and online sources. I have no idea what the mix of non-physical to physical sales is for smaller labels, but I know that such labels (many of which have only one artist) sell a lot of CDs.
- CDs *are* digital music—they carry music in digital form. The headline is functionally equivalent to saying "US print book sales to eclipse paperback sales by 2010"—as though paperbacks weren't a form of print book.

How many of you assume that "CDs are dead"—that they're *already* a niche format in the U.S., comparable, say, to LPs? How many of you assume that "CDs are dead" worldwide?

Worldwide—again, for major players—the same report (all extrapolation) says non-physical sales won't pass CD sales until 2016. During 2008, non-physical music sales accounted for less than 11% of music revenue in Europe. South Korea is the only country in which non-physical sales already represent a majority of music sales.

A more complex point appeared earlier at *Ars Technica*: Jacqui Cheng's July 16, 2009 story, "Report: music fans cling to CDs, but discover music online." This one's based on a UK survey—and trends in the UK aren't necessarily the same as in the U.S. The survey involved a thousand face-to-face interviews of UK music lovers between 14 and 64, all with broadband. "Seventy-three percent of the group reported being happier buying CDs than downloading, with 66 percent of those between the ages of 14 and 18 being among that group. Over half (59 percent) reported listening to CDs every day." There's some question as to whether those CDs are all *purchased* (ripping and burning is a significant "sharing activity").

Still, subscription and music streaming services are apparently doing their part to help people decide which music (CD or otherwise) to buy. According to The Leading Question's research, those who pay for a subscription service such as Napster spend more on CDs than the average music buyer (£16.87 per

month, compared to £11.37). The same applies to people who listen to streaming music—those people spend £12.17 per month on CDs and £7.02 per month on downloads, compared to £3.81 per month spent on downloads by the average music fan.

The CEO of one of the two firms involved in the study seems to have a more complex view of the future than most journalists: "While we fully expect that digital will **eventually replace most physical consumption**, this is not a clear cut replacement cycle like the change from vinyl to CD." Emphasis added: *Most* is not *all*, a point that seems lost in the hoopla. The statement's *still* wrong—there was *no* "clear cut replacement cycle" from vinyl to CD, since cassettes had already replaced most LP sales—as one comment points out. (If I was buying music these days—and I *did* buy half a dozen used CDs from SecondSpin last month—I'd use Pandora as a discovery mechanism to purchase either downloads or CDs, directly or indirectly.)

Maura A. Smale offers a related comment on February 14, 2010 at *from the Library of Maura* ([msmale.commons.gc.cuny.edu](http://msmale.commons.gc.cuny.edu)) in "Digital, Analog." She's teaching a class "Research & Documentation for the Information Age"—a full-semester credit class, not a single session—and brought in a variety of print media for an interesting reason, with perhaps even more interesting results:

Over the past two weeks I've brought an academic journal, newspaper, popular magazine, trade journal, and three zines on different subjects (music, parenting and librarianship) to class. I've long felt that it's confusing to undergraduates when they're confronted with article databases in which everything looks the same. Even on the internet, it can be hard to read visual clues other than advertising (which can sometimes be very subtle, too). The differences between the content in different types of publications are much more obvious when you can hold and flip through them.

It was also amazing to learn how much my students appreciate the physical embodiment of these different media. Most of the students in my class are of traditional college age, the so-called "millennial" generation. While I don't necessarily buy a lot of the digital natives hype (based on my own experiences as well as others'), the truth is that all of us, me included, are probably heavier users of digital media these days. One student lamented that he missed browsing in music stores for CDs, and other revealed that he didn't like buying MP3s because there wasn't anything physical with the purchase.

The digital generation that cares nothing for containers? Maybe not quite so simple.

It might be worth noting Nielsen SoundScan's end-of-year report for calendar 2009, which only deals with U.S. sales. For the year *as based on actual sales*, pure-digital accounts for 40% of U.S. music purchases (up from 32% in 2008). That's presumably in terms of revenue; in *units* sold, Nielsen shows 1.1 billion digital tracks, 374 million albums (76 million of them downloads)—and the highest number of LP sales since Nielsen SoundScan began in 1991, although that number's only 2.5 million. "Others" (beyond the big four record companies that dominate RIAA) make up 11.5% of total album sales and 13.4% of digital track sales. You'll find lots more at [blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Nielsen-Music-2009-Year-End-Press-Release.pdf](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Nielsen-Music-2009-Year-End-Press-Release.pdf).

## Too Bad about TV?

Remember when people watched TV, back before video moved to smartphones, iPods and notebooks? Weren't those the days? Before at least one library guru stated that TV is dead?

A March 27, 2009 *Media Life Magazine* story by Kevin Downey carries the key point in the title: "Fact is, TV's still the king of all media." That's based on a \$3.5 million research project funded by Nielsen and conducted by Ball State University and Sequent Partners—in which researchers *followed people around* and documented their "every engagement with media." They recorded nearly three years' worth of media behavior from 400 study participants—not statistically foolproof, but a fairly large sample for such intense study. What did they find?

- TV remains the dominant visual medium by far, accounting for 99% of all video consumption in terms of time spent.
- "Researchers found that people were inclined to under-report the amount of time they spent in front of TV sets and over-report time spent with other media." Participants *reported* watching just over four hours of TV per day—but actually *spent* more than five hours a day. Conversely, "When asked how much video they watched online, they reported nearly an hour a day when in fact they watched just a few minutes."
- When this study says TV, it means *TV*—broadcast, satellite, cable. Only about 23 minutes (per day) were spent on DVDs, 15

minutes DVR-recorded programs and seven minutes videogames.

- Even among young adults, the boob tube—OK, so it's frequently not a tube anymore—accounts for 98% of all video consumption.
- People averaged an hour a day simultaneously using more than one media outlet—and a total of about 8.5 hours a day "in front of one sort of screen or another."

I can suggest lots of caveats. The DVR number would almost certainly be higher now—but how much higher? That 8.5 hours presumably includes time spent at computers, and that's not all media consumption.

A May 21, 2009 Chris Foresman piece in *Ars Technica* uses Nielsen's online measurements rather than a survey, but also reflects more recent data: The first quarter of 2009. What's changed? Not much. As the story title says, "Despite rise in streaming, 99% of all video watched on a TV." It's not that people *aren't* watching some video "via the Internet"—Nielsen says about 131 million people are watching an average of three hours of video per month that way (which equals six minutes per day). About 13 million mobile phone users watch an average of 3.5 hours of video per month (make that seven minutes per day, but that's among 13 million, not 131 million). And...well, "we" average about 153.5 hours in front of the TV, or a little over 5 hours (300 minutes). The pie chart's pointless but scary: 98.8% of video viewed on TV, 1.1% on the internet, 0.1% mobile phones.

Going directly to the report helps: While it shows 131 million people watching video via the internet, it shows 284.5 million watching TV in the home—and about 79.5 million watching time-shifted TV. Those 79.5 million averaged just over 8 hours per month of timeshifting (call it 16 minutes a day, *nearly exactly* the same as in the earlier study)—but that's *per user*, and only about 2 out of 7 TV users do any timeshifting at all. (That corresponds to known DVR ownership, incidentally.) "TV in the home" includes timeshifted TV.

Foresman includes his own anecdotal viewing habits, which are atypical and worth noting only because even this devoted techie finds that he usually watches internet video sources *on the TV screen* because it looks better, sounds better and is more comfortable to watch. Comments question the numbers (in most cases without bothering to

read the report) and, as you might expect from the audience, seem to assume almost everybody watches most TV via DVDs or streaming—which, I suspect, is *simply not true* for non-geek definitions of “almost everybody.”

I could lament this whole thing. Five hours a day watching TV? *Really?* But the agreement between direct observation and Nielsen’s electronic monitoring is convincing. (One commenter had an answer for that 5 hour/day average: “Weekends. 2-3 hours on weekdays, then like 7-8 on the weekends.” That’s not implausible.)

Will things change? **Of course**—but probably not rapidly and certainly not predictably. A different *Ars Technica* writer, Nate Anderson, wrote an October 12, 2009 piece about all the streaming TV he’s watching and his resulting drop in DVD watching, in “I haven’t watched a DVD in six months. Thanks, Netflix?” The article is purely anecdotal, of course, but Anderson finds that his family is watching *more* TV—but shorter-form TV, generally avoiding movies. Somehow, Anderson finds that having a queue of TV series waiting to be streamed causes anxiety: you need to “make progress” on that list rather than watching movies. There’s too much pontificating on “the burden of an on-demand world,” with Anderson seeming to think other people feel this *need* to watch lots and lots of TV episodes *because they’re there*. (I’d guess his two small children have a lot to do with this.) I sense his desire to generalize about short attention span in general—you know, once you have a Rhapsody subscription you only listen to 20 or 30 seconds of each song, and *never* listen to the same song again *because there’s so much out there*. To which I can only note, politely, bushwah.

The unfortunate part of the bushwah is Anderson’s claim, seemingly consistent with *Ars Technica*’s general coverage, that “people like me” mean Blu-ray’s dead or nearly so and Netflix will be out of the DVD business soon. He’s careful enough to couch that in language that I can’t argue with: Netflix’ shipping/warehouse activity “will eventually scale back and shutter altogether.” “Eventually” is a very long time, and far be it from me to challenge an open-ended timeframe. (Netflix’ CEO says they’ll still be shipping DVDs through at least 2030.) I suppose it’s hard to argue with “Blu-ray’s technological superiority will matter only to some,”

since that’s equally true whether “some” means 1% of the population or 99% of the population.

The truth is likely somewhere in between—and yes, it’s unlikely that Blu-ray will ever be the mass success that DVD has been. On the other hand, Blu-ray’s picking up steam quite nicely.

So why is pontificating like this unfortunate? Because it leads to items like Tyler Rousseau’s “At what point do we stop investing in a format?” posted September 30, 2009 at *library garden*. Rousseau and wife bought an HDTV, then thought about a Blu-ray player—and got idiot advice from an electronics store employee. That employee thought Blu-ray would have taken off by now if it was going to. He quoted a Samsung executive saying Blu-ray had only five years left (the quote is from the same 2008 interview in which the executive says 2010 is the year OLED will *replace* LCD, so the guy’s crystal ball may be broken; it’s worth noting that in early 2008, there was still a Blu-ray/HD-DVD format war). Somehow, the clerk thinks that Netflix’ success is “not really a good thing for DVDs or Blu-rays.” Apparently, the clerk was also big on avoiding possessions and sticking it to the man: Your basic Highly Credible Source.

Rousseau found himself thinking about the difficulty of adding new media to a library collection—and when to *stop* collecting something.

Obviously, changes in formats are nothing new. Even in the relatively short time I have been in the profession, I’ve seen libraries stop buying audiocassettes, CD-Roms and videotapes. More so, I’ve seen them stop purchasing the paper copies of publications in order to invest in the cheaper online versions.

And while I definitely applaud libraries who have decided to invest in Blu-rays I do wonder about how long this medium has. While 5 years seems a little short to me, I would not be surprised to see it obsolete within 10.

He was looking for feedback; I don’t believe he got much that was useful.

Another report in *Media Life*, this time December 17, 2009, from Deloitte as part of an ongoing series of studies, says much the same thing as most of those above: “Fact is, TV is more popular than ever.” This study shows a mild *decline* in multitasking over the last few years but that overall numbers haven’t changed all that much. The Deloitte executive talking about the survey results gives this as the most important point for media buyers and planners (*Media Life*’s target audience):

I think what they can take away is, look at the data and don't listen to the pundits or conventional wisdom. If you to the pundits or conventional wisdom, TV's demise has been coming for years. The format has been attacked, along with the 30-second spot, and you've seen the data—consumption of TV, no matter how you slice it, it's still incredibly strong, it's at the top of the stack. So if you're a media planner or buyer, TV is not dead.

I'm not celebrating these results. But there they are. I hear notes from people who "don't watch TV" or "don't watch much TV"—and I've seen the streams of FriendFeed and FaceBook updates as they're watching basketball or football or *Lost* or...

## Other Thoughts on Old/New Media

Alan D. Mutter wrote a two-part post on charging for web content on February 8 & 9, 2009 at *Reflections of a Newsosaur*. Charging for web content? Mutter thinks it's a non-starter and says so with opening paragraphs that show the extent of his sympathy for newspapers and their future:

It is going to be just as tough for publishers to overcome their Original Sin as it has been for mankind to get past the original Original Sin committed when Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit.

The Original Sin among most (but not all) publishers was permitting their content be consumed for free on the web. Now that ad sales are about as low as the belly of the snake who caused the mischief in the Garden of Eden, a growing number of us have concluded that consumers are either going to have to start paying for professionally generated content or there won't much of it left.

Ad sales in newspapers are still between \$20 and \$30 billion, down considerably but not exactly negligible—but "low as the belly of the snake" is ever so much more lively. Mutter's summary of likely success is clear: "free is the presumptive price of news, information and entertainment on the web."

He quotes RIAA statistics claiming that billions and billions of songs are downloaded illegally (supposedly 10 times as many in 2005 as were downloaded legally)—and adds his *hunch* that the *proportion* of bootlegged music is higher today. That hunch (which, given massive increases in legal download purchases, seems improbable without evidence) then becomes the basis for further discussion. Great journalism: State one "fact," add a hunch, then go from there.

His main point is that newspapers and wire services should *never* have made content free on the web in the first place. Is he right? Would people pay for professionally-generated news content on the web if no free versions were available—or would they rely on TV and radio (always free to the consumer) for that news? If "news" means "latest facts or non-facts," then Twitter and the like have journalism beat anyway; if it means something deeper, it's more complicated.

Craigslist has been a fundamental problem for newspaper economics (since classified ads were a profitable staple for most papers), aided and abetted by a downturn in display ads during the recession, ads that may never come back. Subscribers rarely paid enough to cover the cost of printing and delivery. In a real sense, the editorial content of a newspaper has been effectively free for years—you pay to get it in a convenient form.

The second part of the post considers possible ways to get *some* money for online resources, such as micropayments. Micropayments only work if there are no free and easy competitors. They might work for great local columnists and really fine local journalism, but almost certainly not for news as such. Realistically, it's hard to see this as succeeding. (It also seems to require a cartel, which is both unlikely and legally questionable.)

### *The End of Paper?*

That's the title of a Michael Copeland story in the March 16, 2009 *Fortune*. It's about the concept that the "coming generation" of ereaders could somehow save newspapers and magazines. Not the Kindle and its competitors: Those displays "simply don't provide a good enough reading experience and advertising environment for magazines and newspapers." Nope; it's the new crop of readers that were supposedly coming on the market later in 2009.

Copeland sees an 8x11" plastic screen, "light and durable enough to throw into your briefcase, to take to the beach, or to read in your easy chair," with wireless downloading, print resolution "as clear as what you find in today's magazines" and "striking color"—but also video for ads. Hmm. Magazine print resolution is probably 600dpi or better. The iPad comes in at 133dpi while most e-Ink readers are around 170dpi. We're not there yet—but this was one of the articles suggesting Hearst was getting ready to launch their own big-screen magazine-oriented ereader.

“The technology, for the most part, works. The question is, Will the business model?” Given Copeland’s idea of what’s workable, the technology *doesn’t* work—we’re still a ways from a true magazine-resolution screen, particularly one that’s light, durable and cheap.

Copeland provides upbeat interpretations of Amazon’s obscure figures for Kindle and ebook sales—but also notes that the revenue model for (most) magazines and newspapers are sharply different, since they need both subscriptions and ads. He says going digital could save more than 50% of the overall cost of producing a periodical and makes the usual *untested* claim that ereaders are “good for the environment”—but nobody’s clear how the business model would work. The “free on the web” model makes things difficult as well...as does the fact that print advertisers pay for pass-along readership, much less likely with ereaders.

It’s an odd article, one that seems to take the end of print as a given and accepts claims by prototype makers without much digging. Seen those 8x11” color Plastic Logic ereaders in the stores recently—the ones you can “stomp on without breaking”? No, neither have I, but we were promised they would be available in early 2010. (At this writing, the Plastic Logic ereader is *supposed* to ship in “Summer 2010”—but it’s *not* color, it’s an 8-level grayscale E Ink display, and while the case is 8.5x11”, the display is 6.4x8.5”. At \$650 for a 4GB WiFi model to \$800 for an 8GB 3G model, I wonder whether this *is* a case where the iPad means death before birth.) The close comes from Russell Wilcox of E Ink, who has modest aims for E Ink-based readers:

“We’re not only going to save publishing,” he says, “we’re also going to save civilization.” The laugh that you might expect to come next never does. He means it.

Carolyn Foote commented on this article in “What will the future of print look like?” posted March 22, 2009 at *Not So Distant Future* ([futura.edublogs.org](http://futura.edublogs.org)). She says “it would be a much more reliable business venture to create magazines readable on the Kindle or iPhone”—but neither of those can provide satisfactory magazine reading experiences. Which may be the point:

After reading the article, though I love all things tech, I realized I would really miss magazines that you can touch, hold, and browse through. E-reading seems so much more purposeful than the

way I read magazines. A page loads one at a time, and it’s not something you can “flip” through, or tear a page out and post it on your bulletin board, or read by the pool and get the pages wet. For purposeful journal reading, such a device might work well—but for magazine “browsing” that many readers do, it seems ill-suited.

The rest of the post is about the virtues of media in a democracy—and she seems to assume that, one way or another, everything *will* go online-only.

If we lose print newspapers and/or magazines due to economic pressures, what have we lost? I’m all for e-reporting and blogs, but excellent newspapers and magazines really do unfold a story in a different way—both with their investigative abilities and the abilities of good print journalists to pull a story together well.

Her final paragraph is questions and she adds some **And** thinking—“Will we continue to have side by side technologies for a long time?” Yes, most likely. “What will the world feel like when/if everything is on a screen rather than on paper?” I don’t anticipate that dystopian future coming true in my lifetime—but what do I know?

#### *Media Darwinism: Which Sites Will Survive?*

This one’s for fun—a *Vanity Fair* piece (on “VF Daily”) by Matt Pressman, posted April 28, 2009.

If there’s one thing media prognosticators can agree on, it’s that print publications are on the way out. The great unanswered question is what the online media of the future will actually look like. Although it has been 13 years since the launch of Slate magazine and NYTimes.com, we are still in the early stages of the evolution of online media, and it remains to be seen which creatures will emerge from the primordial ooze adapted to survive in a harsh new environment...

Pressman comes up with seven species, with examples, behavior and survival prospects for each.

- **The Velocireporter** (e.g., Talking Points memo). *Small* staff of real reporters; survival prospects good.
- **The Linkodactyl** (e.g., Drudge Report and Google News): snatching stories from here and there either through editors or algorithms. Survival prospects mixed—what happens when the sources disappear?
- **The Snark-toothed Tiger** (e.g. Gawker): Cuts “big-shots and pretenders” down to size. Survival prospects good—“people never tire of take-downs of the success-



ful/beautiful/overexposed.” There it is: Gossip sells...endlessly.

- **Buzzceratops** (e.g. Huffington Post): “As Rudyard Kipling observed...the female of the species is more deadly.” Mix of posts and headlines, thriving on attention and comments. Survival prospects fair.
- **The Inky Mammoth** (e.g. NYTimes.com): More resources—but nearly all revenue comes from printed product. Survival prospect poor.
- **The Mediamphibian** (e.g. VanityFair.com): Supplementing print-based product with blogs etc. Survival prospects mixed—“most could not survive independently of the mother ship.”
- **Webmagasaurus Rex** (e.g. Slate): “Like an old-fashioned magazine but without the paper...” Survival prospects fair: “Hey, if they’ve managed to stick around for this long...”

This is funnier if you *don’t* believe print is doomed. If you do, it’s a little sad, since it boils down to “gossip and celebrities sell, most everything else loses.” There are, as some comments note, other categories, but this is a charming start.

### *Terms and Conditions*

Since we’re having a little fun here, take a look at *BarnesandNobleReview.com* (bnreview.barnesandnoble.com) for September 18, 2009, specifically a set of “Terms and Service” for The Book. It’s by Matthew Battles and originally appeared in his blog *library ad infinitum* (mbattles.posterous.com). Brief excerpts from a fairly brief (600-word) piece:

**Privacy:** What takes place in the exchange between your brain and the contents of The Book is your exclusive private concern...

**Intellectual Property:**... The Book claims no license, exclusive or non-exclusive, to thoughts and experiences of the user (“reader”). When you experience ideas and information contained in The Book, said experiences remain your exclusive property, to be transferred, transformed, repurposed, or forgotten...

**Registration:** The Book has no account registration procedure. No credit card, social security number, passport, diploma, blood type, vision test, or waiver of rights shall be required to use The Book...

**Use:** The Book is a work of art and a product of craft, and as such is open to any use or repurposing imaginable by readers, writers, and other us-

ers, who may scribble in, decorate, deface, gloss, footnote, illustrate, carve, stack, shelve, hide, beg, borrow, or steal as deemed appropriate...

**Special Provisions:** The Book will not place ads in your brain... The Book will not stop providing its services if you violate the spirit or letter of this agreement...

Good stuff (which is not to say I endorse the rest of Battles’ blog or B&N’s site—it’s not that simple). Go read it.

### *Nitpickery on a Non-Trivial Scale*

Maybe this doesn’t belong here. Maybe it belongs with ebooks or magazines—since it begins with a magazine editor taking on a writer who’s had “ebooks” posted for free—but it feels right as a commentary on frictions between old and new media. It’s by John Scalzi (a science fiction writer) at *Whatever* (whatever.scalzi.com), posted May 11, 2009. The post is close to 2,300 words; 111 responses (so far) add another—good grief—17,000 words. That’s not ranting; Scalzi’s loyal readers tend toward thoughtful, interesting, *worthwhile* comments. This discussion says something useful, if indirect, about Andersonomics and giving it away.

The setup: an interview with Gordon Van Gelder, editor and publisher of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, on the state of the SF market. At some point, Scalzi is mentioned along with Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow as the “big three” SF authors who have figured out how to make the internet work for them. Van Gelder says:

A lot of people try to duplicate what the big three have done and it hasn’t worked, but nobody hears about the cases where it hasn’t worked. A lot of other people have tried to give away their work online and no one’s come and taken it. I know of a case where a publisher made an author’s work available for free online, his first novel. They gave it away as a Scalzi-esque promotion. As I understand it the novel sold less than a thousand copies. It didn’t do anyone any good to give it away. It’s easy to look at Scalzi’s success and say it’s so great to do online marketing but you don’t hear of the author I just mentioned.

Scalzi notes problems with that. First, he posted *Agent to the Stars* and *Old Man’s War* on his *personal* site not as part of a master marketing plan—but because that’s where Scalzi thought they belonged. He wasn’t attempting to sell them; that came as somewhat of a surprise. Eventually, Tor (his publisher) did do a limited-time free ebook version of *Old Man’s War*—but at that point it was

a bestseller, it had a Hugo nomination, Scalzi had won a Campbell award and had three novels out there. “The release happened when the book was, shall we say, a mature item in the market.”

Stross and Doctorow *have* released free ebook editions simultaneously with physical book releases, so “Scalzi-esque” should be “Doctorow-like” or “Stross-esque”—but both writers were also already known quantities. Doctorow was a Campbell winner (and there’s *Boing Boing*); Stross was already a multiple Hugo nominee and Hugo winner.

Which is to say that in all cases that the “big three” released an eBook in conjunction with their publishers, each of us already had established ourselves in the market, in sales and/or critical acclaim and/or by generating—over a considerable amount of time in each case—our audiences through our online presences. Certainly there was some amount of risk in putting our work out there for free, but that risk was substantially buffered by other factors.

Scalzi says, bluntly, that if he was a relatively unknown writer he *would not* put an eBook out there for free and expect to see print sales as a result, rather than doing actual marketing.

Van Gelder says “the big three” aren’t out to do publishers any good; they’re in it for themselves. That’s a low blow for Scalzi, who devotes much of his blog to promoting books by other people.

In a larger sense, one of the nice things about the science fiction genre is that many if not most of the authors do understand that supporting each other is a way of also supporting one’s self—that helping introduce readers to other writers expands the market and accrues good karma toward one’s self. It’s also a manifestation of a concept popularized in science fiction, of “paying it forward”—doing good things for other writers and fans in the hope that when they are in a position of doing good things for still other writers and fans, they will remember your example and do unto others as you did unto them. It’s why I do what I do, and almost certainly why Charlie and Cory do it too.

Technically Van Gelder is correct: writers *are* in it for themselves, since they have spouses and kids and houses and all that. “In a wider sense, however, he’s almost embarrassingly wrong.”

There’s another discussion you should read on your own—as to whether you can compare magazine sales to pageviews of online articles. Van Gelder seems to imply that Scalzi treats them as comparable, but the relevant Scalzi article says *quite clearly* that—well, I’ll quote:

Bear in mind that comparing hits to subscriber numbers is a squirrels to tangelos sort of comparison: As noted, each hit does not necessarily equal a new reader, and while there’s probably a fair amount of overlap in the subscriber rolls of the “big three” (if you subscribe to one, you’re likely to subscribe to two, etc), each individual copy of each magazine is likely to be read by more than one person.

This particular discussion goes into whether *F&SF* (doing badly as a print publication, having dropped to thicker bimonthly issues in order to cut postage and down to less than 13,000 circulation) could, in an ad-friendly format, make more money if it gave copies away.

The last portion of the post has to do with print people blaming the internet for their troubles—and here, I can only agree. The “big three” magazines (all under 30,000 circulation) have had dropping subscription numbers for years. I subscribe to all three. While I have no doubt that I’ll be subscribing to *some* print magazines as long as I am able to read, I wonder whether it will be possible to subscribe to these three for another 30 years. If *F&SF* or *Analog* or *Asimov’s* does disappear, it won’t be because of the internet: I’m with Scalzi on that one. Also true: Putting free eBooks up on the internet does not provably, *in general*, sell print books...and Scalzi doesn’t believe it will.

Did I mention the comments (responses)? We learn that the minimum for “pro” rates for science fiction is five cents a word—which, adjusted for inflation, is *less* than in the bad old days (and miserable by any standard). A writer notes her frustration that marketing people seem to think that if three authors can “leverage the web” to market themselves to fame and fortune, *so can any author*. “I wish there was some way to make clear to marketing people that what you are doing takes work, time, and not a little social savvy; that it takes more, by far, than a desire to just sell books. Building a community doesn’t happen overnight; nor does it happen from raw hucksterism.” There’s a *lot* more—I’d say 90% of the comments are useful—but most of it’s out of scope here.

### *Three Tweets for the Web*

By Tyler Cowen in *The Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 2009 issue. The opening paragraph sets a suitably complex tone:

The printed word is not dead. We are not about to see the demise of the novel or the shuttering of all

the bookstores, and we won't all end up on Twitter. But we are clearly in the midst of a cultural transformation. For today's younger people, Google is more likely to provide a formative cultural experience than *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Catch-22* or even the Harry Potter novels. There is no question that books are becoming less central to our cultural life.

It's hard to argue with the final sentence. I might poke at the next paragraph, which speaks of "a broader shift toward short and to the point." Yes, there are a lot more short messages—but it's easy to overstate the shift. Yes, most YouTube videos are only a few minutes long but, well, see earlier in this article: *By far* the majority of video viewing is on the TV, and that's mostly *programs* lasting half an hour, an hour or longer.

Cowen's celebrating brevity, partly because there are so *many* brief messages: "In the realm of culture, a lot of our enjoyment has always come from the opening and unwrapping of each gift. Thanks to today's hypercurrent online environment, this is a pleasure we can experience nearly constantly." He believes the "culture of the short bit" is making minds *more* powerful—which I find as implausible as I do Nicholas Carr's counterassertion. While I agree that most new media are greeted with doomsday commentary and there's never *been* that golden age, I *really* question this statement: "The mass migration of intellectual activity from print to the Web has brought one important development: We have begun paying more attention to information." Really? *Information*? So all these web users pay attention to information, truthfulness, meaning? Really? That probably explains why health care reform has been debated so calmly, with all that information out there.

Cowen's a big believer in multitasking and sees each of us as doing something remarkable:

There is a deep coherence to how each of us pulls out a steady stream of information from disparate sources to feed our long-term interests. No matter how varied your topics of interest may appear to an outside observer, you'll tailor an information stream related to the continuing "stories" you want in your life—say, Sichuan cooking, health care reform, Michael Jackson, and the stock market. With the help of the Web, you build broader intellectual narratives about the world. The apparent disorder of the information stream reflects not your incoherence but rather your depth and originality as an individual.

That sounds so good, I wish I could buy it as true for most people. Perhaps Cowen actually has a "deep coherence" to his "information stream." I can't claim the same, and I doubt most people can. As for multitasking itself:

Many critics charge that multitasking makes us less efficient. Researchers say that periodically checking your e-mail lowers your cognitive performance level to that of a drunk. **If such claims were broadly correct, multitasking would pretty rapidly disappear simply because people would find that it didn't make sense to do it.** Multitasking is flourishing, and so are we. There are plenty of lab experiments that show that distracting people reduces the capacity of their working memory and thus impairs their decision making. It's much harder to show that multitasking, when it results from the choices and control of an individual, does anyone cognitive harm. Multitasking is not a distraction from our main activity, it is our main activity. [Emphasis added.]

Hmm. That's why people stopped getting drunk, driving dangerously, taking drugs and overeating: Because they don't make sense and we're all rational animals. I missed that somehow. That's in line with the rest of the essay. Cowen believes "we're devoting more effort than ever before to big-picture questions" and that, somehow, the web *lengthens* our attention spans because we can follow a "story" over many years, a bit at a time. I would have said that newspapers, magazines and books all allowed us to follow a story over years; this is new with the web?

There's more to the essay, but I began to find it rather sad. When Cowen finds more richness and worth in watching a few YouTube videos than in seeing *Don Giovanni* (too long, too expensive—and *it's in Italian!*), when he says the measure of *cultural* literacy today is "whether you can operate an iPhone and other Web-related technologies"...I'm done. He's a professor (of economics); I'm not.

(For a site run by a prestigious institute, the *Wilson Quarterly* website is problematic. There are 25 comments on this post—but the last eight are link spam, taking portions of preceding comments as the basis for links to online dating and the like.)

### *The Future of Reading*

That's the title on the first page of the March 1, 2010 *Fortune* article by Josh Quittner. The web version carries a page title "How tablets will change magazines, books, and newspapers" and appeared

on February 10, 2010, along with a set of mini-essays, “10 sages read the future of print.”

Quittner notes that his 12-year-old subscribed to *Vogue*—and he found that interesting. But he also found that his daughter was flagging each issue with lots of Post-its and stacking them for future reference—his wife called it “trying to turn the magazine into a computer.” Maybe.

He thinks this means young’uns still enjoy magazines, but want them “delivered in an exponentially more useful way”—that is, on tablets. He’s been pushing this theory for some time, so it may be no surprise. Quittner has high hopes for tablet computers—and he cites “many people” as believing that tablets “will replace not only the laptop but the desktop too.” Citing a research firm I’ve never heard of with a prediction that 58 million tablets a year will be shipping in 2015 does little to convince me (particularly since 58 million would be nowhere near the combined sales of desktop and notebook computers—not even one-quarter of 2009 sales). But Quittner’s an admitted tablet evangelist. That doesn’t make the article useless, just overenthusiastic. He raises five questions:

- **Will anyone be willing to pay for content delivered to a web?** He seems to think so if there’s a “great device.”
- **Aren’t tablets just a better way to browse the web?** While Quittner repeats his *almost certainty* that “in a few years, more people will be browsing the web via a tablet than on laptops and desktops” he thinks people want a lot more than just browsing.
- **“Reading? Reading is dead.”** Quittner has a fondness for Gurus—on the first two questions Marc Andreessen, and now Kevin Kelly. Kelly sees “reading” as healthy but only in his own warped version, “embedded into screens that are full of moving images...like subtitles in a movie, where you’re reading and watching at the same time.” Kelly is one who thinks *all reading should be movies*. Sigh. Quittner does point out magazine subscriptions rose steadily and consistently from 1970 to 2008, with only modest declines in 2009. “It’s pretty clear that people still derive value from curated, packaged collections of content delivered to them.”
- **What makes tablet-based ads better than web-based ads?** Ooh, ooh: “Full-

screen ads.” Which we’re all really eager to have, right? He believes “ads will work so well on tablets that even if subscription or pay-per-read models don’t work, many publishers will be able to thrive on advertising revenue alone.”

- **Can traditional publishing companies move fast enough?** Now, heaven help us, he quotes Jeff Jarvis...and I won’t bother you with that. Quittner thinks they will move fast enough. Of course, Kelly regards magazines as doomed (not enough video?)

I would go through the mini-essays from “10 sages” such as Steven Brill, Marc Andreessen, Jeff Jarvis and Jimbo Wales, but life is too short.

*The media’s future is written not in gloom and doom, but shades of grey*

What better way to end this section than with Peter Preston’s January 3, 2010 essay in *The Guardian*, which—as the title suggests—offers neither solid cheer nor unmixed doom. Preston does the unthinkable for a proper prognosticator: He offers a dozen grey areas. Just a few of them (noting that some are UK-specific):

- “Straight on to the net.” Of America’s top 30 newspaper *websites*, as many have lost readers and reading time from year to year as have gained.
- In the US, 45% of Americans pick up print papers—and about 10% go to newspaper websites. At least one major UK paper regards online as there to “defend, not replace, print.”
- Unique user numbers don’t tell advertisers what they want to know—and online ads are nearly worthless as revenue sources compared to print ads.
- This one’s from the UK, but the US may have a similar story: Newspaper circulation was (in many cases) dropping *before* the web was a factor. And increasing subscription prices to cover more of costs can cause further declines.

There’s more, mostly about other media—but it’s also mostly UK-specific. But it doesn’t hurt to wind up this section with a whole bunch of grey—a lot of maybes with few certainties.

## Magazines and Periodicals

Let's turn to a specific medium—or, really, a group of related media, namely magazines and periodicals. At this point, those words represent overlapping circles rather than a smaller circle (magazines) within a larger one (periodicals), because there are now quite a few one-shot magazines: Singletons delivered in magazine form and distributed on newsstands.

Much of my source material comes from Samir Husni's *Mr. Magazine* blog ([mrmagazine.wordpress.com](http://mrmagazine.wordpress.com)). Husni is probably the nation's leading authority on magazines—particularly new magazines. I also pick up some items from *Media Life*, which does regular sets of numbers on magazine newsstand sales.

### The Numbers

Magazine sales are going straight to hell—or that's what you could believe if you look at one particular set of numbers. *Media Life* reported on August 31, 2009 that single-copy sales were off 12.4% in the first half of the year—down from 41.4 million copies in the first half of 2008 to 36.3 million in the first half of 2009. That 36.3 million is the *average number* of copies sold for magazines, not the total number.

According to a February 9, 2010 *Media Life* report, sales were down in the second half of 2009 as well: 9.1% as compared to the second half of 2008. But note again the qualifier: average *single-copy* sales. Which, as the first article notes, is not a big piece of total circulation: about 12%.

Total paid and verified circulation was off from the first half of 2008 to the first half of 2009—but by a trivial 1.19%, from 343.7 million to 339.6 million. (That's *circulation*, subscriptions plus average single-copy sales.) There was a larger drop for the second half of 2009—but still only 2.23%.

A drop of 2.23% isn't an increase, but given the recession, it's also not calamitous. It's worth noting that these numbers are *not* for the entire U.S. magazine industry: They're for 472 titles that use the Audit Bureau of Circulation to track circulation. That includes most of the biggest magazines—but it leaves out thousands of smaller magazines, which taken together account for tens of millions of circulation. Samir Husni, who only looks at magazines sold on newsstands, says there are 7,500 of them—where, 30 years ago, there were only 2,000. (There are probably well over 100,000

periodicals, including all those that are subscription-only, trade magazines, journals and others.) One source says other magazines amount to another hundred million circulation, more or less.

When I look at detailed figures, it's frequently the case that one or two titles within a category are doing *much* better or much worse than others—and that makes sense. For example, using the most recent figures (second half of 2009 as compared to the second half of 2008):

- Among teen magazines, *J-14* paid circulation dropped 16%—but *Seventeen* (nearly five times the circulation) *grew* by 1.8%.
- Among four women's service/beauty titles, *Marie Claire* fell 4%—but *Glamour* grew by 7% and the biggest magazine in the category, *Cosmopolitan*, grew by 2.6%.
- Of seven fashion magazines with ABC circulation tracking, the worst was *Vogue* (down 4%)—but *Harper's Bazaar* was up 3.3%.
- *Condé Nast Traveler* may have lost 18% of its newsstand sales, and *Travel+Leisure* 24%—but total circulation was down 1.1% and 0.4% respectively, and neither one gets even 3% of its circulation from newsstands.
- Of five newsweeklies, two were off seriously (one, *U.S. News*, is no longer a weekly), by roughly one-quarter overall...but, even though this is a category where you'd expect general problems, *Time* was down all of 0.9% (by far the largest with 3.3 million circulation, more than 97% subscription).
- The humongous women's service category—14 magazines, all but one with more than a million circulation—showed serious newsstand drops: *Good Housekeeping* down 31%, *Redbook* down 30%, *Martha Stewart Living* down 18% (and *Working Mother* down 33%, but it only sells an average of 800 copies at newsstands)—but no magazine was down more than 5% overall, and *Women's Health* was *up* 21%. (The four noted as having big newsstand drops were, overall, respectively down 0.7%, up 0.8%, up 3% and down 0.1%.) *Better Homes & Gardens* is the biggest, with 7.6 million circulation—and it was off a trivial 0.5%.
- Yes, some categories show more problems. Of nine men's magazines (an odd mix of soft porn, fitness and service), *Playboy* and

*Penthouse* are down 23% and 31% respectively—but *Men's Health* is up slightly and *Maxim* and *Esquire* are essentially level.

- What about the broadest category, 13 general interest titles? *Reader's Digest* got hit hardest (down 13%—but still 7.1 million) and *National Geographic* was down significantly (11%, to 4.5 million). But *Vanity Fair* was up 5%, *Atlantic* was up 3%, and *New Yorker* was only down 1%. (The world's largest circulation magazine, *AARP The Magazine*, which has essentially no newsstand sales—552—was essentially level, up 0.1% to 24.37 million.)

I believe that if you look at actual failures—and magazines have *always* failed from time to time—you'll also find that the “Nth magazine” in a category, usually the newest or weakest, was the one to fail. *Portfolio* wasn't the weakest business magazine editorially—but it was late to the game, without a big established subscription base, so it's not surprising that it was the one to fail.

*Mr. Magazine* looks at new magazines and sees a fair amount of health. Seventy-five new magazines appeared (in the U.S.) in August 2009, a record for August—but, as is increasingly the case, only 17 of these were true periodicals (ongoing publications appearing four times or more per year). The rest were either annuals (two) or specials—one-shot publications in magazine form, including special editions of magazines. September 2009 saw nearly as many newcomers, with 71 titles (18 of them quarterly or more frequent). October, November and December had 91, 43, and 87 new magazines respectively. Jumping forward to this year, there were 56 new titles in January 2010 (15 of them true periodicals) and 63 in February. This is a lot of new activity for a dying industry.

Husni makes that point in another way in an October 9, 2009 post: “Thinking of Brand Expansion? Read what the Food Network's 100 million households wanted as a Brand Extension...” You know the payoff: *Food Network* magazine, begun in November 2008 with 300,000 guaranteed subscribers—and past the *million* mark after a year. Husni pressed this point because four magazines disappeared in early October 2009—and one of the “prophets of doom and gloom” called Husni to ask his opinion “now that magazines are dead.” In 2009, magazines in the U.S. represented a \$47 **billion** business. That's non-trivial.

Husni is interesting. His monthly posts on new magazines include cover shots—and he *only* includes magazines available on newsstands. He leaves out trade publications, business-to-business, church and organization periodicals—and Canadian magazines (he's strictly dealing with the U.S.). He posted a long, thoughtful item on July 8, 2009: “Killing me softly' with their numbers... A plea to question all magazine numbers, including my own.” That came about because his numbers for new magazines don't match those of an outfit that does *not* clearly state its criteria—one that's strong on deathwatches. Husni looks at a report that 256 unnamed magazines died in 2009 (and notes that, when he *saw* a list of deaths in 2008, he was able to verify that some of them were still publishing)—and has personal proof that 345 *new* magazines appeared in the first half of the year.

If we are going to continue to be our own prophets of doom and gloom, we will wake up one day and start believing our own prophecies, our own self-demise. In journalism schools they used to teach us to Question Authority, now I am urging you and my students to Question Numbers, Question Motives, or just Question!

### *The Magazine Isn't Dying*

That's the title of Gabriel Sherman's March 17, 2009 piece at *Slate's* The Big Money ([www.thebigmoney.com/articles/impressions/2009/03/17/magazine-isnt-dying](http://www.thebigmoney.com/articles/impressions/2009/03/17/magazine-isnt-dying))—and the subhead is key here: “It's just the badly motivated ones that are going under.” This dates from March 2009, when the Dow was hitting 14-year lows, Citigroup shares sold for less than \$1—and prophets of doom & gloom made much of Rodale shutting down *Best Life* on the same day American Express Publishing shut down *Travel+Leisure Golf*.

Taken together, the latest magazine failures signaled to many publishing observers that magazines—long thought to be partly insulated from the digital forces battering the newspaper industry—are locked in their own death spiral. For evidence, they point out that since last March, more than two dozen major magazines have folded. But a closer look at the types of magazines that have closed reveals a more nuanced and, in many respects, hopeful portrait of the magazine business.

The shutdowns come in shelter, technology, travel, luxury and teen mags. Here, I think, Sherman gets it partly wrong, even at the depth of the recession:

The reason for each category's challenges are obvious, from a meltdown in the housing sector to teenagers' wholesale abandonment of print for Facebook and Twitter.

I'd offer another reason: Each category—with the possible exception of technology—had *too many magazines*. Most likely, it's a combination...and Sherman is, I think, right on the next points:

It's not that magazines are dying; it's that magazines that were created solely for advertising or market-share purposes are. New magazine titles often fail from a combination of bad timing, bad thinking, and a bad choice of brands to extend. Put simply, there are too many mediocre magazines (as anyone who gazes at the newsstand at Barnes and Nobles would conclude).

Thus, *Portfolio*—which really did have better writing than most business magazines—popped up at the peak of the “finance bubble.” A quarter of the failed titles were “brand extensions” like *Travel+Leisure Golf* (and *Men's Vogue* and *O at Home* and *Cosmo Girl* and *Us Style* and...)

Largely, these magazines never caught on with readers. And it's not surprising. Magazines are emotional products. They are objects of aspiration, passion, and desire. No one needs to read magazines, but millions of readers still subscribe to their favorite titles because they harbor deep connections to the glossy pages.

Is that true for every magazine? Maybe not, but the more I reread that paragraph, the more I see its truth in the magazines I care about—and even more in the magazines I get but wouldn't notice if they disappeared. Is there an emotional connection to *Consumer Reports* (an oddball magazine since *none* of its revenue is from advertising)? Actually, yes, there is...and I think the recent redesign of *Fortune* has everything to do with rebuilding an emotional connection.

Magazines still offer an unsurpassed ability to marry literary ambitions with deep reporting, photography, and visual design. In this new media age, people talk about the importance of transforming readers into “communities.” Magazines have never had a community problem. Great magazines have built enduring relationships with their readers that Facebook and Tumblr still aspire to.

Too many publishers recently have failed to build on that, instead adding Yet Another Entry in This Year's Hot Category. By and large, *those* are the titles that fail when things cool down—while other

titles, many of them smaller magazines launched with passion, may do just fine.

*Charmingly Archaic: Zines in the Post-Print Age*

That's Steve Lawson's title for a July 7, 2009 post at *See Also...*, heralding the production of *Codslap! The Library Society of the World Zine*, a 36-page item in the true “zine” tradition (which *Cites & Insights* is not). The post is mostly reprinting the introduction to the zine, including a remarkable exchange during the December 10, 2008 *Uncontrolled Vocabulary* podcast. Here's the exchange:

**David Rothman:** You know what's funny, Greg? As much as I love Steve Lawson, I will not and cannot support this endeavor.

**UV host, Greg Schwartz:** Tell me why.

**David Rothman:** Because it is wrong to be doing a dead tree endeavor....It's an incredibly inefficient way of getting information out. It's environmentally irresponsible. I mean, it might be charmingly archaic if there's some, you know, real artisanship to the way the paper is made or used, but there's certainly none of that, it's going to be done on a photocopier. It's just terribly unprofessional. Honestly, I think information professionals should be pushing everything towards the digital. I think we should be trying to abolish print journals.

Noting that this is David “Medical” Rothman, not David “Teleread” Rothman, here's part of Lawson's response (also in the introduction):

First of all, I love David, too. Seriously. So I didn't take this as a personal thing. David's also a smart cookie, so if he thinks that putting together a paper zine isn't just quirky, but something approaching downright immoral, then it seems like something worth looking into.

I think David is thinking of this zine as “information.” When it comes to information, I agree with David. I'm not so much into paper journals anymore. I never understand it at work when someone hands me a document they created on the computer then printed out. I don't want a stack of paper that can't be searched or altered. When it comes to information, I'd rather have bits than atoms, in the old Nicholas Negroponte formulation.

But I don't think of a zine as information any more than I think of a love letter as information. If someone writes you a love letter on a scrap of notebook paper, you don't complain that it's not on handmade paper. You don't ask them to scan it, OCR it, and email it to you in RTF. You don't say “it's not very professional of you to call me Boo-Boo.” You read it and cherish it and keep it in your

sock drawer so you can pull it out years later and remember that time when you were in love.

I usually like this David Rothman just fine, but any time someone talks about “dead tree endeavor” or a *responsibility* to “push everything towards the digital,” I get my back up. Beyond that, what Lawson says in the last (quoted) paragraph (I left some of the post for you to read!) goes for most of the *best* magazines as much as it does for zines—they’re not information, they’re something else, something that involves connection and attachment. Want to push to abolish print editions of scholarly journals? I may have mixed feelings, but I see your point. Want to push to abolish print versions of my favorite magazines? You’ll have a fight on your hands. (“Environmentally irresponsible” or not, the Nature Conservancy produces an excellent magazine, for good reasons. I’ll match their environmental chops with anybody.)

There’s since been a second highly irregular issue of the LSW Zine, this time *Librarian Bomb*. Once again produced by the magic of photocopying on 8.5x5.5” pages, “saddle stitched” binding (stapled, folded letter-size pages), this time 40 pages (10 sheets) rather than 36 (nine sheets). In a way, there’s been a third issue—at least of the scholarly journal embedded within the LSW zine. (See the masthead of *Cites & Insights* Spring 2010.)

#### *Notes from the beach...*

The title for this July 16, 2009 *Mr. Magazine* post continues: “It is a print, print, print world over here...” He posted it while on vacation, noting what he saw there:

No lap tops and no Kindles in sight... miles and miles of sandy beaches filled with folks on vacation armed with sun tan lotion, hats, and books (ink on paper books), magazines (ink on paper magazines) and newspapers (ink on paper newspapers). I was once again like a kid in a candy store seeing all these people reading and flipping pages of their printed papers. (I almost took a picture, but was afraid of invading their privacy). They were not worried about putting them on the sand, the kids splashing water on them did not bother the parents, and when and if the pages get wet, the hot sun took care of that problem in few minutes.

Which isn’t the point of the post, except indirectly. That arises in the second paragraph and beyond. Excerpting:

The problem is not with print, the problem is what some folks who own printed products are

doing to print, in the state of panic they are passing through. Case in point, *USA Today* newspaper. I picked up the paper yesterday and went to the beach to read it. On the front page they told me about my hero Superman, however they wanted me to go to their website to see the comic strip serial. To rub it in, on the front page of the Life section they showed me Superman again announcing his new adventure, but yet again it was only a teaser asking me to go to the website. That is the problem with most of the print products now-a-days. The folks behind some of our papers and magazines are in the process of committing suicide. Print is not dying, it is being killed.

Those folks do not believe that their printed product is enough or can deliver a separate experience on its own. When reading a newspaper or a magazine is no longer a complete experience (no matter what type of experience it is going to be) and you have to go other places to finish the experience, there lies the heart of the problem....

People are moving away from print because print is moving away from them. In our search for the new publishing model we have lost our focus on the total reader experience with the total product at hand. The 360 experience should start and end at the medium at hand...

For print to survive print folks have to focus on fulfilling my experience in print before sending me other places. It is the printed product that I have with me on the beach. I do not have to go any other place to read about my Superman...

In my eyes, *PC Magazine* died long before it shuttered the print edition because the magazine became little more than a set of teases for the web version (a situation that was getting better before the shutdown). Is *PC Magazine* still around? Probably, on the web, but I never found that a satisfactory experience and haven’t bookmarked the site. It’s a problem with *PC World* as well, but not such an extreme one. With most other magazines I read (too many of them!), the editors seem to get it: The websites have their own reasons, but stories are complete within the print magazines. (References to back issues, for example, are likely to lead you to the web—and that’s entirely appropriate.)

Looking at the comments, it’s interesting that one *disagreement* comes from someone working for a company with “26 titles” who doesn’t seem to see anything distinctive about magazines at all: They’re just ways to “deliver content” so as to “charge adequate rates for advertising to cover overhead and make a profit.” Oh, and what these “26 titles” deliver



is “news and information”—not packages and stories that people care about. A followup is sadder: This guy’s arguing with his company that they ought to just shut down the presses that distribute “7 million copies nationally” and go all-digital, ‘cause they could fire not only the print-related people but most of the circulation staff as well, and, you know, print’s just a way to drive readers to the website. With hotshots like that, those “26 titles” should shrink nicely in coming years.

### *Innovation in Print...*

The very next post at *Mr. Magazine*, on July 21, 2009, as Husni ended his vacation. The rest of the title: “The Answer to Print Suicide... Create a Necessary and Sufficient Print Product.” This continues Husni’s argument that the death of (some) print magazines and newspapers is as much suicide as anything else. He discusses the “publishing 360” model as it’s been interpreted—that is, the need to shuffle people from one medium to another. “Print folks keep on pushing people to put down the newspaper or the magazine down and head to the web for more. What type of reading experience you are going to have if you have to stop reading and head to the web after few paragraphs, and how often are you going to come back?” This doesn’t work in the long run—particularly since the websites don’t push you back to the print magazine.

Print folks have lost confidence in their printed product and they are trying to create a hybrid product that sooner or later will eliminate the need for the same product they are attempting to save. If I do not need something, then for sure it is not going to be sufficient for me. You can’t be satisfied with something you do not need or want...

I am not saying that our printed products should not have websites and that we should not use the brand we have to the max. What I am saying is that the printed product should be sufficient for a whole experience for the reader; the web should provide a different whole experience; the same is true for any other medium invented or to be invented. None of the media should be short-changed to provide a link to the other medium...

“Need” is a tricky term; but “need or want” covers it. I think this is right on the money. If a magazine becomes a set of entry points, where I need to be on the web to really *get* the content, well, then, *why does the magazine exist?* For all my disdain of *Wired*, the print magazine *works* as its own pack-

age with complete features—significantly better, in my opinion, than the website does.

You might also want to check Husni’s July 23, 2009 post, an interview with the publisher of *Seventeen Magazine*. She (Jayne Jamison) says people who believe “teens don’t read” are simply misinformed, offering the *Twilight* books and *Seventeen* itself as strong counterexamples—but she also says there’s probably not room for five or six magazines in the teen fashion/beauty category. Jamison, who’s also proud of *Seventeen*’s integration of magazine and web features, thinks “there is always going to be a place for magazines in the media mix,” largely because of engagement and “the synergy with content and advertising.” But there have been too many mediocre “get the ads, then we’ll worry about content” entries in too many categories. With fewer ad dollars and more places to advertise, some titles had to die—while others, many in new niches, are being born.

### *I read the news today, oh boy...*

I had a couple of other items flagged, including one that says magazines on iPad-like devices might not work because people don’t read the news online the way they do in print. But that whole comparison, while perhaps relevant for newspapers, is only relevant for perhaps 1% of magazines, probably considerably fewer.

### *People don’t buy magazines for the latest news.*

That’s a generalization, but I believe it’s a sound one. People buy magazines—people *subscribe* to magazines—as curated packages of stories and ads, focused on an area or with an approach the subscribers and readers enjoy. Sensible people know that magazines have significant editorial lead times: They *can’t* carry the latest news. And why should they? Even newsweeklies—at least the good ones—long ago became primarily ways to make sense of it all, not to provide the latest facts.

### *Newsstands and worth*

The title of this February 13, 2010 post at *Mr. Magazine* is “John Harrington on The State of the Newsstands: Bloom in the midst of the doom and gloom.” Harrington, an apparent expert on newsstand distribution, was speaking at Husni’s Magazine Innovation Center and noted that, although 2009 was “the worst year ever in the history of the newsstands,” there were still *more than 9,000 different titles* distributed to newsstands (that figure

includes oneshot “magazines”). Meanwhile, revenue was down about 8.1% to \$4.44 billion (that’s only newsstand sales) and total unit sales were down about 13% to 1.1 billion (that is, all copies of all magazines sold). The one place where “environmental irresponsibility” may actually be a reasonable charge when it comes to magazines: “sales efficiency” (presumably the percentage of newsstand copies actually sold) was only 36%—although that’s an improvement from 35.2% in 2008.

What I find more interesting are Worthington’s figures on relative cost of subscriptions and newsstand copies. In 2001, the average subscription price among a 316-magazine sample was \$1.22 per issue and the average newsstand price was \$2.83: Subscriptions saved you 57%. But in 2008, looking at 437 magazines, the average subscription price was down 8.2% to \$1.12—and the average newsstand price was up to \$3.75 (up 33%). So now subscriptions typically save you 70% of newsstand price.

His conclusion: we are still using the subscription copies as “a giveaway” to meet the rate base. That means we are still focusing on the advertising driven model as the major source of revenue.

The “rate base” is the guaranteed minimum circulation used in selling ads—e.g., you can sell ads for more if the rate base is two million than if it’s 1.8 million, all other factors being equal.

Looking at “major” magazines and how their revenues are derived, Harrington says that in 2001, 10.2% of revenues came from newsstands, 18.9% came from subscriptions and 70.9% came from ads. But in 2008, newsstands had declined slightly to 8.9%—and subscriptions had dropped precipitously to 11.9%, because subscriptions are so deeply discounted. That left 79.2% from ads. Harrington hopes to see more rationality in subscription pricing and a more balanced financial model, noting that newsstands say more about the worth of a magazine—because you actually have to pay for it.

I thought about that and my own recent experiences getting subscription offers so low that they can only be to boost troubled rate bases. I still remember the time I was offered a year of *Time Magazine* for whatever price I wanted to pay—but at the time, I was in a highly desirable zipcode.

Maybe I still am: Just a few weeks ago, I received an offer from *Inc.* for a full year subscription for all of \$5—or, if I preferred, \$10 for three years. That’s for a “monthly” (10 issues a year) that sells

for \$4.99 on the newsstands—offering a 96% discount if I’d sign up for three years. In my eyes, the publisher’s saying they know *Inc.* isn’t worth much, but hope I’ll oblige them by taking it. (Since they misguessed the supposed demographic badly—*Inc.* is supposedly for “CEOs, top managers, and owners of private, fast-growing companies” which describes me not in the slightest—I passed.)

How widespread is this lack of self-worth? Let’s set \$1/copy, for anything that appears less frequently than twice a week, as a threshold: If a magazine is being offered for less than that, it suffers from low corporate self-esteem—they’re mostly trying to sell your eyes to advertisers.

In a March 10, 2010 Publisher’s Clearing House mailing, I found all of these being offered at no more than \$1 an issue: *Maxim*, *TV Guide*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Automobile*, *Equus*, *Famiy Circle*, *Guideposts*, *Kiplinger’s Personal Finance*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Motorcyclist*, *Road & Track*, *Seventeen*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Texas Monthly* and *Time*—and it’s important to note that PCH offers are almost certainly not targeted at superior demographics. A March 26, 2010 mailing included many of those and added *Popular Science*, *Woman’s Day*, *Redbook*, *Horse & Rider* and *Parents*. March 29 added *Prevention*, *Automobile* and *Motor Trend*.

Then there are “use up your mileage” offers—the ones you get when you join an airline’s Frequent Flyer club but almost never fly that airline, and your miles are about to expire after 18 months of inactivity. These involve *no* cash outlay; you’re trading in miles that you’ve probably forgotten about and that might be valued at one to two cents under ideal circumstances—but, realistically, are of almost no value. If I wanted *The Economist* for a full year of 51 issues, using 3,200 of the 9,000-odd USAirways miles that will just go away otherwise is a pretty good deal—for me.

What do I find, if we assume 1.5 cents per mile (probably more than the airline pays the magazine, but a bit less than the miles might be worth if I had enough)? *Condé Nast Traveler*—a magazine I like quite a bit—is 600 miles (\$9?) for 12 issues. *Entertainment Weekly* is 1,300 miles (\$21?) for 52 weekly issues. *Entrepreneur* isn’t very entrepreneurial at 300 miles (\$4.50?) for 12 issues, and *Essence* (a 2-year, 24-issue subscription) isn’t much better at 800 miles (\$12?). A year of *Sports Illu-*

strated (56 issues) is 1,400 miles (\$21?)—and a year of *Time* (also 56 issues) isn't much more at 1,800 miles (\$27?). *Wired* is 400 miles (\$6?) for 12 issues—oh, and for captains of industry, a 190-issue Monday-Friday subscription, home delivered, for *Wall Street Journal* is 2,800 miles (\$42?).

Ah, but that was a February mailing. A March mailing brings *WSJ* down to 2,100 miles for 190 issues (\$32?)—and if I'd prefer 305 issues of *Financial Times*, that's 2,000 miles (\$30?). A dime a copy: That's apparently what *FT* thinks it's worth.

Here's what I believe:

- Print magazines aren't going away any time soon. Some die every year; others are born, generally at a faster clip than the deaths.
- Some print magazines *should* die because they exist only to grab advertising revenue, because they're essentially gateways to web content, because they're mediocre entries in overcrowded categories—or because they've ceased to provide editorial value. Maybe the total number of print magazines should decline—and maybe by quite a bit. We apparently don't need and won't support three weekly general-interest newsmagazines; do we need quite so many fashion, beauty and “men's” magazines?
- Some publishers can make the cheap-subscription/advertising-supported model work and provide valuable print packages in the process, but more publishers might be better advised to raise subscription rates to rational levels (still bargains, but expecting subscribers to show *some* commitment—say, \$1.50 an issue?) and stop printing copies for people who don't care about them.
- Slates/tablets as magical replacements for magazines? Possible in some cases, unlikely on the whole—and almost certainly not an effective revenue replacement.
- If I had to bet, I'd bet that, of 28 (or so) magazines I currently get by subscription or membership, at least half and probably two-thirds will still be around when I give up on them (deliberately or through death or other misadventure)—but I wouldn't bet a lot. On the other hand, few of the magazines I subscribe to have millions of subscribers. How many of those am I likely to stick with—how many do I feel attached to? About half—but

they're not, I'm afraid, entirely the half I'm pretty sure will survive for the long haul.

- *Your mileage will differ.* The neat thing about magazines is that there are specialty magazines for every specialty. Horse? At least two, probably several. Love cars? A slew of choices. Name the interest, you'll find a magazine—and if not, well, that's why you get literally hundreds of new titles each year.

## Newspapers

Even more than for magazines, the picture with newspapers is fuzzy and complex. Newspapers were hit harder than magazines by advertising changes. Newspapers have higher print and distribution costs relative to revenue than magazines do. Too many newspapers were phoning it in: Relying on wire services for most content, with a smidgen of local items and lots of syndicated features, assuming local merchants would keep them not only healthy but *extremely* profitable.

There's that last phrase: **Extremely profitable.** Newspapers *had* been incredible cash cows (at the 30% margin level) for some decades, for one of two reasons I'd really hate to see them disappear: Because they were (and are) the most effective way for local and regional merchants to let you know what they're up to—new stores, sales, etc. (The other: Because *good* newspapers pay journalists to gather news and make sense of it and columnists and reviewers to provide a broad range of perspectives, and because good newspapers keep us aware of lots of stuff we'd ignore otherwise.)

The problem with extreme profitability: Newspapers became desirable purchases, and companies paid *way* too much for them, going deeply into debt to acquire these money fountains. In many cases, it's not that newspapers no longer operate profitably on an ongoing basis—it's that they're no longer profitable enough to carry the debt load from implausible purchase prices.

Oh, sure, there's also generational change of sorts. Lots of younger people *do* read daily papers—but a smaller percentage than used to. For quite a while, the decline in overall newspaper circulation primarily came from the shutdown of afternoon papers in morning/evening paper towns, but over the last few years there's been *real* decline. Some of that decline is intentional. The paper we take, for

example, deliberately shed more than half its circulation, outside its core region, because it no longer made economic sense to subsidize that circulation. That paper—the San Francisco *Chronicle*—is now trying something more radical: Expecting subscribers to pay 40%-50% of the costs of the paper, instead of the usual 10%-20%. We now pay more than \$400/year for a seven-day delivered subscription, billed every five weeks—and it's tough to keep justifying that purchase.

I'm splitting this into two sections. One offers items from more than a dozen posts from *Reflections of a Newsosaur*, the odd blog from Alan D. Mutter, who *used* to be in the newspaper field and sometimes seems delight in telling those who still are how badly they're doing everything. The second offers a broader mix of facts and opinion.

To kick it off, here's an item from the March 2010 *Fast Company*, celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NASDAQ's peak and noting some comparisons between 2000 and 2010. Here's the item—and *Fast Company's* fairly strong on fact-checking: **Number of daily newspapers in the U.S.: Then [2000] 1,480, Now [2010] 1,422.** Is a decline of 4% over 10 years a sign of impending death?

## Mutterings of the Newsosaur

These items come from *Reflections of a Newsosaur* (newsosaur.blogspot.com). I provide the dates, not necessarily the full titles of individual posts. Mutter's good about sourcing factual statements; opinions are, of course, his own (or those of commenters). Once I realized that Mutter *wants* to see print newspapers (but not the newspaper *field*) go away, the posts make more sense...but *not* his habit of equating revenue with ad sales, since some newspapers have significant subscription revenue.

- During 2008, at least, most subscription problems were “metro” papers, those with more than 100,000 circulation. (January 29, 2009). Sales for the newspaper industry as a whole fell 15% for the first nine months of 2008—but for papers with less than 100,000 circulation, the drop was only 2%. 83% of the smaller papers didn't reduce staff in 2008.
- Should newspapers just stop the presses and go all-digital overnight? As examined in a four-part series beginning February 1, 2009, that would be suicidal. Most newspapers derive 90% of their ad revenue from print ad-

vertising. Only those that are already going bankrupt (not the case for most papers) could make the transition, and even those would have to cut half their news staff. (As another installment, on February 3, explains, most *online* ad sales at newspapers are bundled with print advertising, so even the 10% online might not survive.)

- On the other hand, Mutter calls print newspapers “anachronistic” and (June 8, 2009) says newspapers *must* stop doing print versions. He does straight-line projection to have print newspaper readership disappearing altogether in a generation—but somehow believes brand recognition, big staffs, marketing power and big advertising staffs give newspaper publishers an edge over all online competitors. Really?
- When Mutter talks about “sales” at newspapers, he means *ad sales*—period. You'd get the impression that all newspaper subscriptions were free. An August 7, 2009 post has a little good news—a projection that, after declining from \$57.3 billion in 2005 to a projected \$35.9 billion for all of 2009, ad sales should start picking up—slowly—possibly reaching \$39.0 billion in 2014. You can look at that three ways: First, \$39 billion is a *lot* of money for a “dead” industry. Second, \$39 billion is a lot less than \$57 billion. Third, projecting ad sales five years out is tough. All of these numbers are higher than typical numbers you'll see, for the same reasons that AAP book-sales estimates are so much smaller than BSIG book sales. Namely, the most frequently quoted numbers are for the biggest producers (the biggest papers in one case, the biggest publishers in the other). If you subtract ad revenues for the big papers from those for the industry as a whole, you get about \$10 billion in “smaller” revenues in 2005—and \$8 billion in 2009. So, while revenues for big papers dropped 41%, those for smaller papers dropped about 20%. Taken together with that earlier bullet about subscriptions, one might suggest that truly local daily newspapers are more likely to survive for the long haul. One might be right. (One comment is interesting. Namely, ad revenue *per subscriber* is a more important measure than *total* ad revenue—and ad revenue *per subscriber*

actually peaked in 2007, after some long-standing circulation shenanigans [the commenter says “fraud”] were corrected.)

- On October 27, 2009, we get a discussion of “the mass-less mass medium,” which is I believe both wrong and right. Saying that something that reaches one-third of the nation’s household is no longer a mass medium is absurd—almost as absurd as saying the broadcast networks should cancel any program that doesn’t deliver at least as high a percentage of households as the lowest-rated show that was renewed, say, in 1980. (Hint: There may be only one or two shows on the air that would pass that test.) Is radio a mass medium? In the San Francisco Bay Area, the #1-rated station reaches less than 7% of listeners. *No* magazine reaches even 20% of U.S. households, and only one comes anywhere close (*AARP The Magazine*), but most people would still call magazines mass media (or would they?). On the other hand, he’s right: Newspapers that still chase bigger circulation as the *only* important goal, even if that circulation is largely at absurdly discounted prices and loses money for each copy, are in trouble now and will be in bigger trouble down the road. “Circulation statistics...are an anachronistic artifact of the ancient era when newspapers and broadcasters aimed to deliver the largest possible audience to advertisers.”
- How bad was 2009? When it comes to papers actually shutting down print editions, much worse than 2008 (according to a December 21, 2009 piece), with 142 daily *and* weekly newspapers ceasing, almost three times as many as in 2008. But those numbers aren’t as bad as most observers expected. At the end of 2008, there were still more than 1,400 daily newspapers in the U.S.; of 142 shutdowns, at least two-thirds were weeklies.
- A two-part entry on January 12 & 13, 2010 has the doomcrying title, “How long can print newspapers last?” Given Mutter’s overall predilections and his fondness for straight-line projections, it’s not a surprising slant. Mutter seems to assume that younger people will *never* read print newspapers—and that

those who read them now will drop them soon. Given his assumptions, his projections may be plausible—but those projections *still* show 44 million print newspaper readers in 2040. (Commenters note that, in the 1960s, there were charts showing that almost nobody in the 18-to-34 age group looked at print newspapers—you know, those people who are now the only avid print newspaper readers left. “People get older, they find more things to like—and trust—about newspapers.” Others are certain all print newspapers will die even sooner because of expenses—one predicts fewer than 100 dailies in the U.S. by 2020, which seems pretty dire.) In the followup, Mutter makes a clearly-false assumption that “fixed costs” (printing and distribution) have to *stay* fixed. The San Francisco *Chronicle* outsourced its printing (improving it in the process) last year. More than half of Gannett’s 80+ daily newspapers use outsourced printing. Delivery costs aren’t fixed costs.

- In March 2010, Marc Andreessen asserted that newspapers should *just walk away*—they should shut down their presses *now*. What qualifies Andreessen to make such an assertion? He invented Mosaic. Isn’t that enough? A March 11, 2010 entry analyzes this “just shut ‘em down now” scenario—noting that big newspapers sold about \$3 billion in online advertising in 2008—and printing and distribution are nowhere near 90% of a newspaper’s costs. It may or may not make sense for some or most newspapers to move to a mostly-online or purely digital model, but “burning the ships” would be suicidal. (One commenter believes “print production and circulation” *do* represent 90% of costs, which would surprise the newsrooms and advertising departments. I *love* Perry Gaskill’s comment: “I wish someone could explain to me how Marc Andreessen’s views on the news business should actually matter more than some random guy off the street.”)
- Finishing this cycle, we get one that loops back to earlier items—namely, there’s not one “print newspaper business,” there are thousands of print newspapers with thousands of different situations. The title is

worth repeating in full: “Are small papers safe? Yes. No. Maybe.” (March 15, 2010.) “The ambiguity results from the fact that the outlook for any particular non-metro paper depends on the unique characteristics of the market in which it happens to be located.” **Good:** Isolation and lack of competition, including—for rural areas—generally inferior internet and mobile services. **Bad:** Isolation may be good when all’s going well, but can be *really* bad in tough times—and smaller communities may be aging more rapidly than urban areas, which in the long run is troubling. **Maybe:** Smaller newspapers need to make sure they contain “unique and compelling local content” and to create effective print-and-digital ad combinations. Easy to say, tougher to do.

## Newspapers: Other Voices

Begin with a post on March 23, 2009 at the *PLA Blog* by Scott Nicholson—who says “Threats to Newspapers are Opportunities for Libraries.” He seems to take as a given the “newspaper industry collapsing” and newspapers closing down—and thinks about roles served by community newspapers. One suggested alternative is odd for small and medium-sized communities: “While the role of passing on local community news is still being done through other organizations such as local television stations...”—around here, at least, medium-sized communities don’t have TV stations. I believe he’s right in what follows:

Newspapers have been the significant players in the role of creating and maintaining an ongoing community history. Most of the history of local communities since the mid-19th century has been captured by newspapers; any scholar doing historical research spends a significant amount of time with a newspaper history of local culture. If newspapers disappear, who will create and preserve the heritage of a community?

He sees public libraries as an alternative, although stating it as “closure represents opportunity” seems a bit vampirish. “The public library can see the local news items as a collection to be maintained and made available online, and can play a significant role in the preservation of local cultural heritage that newspapers have played in the past.”

When he goes to the *creation* side, it gets fuzzier. The local TV station? Only if there is one, and if it actually has reporters (as opposed to newsmen/anchors that rely on newspapers and wire services funded by newspapers). Community journalists? Possibly. Partnerships with struggling newspapers? Well...maybe, if there are revenue sources. “Hey, sorry you’re laying everybody off, but would they like to volunteer as local reporters for the library?” Somehow, that sounds like a loser.

While the ideas are interesting, Nicholson says there’s “a very short time window as newspapers collapse”—a doom-crying perspective that doesn’t help the situation.

### *Rosen’s Flying Seminar in the Future of News*

This piece by Jay Rosen appeared March 26, 2009 at *PressThink* ([journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink)). Rosen begins by noting Clay Shirky’s essay on “thinking the unthinkable” (which, after rereading, I find too indigestible and incoherent to spend time on—but, it being Shirky, you can guess the overall thrust), then provides twelve links “from a month of deep think” based on the assumption that the newspaper model is collapsing. Rosen provides summary comments on each of the 12 items, all from March 2009, and suggests reading them in this order to form “a kind of flying seminar on the future of news.”

- I won’t repeat the list. Notes on some items:
- Paul Starr waves goodbye to newspapers and anticipates a new era of corruption, given fewer newspaper reporters and editors keeping eyes out. Yochai Benkler thinks crowd-sourcing—the commons—will make up for the loss of professional journalism.
  - Josh Young looks at context—and seems to be satisfied that the many little items that make up most “new journalism” can combine to reveal big stories. Again, I worry about perspective and synthesis; again, I’m not sure I’m right to worry. (Would *Cites & Insights* be better or worse if it appeared as intermixed sets of brief blog posts, without most of my interpretation because I’d probably never get around to putting things together?)

Rosen himself seems resigned to the collapse of newspaper journalism and doesn’t know what will replace it. “The only solution I have to offer is pluralism itself: many funders, many paths, many players, and many news systems with different

ideas about how to practice journalism for public good (and how to pay for it, along with who participates) alive at once.”

### *Paper Money*

“Newspapers aren’t assets to be flipped, leveraged, and stripped”—that’s the subhead for Daniel Gross’s April 1, 2009 “Moneybox” commentary at *Slate*. He notes the run of bankruptcies and closures in early 2009—but also notes something important about the companies that have gone under or into bankruptcy: “Each company was undone in large measure by really stupid (and in one case criminal) activities by managers.”

Sun-Times Media was run by felon Conrad Black—who, along with the publisher, took tens of millions of dollars from the company. “The actions of the top executives in other bankrupt newspaper companies were criminal only if you consider gross financial stupidity and recklessness to be jailing offenses.” Sam Zell, an expert at flipping commercial real estate, buys the Tribune Co. for \$8.2 billion with *four percent down*—resulting in a company owing \$13 billion, unmanageable in *any* downturn. “Private equity types” bought the company that owns two Philadelphia papers for \$562 million—\$450 million of it borrowed—and managed to pay \$650,000 in bonuses in December 2008 before filing for bankruptcy protection in February 2009. A private equity firm purchased the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* for \$530 million—and loaded it down with more than \$400 million in debt. The paper went bankrupt.

In other words, the newspaper companies that have failed wholesale were essentially set up to fail by inexperienced managers who believed piling huge amounts of debt on businesses whose revenues were shrinking *even when the economy was growing* was a shrewd means of value creation.

It’s not that other newspapers don’t have problems: they do. But they also have parent companies with some financial reserves or other profitable businesses; they weren’t purchased for sums that only make sense if newspapers continued to have 30% profit margins, margins untenable in most non-monopoly businesses.

### *How the Next Kindle could Save the Newspaper Business*

I could include any number of items on how the Kindle DX, or the iPad, or the Whatever, would “save” newspapers or magazines or books or...

Here’s an example, by Marion Maneker at *Wired.com* Epicenter on May 6, 2009. Speaking of the Kindle DX:

A near universal chorus of doubt has greeted the new device. Much of it has good reason to be unimpressed. The Kindle DX doesn’t do much more than the original Kindle device but it comes at stiffer \$489 price. That larger screen is a convenient fig leaf to cover a number of small sins. First, Amazon is using it and the greater memory to justify the bigger price. They’re also unveiling a “native PDF reader,” which should have been in the first version, because the screen can now handle the larger format layouts.

Maneker finds these attitudes “small minded.” But Maneker also says, flatly, that ad revenue for newspapers isn’t coming back—and (probably correctly) that digital distribution pushes ad rates down because it makes low response obvious. Ah, but Maneker thinks newspapers on the Kindle DX or equivalent could “create exclusive content that would provide incremental revenue.” Here’s where it gets cute, given the title of the article: “Will [newspapers subsidizing ereaders] save the newspaper business? No. But it might help with the transition in a big way.” Whoops—so much for the article title.

We’re told that great stories in newspapers don’t yield additional revenues—but “if the *Washington Post* runs a fantastic story by Woodward and sells a longer, more detailed version on the Kindle for \$6, \$8 or \$10 and splits the money with Woodward, everybody wins.” Much as I’d love to see people making some money from selling digital text by the copy, that suggestion sounds as probable as getting rich by standing under the flying unicorns and tracking the rainbows they fart until you find the pots of gold.

The next paragraph says *The New Yorker* has a higher proportion of bestselling book writers than just about any other magazine. Fine. Here’s the next sentence: “Who hasn’t paid \$5.99 for an issue just to get that one must-read piece?” My hand goes up; so, I suspect, do the hands of, oh, tens of millions of people who have never in their lives purchased *The New Yorker* for six bucks to read one essay. In the last six months of 2009, *The New Yorker* averaged 37,000 newsstand sales per issue—a bit under 3.6% of its total circulation. Why am I picking on that? Because when somebody’s making economic projections, getting simple claims so wildly wrong matters. (The

third comment also answered Maneker's question: "Me. And about 300 million other Americans.")

### *Pondering the new order in local media*

Here's one where readers may reasonably say "But this has nothing to do with libraries and librarianship, or really with media." I think that's a short-sighted view. This August 4, 2009 *Media Life* piece by Paul Benjou is all about one of the things I've thought *mattered* about local newspapers, in addition to the quick overview of what's happening and the sense of community: The effect on merchants—and specifically *local* merchants, particularly those who really aren't going to drum a simplified story into your ears and eyes hundreds of times on TV and radio. And this is very much a local story.

Consider: If the local paper once had a circulation of 150,000 and now it's down to 130,000, that's 20,000 fewer households that stand to see the full-page ad announcing Saturday's sale on children's shoes. That's 20,000 households that won't receive the freestanding insert announcing the storewide sale on home-improvement products.

It's worse now—because for a long time, much of the circulation loss was peripheral: "Outlying circulation" outside the core area of a newspaper, which didn't mean much to the local advertisers anyway. But recent declines, according to Benjou, are in core circulation areas—and he expects these declines to get worse.

If you are a retailer in a city like Detroit, where the dailies are now delivered just Thursday, Friday and Sunday, how do you reach your customers Monday through Wednesday?

There's no easy answer. Local daily newspapers used to reach the community in a way no other medium has or seems likely to.

The fact is, newspapers are a not an easily replaceable medium by virtue of the sheer vastness of their coverage. Imagine a nation where there was just one TV network and that dwarfed all other media. It's watched by everyone, and it gets nearly half of every ad dollar ever spent. That's what the local daily newspaper is, or was, in much of America. It's on doorsteps, in mailboxes, on counters at the local diner, in the in box at work, on the empty seat next you on the bus riding home at day's end.

As Paul Benjou says, we have no idea what could take the place of that medium—and what the loss will mean for local businesses. For Wal-Mart, it probably won't matter. For local merchants, it may matter a lot.

### *Newspaper Statistics (not what you think)*

To close this roundup, here's a brief item from *What's Next: Top Trends*, dated January 19, 2010.

Newspapers are dying right? Wrong. Newspaper circulation grew by 1.3% worldwide in 2008 to almost 540m daily sales. Adding the free daily papers, the circulation increase was 1.62% - or 13% over the previous 5 years. Overall, 1.9 billion people read a daily newspaper and newspapers reach 41% more people than the internet. OK, in 2008 in the US there was a fall of 3.7%, whilst in Europe the fall was 1.8% but so what? The model isn't broken. It's just that some titles are badly run, have too much debt and are in the wrong regions.

I'm not quite that optimistic, and it's certainly not that simple—but it's also not a clearcut fall to the bottom. I believe daily (and weekly) print newspapers serve communities in a manner no other medium, online or off, can do as effectively. I *hope* there will continue to be strong, local newspapers with strong, local newsrooms for decades to come. Would that I could express confidence on that matter—but I can't.

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## Masthead

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