

# Cites & Insights

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Walt Crawford

## Perspective

### On Social Media and Social Networks

If you're a Proper Social Media Type, I should give you a *tl;dr* version (too long, didn't read), since this PERSPECTIVE rambles on. Here's that version:

**I no longer believe "Social Media" names anything real—or at least not anything interesting (except to marketers).**

That may be overstated but you'll see what I mean during what's likely to be my final essay that uses "Social Media" as a key term. Or you can just skip to the next piece—but I hope you won't, because I think this one could be fun. (Admittedly, if you're one of those given to *tl;dr*, you probably won't even see this, since *Cites & Insights* is consistently in that category.)

Perhaps I should apologize for a misleading title. This PERSPECTIVE is almost entirely about "social media" as term, concept and reality. Social networks come into play only in contrast and in the section just below—because I *do* think social networks (that is, social networking services) are real, interesting and worth discussing. Probably 90% of this PERSPECTIVE is about "social media."

Some of you may remember a February 10, 2010 post at *Walt at Random*, "A Social Network/Social Media Snapshot." I tried to figure out how and where I was involved with social networks and social media—and even then, I tried to distinguish between the two. Here's what I said about the two back then:

- A social medium is a publishing medium that encourages direct feedback and interaction—but that typically involves some significant multiple of readers to those providing feedback. I'd put blogs and wikis in this category. (Realistically, lists also belong here. I think Google Reader and Bloglines also do, but aggregators are tricky...)

- A social network is a conversational medium—one that is fundamentally about interaction, not about messages as such. I'd put Twitter, FriendFeed, LinkedIn and others in this category. Ditto Buzz, if Buzz becomes anything other than a botched experiment in opt-out implementation.
- Yes, you can use a social network as a social medium (I'd say that's the case for any Twitterer with more than 10 times as many followers as follows, or any FriendFeed participant who just feeds in stuff from other sources and never participates in threads.) You can use social media as social networks, sort of, but with considerably more difficulty. (Some wikis might be crude social networks, but not most.)

## Inside This Issue

|  |    |
|--|----|
| The CD-ROM Project.....                          | 10 |
| Perspective: On Words, Meaning and Context ..... | 13 |
| Making it Work .....                             | 18 |
| Trends & Quick Takes .....                       | 26 |

I'm happy with that definition of social networks. I'm not at all happy with the definition of social media, and it's clearly not the definition others would use. The more I look at it, the less I believe there *is* a useful meaning for "social media" (unless you're a guru or marketeer)—and I would note that the one I used applies equally well to any offline medium that allows, say, letters to the editor.

## Social Networks

The term "social networks" does have a useful meaning within the internet, along with its much more complex meaning in real life. Facebook, FriendFeed, LinkedIn, MySpace, Ning, Orkut, Twitter, buzz—these and more all have commonalities that justify a common term. Realistically, these are all social network *services*, but there's no getting around the convenient shorthand. What are social network services?

**Social networks (social network services) function primarily to exchange comments, re-**

## Relationships and ideas among groups of somehow-related people.

That's not a pretty definition, but it will do for now. As with almost any definition in the "social" space, it gets fuzzy around the edges. To me, the key point in social network services is that their *primary* function is exchange among shifting communities, communities that are at least partly self-chosen. (Is email with list support a social network service? I said things get fuzzy around the edges...)

I don't plan to stop writing about social network services and will probably keep calling them social networks, although that abbreviation has its problems. If you want to understand more about the problem, you could start with Wikipedia's "Social network" entry—which is all about social structures made up of people and organizations, not the software that serves social networks. I don't plan to get into the set of philosophical issues surrounding social networks and social network analysis; they're beyond *C&I's* scope (and my tolerance for this sort of deepthink). The Wikipedia article gives me a headache, and I think that's only partly from reading long text on screen. Let's assume this is my own shortcoming.

I should note that Wikipedia's "Social network service" article is pretty good. I find it odd that on the Discussion pages—which I now almost always find more interesting than Wikipedia Article pages—"Social network service" rates a "C" in quality, while the "Social network" page, which I find wholly confounding, gets a "B."

Fuzzy or not, "social network services" defines a real category of software, one with quite a few issues but also considerable promise. I believe most of us know whether something is or isn't a social network (at least if "social" is defined broadly enough to include business relationships).

That may be all there is to say about social networks for this particular essay. I don't believe social networks *are* social media—but as I've already said, I'm no longer satisfied that "social media" defines much of anything.

## It's Web 2.0! It's Circular!

Consider some definitions of the term. Here's the first paragraph of Wikipedia's "Social media" article (as of June 17, 2010 at 10:50 a.m.):

Social media are media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing

techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues. They support the democratization of knowledge and information and transform people from content consumers to content producers. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Businesses also refer to social media as user-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM). Social media utilization is believed to be a driving force in defining the current period as the Attention Age.

The first sentence combines circularity with vapid buzzwords. "Social media are media for social interaction." Maybe I'm wrong to call that circular. Maybe *wrong* would be better—at least if you include, say, blogs as social media. ("highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques"—that's just blather.)

The second sentence is an assertion, not a definition, and I claim that "web-based technologies" is the only meaningful part of the sentence—since traditional media have *never* been exclusively monologues, since "social" can and should involve multipart conversations, not dialogues, and since whatever these webbie things really are, they don't "transform and broadcast" traditional media, they extend them. The third sentence violates Wikipedia's NPOV policy and is mostly wifty platitudes.

Then we get a definition that *could* be meaningful—but only if "ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0" has meaning, which I do not believe. Even if you do, this boils down to "social media allow for user-generated content." Which means *all* media are social media, at least to some extent, since pretty much all content is generated by people, er, users. That's followed by the claim that businesses *refer to* social media as user-generated content or its ugly cousin "consumer-generated media" (that's *businesstalk* for you: turning people into consumers). Finally, we get a sentence with so many problems I'm not sure where to start: "is believed" *by whom?* Since when has "the current period" become "the Attention Age" as a consensus term?

That's just the first paragraph. Here's the second paragraph:

Social media have been modernized to reach consumers through the internet. Social media have

become appealing to big and small businesses. Credible brands are utilizing social media to reach customers and to build or maintain reputation. As social media continue to grow, the ability to reach more consumers globally has also increased. Twitter, for example has expanded its global reach to Japan, Indonesia, and Mexico, among others. This means that brands are now able to advertise in multiple languages and therefore reach a broader range of consumers. Social media have become the new “tool” for effective business marketing and sales. Popular networking sites including Myspace, Facebook and Twitter are social media most commonly used for socialization and connecting friends, relatives, and employees.

I won't fisk the whole bloody article, tempting as that is. Still...the first sentence here only makes sense if social media *predate* the internet, in which case they can't be based on Web 2.0 (or can they?). The rest of the paragraph up to the final sentence is entirely business-oriented, which may be telling: Apparently social media is all about *businesses reaching consumers*.

It doesn't get better. I mean, one “common form of social media” listed is “print media, designed to be re-distributed”—as opposed to print media that can't be passed along, perhaps? The section “Distinction from industrial media” (which seems to equate traditional and “industrial” media) is very nearly incoherent, particularly when the first distinction drawn is stated as a commonality, not a distinction.

I'm not trying to critique Wikipedia here (been there, done that, didn't get the T-shirt)—but given Wikipedia's nature and structure, you'd think that—if “social media” had a clear and useful meaning—you'd find it here. Instead, perhaps the clearest part of this article is the box that appears above the text with a big exclamation point:

This article has multiple issues. Please help improve the article or discuss these issues on the talk page.

\* It needs additional references or sources for verification. Tagged since September 2009.

\* It reads like a personal reflection or essay. Tagged since September 2009.

“Multiple issues” is putting it mildly. The Discussion page is interesting (and *long*—nearly seven times as long as the article) but not that helpful. I rather like one *earlier* definition of social media, which uses the term twice and then, in the third sentence, jumps to “Popular social mediums in-

clude...” So social media consists of a bunch of social mediums? Notably, the person citing that definition says that it “pretty much describes the majority of the Web today.” I am reminded once again that Wikipedia's editors regard the crappiest book as a more reliable source than the best blog—which, by extension, means that the worst published reference work should be regarded as more reliable than the best of Wikipedia.

Perhaps the best proposed definition in that Discussion page comes from “Mystalic” on August 9, 2008:

**Social Media is the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings.**

Anyone here see the problem with that definition? Hands? OK—by that definition, *any medium* is part of social media as long as it involves electronics. Which, in today's world, means all media except, possibly, sculpture, painting and ballet are social media. Even if you drop “electronic,” what you have is an equation:

**Social media = Net media.**

That is: Any medium on the internet is social media. Do you buy that?

Should I stop here? If Wikipedia can't define it, maybe it doesn't exist?

Nah. That would be too easy...

*Cases*

Which media are social media?

Blogs? Lots of worthwhile blogs don't accept comments. In what way can those be called social?

Yelp and its ilk? Lots of user-generated reviews (and a fair number of sock-puppet reviews)—but little real conversation. I'm not sure what's particularly social about these sites and I'm not sure they're really media.

Facebook, Twitter and FriendFeed? Definitely conversational, most assuredly social—but they're quintessentially *network support services*—broadly, “social networks,” not media as such.

Email? Let's not go there, shall we? Nothing “Web 2.0” about email, and although lists can support multiway conversations, regular email is neither a medium nor specifically social.

Slashdot, LISNews and the like? Perhaps.

Wikis? Collaborative, ideally. Media, probably. Social? I'm not sure that's a significant word. Some might be, some aren't.

The daily newspaper I take, which has staff who understand tech stuff very well, used “blogs and social networks” in lieu of “social media” when discussing a recent poll about online participation and involvement. I think the newspaper got it right.

Can we find worthwhile definitions and cases on the web?

### *Dipping into the search engine flood*

Bing returns 178 million results for the words **social media** and 338 million results for the phrase “**social media**.” (Ya gotta’ love Microsoft’s amusing new attitude toward the nature of large results—“hey, narrow the search and you can get *twice* the results!”) Since neither number means anything, let’s just look at the first 20:

- After the ubiquitous Wikipedia we get SocialMedia.com—which “turns standard ad units into social experiences.” Then we get Socialmedia.biz, a blog on “the *business* of social media and the social Web” that “can help your company become a social business.” (Emphasis added.) #4 is from Freebase, a copy of the Wikipedia article. And a page on *wikinvest* (yes, another business site) that “describes a concept that could impact a variety of companies, countries or industries” and starts with an interesting definition: “Social media describes websites that allow users to share content, media, etc.” Gone: Any sense of *discussion* or *conversation*. This seems to describe any website with *any* facilities for “user” content—in other words, pretty much everything. (The article also calls Myspace “the most-viewed website in the world,” so it may be a trifle dated.) Three of the first five seem to say *it’s all about business*.
- What of the next five? “How social media is changing franchising.” Social Media Today, a “*moderated business* community for the web’s best thinkers on Social Media and Web 2.0.” That’s the best of the best—moderated (after all, open discussion is dangerous), business, self-referential and with the critical Web 2.0 connection. “Can IT suppliers industrialise social media?” Alltop, a “news” aggregation site (noting that all the top items seem to be business-related). The Social Media **Business** Coun-

cil, a “brands-only community focused on helping large organizations build successful social media programs.” Getting the picture? At this point, a plausible definition might be “**Social media is a set of methodologies for businesses to co-opt citizen involvement while appearing user-oriented.**”

Yes, that’s unfair. Or is it?

- Let’s try five more: Social Media Explorer—the home and blog of a consultant *working with companies*. He’s honest enough to admit that he’s a PR professional. “Talk to Qwest—Qwest’s social media portal.” A mashable list of “essential social media resources you may have missed”—and that one’s too confusing to describe. “Social Media News,” another blog from a dot-com that’s all about the advertising. And one of those “plain English” CommonCraft videos, more than two years old, that seems to say ratings and cheap production are what social media is all about.

Discouraged yet? After that, we get a “social media **marketing** industry report,” a “social media slides eBook” (a brief set of slides that includes its own either useless or wrong definitions and is otherwise MOM—Mostly About Marketing), a *BusinessWeek* article “Social media will change your **business**,” an online **marketing** blog—and a Forbes article that, in attempting to distinguish between social media and social networking, muddies the water even further.

What I do get from this dismal succession (trust me, it doesn’t get better as you go down further): *It’s all about the money*. I’m enough of a Pollyanna to believe that’s wrong.

Better luck with Google? Well, the words yield **826 million results** (setting a new standard for meaningless size) and the phrase yields a mere 53 million. It’s hard to even figure out the first five (etc.) links in Google’s new interface, given the mix of news, images, videos and results from “people in your social circle,” but as I go through the first couple dozen results, I see very little new or less business-oriented—with one odd exception: the Center for Social Media, an American University School of Communications operation that “showcases and analyzes media for public knowledge and action—media made by, for, and with publics to address the problems that they

share.” It’s about documentaries and other “socially engaged media-making.” This one turns “social media” on its head: It’s not about *conversational media*, it’s about media *with social purposes*.

*It’s either nonexistent or ubiquitous*

In the end, I conclude one of two things—or maybe both:

- All media are social media to one degree or another, perhaps more directly for web-based media than for others.
- Social media is a marketing term that doesn’t describe anything distinctive.

It’s almost as useful a term as Web 2.0, which is to say it’s worth a lot more to marketers, consultants, speakers and gurus than it is to worthwhile discussion of real-world issues.

I would say, “I say it’s spinach, and I say to hell with it,” but spinach has a lot more going for it than “social media” does. And that’s the end of the PERSPECTIVE as such.

## Notes from the Literature

The rest of this is some old fashioned pointing-and-discussing, taking a couple dozen items\* related to social media and commenting on them—otherwise known as “clearing out my socialmedia tag on delicious.” Order is, as usual, mostly chronological. Overall meaning? That’s up to you.

### *Opinion Spectrum Collapse Disorder*

That’s Jason Scott at *ASCII* ([ascii.textfiles.com](http://ascii.textfiles.com)), posted March 15, 2009. As a sometimes computer historian/archivist, Scott looks back at what’s happened—in this case, looking at the “past 20 years or so” and “watching theoretical situations become hard reality, and then that hard reality encountering problems that the theoretical situations never even dreamed of.” He notes changes in online access to newspaper stories—and some of the unexpected consequences,

like print newspapers collapsing, always-there inherent flaws in journalism being ripped apart, and low-cost aggregators that once were thought to be moneymaking opportunities in the “smart agent” space that are now so beneath economic contempt that you wouldn’t get three sentences in with your business plan before you found yourself on the curb, watching a truck hauling away empty newspaper vending machines.

There are other flies in the ointment—“problems we are totally unprepared for and situations we’re

not even getting a full grasp around.” For example, the title of this post—OSCD. He notes a 1984 text-file captured from a BBS, The Safehouse—a new discussion board that began like this:

Welcome to the Debate Den!

The Den is for debate and discussion on almost any topic you wish...

This room is especially for political discussion, since this is an election year...

Go ahead.. post!

Scott’s reaction—and, in 2010, it’s hard to argue that he’s wrong:

Could you imagine? Can you even think, in this modern day, both starting a political discussion on purpose, or, for that matter, writing such a happy go lucky invitation for debate? As if you were seeking it out? Like plastic or internet access, a once rare thing is now so common that its mere existence is not a miracle, and in fact has degraded to an air-like status: it’s just there, and sometimes it is choking.

Although it was online, the 1984 board didn’t move at the speed of today’s social web. He lists the timestamps for postings—25 of them over a period of five weeks on a “very popular BBS by 1984 standards.” The “hottest” day had four messages.

In this environment, everything tends to run cool, although flamewars are definitely possible. But a flamewar then [was] usually a small number of folks dropping into well-worn melees.

Scott compares this—and higher-frequency postings on Fidonet—with “the modern day.” He uses Fark and Something Awful as examples, but you could look at Slashdot or HuffPost or...well, lots of places. A discussion can begin with a highly specific point or event and “can instantly expand into a multiple-hundreds-of-participants orgy of linguistic violence.” That doesn’t always happen, and it doesn’t happen as often on narrowly-defined sites, but it *does* happen.

As the accessibility of a conversation increases, so too does the spectrum of opinion brought to that conversation, until the opinions range along such a wide spectrum that the conversation simply cannot move forward. It will continue to grow, but like a tumor it is useless and for all purposes dead. It will not better anyone involved in it. The conversation has collapsed from the width of the spectrum of opinion.

Overstated? Possibly—Scott’s fond of overstatement. Wrong? Not so much. I spent a few minutes

at Fark looking at some comment sets. One story (on a new director for “dialogue on science, ethics and religion” at the American Association for the Advancement of Science) from *Inside Higher Education* had, in its first day, 13 comments at *IHE*—comments representing strongly diverging perspectives but, in most cases, civilized wording and careful thought. (It’s perhaps unfortunate that the rudest and most divisive comments come from hard-core atheists.) Then there’s Fark: 345 comments in the first 10 hours, *beginning* with a sophisticated argument presented here in its entirety:

People who believe religion and science are compatible are farking retardards.

Some of the comments—hell, *most* of the comments—are a little longer and sometimes more complex. Still, even when commenters *seem* to be responding to one another, it’s frequently an “I’m right.” “No, you’re wrong.” “You’re an idiot.” set of monologues being hurled past one another—not a conversation. (No, I didn’t read all 345 comments.)

That was in the “geek” section. How about politics? Here’s a same-day story from *The Daily Kos*—admittedly not an impartial source—about Congressfolk at a hearing with the BP CEO that tried to shift the blame for the oil spill to the government. Specifically, Joe Barton said he’s *ashamed* of the government for a “\$20 billion shakedown” (the escrow account)—he literally *apologized* because BP was pressured to make things right instead of waiting for a series of criminal trials. (Yes, he used the word “apologize.”) In this case, given the site, you get fast-action commenting *both* at the site itself and at *Fark*: what looks like 441 comments in eight hours at *Daily Kos*, more than 500 in the first 12 hours at *Fark*. In the first case, while I could hardly call the commentary enlightening, it’s reasonably convergent (for a while at least) because of the general audience involved and the extremity of the story. *Fark*? The level of interpersonal insults and pointless swearing in the comments was so high that it was difficult to discern *any* actual conversation or discussion—but as soon as the right-wingers in the group came out to play, it became shots fired in all directions.

After being reminded of why I stay away from sites like this, I tried Something Awful—with its 2.9 million threads and 104 million posts. And, frankly, there I think Scott’s simply offbase. Something Awful appears *intended* for extreme discussion—I

mean, the thread on this same absurd apology appears under “General Bullshit.” And it actually had somewhat more rational discussions than at *Fark*, albeit intermixed with a lot of oddness.

Do web conversations inherently collapse in OSCD? Clearly not. Is there such a tendency on more popular sites? Yes, I think there is.

### *The Wisdom of Community*

Derek Powazek published this essay on May 5, 2009 at *A List Apart*, discussing the “Wisdom of Crowds” theory. He thinks it’s important and valid, and offers tips for making a “WOC site” work properly—that is, actually yield improved conclusions through group participation.

What’s clear from this article, though, is that WOC systems are *not* social media—they’re about voting, not conversing. The article points out one fundamental issue with most social systems—the likelihood that any network with more than 150 people will start to fall apart. “Discussion systems and chat rooms fall apart when too many voices get involved”—but WOC systems are supposed to *improve* as they get larger.

One interesting point about this article: There are *very* few cogent, non-spammy comments—astonishingly few for a high-visibility site (GPR 8!) and an article that’s been there more than a year. (Determining which comments are link spam is difficult, but I couldn’t spot more than half a dozen legitimate comments with useful new opinions or ideas expressed in clear English.)

### *What happens when you cross the streams?*

Christina Pikas asks that question in a May 15, 2009 post at *Christina’s LIS Rant*. She’s looking at “norms in online communities, how journal commenting is different, and waving the flag on potential issues when aggregating web comments with journal articles.”

Groups *do* develop norms, whether those groups are real or virtual.

These norms might include when and what to link to, how rowdy or polite to be, and what topics are appropriate. Some discussion forums are supportive and helpful and warm, comfortable places to be whereas others are full of insults and ribbing and out and out flame wars—that’s the norm, though, so people go there for that. Newbies generally lurk (hang out without posting) for some period of time before commenting on posts, and then initiating threads... [U]sually, except for the

first few people who have to sort of blaze a trail, people learn how to interact in a new communication forum by watching and then dipping their toes into the water. And the first few people may be using the tool in a completely unexpected way (or at least many people aren't reporting what they're doing right now on twitter).

Tools influence the norms, to be sure. *Your* blog is “sort of your own little home” and the norms for comments at *your* blog will reflect both “blogging norms” and your own attitude—if you allow comments at all. Meanwhile, Twitter has norms, various groups within Flickr have norms for comments (I think), and so on...

Crossing the streams? Pikas notes FriendFeed, which draws from multiple sources and, as a result, mixes multiple norms. Perhaps surprisingly, this has not been particularly problematic:

It turns out that instead of this causing a whole lot of confusion, hurt feelings, and people acting inappropriately (for the most part), it's caused the formation of new norms and ways of doing things—because we're all pretty adaptable, and it's basically the same people, with the same user ids, and because we know that people label delicious things differently for themselves than to share, for example.

The conclusion is that it should be fine for journals to aggregate comments on papers from all public sources and provide them as commentary and context. But in this case, Pikas isn't so confident:

However, the norms when people comment directly on the journal site are quite different. People think through their comments more. People are sometimes forced to use their real names (the names on their drivers licenses). There is probably more civility because these people might be the reviewers of your next paper!

Whereas off-the-cuff comments can be, well, off the cuff and probably rowdier and less carefully considered. Pikas' solution: Offer a way for people to *opt in*—to say “yes, this casual comment can be aggregated into direct journal comment streams.”

This is a more specialized discussion but worth considering. What I would say about Friendfeed's apparent ability to cross streams without undue angst: First, Friendfeed—like most social networks—consists of many overlapping networks, most of them not enormous. Second—well, I've been seeing plenty of angst and fireworks on *some* Friendfeed conversations, and some of the time it is because of unclear norms.

## 10 Golden Rules of Social Media

Here's one (by Aliza Sherman on May 26, 2009 at *WebWorkerDaily*) that pushes three buttons in one short phrase: It's a List Post, it posits a set of Rules and it claims to be about a field whose existence I question.

You know how List Posts work, so here are the “rules” without the glosses: Respect the Spirit of the 'Net (which she claims is *not* about marketing and selling!), Listen, Add Value, Respond, Do Good Things, Share the Wealth, Give Kudos, Don't Spam, Be Real, Collaborate.

All good stuff—and all applicable to almost any setting, online or off. Well, why not? The post ends “We are social media.” But as you read, you realize that Sherman's a web consultant to companies and get that fringe sense of what's not *quite* being said. The tenth point, Collaborate, begins as follows: “Before you dive into social media for marketing and selling...” Whoops. This really isn't about conversations among people—it's about *using* “social media” to sell stuff. In other words, same old, same old, with pretty words on top.

### *Report: Social Networks Growing while Other Social Media Sites Stagnate and Decline*

This item—by Sarah Perez, on *ReadWriteWeb* July 29, 2009—is interesting mostly to see whether it provides a useful, meaningful definition of “social media.” It's based on a Universal McCann survey of internet use—and as far as I can tell, the report includes anything that can have any sort of user-generated content. It appears that online radio streaming even counts—which stretches the definition beyond repair.

Conclusion? **Everything** online is social media, or at least everything except pure feedback-free corporate sites—which makes the term meaningless except for marketers.

### *The coming trust crisis in the social media expert space*

Duncan Riley, August 31, 2009, *The Inquisitr*. Maybe the first paragraph says it all:

I had the privilege of attending my second Gnomedex two weeks ago and there was a regularly used joke: everyone claims to be a “social media expert” just because they've used Twitter.

Or, he goes on, started a blog “or at the extreme, have a Facebook account.” Why? Because the supposed proliferation of “social media” has resulted

in a proliferation of conferences and speaking gigs—and it's not easy to tell who really is a social media expert. (When the term is fuzzy or meaningless, expertise is hard to define.) This will lead to a "trust crisis" as more and more speakers and gurus don't know much of anything.

Riley believes the crisis will come both from the bottom—all those fools who proclaim expertise—but also from the top (as "gurus of old media" try to reinvent themselves). And, apparently, there are *so many* conferences and speaking gigs that we're now getting "those who can talk the talk, but have never walked the walk." You can be a full-time speaker, which of course means that you're not actually *doing* much. (Thinking about library conferences and speakers who appear to be speaking all the time...nahh, we couldn't possibly have anything like that, could we?)

The problem here is that in many cases the implied trust is flawed: the audience expects to hear true experts, but that trust only extends as far as the audience's knowledge level; once you get more knowledgeable audiences, those not really qualified to talk will be caught out. As a fundamental, that has to undermine trust, and once that stretches out across many, the whole sector suffers a trust crisis that even those qualified may be caught up by.

Riley doesn't have a solution. To me, part of the solution is to move away from a term so nebulous it invites bullshitters.

There's a followup essay, "The Social Media Expert Crisis Descends," written March 9, 2010. Riley—who's mostly in Australia—says "the crisis is here." In November 2009, he attended a conference and saw "speaker after speaker" essentially say they'd been on Twitter for a while and this was how it worked for them. "Apparently being on Twitter for 5 minutes gave these people the license to speak for 5-25 minutes on being a social media expert."

Ah, but by March 2010, it had become much worse—"like an outbreak of the plague, particularly among the PR/Marketing crowd." "If you've gotten 200 followers for your corporate Twitter account in Sydney, and sent out 20 tweets, that's now ample qualification that you are a social media expert." Riley's concerned not only because the preachers mostly haven't done much but because "the advice given now isn't just shallow, it's bad. Not just bad, but damaging."

Oh, by the way: Who's paying for all this advice? *Companies*. Which want to be involved in

multiway person-to-person conversations why? *To sell stuff*. So the flood of opportunities for speakers and consulting gigs is...well, you know the answer by now. "To enhance personal growth through effective communication" is *not* the answer.

### *5 Signs You're Talking To A Social Media Douchebag/5 Terms Social Media Douchebags Should Stop Using*

Two pieces, both on *Tremendous News*, the first posted January 19, 2010, the second six days later. I don't know who the writer is; I'm not entirely sure I care. We'll call him or her "TN" for now.

To many, the Internet is a world full of promise.

To others, a ripe field ready to be harvested by douchebags.

Both are true.

Yep. TN even offers a definition of "douchebag": "Someone who thinks he's better than others." Although there's more to it than that. He sees these folks flooding social media. The five signs?

- **Nobody knows what they actually do.** You get answers like "I leverage insights" and "I put brands at the forefront of the social media revolution."
- **They actually think they're internet celebrities.** I suspect there's way too much truth in that. "If you have to preface the word with 'Internet,' you're no celebrity."
- **They will speak at any event.** (Hmm. I'm starting to see library connections, but never mind.)
- **They recommend their friends who are, coincidentally, also douchebags.**
- **They always need to "rate a brand."** You need to read this one to see what's being said.

TN also notes: "Many people think I'm a douchebag." And doesn't deny the possibility.

The 79 comments are interesting—including one who, attempting to be funny, managed to exhibit a "6<sup>th</sup> sign": Not reading the entire article and then commenting as if you did. Oh, but hey, the post was 676 words long, mostly in short sentence-paragraphs. Admittedly, the item the commenter didn't read was in boldface, but it wasn't in the first 100 words. (What's the attention span of a social media douchebag? 140 characters? 140 words?) One *great* comment: "So, are you going to offer to speak about this at every SM event in 2010?" (With emoticon, to be sure.)



In the followup post, TN says social media douchebags “used *social media* to attack me.” They called TN pretentious, said TN didn’t get it, said TN was out of touch. That was no surprise. What did surprise TN: dozens of “the exact same people I was talking about” *agreed with him*. So he had to up the ante by offering the lexicon: “If you use any of these terms regularly, you’re the person I’m talking about.” Here they are, with no further explanation (go read the post: it’s funny).

**Participate in the conversation. Monetize your social media presence. Social media rockstar. You’re doing it wrong. Social media is all about...**

Fill in that ellipsis with any convenient word or brief phrase—e.g., engaging, interacting, community building, ROI, buzz, conversation.

If you use some of these phrases, sometimes, don’t worry.

I’m not talking about you.

If you have these phrases on slides in a presentation you’re about to deliver at a “podcamp”, then yes.

I’m talking about you.

Still not seeing any relationship to anybody in the library field or any pat terminology or anything, nope, not here, not at all.

The most amusing portion of the 63 comments was an interchange in which a person who Actually Works in Social Media, defending the use of some of the buzzwords, managed to demonstrate that he was one of those being talked about...and will clearly never admit it to himself or anyone else.

### *In the Future We’ll All Have Online Reputation Scores*

That’s Hutch Carpenter in a January 26, 2010 post at *I’m Not Actually a Geek* (an oxymoronic blog title)—and maybe the title is enough, perhaps with “to go with our flying cars and jetpacks” added. Going to the About page, I find that Carpenter is “VP of Product” for a company that helps other companies “manage innovation”:

The goal is to enable easy capture of ideas by employees, customers and partners, and convert the most promising to innovative initiatives.

Um. Yeah. OK. Meantime, Carpenter—who makes a point of saying this happened *in an interview*—predicts that:

[I]n 20 years, we’ll all have online reputation scores. Little badges, numbers that communicate

our level of authority, this sort of thing. And these reputations will have tangible impact.

He’s now used “**we’ll all**” twice, with “all” notably added, so I have to assume that he honestly believes this applies to *everybody*. Not only are we all going to be online, we’ll all have little badges to show how authoritative we are. Can I get an Amen?

Why does he make this odd (and, to my mind, dystopian) prediction? Because of “three trends pointing to the emergence of online reputation”—“Rely on social media for info,” “Migration of transparent work & info online,” and “Rate performance of business (Amazon, eBay, Yelp).” There’s even a big graph with three arrows and a timeline that clearly shows...nothing at all. But it’s pretty.

So he adds helpful explanations. Carpenter is one of those who trusts business ratings—he’ll pay a premium for high positive ratings and assumes most of us will go to restaurants with high Yelp ratings. “The rating ethos” is expanding. We’re rating *everything!* Carpenter seems to think all these anonymous ratings are as valuable as actually doing online research or asking friends and people we know.

The “migration” phrase is so fuzzy on its own—“transparent work”?—that I shouldn’t be surprised “lifestyle” and gengen show up right away, along with a leap of logic: Young folks supposedly have more and more media exposure over time, and therefore they’re “more accustomed to online engagement and information-seeking.” Well, sure, if most of that media isn’t TV, music and the like. I read the rest of the explanation, and damned if I can make sense of it. I guess I’m doing it wrong.

“Rely on social media...” is nice because Carpenter gets a chance to dismiss all the irrelevant crap of yesterday: “Remember libraries, magazines and microfiche?” Not only are libraries irrelevant, they’re irrelevant by multiple generations—superseded first by “1.0 websites where we got information” then by “portals that aggregated information” and then by search. Now, you see, *all of that* is irrelevant: Social media is where you go to find “information.” There’s another graph for proof—one that reflects an absolute determination to twist numbers to prove Carpenter’s thesis.

A survey asked *what type of website* you’d use first when looking for information—thus imme-

diately dismissing all offline sources. The results? 37% said search engines; 34% portals; 11% sites dedicated to the type of information; 9% Wikipedia; 5% blogs; 4% “Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.”

You might say “Well, that’s 9% ‘social media’ if you include social networks as social media.” Ah, but not so fast: Carpenter includes Wikipedia as social media. That’s still only 18%, but, you know, it’s a *trend* (with one datapoint), so it “points toward an increased reliance on others to provide information to us.”

Somehow, all this leads to “the development of formal, online reputations.” In the process, Carpenter makes it clear once again that this is *universal*: That social media will be “**the only way** we will get information. Or make decisions.” Wow.

He never does get to an explanation of how you could plausibly have formal “reputation badges” that weren’t readily gamed. Apparently one PR firm has developed a tool that allows it to identify “the top analysts on Twitter,” so this is heavily about PR talking to PR about how to make PR work better as PR.

Carpenter avoids the trap of stupid futurism by setting this nonsense 20 years out, making it wildly unlikely that anyone will call him on it. Call him on excessive generalization and other nonsense? That doesn’t require such a wait. It is reassuring to know that *social media is the final movement*, that nothing else will supplant it. At least not for the next two decades.

The comments? High-fiving from other social media folk, some spam, and one person who asks “Wikipedia is social media?”—which Carpenter doesn’t bother responding to. Actually, of course, *it is*—because “social media” is like fairy dust and can be whatever you want it to be. Let’s just call search engines and portals social media, why don’t we?

*All that user-generated content? 95% is malware, spam*

Chris Foresman on February 8, 2010 at *Ars Technica*, based on “research from Websense Security Labs.” Websense—in the business of limiting access to all that threatening stuff—claims to “scan and analyze over 40 billion websites every hour.” The company claims an increase of 225% in malicious websites in the latter half of 2009—but also says, well, what it says in the title. “Websense analysis revealed that 95 percent of all user-generated content is spam, malware, or both.” Specifically,

85% of *all* email is spam—and 81% “also contains links to malicious software.”

Even if the claims have solid numbers behind them, the term “user-generated content” is misapplied—since virtually all of that spam and malware comes not from users but from companies (of sorts), spammers who do this for a living. In other words, “social media” has largely turned into anti-social crap if you believe Websense.

The last paragraph of the piece is sad and a little odd for *Ars Technica*:

Savvy users who maintain constant vigilance may not have too much trouble spotting attempts to hijack legitimate content. Ultimately, however, the increases in malicious websites or content that appear to be legitimate simply make it harder and harder for the average person to know who, or what, to trust online. And when just five percent of user-generated content isn’t spam or malware, many may question the utility of bothering to discern a difference.

There aren’t many comments but there’s a healthy level of distrust for the claims. As one commenter points out, most spam email is automatically rejected. Others point out all the abandoned blogs and parking sites that are open to *huge* quantities of spam and malware—but that nobody visits.

## Conclusion

\*I started out with 30 items. I found myself discarding some along the way, seeing nothing that on second viewing seems worth noting or discussing. I ended up discussing nine of the “couple dozen items”—and I find that meaningful.

What I don’t find meaningful at this point: “Social media.” I may be doing it wrong, or maybe I just don’t get it, or I need to get over it.

## The CD-ROM Project

# It’s Crackers to Slip a Rozzer...

...the Dropsy in Snide.

If that doesn’t make any sense to you, the first review in this group will leave you cold.

## Totally Mad

The title tells you what it is, given when it was published: The first 46 years (!) of *Mad Magazine*

on seven CD-ROMs. Here's what the box and each inner pack says about System Requirements:

To run this program properly you should have a computer. (Our technical research shows that a working one is preferred.) Your computer should also have one of those little slide-out "snack trays."

Take the snack out and put in one of the small round CD-ROM things that are in this package.

You get the idea: The whole package is done in *Mad's* style, take it or leave it. The rest of the system requirements—shorn of most embellishments—include Windows 95/98 or Windows NT 4.0 (a promising sign—if it runs on Windows NT it *should* run on Windows 7), a Pentium 90MHz or higher ("any slower and you'll be dead by the time you get to reading issue #245"), 32MB RAM, 30MB disk space, SVGA graphics card and monitor, 640x480 resolution, 256-color minimum, 2x CD-ROM drive, 8-bit sound card, mouse ("or IBM-compatible chipmunk"). For 1999, those requirements mean something more than a bargain box. My little notebook doesn't have a graphics card or a sound card, but significantly exceeds the other requirements.

*It works!*

*And it works*—mostly. You have to install from Disc 1 and the install worked nicely. Given limited disk space back then, it's not surprising that they offer a choice of 27MB or 38MB installation. Installation went smoothly and rapidly.

When I reviewed this set (in the January 2000 *Library Hi Tech News*), I gave it a 93—an Excellent score that "would be even higher but for some weaknesses in secondary aspects of this first-rate package." More of that in a moment. Meanwhile, when you start up:

Once the opening dumpster leaves you in the main Trash Heap, you can wander over to the cover browser, check out nonprint stuff on the juke box, or find specific content using the Search-O-Meter. Sooner or later, you'll probably wind up in The MAD Veeblefetzter, which helps you look at the pages of *Mad*. Not that you really need to use the Veeblefetzter—it's just the only way you can get inside the covers. If you really and truly despise *Mad*, avoid the Veeblefetzter at all costs. Then again, you may not be a good candidate for this set. What, me worry?

I'm afraid the *Maditude* was catching—but I wasn't making anything up there. It does start up with a video (640x480 on a full-screen backdrop) of the

Totally Mad dumpster dumping trash onto your page—and then leaves you in the Trash Heap. Which, unlike the opening, *is* a proper window, can be moved to a secondary screen, and scales to take full advantage of whatever screen you have. The MAD Veeblefetzter is the page-reading interface with several zoom levels, callable table of contents (which can be a separate window elsewhere on a multiscreen system), print/copy capabilities and...for the inside back cover of many issues—a little tool that lets you fold over the back cover to see the secret message.

*A whole lotta Mad*

The quality of scans is very good, and *it's all here*—notably including the rare ten-cent full-color comic book issues that began *Mad* back in the day (beginning in 1952). When you navigate to something on a different disc, you get a "Nice going, clod" dialogue box that tells you which disc to insert (and you can start from any disc, once you've installed the system). The set includes 376 regular issues, plus 133 *MAD Special* issues, 12 *Worst from MAD* annuals, 12 *More Trash from MAD* annuals and 24 other special issues. (When special issues consist mostly of reprints, you get the pages that are new and a table of contents that will take you back to the original of each article, a sensible space-saving methodology.)

Extras include animated cartoons, music clips from the flexi-disks that were bound into some issues, a few video clips, a couple of odd bits...and a panic button that brings up a phony Excel graph. The Search-O-Meter offers set lists of features, themes, artists, writers and date ranges and keyword searching. You can save individual article bookmarks or result sets. The Veeblefetzter shows page spreads, but you may need to zoom to read everything. Oh, and there's a rotation feature for special situations where pages were meant to be read sideways.

One video clip had audio but no video. Otherwise, everything I tried ran just fine—impressively well for an 11-year-old product. It cost \$50-\$60 back in the day. If you remember *Mad* with any fondness (I used to like it better than I do now), this is a treasure.

*Availability and alternatives*

If your library has this, the good news is that it still works—and works very well. I'm keeping my set in

case I want to do some pop-culture investigation (since most every major pop-culture meme was lampooned in *Mad* at some point) or just go back to those 25 full-color comics.

You can still buy the set. Amazon has it from other sellers for \$55 new, \$20 used. But you can also buy *Absolutely Mad*, a newer product with the first 54 years of *Mad* on one DVD-ROM: that goes for a little over \$40 and includes more than 600 issues in all. It adds seven more years to the CD-ROM set, and is apparently done entirely differently (e.g., everything's in PDF). Some reviews suggest that the DVD has lower-resolution scans; since I haven't seen it, I can't comment. The new version does appear to lack some of the extras and the silly interface. Oh, and the DVD version will run on a Mac...

I'm guessing you're not going to find a free online archive of all of *Mad*. The official site does have a few bits of "past madness." It's hardly surprising that the publishers don't give the archives away for free.

## Doonesbury Flashbacks: 25 Years of Serious Fun

I had high hopes for this one, which I apparently didn't review back in the day. It came out in 1995 and included the first 25 years of *Doonesbury*—with, as I vaguely remember, some cute little extras (video clips, a clickable map) and an index as well as browsable access to the strips.

It was not to be. Autorun immediately pops up a message, "Must run under Windows 95"—but when you close that, a nifty Install screen (with a *Doonesbury* image) comes up. But clicking on Install first brings up an error you can ignore, then a GPF fault. This one isn't going to install under Windows 7 (or any Windows from the last decade) without some form of trickery.

This time, I tried a little harder, since Windows 7 does have a compatibility adviser that can apply various settings. No luck—even with Windows 95 settings applied, the result is a GPF when attempting to install. Best guess? The program uses the kind of direct low-level access that isn't allowable with a secure OS.

When I went looking for the CD-ROM online, I ran into reviews saying you could right-click on "DA.exe," apply the W95 compatibility setting and it would run. To which I can only say, "Sort of."

Doing that does bring up an opening multimedia splash screen and an animated main screen—but all my efforts to move from that main screen resulted in DA.exe shutting down. Fundamentally, I just don't think an ordinary user would be willing to do enough to get this to run.

### Availability?

You can still buy the CD-ROM. I see it offered for \$4.36—but with the explicit statement "Windows 3.1/95." No more recent version is available.

Unfortunately, there's really no online alternative. *Slate* and other sources offer today's strip and selected older strips, but although there's a place saying you can sign up for access to the full archives, there's no live link or way to actually do so.

9,000 strips, interesting ways to get to them, some video clips: It's a loss. Not a huge loss, but a loss. Too bad.

## UFO

Here's an oddity: A CD-ROM from 1993, produced by a division of Softkey, that must have been part of one of the ten-packs back in the day. I never reviewed it back then (as far as I can tell), but somehow kept it.

It installs if you open Windows Explorer and double-click Setup.Exe, with neither a security warning nor much trouble—a screen with an odd little animated UFO appears for a few seconds as a shortcut is added to the computer. That's it: Everything runs from the CD-ROM.

It runs properly—opening up a group of windows (a menu bar, a map, an "incidents" window, an optional search windows with date parameters and various incident options, and two optional windows for each incident: A photo or video window and a text window). While all windows start out in the upper left corner of the primary screen, they're all movable and the photo and text windows are resizable—but videos are always tiny, and most photos have so little detail that they should remain tiny. Text is white on a blue background, but readable enough.

What this is, is a whole bunch of "incident reports" with dates, place and text for 988 incidents, photos for 201 of them and videos for 30. The photos are variously unconvincing (a few are at least interesting); the videos, with breathless narration and text about their incontrovertible evidence, are

pretty much uniformly worthless and appear to be taken from some TV special for credulous viewers.

I don't think I'll keep this one around. It's an odd little disc for an odd little audience.

### *Availability and alternatives*

This disc seems long gone, but I do see more recent alternatives, such as the 1998 *UFO Anthology Vol. 1* with about four times as much stuff (and, from an odd little company, two DVDs of all that Suppressed Truth). There's also a three-CD *UFO Anthology Deluxe* from 2000, available for \$3.99(!) and probably worth almost every penny; one can gain an insight into the audience from the single Amazon review—which gives the product five stars (the highest possible rating) while using the headline “Thief” and saying the CDs wouldn't play on today's computers. Well, at least it's the *highest possible quality* set of useless plastic!

The thing is, this is an area where the web shines: Lots of “information” about a topic with hundreds of thousands of enthusiasts. You can find more than 50,000 sighting reports (on one site), hundreds of higher-quality photos and videos, and more theories than you could shake an Area 51 at. I'm sure most of these sites are done with the same care for documented accuracy and verifiability as the CD-ROM.

## Perspective

# On Words, Meaning and Context

Do you own your words?

I don't mean “Do the words you write belong to you?” That has an easy answer in these times of automatic copyright—yes, they do, just as soon as you save them to your hard disk or the cloud.

I mean: Do you stand behind what you say—or do you start doing a moonwalk when someone disagrees with you? Or do you find that others do the moonwalk on your behalf, with various forms such as “what X really *meant* to say was...”?

Three years ago I published “ON DISAGREEMENT AND DISCUSSION” (*C&I* 7:9, August 2007). I was disagreeing with a librarian/writer who said (or was interpreted as saying) librarians didn't do a very good job of disagreeing with one another, forthright discussions on serious issues were

somewhat lacking, liblogs in particular tended toward me-tooism. I thought the field—and specifically the gray literature of blogs and their cousins—was good at forthright discussion and disagreement.

I didn't name the librarian/writer in the preceding paragraph (you can read the original essay) because his name, and whether he said those things and still believes them, isn't relevant to this PERSPECTIVE. I mention it only because there are times I wonder about our ability to discuss and disagree clearly and meaningfully—in short, whether I was right in 2007. I wonder about that ability when I find people failing to own their words or telling me why other people should not be expected to own their words.

## Words, Meaning, Context and Significance

You have something to say. English provides a staggeringly complex set of possible ways to say it. You choose one or more of them, depending on your mood, the medium you're using, your skill with the language and other factors.

Did you say what you meant? Are there meanings in the set of words you used that you didn't intend? Or did you *fail* to say what you meant, hoping readers would intuit your meaning from the words you used?

That's a set of difficult questions. I suspect few of us consistently succeed in saying exactly what we intend to say, exactly what we mean—and even if we do, chances are some readers will pick up different meanings from what we intended.

There's another set of issues that boils down to context. You don't write in a vacuum. Some contextual aspects:

- **Personal context:** Your own history as a writer and person. If I write “ebooks are clearly the dominant future of reading,” it will have considerably different (*startlingly* different) contextual significance than if David “Teleread” Rothman writes the same statement.
- **Temporal context:** The history of the conversation you're part of and how it relates to what else is happening at the time. A statement that “BP is one of the more ecologically sensitive energy companies” has

considerably different contextual significance in June 2010 than it would in, say, June 2009. (No, I won't replace your keyboard; spit takes are your problem!)

- **Medial context:** The nature of the medium you're using for the statement. I discuss this further a little later, but I believe most readers will interpret a set of words differently if they appear as a tweet, a comment in a FriendFeed thread, a Facebook status message, a *comment* on someone else's blog post, an original blog post, a column in an online or print periodical—or a formal article or book.
- **Social context:** The nature of the conversation (or other exchange) in which this statement appears. This is related to temporal and medial context, but isn't quite the same.
- **Direct context:** The classic contextual issue—the larger set of words surrounding a subset of words. “Out of context” usually refers to direct context issues. As a truly blatant example, if someone reads this article and says “Walt Crawford writes that ebooks are clearly the dominant future of reading,” they're deliberately quoting out of context in a way that distorts what I wrote. Most direct context issues are more subtle and controversial.

I suspect there are more, but let's leave it at five. Context adds meaning to content, and there's always danger when interpreting content outside of context. I sometimes think calls for “charitable reading” are partly calls to respect context, but I also think they can go too far. It's nearly impossible to preserve all contextual aspects of a statement when discussing that statement; calls to do so are, in effect, calls to *avoid* discussing statements. (If I can't quote or comment on a sentence or paragraph at a later time without quoting the entire piece, and without using the same medium, the game is over.)

What I'll call **fair reading and discussion** should include contextual flags as appropriate. If I sometimes fail to do that, I apologize. So, for example, if you're quoting somebody directly or paraphrasing what they said, it's reasonable to indicate the date they said it (and in some cases the significance of that date) and the medium used. I'm not sure it's the duty of a writer to try to establish personal context for people you're quot-

ing (I'm not sure it's feasible, although there's a tendency to use a brief identifying phrase to establish some context), and respecting the social and direct context is important, but different than trying to replicate it. (Remember ‘David “Teleread” Rothman’ in an earlier paragraph? Because most of my readers are in the library field, that's a terse way to provide personal context for a David Rothman who's unlikely to be the first one readers think of—that is, David “Medical” Rothman.)

When you're participating in an ongoing discussion and commenting on what's already been said, either in a social context or through more formal means, you're typically dealing with meaning and significance based on your understanding of (and communication of) the words themselves and the set of contexts. “I'm sick of libraries” said in a 5 p.m. Friday tweet by a frontline public librarian has very different significance than “I'm sick of libraries” as the first sentence in a *New York Times* op-ed by a bestselling author or, say, the former president of the American Library Association.

Things can get dicey when writers and readers fail to recognize or convey contextual clues. That's not the problem I'm most interested in here. If someone objects to my characterization of a Friendfeed comment saying “Geez, I was sick, tired, and it was part of a snarky stream,” that's likely to be a legitimate objection (and I might even apologize and do a followup clarification). I'm interested in those cases where people really don't want to own their words—where they expect a little *too* much charity or, for that matter, simply don't want to stand behind their statements.

That can emerge as some combination of objections like these:

- “I didn't say that”—even though those were the words you used and they weren't taken entirely out of context.
- “That wasn't what I meant”—the most common form, which can represent honest failure to communicate or what I call moonwalking, as the writer backs away from the statements.
- “My *real* point was X”—where X does not appear in the original statement or appears only as a sidenote. Consider this Advanced Moonwalking, backing away from what you said and trying to point in some other direction entirely.

- “You’re being unfair”—without any specific indication of what I did that was unfair.

Some of these are legitimate objections and attempts to clarify. At some level, though, these and others are attempts to *avoid* disagreement—to neuter discussion. If you can’t ascribe meaning and significance to someone else’s words, you can’t disagree with them.

### *Levels of discourse*

Clearly there are levels of discourse—where and how you say something influences the way it should, ideally, be read and interpreted. Levels of discourse particularly influence how reasonable it is to use hyperbole, generalization and other sloppy rhetoric. I don’t claim that I don’t get this wrong at times, but a broad set of levels would be something like this:

- **Quick reactions** to someone else’s face-tious FriendFeed item (or comment), tweet, Facebook post or the like: Ideally, such reactions get left out of serious discussions altogether. If not, they should be assumed to have very little significance—they’re mostly just idle conversation.
- **Precursors** to such reactions—that is, apparently-offhand FriendFeed items, tweets, Facebook posts.: You’ve initiated the discussion, so it’s reasonable to assign a *little* more significance—but not much.
- **Anonymous trolling**: In general, I take anonymous writing less seriously than signed writing; there *is* no personal context and it’s clear someone doesn’t intend to stand behind what they say. Anonymous trolling (in the eye of the beholder!) is even less significant than anonymous writing in general.
- **Comments on blog posts and serious FriendFeed items**: I think this is the point at which it’s reasonable to assume that you’ve thought at least briefly about what you’re saying before you hit Enter. Letters related to traditional media items may fall in roughly the same category.
- **Blog posts and other net media**: It’s fair to ascribe more significance to a post than to comments on that post, although some comments are similar to posts.
- **Columns, op-ed, articles**: The dividing line between blogs and traditional media (or “net media,” traditional media carried over

the internet) is a vague one—but I’m still inclined to assume *some* additional care with words and their meaning, if only because some traditional media involve copy editing.

- **Scholarly articles and books**: The highest level of significance and direct context, I think. Here, it’s reasonable to assume that the writer has done *serious, extended* thinking about what they’re trying to convey and that they’ve had help refining those statements. A truly stupid paragraph in a published book is harder to excuse on the grounds of inadvertence or casual expression than the same paragraph in a blog post.

Perhaps one reasonable cutoff is that it’s a little harsh to fisk anything above the blog-post line—that is, you probably shouldn’t do detailed demolitions of Facebook posts and comments on blog posts. In my less charitable moments, I believe the line should be a little tougher: That apparently-thought-out comments on posts are as subject to critical examination as the posts themselves.

## The Latest Incident

Here’s most of a June 1, 2010 *Walt at Random* post:

Stephen Abram posted “Today is Quit Facebook Day—for Dummies” at *Stephen’s Lighthouse* on May 31, 2010. (If you go to the link, be sure to read “About the Author”—about which I will not comment.)

I thought it was an insulting post, right from the first sentence:

I wonder how many info pros will announce to the world they don’t have the information skills to manage privacy by leaving Facebook today.

This seemed to me to say that librarians (“info pros” lost at SLA and I’m not about to use it) can’t reasonably quit FB based on principled objections; if they do so, they’re “announcing” that they’re dummies. Hokay. And I started wondering about this:

It seems to me that it should be a reasonable user expectation of librarians and information professionals that they should be able to manage privacy settings and use **the full range of web tools**. [Emphasis added.]

Really? Every librarian should “use the full range of web tools”? Why? Well...

I also would expect to be able to receive informed, current and excellent advice and training on how to deal with the emerging social tools from my professionals in the social insti-

tutions I frequent (public libraries, schools, universities, colleges, etc.).

And here I come up short. [By the way, that was a direct cut-and-paste, not retyped.] Should I be able to take a workshop on Effective Facebooking at my library? Maybe. Should I expect that I can walk up to **any librarian—every librarian**—and get “informed, current and excellent advice” on every “social tool”? I think that’s unrealistic, and I think it privileges “social tools” over nearly everything else in life. I don’t expect every librarian (or any librarian) to tell me where I can find the best asparagus or whether I should sign up for Safeway’s Club Card. I don’t expect every librarian to offer informed, excellent advice on how to improve my (nonexistent) golf game. I don’t expect any librarian to be a source of current, excellent advice on which software would be best suited to producing a self-published book, and certainly not on how to use each program—although I might be delighted if the library (not every librarian) had a workshop on the topic. And I don’t believe I should be able to walk up to any librarian and say “should I be using Flickr or Picasa to organize my photos—and how should I set up my Picasa account?”

Abram then tosses in a stick:

Will they exit Twitter and Google too for collecting private information? I suspect that would make them unemployable. At least, ironically, they’ll be easily identified by professional recruiters and HR folks through the standard tools and the digital trail they leave as they exit and discuss their position.

Set aside the simplistic equation of FB’s **deliberate undermining** of its former policies with Twitter and Google policies. Is it plausible to regard a librarian who doesn’t Twitter as *unemployable*? Really?

I commented as follows:

This is a touch offensive. It’s **extremely** unlikely that any librarian is leaving FB because they can’t figure out how to handle privacy settings. On the other hand, it’s quite possible for a librarian, or anybody else, to decide that FB as currently managed is simply not trustworthy as a social network, and to leave on principle. Or don’t principles count?

Abram responded at some length. He started with an indirect slap at my reading abilities:

If anyone is reading this post as a direct insult to librarians’ skills, please read it again slowly. I am not a self-hater.

I didn’t say he was directly insulting librarians’ skills—I said the post was offensive. The interesting part is what follows—why “bailing is a very poor

strategy for you as an individual or for collective influence.” Quoting in part—you can and should read the original:

1. Recruiters and HR types may not have that same viewpoint or see a principled stance as a plus for their researcher hiring to client’s specs. What justification is there for hiring a researcher who won’t play where the majority of users are? I doubt it will come up in an interview for people to explain, since they wouldn’t make the cut in the pre-interview screening process where resumes are fodder for internet screening.

**Wow.** First off, if I was an HR type, I’d expect a librarian to investigate claims before making them—such as “where the majority of users are.” Compete’s analysis says Facebook had 135 million unique visitors in April 2010: That’s a big number, but it’s nowhere near a majority of internet users. Even the highest number claimed for Facebook usage, by an ad agency, comes out to 35% of Internet users—by the ad agency’s own assertions. In what universe is 35% a majority?

And in what universe is it reasonable to say that librarians must be where the majority of users are? By that standard, it’s reasonable to reject anybody applying for a U.S. library job who doesn’t attend a Christian church or who doesn’t use Microsoft Windows. (Depending on your definition of “where the majority of users are,” you could extend that to rejecting anybody who isn’t part of a heterosexual marriage with children or, for that matter, anybody who believes in evolution...)

Apparently, somehow, social networks are special—so special that it’s reasonable to reject a librarian outright if they **deliberately choose** to avoid one. I find that pretty shocking.

I won’t fisk the remainder of the comment. I sense a little slap about retirees in there, and there’s a little comment that seems to say anyone making a principled choice is using “common consumer mob revolt tactics,” but the key here is the assertion that it is the duty of **every librarian** to be part of whatever set of social media are the flavor of the month, no matter how repulsive or untrustworthy those media might be. (Well, and the factually erroneous assertion that Facebook is used by the majority of Internet users—or, for that matter, that it’s “the most global site,” which it isn’t.)

Have I urged anybody to leave Facebook? No, I have not, and I don’t in the Zeitgeist piece. Am I leaving Facebook? No, I am not. On the other hand...

**Do I believe that it is wrong for a librarian to make a principled choice to leave Facebook, or that doing so makes the librarian unfit as a librarian? I do not.**



And I think the whole concept that each and every librarian should be an expert on every hot social network or web tool needs a lot of rethinking. I think it's nonsense.

'Scuse me, while I go ask a librarian how to set up my router and which fluorescent lights will work best with dimmers. I assume I can ask any librarian and get excellent, informed, current answers. Right? And that I can suggest that librarians be fired if the answers aren't good. Or does this only apply to social networks and web tools?

Abram commented on my post. Here's the full comment, so you don't lack context:

Hi Walt:

I regret that you feel that I was being personal and making a comment on your personal reading skills. You'll have to take my word for it that nothing could be further from the truth and I will attest that you read very well. I apologize that you took offense. By way of explanation, from your first comment on my post, I realized that my post could be misread and attempted to clarify and point people on to the main point – how do we influence FB?

You asked “don't principles count?” Sure they do. I still argue that being one of potentially 25,000+ people closing their Facebook accounts out of 400 million active users is too tiny a number to make any difference (that's something like 0.000625% altho my math can be error prone and you're the survey expert). As I noted in the comments, I think that collective action through our associations is a better way to influence Facebook and with us as users not bystanders. It appears that some people defend bailing as a principled act which it definitely is. I just question whether it will have the impact it should. I also question how much power non-users will have over time. I doubt it will make enough difference. It's a shame that too few are taking up the fight to have FB investigated and new rules/laws in place and using our associations to take collective action. I'll still be pumping for that strategy while others defend the impact of a boycott. I realize there are different points of view and maybe I'll be proven wrong and a tiny consumer revolt may have more impact. In the past few weeks the small group of us attempting to get governments to investigate are starting to bear fruit in some countries.

We'll have to agree to disagree about whether professional librarians need to be able to use the primary tools and environments of the web and whether that is a key requirement for hiring.

Lastly, my sources for saying that the majority of Internet users use FB is the standard Pew surveys.

We can probably find competing data as well but is there anyone who wants to argue that a minority of academic and college users are on FB? High school students? Urban users? Canadians? Is it a good strategy for people to be looking for data and reasons to avoid FB and studying its impact on their user communities? I am just saying that being outside the fence is not the right way to run insititutional strategies.

I hope I'll see you at ALA this year. Are you coming? I'd love to know what is behind your comment on my “About the Author” blurb. Is there something untrue in it? Should I be offended that your comment is some sort of arch comment? Otherwise, I'll call you if I can't see you face to face.

Cheers,  
Stephen

Did you read Abram's post yet? If not, you might want to read it now—given Abram's assertion that his main point was “how do we influence FB?” Because, even after I read the post a third and a fourth time, *I couldn't find that point*. My response:

If your posts (there was an earlier one) had focused on desirable ways to influence FB, I would not have commented in the first place. If that's the main focus, it strikes me as well-hidden as compared to comments about people's professional ability and employability—which have nothing to do with influencing FB. (And, of course, collective action through organizations doesn't require that each member of the organization retain their personal FB account if they regard FB as untrustworthy.)

Reading the post itself for the third or fourth time, it says **nothing** about influencing FB—not one word. (Unless you want to count the extremely indirect note in the final sentence—an odd comparison, since G8 and G20 are closed groups. I'd argue that protesting will have precisely as much effect on G8 and G20 as anything else an ordinary citizen can do.) The argument that library people can't influence FB if they're not members only shows up in your response to my comment. An odd way to make your primary point, by omitting it entirely!

In practice, what appears to influence FB is the constant hammering of commentators, both Gurus and others—well, maybe with a vague hint of government investigation attached. In a way, it's that string of protests that seem to be having an effect.

The post also said librarians should “use the full range of web tools,” a potentially unlimited set. Now you say “the primary tools and environments”—a very different thing (although still undefined).

To the best of my knowledge, the number of librarians who publicly said they were leaving FB as part of a “me too” boycott is tiny—I doubt that I could identify more than two or three. I believed then and continue to believe that it’s both professionally competent and in some ways admirable for a librarian to leave FB as a matter of principle (also a very small number, at least those saying so in public), and that it’s insulting to suggest that doing so is an admission of professional inadequacy. The whole issue of organizational pressures is entirely different, and also not addressed in your post.

This incident didn’t spark this essay, which I’d been thinking about for some time. Fact is, this was a mild case—relatively few readers jumped in to claim Abram hadn’t really *meant* what he said, although Abram himself did some moonwalking on the thrust of the post and his initial response to my comment. I’ve dealt with much worse cases.

## Why Does It Matter?

For me, as a writer and commentator, it matters because it’s difficult to comment on what other people are saying if they don’t stand behind what they’ve written. Every time I hear “but that’s not what I meant” or, worse, “but that’s not what Writer X meant,” I get a little more discouraged about the whole business.

For the field as a whole, it matters because moonwalking precludes actual *discussion* and disagreement. You wind up with various people making different statements, essentially talking past one another because they’re unwilling to argue points that have been raised. That becomes a sad spectacle, with different Firm Positions staked out and no willingness to move toward possible consensus or deeper understanding.

I don’t think we’re there or anywhere close. In my library experience, most people *do* own their words—some are even willing to admit the possibility that they may have overstated a case, indulged in hyperbole or even (gasp) been wrong.

At least I’d like to think that’s true.

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## Making it Work

It’s summer (except for readers in Australia and New Zealand)—maybe not the ideal time for a Serious Perspective on a major aspect of making it (libraries, that is) work. Instead, let’s look at a mis-

cellaneous set of items I’ve saved over the past couple of years. Think of this as a reversion to THE LIBRARY STUFF—comments on a range of interesting pieces from liblogs, some you may have missed, some you might want to revisit.

*Image Problems? You Bet Your Sweet Database!* Did I say “couple of years”? Make that three. This post, by Rochelle Hartman at *Tinfoil + Raccoon*, dates from July 12, 2007. She notes discussion of a *New York Times* piece on “A Hipper Crowd of Shushers” and relates it to some “one-on-one bibliographic instruction” she was doing via IM, helping a student in his early 30’s working on a (first) bachelor’s degree. This is someone Hartman has known for some time.

He had started work on his second paper and pinged me via IM. He had a rough thesis statement, and what he wanted from me was advice on how to read the four books he had chosen to use for research. I said that first I would go to the indexes to look for words related to my thesis, but offered that I’m able to skim and synthesize pretty quickly, a skill that not a lot of people have. Then I paused. “Wait a minute. Did you look at ProQuest for articles?” After a few more questions, it became clear that it had not occurred to him *at all* to use his university library website, or his employer’s website to get started on his research.

Did I mention that my friend is a webmaster for a public library? And that he has spent a lot of time trying to make the library’s databases as accessible as possible? Think about this. If online library resources are not on the radar of a pretty smart guy, in a decent undergraduate program, with mad web skillz and a library job, something is seriously wrong. (Don’t even think about dissing my friend...how many people in your library know *all* its resources?)

I convinced him to use the books to get started, and assured him that he could find tons of articles about the concepts written about in the books. First, he tried his university’s library website, without much guidance from me. He came back asking about results from what I figured out was a state union catalog. That, I told him, would only (mostly) list titles of print sources held by libraries. I explained that he needed an article database that he could search by keyword and from which he could get full-text articles. I reviewed the e-resources for the university library—it was just too much for what he was working on, so I told him that he could get everything he needed from the public library.

I suggested ProQuest again, and he took off on his own, reporting back that he got very few results, none of them useful. My hunch that he was using subject search was correct. “Never start with a subject search,” I coached. I explained that subject headings were made up by librarians and wanna-be librarians who did not think the same way as real people. At this point, he gave me access to the database so I could offer some more specific advice, and challenged me, “Race you.” I came up with an unwieldy list of results in short order. He was not too far behind, clicked on one that looked good, then asked “Where’s the article? All I see is an abstract.” I explained that there were limiters that could narrow his search, including one for “full-text.” Even though I use databases every day, I had to stop and study the interface and make sure I was being very clear, specific and jargon-free in my coaching. As hard I as I try, I still catch myself using librarianese when working with patrons. I gave him a couple more tips and he finally started getting appropriate results. My friend had a “eureka” moment when he realized just what a powerful tool he was working with, and I regret not saving the chat transcript. It was really a high-fiving/Chariots of Fire themesong sort of moment...

My friend apologized for being dense, for not just knowing in his bones how to do this. I told him that he owed apologies to no one and that, truthfully, apologies were owed to him. Something is really wrong if library services make people feel stupid. While I appreciate the discussion about the nuances and implications of the NYT article, I’ve found it entirely beside the point of what our concerns should be. Patrons could give a crap about the image of the folks behind the big desks or in the stacks. I’ve read recently that the only survey question you need to ask a patron/user/customer is “After using the library today, would you come back?”

True confession: As a “library person” married to a librarian, I’ve always found the whole image thing a little odd—but then, I think Marian Paroo as portrayed by Shirley Jones is a *great* character, so what do I know? I do know this: Hartman’s right, in that patron attitudes about the library and its services—and the usability of those services—matter a lot more to the future of libraries than whether librarians are perceived as hip.

In one comment, Laura Crossett says “I got in big trouble once for saying to a patron, ‘No, you’re not stupid—the catalog is’—but I stand by what I said and would say it again.” As one who spent years working on online databases and user inter-

faces, I think Hartman and Crossett are both on the money. Have things improved since 2007? In some ways, yes; in other ways—I wonder.

### *What are Reference Works Good for in the Google Age?*

Iris Jastram asks this question in a March 14, 2008 post at *Pegasus Librarian*. She notes that—as of 2008, at least—student use of her library’s reference collection was steady “and possibly even increasing.”

And while I love this (I mean... obviously... cuz I’m a reference librarian), I’m also always just a little bit surprised by it. I mean, they’ve got Wikipedia and Google, and goodness knows they use them for everything. Hey, even *I* use them umpteen thousand times per day, so I certainly can’t fault anyone.

An area meeting discussed the future of reference collections, which got Jastram thinking about “what the actual value of a reference collection is these days.”

With a few exceptions, I think the value of a reference collection is not in the ability to locate facts. That’s what it used to be good for, but unless I’m looking for pretty specialized facts that I don’t think would get published on the web, or that would be hard to digest on a screen, I generally go to my friend Google. And while I’m sure that reference collections were never just about finding facts, that was one of their key roles before, and continues to be their perceived function. But, for me the reference collection is valuable in a completely different way these days. **It’s not about discrete facts; it’s about context. It’s not a place to find what you need; it’s a place to find a beginning and get help interpreting result lists.** [Emphasis added.]

As a library user, that sounds right to me—it’s been a *long* time since I thought library reference collections were the place to go to get simple facts, but I still use them (from time to time). Jastram notes three ways that print reference can provide contemporary value: built-in bibliographies, “term harvesting” (by providing disciplinary context for concepts) and managing result lists.

There were only three comments but each added something. “Martha” noted that specialized subject dictionaries can still be hugely helpful and that *subject* encyclopedias and textbooks help for finding background information and “information that is already distilled” for patrons. Mark quotes the section I highlighted and adds (in part):

I adore having brilliant friends who can state the obvious which many of us still manage to miss.

I think this has always been one of the prime roles for many reference works and we have been either too blind, too naive (hoping instructors were imparting this info), or too something to just get this and to vocally pass this info on to others.

Finally, Courtney S. notes that she uses these same reasons when doing BI—"I let the students know that the specialized books in reference **will** help them with the terminology and background information they need in order to understand their search results."

I'd add that *some* print reference works also provide essays with authority and (sometimes) readability that's hard to replicate on the open web—and some of the best specialized works can be engrossing and fascinating as well as useful.

*teaching technology/ies.*

char booth, April 23, 2008 at *info-mational*. She's responding to an April 1, 2008 post at *ACRLog* by Steven Bell that questions LIS courses that require students to create and use blogs, wikis, social networks and podcasts. Quoting from Bell's post:

Now maybe I'm being narrow-minded here. Yes, right now these technologies are all the rage, and you could take the perspective that the courses are focusing on teaching students to be risk takers who can experiment, take chances, exploit new technology, etc. All good lessons indeed. But does that require a semester long course? Could a week dedicated to the topic of hot new technologies communicate the same information, especially in the context of a broader course about developing skills that will allow for constant adaptation to the latest technologies?

...The current web 2.0 technologies will no doubt be bypassed by disruptive new technologies before we know it, and then what will our library 2.0 savvy students be left with from these courses. Put another way, are you still using those skills you learned in that course you took on putting cd-roms and laserdisks to practice in libraries?

I was always bemused by the sheer number of Mandatory Liblogs, blogs *clearly* created to fulfill course requirements, most of which are abandoned as soon as the course is complete. I suspect there are quite a few Mandatory Wikis out there as well, but I've never tried to survey those. I don't know: Are current students required to tweet?

booth supports "Bell's call for integration of instructional design and technology (ID/T) me-

thodology into the LIS curriculum"—but disagrees on the specifics:

That said, I disagree with Bell's assessment of social/2.0/etc. classes. My feeling is that rather than being pop-tech overkill, these are an important step towards integrating a broader design ethic into the LIS curriculum. They signal a experiential, hands-on focus that I wish had been available to me as a MLIS student—one that gives students the ability create and evaluate projects over time that mirror those being developed by libraries... our own version of real-world skills. What the curriculum doesn't offer enough of is a simulation of the working environment of most libraries, which at its best includes trying out and modifying existing products to our advantage, thus creating inexpensive services from commonly accessible technological platforms.

Skipping over some discussion, booth says:

In terms of the rate at which 2.0 technologies are outdated, I don't think tools such as blogs and/or wikis will be going anywhere soon. Morphing, perhaps, but not cratering. Moreover, new applications will undoubtedly be built on the shoulders of those that preceded them, meaning that given the a foundation in current social apps LIS students will have the ability to anticipate what upcoming approaches might look like, and the basic skills to modify and adapt these as needed. Library school doesn't tend to train us to be programmers, so gaining practical experience with lo-fi user-generated tools instills students with what I consider to be an extremely practical introduction to what they'll be doing on the job—namely, evaluating technologies for their best purposes. LIS graduates need to know how to practically integrate into libraries that, more often than not, use some instance of every 2.0 technology under the sun to varying degrees of effectiveness.

I'm a bit surprised that there appear to be no comments *at all* on this post (there were 19 on Bell's, many of them somewhat orthogonal to the point Bell was making). And, again as an outsider, I find myself somewhere in the middle. Sure, it makes sense for LIS students to be familiar with blogs and wikis and podcasts—but does it make sense for them to spend a lot of time *creating* such things, which involves specific tools more than it does principles? Are librarians of 2012 *really* likely to find wikimarkup and wiki installation particularly useful tools, so useful that *every new librarian* needs them? Maybe. Maybe not. As for blogs, I believe the only real lesson you learn from starting a blog is

that the technology is absurdly simple—and the content isn't. That's worth 15 minutes, no more. But maybe I'm wrong. (Podcasts? Are podcasts *really* thriving to such an extent, and so important for library services, that every new librarian should be an experienced podcaster? Should they also be required to edit and post YouTube videos—wait, maybe I better not ask that question.)

### *The user is not broken*

No, it's not what you're thinking—in this case “the user” is the library and its expectations of its vendors. Jenica Rogers wrote this at *Attempting Elegance* on June 5, 2008, after spending a frustrating morning with a sales rep—one representing a vendor with inscrutable pricing policies that essentially require haggling and navigating options. Part of what Rogers had to say to this person (noting that *she* removed the vendor name):

If I wanted to spend my time navigating options, haggling, and being a hard-line negotiator, I could take my middle management experience and go work in the corporate world, making double what I make now. I don't want that, and I don't want to have to do the tasks related to that environment. **What I want is for all library vendors selling to the academic market to offer sane, reasonable, fair, and consistent prices, at all times, to all customers. I want prices and the pricing schemes to be published on the web or otherwise readily available. I want prices to be the same from month to month, barring incentive sales and discounts.** I want vendors to tell me why their product is good and what it costs, and then walk away until I make my decision. I don't want to spend an entire day figuring out how to make this all work because I'm operating in the dark as to what's available, at what cost, and under what parameters. [Emphasis added.]

And if that sounds like an unreasonable request, look around you. EBSCO, JSTOR, Project Muse, and Gale, just to name the first four that came to mind, all operate the way I described. I may not always like the pricing they feel is appropriate, but I always know what it is. And it works far more effectively for us than this dance that we do with you every year. Frankly, I have colleagues who've requested that we cancel our [Vendor name removed] subscriptions because they don't like the process.

I'll keep dealing because it's how your company works, and I still think the content you can provide is, in the end, worth the time and effort, if I don't have any other options. But I'd rather have another option.

I have not the slightest idea who this vendor might be. Rogers tells us the vendor responded to her email a few hours later:

It said, taking four pages or so to say it, that their business model is the right one, and that they were vaguely sorry that I felt differently, and then explained why those other vendors do what they do, and then explained why their own way is clearly the only way they can do what they do, and, frankly, too damned bad for me if I don't like it. No options were offered. No olive branch extended. Only justifications.

To which Rogers responds: “I. Am. Not. Wrong.” She repeats the core request (boldfaced in the quotation above).

Asking for fair pricing, transparency in financial structures, and respect in our transactions **is not wrong.** I refuse to concede this point. It may be best for certain businesses to operate as they currently do in order to maintain their profit margins—but it is not wrong to ask for fair play, transparent operations, and consistent access to information from my vendors. **It. Is. Not. Wrong.** [Emphases in the original.]

I'd be hard-pressed to find rational ground for disagreeing with Rogers. Nor did the 10-odd commenters; this is a case where high-fives were in order (and provided).

### *Changing Academic Librarianship Scholarship Criteria*

I've written before (e.g., August 2007) about my sense that (much of) the most important literature on librarianship and library issues is in the gray literature (blogs and the like, including this here ejournal) rather than the formal peer-reviewed journal literature. Eric Schnell writes on October 6, 2008 at *The Medium is the Message*, noting that he was serving as chair of Ohio State's University Libraries Promotion and Tenure Committee.

He's looked at “the criteria used to define and evaluate scholarship in tenure and promotion cases” and wonders about “the increasing gap between how scholarship in academic librarianship is defined and the practices of the profession.” He's finding that some libraries *are* redefining how they define and evaluate scholarship.

So, for example, Florida Atlantic University does not appear to distinguish scholarship as being independent from job related activities. The creation of curriculum and courses relating to a specialty are considered. Grants and external

funding in support of library services, not just the associated publications are considered. Software or technologies created or adapted in support of library services are also considered.

The University at Buffalo includes traditional contributions—but also “Significant web based publications that can be peer reviewed.” What does that mean? Quoting Buffalo:

Peer review is characterized by the disinterested, critical review of the candidate’s research or creative activity by respected members of that community.

Schnell notes how they do *not* define peer review—that is, it’s not limited to pre-publication review.

One therefore could assume that peer-review includes feedback obtained after publication. What I like here is that one could define blogging as a ‘significant web based publication’ and comments and track backs becoming evidence of peer review.

And Oregon State University “has an interesting way of defining scholarship:”

In some fields, refereed journals and monographs are the traditional media for communication and peer validation; in others, exhibitions and performances. In still other fields, emerging technologies are creating, and will continue to create, entirely new media and methods.

So: Could blogging count? Perhaps. One comment notes that *evaluation* is a stumbling block for considering alternative scholarship but raises what strikes me as a red herring:

Another concern to me is how much of the content is “original” or was truly written by the person taking credit for it. If the blog is a collection of links out to work written by others OR like your entry here a critical synthesis of what you are finding in your searches - it is a reflection of the overall quality of it.

Does an unannotated bibliography count as “scholarship” for tenure purposes? If so, and for that matter if literature reviews count as scholarship, then I’m not entirely certain I see the critical distinction. In any case, a scholarly blog should be judged on its own merits—I don’t see Schnell suggesting that “I haz a blog” is, in and of itself, a sign of tenure-deserving scholarship. (It doesn’t help that this commenter, who has served on several promotion and tenure committees, uses “complimentary” where “complementary” was almost certainly intended.) Hmm. The comment seems to suggest that alternative publications suffer due to

“lack of visible impact on the profession.” OK: How many refereed LIS articles in scholarly journals have had as much impact as, say, LIBRARY 2.0 AND “LIBRARY 2.0”? I could probably list a hundred blog posts with *far* more impact on the field than the average article in the typical second-tier (or even first-tier) journal...although, of course, none of those posts would have Impact Factors.

### *Don’t Friend Me!*

Here’s a case—several related posts, beginning with one by David Lee King on November 7, 2008 at his eponymous blog—where I wonder whether the arguments would be the same in mid-2010.

I’m quoting the original post in full before commenting and adding notes on comments and responses:

Libraries... stop friending me! What???

I’m noticing that when a library decides to start a flickr account, a twitter feed, or create a Facebook page, they naturally want to start “making friends.” So what do they do? They friend me. Or you. Or they friend other libraries.

**This is bad.**

Why?

Social networks exist to connect with other people, right? When your organization decides, say, to create a Facebook page ... who are you trying to connect with? Me? I don’t live in your neighborhood. Another library on the other side of the world? They’re not going to use your services.

**Who are you trying to connect with?** If you can’t answer this question, take a breather from the web for a couple of days and figure out your answer. Think about it for a sec—you wouldn’t open a new branch if you didn’t know your target audience, would you? Do you invite people to a book group with no idea of what book to read or who the target audience is? I hope not.

It’s the same with social network sites—you need to establish a target audience, and then work on finding that audience. Once you do that, my guess is this—the friends you want to attract probably don’t include me or a library from the other side of the country!

Another way to look at this is from your customers’ point of view. If I use [fill in your favorite social tool here], and I discover your page, one of the first things I might do is check out who your friends are. If they are mainly other libraries, I might decide it’s a librarian thing, and not for me. I’m gone!

Don’t get me wrong. It’s great to get ideas from other libraries, and to spy on their social media

tools to see what they're doing. But if you can, try not to accept too many friend requests from other libraries ... or your friend page will look more like an ALA reunion rather than a true reflection of your local community.

That's an extremely cogent statement in less than 400 words—and apart from disliking “customers,” I really don't have any disagreements here. It's something I'd noted and wondered about earlier, including back in the days when I still tried to make sense of library use of Second Life. I was acutely aware of the first issue—that is, that a library's social-network space only succeeds if it's reaching *its own community*. I hadn't thought about the second: Would-be local users may be turned off by an excess of other libraries and librarians.

The comments are interesting, some disagreeing and some agreeing, and at least one not only agreeing but disliking Twitter-as-news-feed “social” networking. One person who disagreed took a “we mustn't offer *any* criticism of library involvement in social networking” stance, which I always find a little sad. (Frankly, if librarians are looking for reasons to *avoid* library presence on social networks, there are a lot better ones than “David Lee King may not like the way we're doing it.”)

A few days later (November 12, 2008), King wrote a followup post, “More on Friending.” He refers to a Darren Rowse post on defining goals for social networking (in this case Twitter). It's an interesting issue in general—what *are* your (or your library's) goals in using a new tool of any sort—but perhaps more pointed for institutional involvement. “I just want to try this out and see whether I like it” is a perfectly valid initial goal for a personal Twitter, Friendfeed, Facebook or Flickr account and possibly even for a new blog—but I'd expect a library to have something a little more concrete in mind.

King says:

I think that many libraries haven't really figured out goals for their shiny, new social networking sites/tools. When they start collecting friends, they immediately pick the safe route—friending primarily other libraries that are doing the same thing.

And that's great for learning the new tool. But at some point, it's a good thing to figure out what you really want out of the SN site, and then start pursuing that. My guess is this: the goal in friending isn't to gather other libraries—it's to gather patrons as friends.

[Yeah David: “patrons” is so much better than “customers”!] He responds to comments that disagreed with his fundamental premise—and here we're dealing with issues specific enough that you really should read the post. I must admit, when Bobbi Newman informed us that “By nature people are joiners,” I had an immediate “sez who?” reaction. Some people are, some aren't—and for those of us who are a lot introverted and a little gun-shy, the nature of other people in a community may well influence whether we'll join. (Using the same tool King links to, I appear to be in a grotesquely generalized demographic where only 22% are joiners.) And King offers this anecdotal point: “Speaking for myself, I always look—I don't want to friend a spam site, a person more interested in selling me something, etc...”—and King's certainly not the only one, not by a few million.

When you're on David Lee King's blog, you might also jump forward to May 29, 2009 and “Making Connections—the Institutional Version.” Here, King offers some suggestions for who institutional social network accounts *should* friend or follow. The first three make excellent sense from the perspective of a library as a *local, community-centered institution*: Friend patrons, friend other local organizations—and friend others who are “interested in your stuff.”

Does King's advice still apply in mid-2010? I think it does. Do libraries heed it? I don't know.

### *The humble index*

This excellent 1,000-word entry comes from Dorothea Salo, writing August 25, 2009 at *The Book of Trogoon*. Salo, who says she does “not have the chops to be a good indexer,” respects those who do:

Go find a book with an index and flip through it. Seriously, go ahead. I'll wait. Just bask in the lovely indentedness and order of it all.

Now answer me a question: Should Google be calling that huge mass of crawled web data it computes upon an index?

Warning: Don't use the indexes in my self-published books as examples; they're truly crappy when compared to professional indexes. Still, they *are* something more than what Google offers—which Salo thinks of as a concordance (that is, the *words* in a text with pointers to where those words are used).

Google's index is a bit more than a straight-up concordance: they do stemming and some n-gram

analysis and other fancy-pants tricks. But it is still qualitatively different from a back-of-book index. How? I'll adduce three major differences: human intervention, terminological insularity, and intentional grouping.

The rest of the post discusses these differences and what makes really good indexing so difficult. One may be obvious to some of you: A good index deals with concepts, not just words and phrases...and indexed concepts might never actually appear in the text of the book. Intentional grouping? Consider *see* and *see also* entries.

A fine essay worth reading and thinking about. Too many people believe full-text searching makes indexes irrelevant. That's not true, and if we lose indexes, we lose something useful.

### *The bookless library*

Mostly noted as a pointer: *Historiann*, Ann M. Little, November 14, 2009. As a historian—as a humanist—she's upset at the notion that academic libraries should just get rid of their books (or even move them to remote storage) and repurpose all that lovely prime-campus space as learning commons or study space. It's not exactly a rant; it is a strong, heartfelt argument. "Speaking as a historian—*we still need the damn books.*" Since I'm trying to tread lightly in this particular area, I'll just say: **Go read it.** [www.historiann.com]

### *Libraries dying for bandwidth—where's the fiber (and cash)?*

That's the title of a November 24, 2009 story by Nate Anderson at *ars technica*, a story that works from an ALA report on public library connectivity. The first three paragraphs:

Most of America's libraries make it a part of their mission to offer Internet access to anyone in the community, but a severe bandwidth crunch is hobbling those efforts. That's one of the conclusions reached by the American Library Association, which says that 59.6 percent of American libraries "report their connectivity speed is inadequate some or all of the time to meet patrons' needs."

One of the problems is funding; in a recession, and especially a recession where housing prices (and therefore property taxes) are dropping in many communities, it can be hard to scrape the cash together for a library bandwidth upgrade.

But another problem is simple availability. As the ALA's report (PDF) points out, "moving from a 56Kbps circuit to 1.5Mbps is one thing. Moving from 1.5Mbps to 20Mbps or to 100Mbps or even to

a gigabit—depending on the size and need of the library—is another." Even when they can pay for it, many libraries are finding that higher speeds simply aren't available.

It's an excellent brief commentary; *ars technica* generally seems to get it. Some commenters, of course, don't: The first one grumps because ALA is focusing on broadband when "libraries are closing all over the country, cutting hours and laying off staff." This person seems to feel libraries shouldn't be in the access business. You won't be surprised that another commenter claims "the homeless" monopolize all the library computers all the time...but there are also library users who see what's happening and understand how important library computers and access actually are. (One responds directly to the "why should libraries provide access?" comment by noting that public libraries have always been "THE source for public, readily accessible, free information. The actual format was irrelevant." And, of course, you get the usual arguments over e-rate and CIPA and the usual claim that automated filtering by a third party is just the same as content selection. And, of course, at least one commenter says they should just shut down the library 'cause, you know, it's all online. I'd say two-thirds of the commenters were actual library users and appreciated what libraries do.

### *The future of bookstores is the...*

"...present of public and academic libraries?" That's how John Dupuis begins this November 30, 2009 post at *Confessions of a Science Librarian*. He's quoting from a Clay Shirky post basically saying physical bookstores are doomed *as bookstores* ('cuz, you know, *digital always wins*) but that they could succeed as social places.

And, as Dupuis notes, the role that Shirky suggests for bookstores is a role that libraries are carrying out right now.

Public and academic libraries are mutualized resources—they literally belong to their communities already. If we as a society want to expand the realm of public spaces, to reclaim previously commercialized spaces and integrate them into the public sphere, there's already a template in place for those public spaces. Building and investing in our libraries and community centres seems like a great place to start.

Good point. One of many differences between Dupuis and me is that he's "always thought that Shirky was one of the smartest and most sensible com-



mentators out there so I find it unfortunate that he has such a library blindspot.” The library blindspot doesn’t surprise me; it’s in line with Shirky’s general blindspot toward anything that doesn’t fit his theories. (Don’t get me started on Shirky and women or what seems to be a general attitude of “If everybody else isn’t just like me, *they damn well should be.*”)

That’s a secondary issue (and why I don’t quote Shirky much, since he’s one of the many ever-right gurus whom it’s pointless to disagree with). The primary issue here is sound: Good libraries already do what Shirky thinks bookstores could do in the future. Oh, and provide free (that is, prepaid) books and other resources as well.

### *85 Reasons to be Thankful for Librarians*

I have mixed feelings about mentioning this piece, which appeared in December 2009. On the one hand, it’s a moderately cute list of what it says, some of the “reasons” silly, some significant. Here are the first five:

1. Librarians take care of libraries, which are still invaluable today.
2. Not all information is on the internet.
3. Older books still hold great cultural significance.
4. Libraries are still repositories for some of the most valuable works of literature in the world.
5. Even with the internet, the library is still the best place to do research.

Some are fairly insulting, too, such as #17: “‘Librarian’ is still a better career choice for spinsters over ‘School Lunch Lady.’”

On the other hand, the site is...sigh...yet another one of a seemingly endless set of sites with different names featuring Lots O’ Numbered Lists, always sponsored by online colleges, always effectively leading people to for-profit online colleges. I’m not citing the site. If you’re interested, you can find it.

### *Academic libraries, a view from the administration building*

Here’s another one I’m noting mostly because, if you haven’t read it (and you work in an academic library), you should. It’s by Barbara Fister, published on May 1, 2010 by *Library Journal*. You can find it online at [www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6726948.html](http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6726948.html)

Fister begins by combining four of the Taiga provocations with another from Daniel Greenstein at UC—and goes on to show that most university

administrators don’t really seem interested in getting the books off campus or cutting library budgets. Beyond that, it’s an interesting article with some survey results attached. The whole thing runs 3,500 words and is well worth your time.

### *Why people continue to work in libraries (survey results)*

Speaking of surveys, this one’s more a poll than a survey, taken by Sarah Houghton-Jan of *Librarian in Black*. She posted an initial commentary on May 10, 2010, when there were 92 respondents, and later added updated results as of June 9, 2010. (As of July 2, 2010, there were more than 400 responses.)

The results as of June 9 for “Why do you continue to work in libraries?”—noting that people could choose more than one option:

- 68% – Belief in the library’s mission in society
- 62% – Love the work itself
- 32% – Good work environment
- 26% – Love the customers
- 24% – Love my co-workers
- 15% – Good pay/benefits
- 9% – Fear that I’m not qualified for anything else
- 8% – Other
- 7% – Convenience (e.g. job close to home)
- 7% – Laziness (changing jobs is too hard)
- 6% – Holding on a little longer to get vested/get better retirement benefits

Since this was an anonymous poll, there’s no particular reason for people to give loftier reasons than the reality. Houghton-Jan found it interesting that “love for customers” only scored 26%; I wonder whether “Love serving library patrons” (avoiding the c-word) might have scored higher?

Houghton-Jan was in danger of being laid off in July 2010 and had this to say:

The thought of moving out of libraries after my impending probable lay-off in July is both exhilarating and scary. Exhilarating at the possibility of making much better wages and benefits in private industry or non-profits with my skill set and willingness to work long hours. Scary because I really like libraries and I want to work in them longer. I want to contribute to the great equalizer in our society. I want to better people’s lives in a non-profit environment. And also scary because maybe private industry doesn’t have a role for a tech-savvy project manager, information architect, and writer. In some ways, I think about moving into consulting full time—speaking and writing my days away, but the thought of not having stable income or health

insurance scares the devil out of me. But in the end, I just like libraries too much to leave. And maybe that's the case for most of us. What we do is admirable in my book. We make differences in people's lives, and that's something that I think we should all be proud of at the end of the day.

There's more to the post, including a sense that the field will lose "many quality library employees to other industries better positioned to reward them."

## Trends & Quick Takes

# Myths and Misses

The April 12, 2010 *Fortune* has an intriguing feature, "25 Green Myths Debunked." The claim is that these pages "clear up 25 common misconceptions about the food we eat, the products we buy, the way we travel, and the energy we use."

Maybe so, maybe not. Some are clear myths—although, in some cases, they're ones you'd expect most well informed people (presumably *Fortune's* readership) to know as myths by now, such as "1. Bottled water is safer than tap water" and "14. It doesn't pay to turn down your thermostat when you're not home." Some are interesting, e.g., "8. It's better to buy an artificial Christmas tree than cut down an evergreen every year" and "23. Car air conditioning wastes energy." (Remember, these are all supposed to be *myths*.)

But a few too many are *not* myths and the "realities" are not refutations. For example: "4. Cars are one of the biggest emitters of greenhouse gas." The counter is "Yes, but those hamburgers you like to gobble down are actually much worse." Once you say "Yes, but," the game's over: If it's true, it's not a myth. Ditto "11. I'll save energy if I keep my appliances turned off" (sure, there's parasitic usage, but this is still a true statement). Others fall somewhere in between, boiling down to "it depends" or "all else being equal, which it frequently isn't." I think you could have a solid dozen cases where these would be learning experiences for most people—and, frankly, I think stretching that dozen out to 25 weakens the dozen best.

## Price and Value

Farhad Manjoo wrote "The Poor Man's Mac" on April 2, 2009 at *Slate* (this is probably a good place to note that Microsoft doesn't own *Slate* anymore—Washington Post Newsweek purchased it

some time ago). Manjoo takes issue with the ad campaign Microsoft ran briefly in 2009—the one where people were allotted a certain amount of money with which to buy a computer that would satisfy their needs.

Manjoo says it's a terrible marketing strategy because it makes Windows something you settle for, and that once we're out of the slump, people will happily pay for Apple's superiority. (He also says Apple *dominated* the notebook market in 2008, which says something about Manjoo's objectivity or awareness. Some 146 million notebooks and netbooks were sold in 2008. Apple's own annual report for 2008 shows six million notebooks sold. Admittedly, Apple's operating year isn't a calendar year, but it beggars belief to suggest that Apple went from being the 7<sup>th</sup> largest notebook manufacturer to not only being first but having a *majority* of all sales within six months. That would require that Apple sold more than 65 million notebooks in the second half of 2008. *That did not happen*, I can say without much fear of being wrong.)

Then Manjoo tells us what "People want" from computers—and it's clear he believes these are things Apple offers and Windows notebooks don't. ("Look awesome." "Environmentally responsible." "Easy to fix.")

The ads themselves? Mac fans say PC buyers will regret buying a "cheapo" \$700 Windows notebook because it's "terribly slow," "weighs a ton," etc., etc. Well, maybe—the machine chosen by one of the ad participants is a heavyweight and uses an AMD chip.

But...I'm writing this using as my "desktop" a Gateway notebook. I purchased it in early 2008, a year *before* these ads were running. I paid \$600 or \$700—let's say \$700. It weighs about six pounds (but I'm not really using it as a portable—if I was, I'd add another \$300 and buy a two-pound netbook to use on the go). It has—and remember, it's already 2.5 years old—a 1.6GHz Intel Core 2 Duo CPU, 3GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, a 15" screen, a DVD burner, and draft-N wireless. It's more than fast enough for anything I want to do with it. Oh, and it's snazzy-looking, with a dark red case. I'm pretty sure I would have paid at least 50% more for a Mac notebook with similar specs *for the things I care about*.

If you find Apple notebooks and desktops to have good value *for you*, more power to you. You're

probably right. But when you tell me I'm just cheaping out and must be regretting "settling" for something less—or when a supposed journalist does the same—well, sorry, but you're not only wrong, you're offensively wrong. Whether the year is 2009 or 2010.

## 50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice

That's the title of a *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece by Geoffrey K. Pullum dated April 17, 2009 ([chronicle.com/article/50-Years-of-Stupid-Grammar/25497](http://chronicle.com/article/50-Years-of-Stupid-Grammar/25497)). The day before (April 16) was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*—and Pullum "won't be celebrating."

The *Elements of Style* does not deserve the enormous esteem in which it is held by American college graduates. Its advice ranges from limp platitudes to inconsistent nonsense. Its enormous influence has not improved American students' grasp of English grammar; it has significantly degraded it.

I hadn't realized "Strunk & White" is really E.B. White's expansion and revision of Strunk's self-published earlier work (*required* for Strunk's English class at Cornell—*that's* the way to self-publish something!), done after Strunk's death. Pullum calls Strunk and White "grammatical incompetents."

Pullum doesn't necessarily object to the *style* advice, calling it "mostly harmless" if frequently vapid. (Vapid? "Be clear" and "Do not explain too much"—hmm. As Pullum says, "Omit needless words" is useless because writers who *know* which words are useless don't need to be told.) He objects to the advice on grammar itself:

It is atrocious. Since today it provides just about all of the grammar instruction most Americans ever get, that is something of a tragedy. Following the platitudinous style recommendations of *Elements* would make your writing better if you knew how to follow them, but that is not true of the grammar stipulations.

He objects to the *general* advice to use the active voice (as a section heading: the actual discussion is more moderate) and claims that three of four pairs of examples showing how to avoid passive voice are misdiagnoses: For example, "There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground" isn't passive voice.

There's a lot more. He notes "the book's contempt for its own grammatical dictates"—and thinks that it's not so much willful as ignorant.

There is of course nothing wrong with writing passives and negatives and adjectives and adverbs. I'm not nitpicking the authors' writing style. White, in particular, often wrote beautifully, and his old professor would have been proud of him. What's wrong is that the grammatical advice proffered in *Elements* is so misplaced and inaccurate that counterexamples often show up in the authors' own prose on the very same page.

Then there are the bogeymen Strunk & White helped maintain—for example, the advice to avoid split infinitives (which have "always been grammatical") and the idea that you shouldn't start a sentence with "however" used as a connective adverb. (Poor old Mark Twain: He used that construction much more often than the Preferred Alternative—but then, Clemens could barely write at all. Right?) There's even one I take some pain to obey: the use of "which" and "that." According to Cullum, "There was never a period in the history of English when "which" at the beginning of a restrictive relative clause was an error." (In fact, Strunk used it that way—apparently White added the new rule.)

Interesting stuff. I read Strunk & White back in the day—of course I did. I suspect I can't get away from some of the "rules" that may not make any sense at all, even as I've obviously abandoned some of the style advice. The 2,500-word article is a fun read and may be worthwhile if you take *Elements of Style* at face value.

## In Defense of Twitter

I'll probably do a ZEITGEIST or PERSPECTIVE on Twitter one of these days—but today isn't that day. Instead, this is a little note on Geoff Manaugh's "How the Other Half Writes: In Defense of Twitter," posted April 22, 2009 at *BLDG BLOG*. It's a 1,300-word post accompanied by 115 comments. I think he's both right and wrong—right to "defend" Twitter against some of the silly things said about it in 2009, wrong in his evaluation of what Twitter is and even wronger in his final sentence: "**Get over it.**" Always a terrible way to end a thinkpiece, as it comes down to "I'm right, you're wrong, end of discussion."

Of course Maureen Dowd was silly to attack Twitter; of course Manaugh's friend who said "Twitter is the death of humanism" was being absurd (and apparently a bit drunk). Of course you

need to distinguish between Twitter itself and what (some) people write on Twitter. But...

Twitter is a note-taking technology, end of story. You take short-form notes with it, limited to 140 characters.

Buzz. Thanks for playing. Twitter is a social network service. I suppose you could have a private Twitter feed and never allow anybody to follow you, in which case Twitter would be a note-taking technology. Heck, you could have a private blog and not allow any subscriptions, in which case the blog would be a diary. But saying that blogging is a bunch of diaries is nonsense—as is saying that Twitter is (for most people or in its methodology) a note-taking technology. Manaugh is apparently an architect; how would he respond to my suggestion that most modernist skyscrapers are glass-and-steel sculptures, end of story?

Manaugh makes a comparison with ballpoint pens, if they'd been introduced into a world where all writing was done using typewriters:

People use it to write down grocery lists and street addresses and recipes and love notes. *What is this awful new technology?* the literary users of typewriters say. *Ball-point pens are the death of humanism.*

Nevermind, of course, that you can use ball-point pens to write *whatever you want*: a novel, a screenplay, epic poems, religious prophecy, architectural theory, ransom notes. You can draw astronomical diagrams, sketch impossible machines for your Tuesday night art class, or even work on new patent applications for a hydrogen-powered automobile—it doesn't matter. You can draw penises on your coworker's paycheck stub.

*It's a note-taking technology.*

Well, no, it isn't. A ballpoint pen is a writing technology that yields semi-permanent results (unlike a pencil). Twitter is not, primarily or fundamentally, a note-taking technology. Its whole design is centered on social networking, on *sharing* of those notes among your small (or large) circle of friends.

Kafka would have had a Twitter feed! And so would have Hemingway, and so would have Virgil, and so would have Sappho. *It's a tool for writing.* Heraclitus would have had a f\*\*\*ing Twitter feed.

Bull. I'm pretty sure Hemingway and Kafka would not have sent their initial ideas out 140 characters at a time. If they had Twitter accounts, they wouldn't use them as "tools for writing"—they'd use them for social networking purposes. I could

be wrong, of course, since I have exactly the same personal knowledge of Virgil, Kafka, Sappho and Heraclitus as Manaugh does, which is to say "none whatsoever."

What Manaugh is really doing in this article is attacking elitism—he thinks Dowd and others are upset because "the other half" is writing.

Those other people—those everyday people who weren't supposed to have thoughts, who aren't known for reading David Foster Wallace or Dostoevsky or James Joyce, those overlooked people from whom we buy groceries, who fix our cars, clean our houses, and vote differently than we do—*weren't supposed to become writers.*

That may be an objection to blogs. It could be an objection to the read/write web in general. It's a stupid objection, but it's not the same as some people's nervousness about Twitter's early emphasis on the most mundane and its 140-character limit. Somehow, though, to Manaugh it's all about class. Here's the *simply wrong* penultimate paragraph, before the final three-word paragraph that I object to in general ("Get over it.") with that horrendous close:

Twitter is just another option for people to use when they want to take notes—and it's no more exciting than that, either, to be frank. It's a ballpoint pen.

Nope. **Wrong.** Oddly enough, one commenter starts out by high-fiving Manaugh ("Spot on as ever Geoff") just before offering a paragraph that says something about what Twitter *really* is:

I remember when I first tried Twitter it seemed rather pointless. After a while and having increased the number of people I was following it finally made sense until the point where there were enough people to require filtering and it has now become indispensable to me.

In other words, "once I had a worthwhile social network on Twitter, it became indispensable."

I don't use Twitter currently because it doesn't work well (directly) for me (at this point), although I surely partake in the Twittersphere through Friendfeed. I do know enough about Twitter to know that it's not the death of humanism, it's not evil in any way—and it's not "a ball-point pen."

## Quicker Takes

Wanna buy a netbook cheap? That's the lure of AT&T and Verizon specials at various places such as Radio Shack: You get a name brand netbook (Gate-

way, HP, Dell, Lenovo, Acer) for a lot less than you'd expect—maybe free, maybe \$100, maybe \$200. There's just one catch: You also have to sign up for a two-year 3G data-only plan—at either \$40 for around 200-250MB per month or \$60 for an “unlimited” plan, that is, 5GB a month. The \$40 one is hairy—if you use too much data, you'll pay another \$0.10 *per megabyte*. (Actually, \$10 for 100 megabytes from AT&T. Don't buy the \$60 plan and *ever* go over 5GB: They'll sock you for \$0.50 per megabyte.) So how much does that netbook really cost? \$1626 for a Dell Mini 10 from AT&T, \$1675 for an HP Mini 110 from Verizon—basically, \$68 to \$70 a month. Sure, you're saving money on the netbook—but if you don't really *need* 3G (if you can use it with wifi), it's an expensive way to save a few bucks.

- Interesting story in the February 2010 *PC World*: How the “good guys” managed to take down a botnet, Mega-D, that controlled a quarter million PCs. If your spam level went down slightly in November 2009, you can probably thank FireEye.
- A *Wired* story by Jordan Ellenberg (March 2010) talks about a “revolutionary algorithm” that “can make something out of nothing”—going by the name compressed sensing. It's an interesting technique, one that could allow for (for example) much faster MRI scans. As I read the story, the technique makes perfectly good sense—it's basically applying Occam's Razor to filling in missing pieces (that is, finding the least complex way to reconstruct what's missing). “It turns out that of all the bazillion possible reconstructions, the simplest, or sparsest, image is almost always the right one or very close to it.” That seems not only reasonable but natural. Interesting article, probably also available online.
- I'd *like* to like Clive Thompson's “I'd Rather Be Texting” column in the March 2010 *Wired*, where he says the texting-while-driving problem needs to be reversed: We need to keep texting and stop driving. That's fine—but the U.S. is a relatively sparsely populated, spread-out country, and that's not going to change any time soon. He says U.S. cities and suburbs have “completely neglected their public transit.” That's hogwash, but it's true that public transit is generally

less than satisfactory—and there's no plausible way you'll get the funds to make it otherwise. Meantime, do you *really* need to be texting every waking moment?

- Sometimes the current delay in dealing with TRENDS & QUICK TAKES items is revealing—as in an April 21, 2009 item by John Battelle at *Searchblog*, “News: Google Lets You Put Yourself Into Results For...Yourself.” He's touting the addition of Google Profile results to Google, noting that you can build your own Google Profile and seems to think this is a wonderful thing—while admitting that this is mostly a way for Google to get more people to build profiles. I'm guessing more than a few people who *had* Google Profiles shut them down after Google did its cute Buzz introduction; I know I did. And somehow, the idea that Google's manipulation of self-manipulated profiles puts a “human, community-driven face” on Google is...well...odd. As far as I can tell, Google abandoned the wonderful new service—at least I don't see profiles in name searches...although, doing a vanity search, I do get an *ad* from Google itself urging me to create a Google Profile.
- Since I still haven't read Chris Anderson's *Free* (and am not chomping at the bit to read the output of any *Wired* guru), consider this a pointer to John Dupuis and a year-old post at *Confessions of a Science Librarian*: “Guru cage match: Gladwell vs. Anderson,” posted June 29, 2009. He discussed Malcolm Gladwell's *New Yorker* review of *Free: The Future of a Radical Price*. He cites one specific weakness Gladwell identifies in the book. Here's Dupuis' comment, which I particularly love:

The weakness, of course, is more due to Anderson's overweening hypiness and guruhood than anything else. He wants to make his ideas on business models based on free digital content some sort of Grand Unification Theory of markets, digital and otherwise rather than honing in on cases where it actually makes sense. He has to shoe horn everything into his model.

Note that Dupuis isn't dismissing Anderson entirely. I'm just citing a nicely worded key point.

- “If you're going to track me, please use cookies.” That's from Ed Felten (July 7, 2009,

*Freedom to Tinker*). Surprised? You shouldn't be. In a terse essay, Felten makes the point that there are many *other* ways for sites to track users—some of them much more invasive and harder to deal with than cookies, which by their nature can be examined and deleted. “My attitude, as a user, is that if a site is going to track me, I want them to do it openly, using cookies. Cookies offer me less transparency and control that I would like, but the alternatives are worse. If I were writing a self-regulation code for the industry, I would have the code require that cookies be the only means used to track users across sites.” As seems increasingly common, a fair number of the comments are linkspam.

- I found this wiki bemusing, although I'm not quite sure I know why: “Theories Used in IS Research.” [[www.fsc.yorku.ca/york/istheory/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://www.fsc.yorku.ca/york/istheory/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)] It is exactly what the name implies: “This site provides researchers with summarized information on theories widely used in information systems (IS) research. Click on a linked theory name below to find details about the theory, some examples of IS papers using the theory, and links to related sites.” There are a *lot* of these theories—close to a hundred. I'll admit that I never thought of Darwin's evolutionary theory as an information sciences theory, but I'm no information scientist. (Even if I was, I'd be challenged by text such as the first sentence for “Hermeneutics”: “Hermeneutic theory is a member of the social subjectivist paradigm where meaning is inter-subjectively created, in contrast to the empirical universe of assumed scientific realism.” Does that mean “We just make shit up”? The rest of the description leaves me even less certain of what's being described and how it could fit into a “science.”) I do like the presence of a “Top 5 Theories” list!
- To finish off this random set on a humorous note (albeit one that doesn't appear *intended* as humorous), here's Jeremy Reimer's August 3, 2009 *ars technical* piece, originally titled “Microsoft Word, RIP: 1983-2009”—now re-titled “The prospects of Microsoft Word in the wiki-based world.” What's that you say? “Wi-

ki-based world” strikes you as a ludicrous term? Well... see, the author's someone who's used Word for 20 years and now realizes “that I don't need Word any more. At all. Ever.” (Those last three words appear as a separate paragraph.) Why? First Reimer talks about features (he seems to be for them but complains about the difficulty of converting complicated documents into XML), then about Word being designed to prepare documents for *printing* (which, of course, nobody does any more). He seems to assume that all anybody uses Word for is to write office memos—and somehow concludes that MediaWiki is *the answer*. And at his wholly representative firm, *everybody started using it* right away, loves it, and it “transformed our office's documentation landscape.” Since it's *trivial* to convert Word documents to wikimarkup (*rriigghhtt...*), “that's basically the end of Word at work.” So that's it: “Word...is the new typewriter.” As the second commenter says, “It's official. Word is dead because Jeremy Reinter stopped using it.” After all, *nobody* needs any of the Word formatting, structuring and other features MediaWiki doesn't support... (Another commenter has clearly had Fun MediaWiki Editing Experiences, noting what frequently happens after half an hour or an hour of intense editing—whoopsie, it's all gone!) What we have here is one interesting (if unusual) case of one small office adopting a wiki as a document handling standard...that's then generalized beyond all rational thought into a universal solution.

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## Masthead

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