

Cites & Insights

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Walt Crawford

Perspective

Writing about Reading

It's been more than a year since *WRITING ABOUT READING* 5 and more than two years since the series began. Time to drop the sequential numbering and start over. When it comes to ebooks and ereaders—the primary focus of *WRITING ABOUT READING* 3—I've tried to carve out discussions that seem most relevant to reading and the nature of books and writing, leaving other aspects for other essays.

It may make sense to start by repeating and updating some of my beliefs and biases in this area, previously summarized in *WRITING ABOUT READING* 3 (*C&I* 9:9, August 2009). In case it isn't obvious, for nearly all of these segments the left-aligned heading in italics is the title of the post or article being discussed, which is why that title doesn't appear in quotation marks within the discussion.

Beliefs and Biases

Some of my beliefs and biases about the present and future of reading and writing:

- I'm biased against those who believe they are the world—the “we all” that springs from personal experience or anecdotal. I'm biased against “we all” in general. There are times I'd love to be brave enough to jump up in conference programs and shout “Bullshit!” as soon as someone says “We all”—because unless they're talking about death, what comes next will almost certainly be wrong.
- I do not believe print books and the long narrative form are endangered—not by illiteracy, not by attention deficit preference, certainly not by ebooks.
- I believe, and have long said, that ebooks and ebook readers can and should have substantial markets where they do the job bet-

ter than print books, without necessarily displacing the majority of print books.

- I regard “inevitable” as a nonsensical and damaging argument. It isn't “inevitable” that print books will disappear because digital transmission is cheaper. It's never been inevitable that a new medium entirely displaces an older medium: That's the exception, not the norm. I also have a simple reaction when someone dismisses questioning of new technology or changes on the basis that such questioning has, *sometimes*, been wrong in the past. That isn't an argument; it's sloganeering.
- I don't have a horse in this race. I buy few print books, and most of those I do buy are mass-market paperbacks. If people *decide* they prefer ebooks, more power to them. I read quite a few library books, in print form. I don't travel enough to be a target customer for ebook readers at present.

Inside This Issue

Trends & Quick Takes	24
The CD-ROM Project.....	27
My Back Pages.....	30

- I do *not* believe long-form narrative is inherently superior for all purposes. I'm certain it isn't. I *do* believe book-length fiction and nonfiction continue to be important as one element of reading and media and that long-form narrative is an unusually good way to communicate difficult and subtle topics.
- I believe textual narrative works exceptionally well for many forms of stories and is unlikely to be *replaced* by multimedia forms—and I also believe some people will find more effective ways to tell stories effectively using multimedia, complementing rather than replacing text.
- I don't believe there's a “post-print generation” or that people *in general* have lost their ability

to read long forms or pay attention. I do believe long-form reading has never been a universal pursuit and that many people change over time in terms of whether and how often they read books and other long forms.

- Reading itself is not endangered. That's not a belief so much as a fact. Increasing diversity in forms of writing and methods of reading seems likely to continue in the future as it has in the past, and that's a good thing.

Now, on to some of what's being said—sometimes going back two or three years.

Just the Facts

We begin with a few items that are not particularly argumentative but that attempt to lay out assumptions or facts about aspects of writing and reading.

Assumptions about eReaders, Books, Reading

This long list of “various assumptions different companies and readers are making” appeared November 11, 2009 on *Kindle Review* (ireaderreview.com), posted by “switchu.” There's one enormously argumentative statement at the very end, but the lists of assumptions are valuable and in many cases still applicable. Note the introduction:

Here are various assumptions different companies and readers are making. It's just a list because a lot of the dissent and confusion stems from people assuming things rather than finding facts. Admittedly in some cases there are no facts.

Of course, these might be correct assumptions ;)

I'm tempted to quote the whole post—69 numbered items in eight lists—but that would be a blatant copyright violation and a mess, since I'd be tempted to comment on each one. I refer you to the post itself. Here are a few where I think *questionable* assumptions are being made (my comments *in italics*)—**emphases** added:

Assumptions Publishers are making

1. They are as valuable as they used to be.
2. Their business model can continue as is. (*I doubt many publishers really believe this.*)
8. Removing lending and used books is good for them.

Assumptions Authors are making

1. Readers will think about what's best for reading and not be seduced by temptations.
2. They can make a living writing. (*Some, indeed many, authors know better.*)

8. They can be free of Publishers (some of them do want it).

Assumptions Amazon is making

2. **The** future of books is ebooks. (*I'm nearly 100% certain Amazon does not believe this.*)
8. They can shift Publishers over to \$9.99 prices.
9. They can become the platform for all of Publishing. (*I doubt Amazon believes this anymore—and should note that Amazon sells a lot of stuff besides books and ebooks.*)
10. They can create a **replacement** for paper. (*See #2: I don't buy this.*)

Assumptions Google is making

1. They can add even more Enemies and not be affected in the long-term.
7. They can make Android **the** default OS for eReaders. (*Really? Is Google that ambitious? Schmidt maybe, but Google?*)

Assumptions eReader and eBook Companies are making

3. eReaders will be a big enough market to sustain 5-10 companies long-term.
4. eBooks are **the** future of Books. (*Some companies aren't quite so simplistic.*)

Assumptions Readers are Making

1. Half are assuming eBooks cost \$1 or \$2 to make.
3. Many are assuming printing takes up half or more of the price of books.
5. There is such a thing as Free Lunch.

The Future

1. Quality will not suffer as prices go down. (*Really? Who believes that?*)

The writer doesn't mention libraries at all, but that's scarcely surprising. Here's the wildly argumentative final statement, “the biggest takeaway for me”:

If we don't establish a \$10 price for ebooks, Books as we know them are going to die out—both the quality and the art form.

I find it hard to believe even an ebook absolutist could make that assertion. Oddly enough, there was only one comment. Perhaps only ebook absolutists read this blog?

E-books: Understanding the Basics

This seven-page PDF by Jane Lee of the California Digital Library appeared in June 2009 and can be found at www.cdlib.org/services/uxdesign/docs/2009/e-book_basics_june2009.pdf. If there's a newer version, I can't find it. It's a very good discussion of what ebooks are about (albeit presented in an ugly sans

typeface), although it's not without its own questionable assertions, e.g.:

Some will argue that no matter how comfortable people get with reading from a screen or how advanced e-book technology becomes, e-books will never equal a traditional, printed book. They are right.

But, it doesn't matter.

"It doesn't matter"? Really? The next paragraph suggests that there's a missing "in the context of this discussion" at the end of that startling four-word paragraph (*emphasis added*):

The central question is not whether people will or should choose e-books over traditional printed and bound books. The central question is how are we, *especially in the academic community*, going to respond to this emerging technology and market in order to serve our patrons.

This is followed by excellent discussions of ebook advantages for reading, some of the disadvantages, and the formats available as of April 2009. Then comes "Will e-books make printed books obsolete?" and we get a "some" vs. "all" problem right in the first sentence:

Everyone seems to have an opinion about this, and the arguments against the adoption of ebooks tend to fall into several categories.

These are two different issues. I *support* the adoption of ebooks (not that it's any of my business)...and I don't believe ebooks will make printed books obsolete. Unless you believe there can Only Be One Reading Technology, there's no connection between the two. The extreme scenarios that follow are much subtler—addressing the need of academic libraries to *support academic researchers* with whatever media make most sense.

I have very little disagreement with Lee's final paragraph:

For academic libraries, the rise of e-books highlights the struggle to offer services that address the increasing demand for electronic resources while maintaining legacy collections. There will be questions and arguments about the future of books and the role that academic libraries must fulfill, but we must stay focused on the central question. Our materials and methods may change, but our mission remains the same. We exist to support scholarship—whatever form it takes.

I wonder whether the largest academic libraries (of which UC has several) have missions that go beyond "support scholarship," but if you define

scholarship broadly enough, maybe that's a quibble. In any case, this is a fine short article, still offering good explication in 2011.

What impact do page and font size have on reading?

Another one from *Kindle Review*, this time dated March 27, 2010; take "switch11"s ebook-über-alles bias as a given. These supposed research findings are mostly about reading from the screen, including Kindles. There are ten claimed main findings and the author notes that most research isn't extensive and some is hidden behind paywalls.

I'd regard some as nearly obvious. For example, *up to a point*, you read faster when there are more words per screen. Another item, "Increasing the Spacing between lines improves clarity," might be true up to a point—the point at which the paragraph starts to fall apart, becoming a series of independent lines. "Paging is better than scrolling" seems likely, "black characters on a white background produce the best readability" also seems likely, and a set having to do with minimum and preferred type sizes mostly seems reasonable. (I should note that reading *speed* and reading *effectiveness* are not at all the same thing, but never mind.) The "increasing the spacing" line misstates the quoted "research"—which actually says this:

[T]he data suggests that a moderate type size—11 points—and a standard 13 points of leading yields the best balance of type size and overall reading comfort.

11-0n-13, 20% leading, is pretty much typical for print books; increasing leading to 30% or more can be problematic, and the post doesn't cite one piece of research suggesting otherwise. (Later there's another source, but it's so peculiar that it's hard to claim it as support for anything. What do you make of "interline spacing should be variable"—that the leading should vary from time to time just to keep things interesting?)

Then there's the last one: Serif typefaces are better than sans for print on paper and "the results are supposed to be the reverse for computer screens." Really? A source cited for character size when children are reading begins with this:

Serif fonts aid struggling readers by making words easier to read. They also reduce eye fatigue.

I don't see a "but on the screen, sans serif is easier to read" caveat in that source. The post—which is long and quotes lots of sources—does not include

any item to back up the “supposed to be the reverse” claim. When I’ve tried to find such studies in the past, all I’ve found were studies—mostly done when on-screen typography was pretty crude, making serified letters somewhat ugly—that *failed to show* an advantage for serif over sans, not studies showing an advantage for sans over serif. Given the lack of any citations in this article to the contrary, I’ll stick with that.

A useful article, albeit requiring several grains of salt. The author’s cheerleading attitude regarding ebooks and especially eInk become more evident late in the post, but you can filter out that bias as you’re reading.

Reading and Life

Commentaries on aspects of reading that strike me as mostly reasonable and interesting, from a variety of sources including librarians.

Douglas County—reading too much?

August 14, 2008. Jamie LaRue. *myliblog*. His suggestion for an *anti-library-funding* campaign. I’m going to quote the whole thing because it seems like a great way to start this section (and I don’t think LaRue will object).

Sports dad: “I thought the Internet was ok. It’s kind of like TV, ya know? But I come home one day, and what do I find my son is up to? Reading! Books, hidden under his pillow! And after last summer, he went back to school and started off with good grades. I just ... don’t know where we went wrong...”

Senior citizen wife: “I thought when my husband retired he would sit on the porch in a rocking chair. Like in those commercials, drinking lemonade, and sharing little jokes with me. But NOOOO. He’s down at the library every day, attending meetings, lectures, programs, coming home with all of these projects and ideas. He’s reading up on history and politics. He knows more people than ever. When do I get my husband back?”

Grumpy old Republican: “yes, yes, something else for the kids. Bah! When I was a youngster, I was in a gang, like any red-blooded American. Now, these pansie-ass youngsters are in teen reading clubs!”

Business person: “For years now, I’ve been saying that the public sector needs to be run like a business. Well, over the past five years, our local library district has increased its use six to nine times greater than the rest of the nation. It did that while holding staffing levels virtually flat.

They’re not just running it like a business, they’re running it like a successful business! [Shakes head.] What next? We’re supposed to run our businesses like successful government?”

Concerned mother: “For years now, the library has seen a growth in use that I can only call obscene! 23% increase in checkouts one year, 21% the other. Last year it was only 18%. Finally! Yes, it’s still way more business, but least it’s slowing down. All I can say is thank God the parking lots and buildings are so crowded, especially in Parker and Lone Tree. Maybe that will scare some of my family away. I mean, there’s more to life than learning!”

Tag line: “**If you say yes to libraries, this can only continue.**”

What? You think I have anything to add to that? I’m guessing most of you don’t read *myliblog*—and if you do, well, that was three years ago.

8 Ways Reading Makes You Better at Life

That’s by Glen Stansberry on June 1, 2009 at *Life-Dev*—and the title now reads “8 Benefits of Reading (or Ways Reading Makes You Better at Life).” It’s roughly a thousand-word post and I’m only providing the eight headings, part of the introduction and the closing. This is another one that’s well worth reading, noting that it’s *not* about print books vs. ebooks but *is* partly about libraries.

The public library is a phenomenon that to this day I still can’t get over. Free knowledge, for anyone. Literally, anyone. I can’t think of an equivalent other than going to a clothing store, “checking out” an outfit, wearing the outfit and returning it in four weeks, free of charge.

Except books are so much better than clothes.

Recently I’ve been on a huge reading kick, checking out anything I can get my hands on in the library... I’ve found that no matter what I read, the act of reading every day has helped me in nearly every aspect of my life. Here are a few of my favorite ways that reading has improved my quality of life, and will definitely improve yours.

1. Enhanced Smarts
2. Reading reduces stress
3. Greater tranquility
4. Improved analytical thinking
5. Increased vocabulary
6. Improved memory
7. Improved writing skills
8. Helps prioritize goals

If you think that you don’t have enough time to start reading, you’re wrong. How do I know? Because we make time for the things that are impor-

tant to us. How much TV do you watch? How much time do you spend trawling the web? You could easily replace reading with those activities.

If you're worried about the cost of books, check 'em out at the local library. Most libraries take advantage of the interlibrary loan system, so you can check out nearly any book on the planet. I also use Worldcat to find libraries in the area that might have my book.

There's really no excuse to start reading on a regular basis. The benefits far outweigh the costs, and more knowledge never hurt anybody.

I don't have a lot to add. Perhaps #2 and #3 are partly the same thing, as are #1 and #4, but that's OK. I'm sure there are writers who don't associate lots of reading with improved writing skills, but I'm not sure there are many *good* ones.

Professional Metareading

Going from posts that applaud libraries to one *by* a librarian, we have this from Wayne Bivens-Tatum on May 28, 2009 at *Academic Librarian*. He'd been reading two books on librarians and reading, both of which "advocate wide reading as a goal to become a better librarian." Some of the discussion that follows is specific to academic libraries, some to reference work—and along the way there are interesting notes about the ability of technology advocates to marginalize others.

The advocates of constant technological innovation often look for any sign that library users are moving in their direction, while ignoring the overwhelming organization of a considerable portion of academia. In the humanities, those might be the librarians who praise and wonder at a tiny flowering of "digital humanities" while ignoring the undeniable fact that most humanists do now and have always engaged in the study of texts without accompaniment of multimedia. Confirmation bias is rampant in this company. However, at least in the humanities, how easy might it be to turn the tables? To reply, when challenged about the latest technological innovation or sad, shallow method of connecting people, "No, I'm unfamiliar with that tool, but tell me, what's the last scholarly book or article you read, or what academic field of study do you have any mastery of?" Since it's clear that faculty and students benefit from having librarians with subject knowledge of academic fields, it's quite possible that the current terms of debate do a disservice to our users and ourselves by urging librarians to be computer support and keyword searching specialists rather than academic subject specialists.

The comments—or, rather, the comment, since there's just one, followed by B-T's response and an additional note from the commenter—are worth noting. I like "caleb"'s misquote from George Needham: "you shouldn't accept the word of a librarian who doesn't read - it's like getting advice from a doctor who smokes." Caleb doesn't see much real discussion about technology in librarianship, and says "generally when one of us waxes hyperbolic one way or another, the rest of us politely ignore it." Well, not all of us, but I for one have grown tired of calling people on hyperbole. Turns out B-T was mostly referring to debates over whether library reference work should be outsourced to call centers, and that debate probably has waned over the years.

As for other debates, I think they exist more in conversations, and are only implicit in written discourse. It's implicit in arguments about "keeping up" with the latest technology, in promotion of "23 Things" type courses, and in the general disdain for librarians who really don't care much about social media. It concerns how academic librarians should spend their time. Should they, for example, hang out on Facebook or follow Twitter posts or constantly experiment with new social media, or should they spend their time reading scholarly books or taking classes or earning degrees. Most librarians can't do all of these well, and some librarians can't do any of them well.

I don't buy either-or any more from B-T than I do from those with technolust. If there's a conflict between reading well and deeply and being involved with social networks, it's one balanced people should be able to overcome. But that's me. Read the post and the comment.

Some thoughts on the anthology

Mandy Brown writes *a working library*, which isn't about libraries as you and I might think of them but rather "a collection of texts on a given subject, for the purpose of an academic or professional work." In this case, the library's subject is *reading itself*. A note from the About page may be in order (since you might or might not wish to follow *a working library* more closely):

Of the many ideas at play here, the most significant is my belief that every book is connected to many other books, such that no book can or should be considered in isolation. When you read a book, you bring to it all the other books you've read (and been affected by), so your reading of it is necessarily

unique. Furthermore, the act of reading predates the form of the book—and will most likely outlive it; as such, this site aims to explore the ways we read, and how they are changing.

There's a phrase there ("and will most likely outlive it") that suggests Brown is one of those who believes books on paper are on their way out—a suggestion strengthened by the first sentence of this July 12, 2009 article (**emphasis added**):

Among the many complaints made about **the shift** from reading on paper to reading on screen, perhaps the most common—and most difficult to counter—is that we are moving from a medium that requires concentration to one that sows distraction into every syllable. This complaint assumes that the act of flitting from one reading to the next is necessarily inferior; but what if that were not always the case?

Brown notes that novels are the form most commonly raising this complaint:

[R]eading that is all-absorbing, where the world outside the page disappears, and the one within beckons during every waking moment. This is reading on the brink of religion—a deeply blissful state that all readers aspire to, memories of which evoke a nostalgia usually reserved for a first love. I am as enamored as anyone with reading like this, and I sympathize with those who would mourn its passing.

Brown doesn't have an answer for those complaints—but says, correctly of course, that novels aren't the only kind of reading we do on the page. Calling the complaint "a straw man" seems ludicrous unless Brown also believes novels are doomed, but set that aside.

A better comparison would be to align reading on screen with reading an anthology. Both involve a selection of readings—not one text, but many. Both envision a connection among the texts—a constraint that argues for their co-existence; the writers could be from the same region or period, or the texts could explore the same topic, or they could be of the same form (essay, poem, play). And both revel in the excerpt—one act of a play, a chapter from a novel, a few poems from a larger body of work; one rarely reads an anthology cover to cover, but instead dips in here and there—now reading a headnote, now a short selection.

This makes sense. Brown says the anthology is "a better analogy for reading on screen"—with the difference that the reader becomes their own editor.

It seems to me this kind of reading can be as engrossing as anything on the page—that in this case, it is not the *medium* of reading that engend-

ers concentration so much as it is one's interest in the subject. How many times have you searched online for the answer to a question, only to discover that hours have passed, your tea grown cold, the sun much lower on the horizon than when you started? The bias of the book reader looks upon such "reading" as inferior—if he even deigns to call it reading at all, and not surfing or screwing around. But it seems to me the time for such a view is coming to an end—that we are better off if we expand our definition of reading instead of stubbornly diminishing it.

The bias of "the book reader"? Is Brown suggesting that all of us who read novels and other print books regard screen reading as inferior or don't call it reading at all? *Really*? There was a mention of "straw man" earlier in the article, and this is at least a wild generalization if not wholly a straw man, setting aside NEA's regrettable narrowing of what constitutes reading.

I agree with Brown that broader definitions of reading are more useful than narrower definitions and that reading from the screen or the ereader isn't (necessarily) just screwing around. (Hey, I read print books where "screwing around" is probably an appropriate metric for their long-term worth, so...) But this follows from Brown's seeming assertion that print books are (inevitably?) on their way out. Unless that also means novels are *and should be* obsolete as a form, there's a disconnect here: Brown's not talking about expanding reading types so much as shifting them. But I may be mis...er, reading. (I would note that *a working library* posts are set in a handsome serif typeface and quite nicely written.)

Teens don't read and other myths shattered...

That's the start of the long title of Samir Husni's July 23, 2009 post at *MrMagazine.com*, consisting primarily of an interview with Jayne Jamison, publisher of *Seventeen Magazine*. You know many pundits have written off the next generation as either non-readers or at least non-print-readers, despite wildly successful YA publishing programs and all other indications to the contrary.

Seventeen is a teen magazine—right there in the title. It's one of many. The first question asks how Jamison responds to the people who say teens don't read and don't care about print. In part:

I start out by telling them, in a nice way, that they are misinformed. Clearly, teenagers multi-task and they are voracious with their media usage. But magazines

have always been and continue to be a really important source for beauty and fashion trend information for young women. What has been so interesting to me is when you see the success of *Twilight* for example, which sold 16% of all books in the United States in the first quarter of this year (all four books). I don't think that those are a lot of adult women reading those titles. So, I think that what people need to understand is that teens, especially female teens have always enjoyed magazines.

Then comes a remarkable statistic, given that for most large-circulation magazines newsstand circulation is a tiny factor: *Seventeen* "sold 350,000 copies on average on the newsstands" in the first half of 2009—and there are eight other women's magazines that did even better.

A number of teen magazines *did* fold, including some with large circulations—because advertisers went elsewhere and subscription prices have been so nominal. *Seventeen* hasn't ignored the web side of things: Their website averaged "almost 50 million page views and 12.5 million uniques" per month in early 2009. Does Jamison see "mass print" magazines going away entirely?

I think there is always going to be a place for magazines in the media mix. I think engagement factors you have with the magazine reader and the synergy with content and advertising is unavailable anywhere else... There will never be a time when there are no magazines. There is no way I can even envision that... That experience of reading a magazine or book is never going to be completely replaced.

Magazines aren't books. They are yet another set of reading experiences, each one slightly different.

Why the Digital Revolution is Missing the Big Picture

That's Jason Pinter on October 5, 2009, writing at *The Huffington Post*. Pinter, described as a "best-selling thriller writer," calls himself a book addict and thinks he *should* own an ereader—but doesn't.

To my surprise, I have not purchased an e-reader of any kind, despite incredible temptation. E-reader companies keep trying to lure me in with new versions of their machines, with lavish press conferences that trumpet huge sales figures that are so big they just can't be made public. And all that, that's the problem.

You see, for years we've all been pelted with articles about the oncoming digital book revolution, with columnists and press release regurgitators telling us how ebooks are going to change the face

of publishing and reading all while damning those old printed dinosaurs, with their antiquated dust jackets and unit costs that terrorize P&L sheets, to the same landfills that currently house millions of cassette tapes, CD boxes and copies of that old "E.T." game for the Atari system that was about as much fun as having being repeatedly poked in the eye with a sharp stick. Through all of this, they want *me* to buy an e-reader. Me. And that there is the problem.

He believes he's the wrong audience:

By marketing the Kindle to people like me—i.e. adults who already read regularly and don't need to be sold on how great books are—publishing is merely doubling down on the biggest problem facing the industry: *not enough people read books*. Right now, e-readers are being touted as an alternative to paper. The print killer. Big mistake. E-readers should be promoted as a cool option for non readers or hesitant readers.

Sigh. He then goes through "CDs were dead as soon as Napster arrived" bad history and says books aren't as doomed as CDs—in general, you don't read (some kinds of) books one chapter at a time and Pinter, at least, finds it hard to read long-form text on the screen. He loves physical books. He thinks ereaders should bring in new people—but he's pretty snotty about that "coveted demographic," describing it as one that "currently seems to embrace the printed word only to the extent that they skim the captions beneath a photo of a bikini-clad Kim Kardashian."

I'm with Pinter on the idea that "Ebooks should *expand* the book buying market, not be used as an alternative for the print edition," but any hesitant reader who slogs through this particular essay is more likely to offer a one-finger salute to Pinter than to rush out and buy a device, even a \$139 device, to read more books.

Sorry, English major, the engineers have triumphed

This one's sort of silly—by Nate Anderson on February 19, 2010 at *ars technica*. It springs from one of Nicholas Carr's books-about-how-we-can't-read-books-anymore (or articles leading up to such books), and I'll get back to Carr later, as this PERSPECTIVE gets more and more into silly season.

You know about Carr's 2008 threnody where he tells us that Google is making *him* stupid, and therefore it's making *us* stupid because, you know, Carr is Everyman. (He didn't put it that way, but

Carr is a prime example of “Because Me, Therefore Everybody” punditry. I was going to call it “thinking” but that’s too kind a term.)

So, to go from silly to silly, Pew Internet included his nonsense in one of their “what do a few hundred of Our Favorite Experts think about this?” Turns out more than three-quarters of them thought Carr was wrong.

Oh, but wait:

Respondents were nearly unanimous in their view that tools like Google allow different parts of the brain to take prominence. Instead of seeing this as “bad,” most respondents see it as merely “different”—one more long change on the continuum of human mental development, the next tech step after reading, writing, and the calculator.

The rest of the piece quotes some of these “experts.” Carr continues to say skimming actually *changes your brain* so you’re (permanently?) incapable of depth. Peter Norvig of Google takes a view I’d regard as a little more plausible:

[W]hen you have access to thousands of articles, blogs, videos, and people with expertise on the topic, a good strategy is to skim first to get an overview. Skimming and concentrating can and should coexist.

Others say the web is taking on some of the memory-replacement functions that print already had, although I’m afraid I can’t be as optimistic as Andreas Kluth of *The Economist*:

This is the continuation ad infinitum of the process launched by abacuses and calculators: we have become more ‘stupid’ by losing our arithmetic skills but more intelligent at evaluating numbers.

I’m sorry, but if “we” are becoming better at evaluating numbers, I sure haven’t seen many signs of that intelligence. It seems easier than ever to snow people with chartjunk, misleading infographics and distorted numbers. Sheer lack of basic numeric skills doesn’t help much. Then there’s Andrew Nachison of We Media (whatever that is):

It has confused and overwhelmed us with choices, and with sources that are not easily differentiated or verified. Perhaps it’s even alienated us from the physical world itself—from knowledge and intelligence that comes from seeing, touching, hearing, breathing, and tasting life. From looking into someone’s eyes and having them look back into ours. Perhaps it’s made us impatient, or shortened our attention spans, or diminished our ability to understand long thoughts. It’s enlightened anxiety. We know more than ever, and this makes us crazy.

I would say Nachison needs to go up to a mountain cabin or somewhere and get a little less crazy, and maybe pull back on the universalisms a *lot*, but that would be mean.

Sigh. There’s a Clay Shirky quote that’s the basis for the article title, but I don’t quote Shirky’s oversimplifications if I can avoid it. Kluth sees the failure of “book culture” and a resurgence of short-form stories, apparently unable to accept the idea of *more* forms—and Gene Spafford of Purdue doesn’t anticipate a lot of “classic tweets and blog posts” for future reading. Tweets? Yeah, I don’t imagine there will be thousands of “classic.” 140-character texts, although there will surely be a few. Blog posts? There, I believe there’s more room for lasting items. Heck, blog posts of some lasting worth form the basis for most of my writing, which proves...nothing.

The first comment says about Shirky’s comment much what I would say. I love JonTD’s response: “Unless you’re JK Rowling. Then you crush the engineers with the weight of your money bags made by selling all those books no one is supposed to want to read anymore.” Lord_Byron offers a cogent comment on Pew Internet’s methods for discovering the truth: “So, we’re testing an assertion about cognitive development with a poll?” “quiets-torm” offers a long and thoughtful comment; this person seems to find room for stories of all lengths: “I question, too, the insinuation that a focus on short-form writing will be to the detriment of long-form writing.” I didn’t go through all three long pages of comments, but these are *ars technica* commenters, meaning the ratio of thoughtful comment to idiocy is considerably higher than on many other comment-heavy sites.

Reading Instrumentally

What’s instrumental reading? As Iris Jastram describes it in this October 12, 2010 post at *Pegasus Librarian*, it’s reading articles “in order to use them as springboards for finding new material.” It’s not a replacement for deep reading, it’s another useful kind of reading that may be particularly valuable for (some) shorter items.

The idea is that reading for comprehension is good and important and all that, but that the point of the article is only one of many things you can learn by engaging with it. Just reading the first few paragraphs of a work slowly and carefully, you can glean a whole host of names and terms

that you can then use when crafting further searches or deciding where to search next. For example, you can note down concept names, other vocabulary, researcher's names, relevant institutions that might produce or publish information for the topic, or types of evidence used in this kind of argument. After reading the first few paragraphs of a few likely articles, you can go back and start using these new concepts and terms and research/institution names to craft more focused searches. At this point, you're more likely to be using vocabulary that a more expert person would have used in the first place.

Jastram offers an example—an article citation and abstract—and the clues it provides to do further research. It's an interesting approach and illuminates yet another kind of reading, one that's particularly useful when you're approaching a new topic with more than casual interest. **Read the post**; I've only offered one excerpt.

Reading: Outmoded or a la mode?

As with Iris Jastram, Barbara Fister's one of those writers for whom I'm tempted to just say "Here's the article. **Go read it.** I'll wait." In this case, it's a *Library Journal* "Peer to Peer Review" piece from October 28, 2010, and the third paragraph is lovely:

You know how kids today don't like to read? Can't focus for more than five seconds? Are so intent on multitasking, visual stimulation, and interactivity that they turn their noses up at books? You've heard all this before, right? (Usually at a library conference from a middle-aged male librarian in a suit pontificating about how to transform our libraries for the millennial generation.) Because when people think of libraries, they think of books, which are an outmoded technology. If we don't do something about it, we are so screwed.

That parenthetical sentence: If you haven't been there, you've been lucky. There are two links in that last sentence; you can get to them from the column itself. Then Fister gets to reality:

The strange thing was, in casual conversations with college students, I could never confirm any of the stereotypes about their habits and preferences that I hear so frequently at library conferences. Though schools boast of innovatively "bookless" libraries, students like to study surrounded by those old-fashioned objects and when it comes to textbooks, they repeatedly say they prefer print—not always, not all of them, but in published reports it's typically a substantial majority...

Most of all, I couldn't get students to tell me that, in fact, they dislike books. That reading is a drag. That

they would much rather fiddle with Facebook than read a novel. I'm familiar with all the terrible news about the decline of reading, particularly among youth. I just never seemed to run into any students who would say "oh, for sure. Books are so, like, over. Man, I hate those outmoded suckers." I had to take the word of national studies and library pundits—who would probably be stumped if asked the title of the last novel they read.

Ah, but that's anecdotal, and those middle-aged male pundits *must* know better. Right? So Fister and a colleague did a survey asking students what they thought, and found...

Are you sitting down?

A whopping 93 percent of our students reported that they enjoy reading for pleasure. All kinds of reading: books, magazines, newspapers. Reading on the Internet (though that scored lower than reading in print). Women like to read a bit more than men, and there's some variation among majors—over 99 percent of humanities majors say they like to read, while only 90 percent of social sciences and pre-professional majors confess to enjoyment of reading—but still, that's a majority solid enough it could be called a landslide.

Is this only true at her college? Apparently not, based on every study she could find. And yet, and yet, when they surveyed *librarians*, 40% or more "assumed students don't read much because they simply don't enjoy it." Which, according to students, isn't true. Instead, they're *too damn busy* to do a lot of pleasure reading, between assigned reading, other studying, the necessary socializing for growing up, "part-time" jobs and everything else. That was true when I was in college and the world was a simpler place; it seems only reasonable that it's true now.

I vividly recall a retired English professor chortling because for the first time in decades he finally had time to read. So, before you say "ah, they're just making excuses," check your own priorities.

I'm reading more books now than I have in a long time—and I did more pleasure reading after I (ahem) dropped out of grad school than I did while in college. There's more to the column, including the payoff—finding ways for the college and the library to encourage a taste for reading. Why am I not surprised that the first comment, clearly by somebody who isn't in college at the moment, claims that they're making excuses—that "young people" have *more* free time than adults. Fister didn't buy that; I don't either.

Reading in the Digital Age, or, Reading How We've Always Read

Kassia Krozser posted this on *Booksquare* on November 30, 2010. Krozser argues that “social reading” is *normal* reading—that reading as a group activity is the norm. Krozser’s also not buying “enhanced books” as a general shift:

As much as the idea of enhanced ebooks brings the sexy to publishing, it doesn’t really do much for most of the books published. Enhanced, enriched, transmedia, multimedia...these are ideas best applied to those properties that lend themselves to multimedia experience (or, ahem, the associated price tag). While many focus on the bright and shiny (and mostly unfulfilled) promised of apps and enhanced ebooks, the smart kids are looking at the power of social reading.

A very brief history of storytelling modes makes the point that storytelling is almost always a group activity—and that book discussions are a reasonable part of bookreading.

It wasn’t until mass market books became available that reading, as we know it, was identified as a (almost-solely) solitary activity (overall literacy rates had to catch up as well, but that’s another issue). By reading as we know it, I mean selfish reading: alone in the bathtub, alone under the covers, alone on the couch, alone in a restaurant, alone in a park, alone in the bathroom while the family argues about football. Solitary reading is my preferred style, but I also make my book club’s monthly meetings for literary discussion.

Then there’s annotation, “writing in books,” which I detest when I encounter it in library books. There are also book reviews and other outcomes. “For many of us, transforming the book is as important as reading the book.”

Yes, ebooks *could* have more social reading, with shared notes and the like—and as one form of reading, that seems reasonable....as *another form*, not as a wholesale replacement. How would such social reading spaces work? The post offers some thoughts, including the argument that publisher websites are *not* the right places to gather book discussions and digital marginalia.

Will *most* booklength reading become social in nature? I doubt it. Would it make sense to have easier mechanisms for *some* of this to happen—to make it easier for those wishing to share their thoughts on a book to do so? Yes, and that would add flavor to some existing reading models.

Or maybe, as some comments suggest, it’s happening already in smaller spaces and might be better in such spaces: General, widely-known discussion spaces might be overwhelming in the same way some online commenting systems are overwhelming and, eventually, overwhelmed by spam and garbage.

On Writing Reading

That’s the title as it appears of Colleen Harris’s December 21, 2010 post at *Colleen S. Harris, Wordsmith*. She says “reading is nearly as important to my identity as a writer” as writing itself is and notes that many writers she admires claim the same. That seems reasonable, and I’d wonder about writers who *don’t* believe reading is important to their identity.

Harris calls herself “a voracious reader” who reads all sorts of things and got through more than 110 books in 2010, which I think supports her description. She knows “I am influenced by my reading in terms of how I write, what I write about, and how I think about writing, sound, line breaks, and more.” She’s heard that some writing students don’t want to read a lot because they want to be *original*—but that doesn’t work.

I believe that choosing to be poorly read is the same thing as choosing ignorance; being willfully un-knowledged. I would recommend instead that writers read as broadly as possible, and be influenced by as many as possible. As a writer, become aware of which writers you like, and try to articulate why it is you prefer them.

There’s more here and it speaks to one reason I believe books, narrative and long-form narrative are unlikely to die. It’s also as good a place as any to wrap up this section.

Complementary Forms

The items in this section discuss, in one way or another, ways in which various forms of reading are likely to complement one another rather than leading us into a single narrow path—although at least one of them seems to come down too heavily in favor of a single future. I won’t bother repeating survey studies that show kids, when actually asked, say they still want to read books printed on paper (and anticipate that digital reading will supplement rather than replace such reading)—that’s consistent with marketplace realities but appears not to matter to those who have convinced them-

selves that The Digital Generation or Digital Natives (or whatever this season's silly moniker is) don't like print books and much prefer to read everything in digital form. Roy Tennant noted anecdotal data regarding slightly older youth in an April 6, 2009 post, "Will Digital Kill Print?"—noting that Stanford undergrads, at least, seem to be using Google Books to *supplement* library research and when they can't get the print books they really want. But then, Tennant's another one of those who see no plausible reason to believe digital books would completely supplant print books. (Which, for the sake of those whose comprehension may be slowed by reading everything on the screen, is not *at all* the same as believing that ebooks are inherently useless and doomed—a strawman position with surprisingly few adherents in the real world.) Complementary forms go beyond reading *media* to reading *sources*, as the first item here makes clear.

Publishers & Librarians: Two Cultures, One Goal
That's Barbara Fister's May 1, 2009 *Library Journal* article. Although the usual Fister advice applies here I'll offer a few excerpts and comments.

For two professions so committed to meeting the needs of readers, publishers and librarians have distinct cultures. Put simply, one culture is all about developing and selling books; the other is about sharing them and fostering a culture of reading. But there's another basic difference, too. Publishers work closely with authors and use sales figures to tell them what readers want, interpreting those figures like tea leaves. Librarians work closely with readers, using them as informants to help them select books that will satisfy the diverse tastes of a community.

Although it's not the primary focus of this article, I'll suggest that publishers and librarians appear to have conflicting goals when it comes to ebooks, as so far publisher (and publisher partner) moves seem wholly focused on *preventing* shared reading.

Libraries are a major market for books. Their purchases account for over ten percent of the \$27 billion industry (excluding print textbooks for K-12 and higher ed). In contrast to consumer buying, which relies on discretionary dollars, the library market remains a consistent sales channel for publishers.

That \$27 billion figure may be low—it appears to use AAP's "big publisher" numbers rather than BISG's all-publisher numbers (over \$40 billion)—but the point's valid.

Libraries are far more than a market, however. Libraries create readers. They are the test bed, the petri dish for books, a place where people can discover a passion for reading as children and indulge it as adults and where passionate readers can sample new authors.

No comment required here. I'm skipping much of the post about what book editors do (it's an interesting discussion and includes some useful notes about the real economics of book publishing), but I will include this section—where I think things are likely to change, with multinational corporations becoming less important and tens of thousands of small publishers (many of them with no physical facilities) becoming more important.

All these pressures don't stop the higher-ups from demanding higher profits. Though there are tens of thousands of small publishers, a handful of multinational corporations dominate the book business, and for them it's just another business. What I don't get—why did these geniuses buy book publishers in the first place? Books may be a big business, but it's not exactly a boom industry, and margins are historically narrow. You can't mass manufacture books. Each book is different—meaning it's handcrafted, page by page, chapter by chapter. And there's no telling how readers will respond. You can't just follow the trends, aiming for another *Da Vinci Code* or the next *Twilight*. Readers are too smart for that—not that we don't try. All you can do is use your best instincts, rally the resources you can get out of the publisher, and cross your fingers.

Then there's the final paragraph—which illustrates the problem (remembering that Fister is speaking in the voice of a book editor):

My mother keeps sending me articles about how people are going to the library to get their books. But she doesn't get it. How can we keep publishing books if people think they should get them for free?

The next section speaks in the voice of the librarian, and much of it will be old news to *C&I* readers. A few excerpts may bear repeating:

What I love best is helping people find the perfect book for them. I know my community, and I know what their interests are. I'm excited by the sense of pride that a child feels when she learns how to read all by herself, and I know how reading expands the horizons of an elderly shut-in who reads six or seven books a week... There's no doubt in my mind that people love books. Heck, nearly everyone seems to be writing one.

Which brings its own issues. I get a lot of requests from self-published authors asking me to buy their books, and I have to explain that with limited resources and only so much space on the shelves, we have to go with books that are reviewed, that have been professionally edited. With nearly half a million books published each year—maybe half of them self-published, and most of those pretty awful—I just don't have time to go beyond trusted sources. This usually doesn't go over well.

Not to argue with a professional librarian, but I wonder whether the percentage of “pretty awful” self-published books is actually that much higher than the percentage of trash from big commercial publishers? Any good public library buys loads of professionally-edited garbage because it circulates, and that's fine—but I wonder. Anyway, then there are some wishlists for publishers, well worth reading. And there's this:

And don't get me started on ebooks. We thought about getting a Kindle, but we kept getting different answers from Amazon. Yes, you can use it. No, you can't. Well, you can loan out the Kindle, but only if there aren't any books on it because that would be a violation of the terms of service... Ebooks have a tremendous future, but you run the risk of driving readers away by creating products people don't want and locking everything down...

Making it hard for us to lend books as they go digital is not the way to grow a strong customer base. Why don't publishers realize that we're early adopters and strong allies when it comes to digital formats? We work hard to make our e-collections accessible and attractive, and we'll help readers who are on the fence about technology embrace it. This is the cheapest marketing publishers will ever have!

I can't add anything to that section (and quoted only portions of it).

Though publishing and librarianship may have different cultures, we have a common goal. S.R. Ranganathan put it in a nutshell with two of his famous rules: every reader his book; every book its reader. In an era when publishing opportunities have proliferated and the number of titles being published has skyrocketed, libraries rely on professionals who can do the painstaking work of developing quality books. In turn, publishers need librarians, who help spark a love of reading among children, sustain it through the stages of life, and know what's important to readers.

Though book sales have slumped in recent months, library circulation is soaring. If publishers didn't get the importance of libraries before,

now's the time to get the message, because it's in libraries that book culture will be sustained through these hard times.

Where Fister and I might disagree is on the relative worth of Big Publishers and “quality” books vs. micropublishers and self-published books. With all due respect, I see an awful lot of easy, hook-em-on-the-series books from big publishers that could easily be written by minimum-wage drones or IBM's Watson, and I've seen a fair number of high-quality micropublished books. Books that won't show up in libraries because they're not usually reviewed and they don't have big-publisher cachet. But that's a different problem.

Text in Decline?

Andrew Dillon posted this at *InfoMatters* on July 9, 2009, although the date doesn't show with the post. Dillon's pointing to an *edge* piece by Marti Hearst that proposes a decline in text in general, to be replaced by video and speech.

This is not the first time the predictions for the power of new media have been made (David Jonassen infamously predicted in 1982 that the book would be dead within a decade) but Hearst's argument is more nuanced and based on emerging trends in video search retrieval and mobile technology use... I don't see text in decline as much as unfortunately shackled to interfaces that in turn shackle us, and it's not clear to me that a shift from text to video solves this particular problem... Text has evolved a series of affordances that extend beyond the mechanics of input and output...the cognitive advantages of being able to re-read and navigate through a familiar structure cannot be easily replaced or even replicated...

It may be true that, as others have argued, serious extended reading is in decline and the communicative forms we will share and create in the decades ahead may well be shorter and less textual. But it is also possible that we will just retain text and supplement it. Remember, digital technology was supposed to be the death of paper too, until we realized that printing and faxing were so easy...

Predictions of a “return to orality” aren't particularly new or compelling, and I won't get into an extended analysis of Hearst's paper (not a video) or whether it's likely, although it is worth noting that “books dead in a decade”—a silly prediction still being made by some library dystopians and others—has been around for *three decades*. A key sentence here, I think, is the penultimate one: “But it is also possible that we will just retain text and

supplement it.” I’d add that it’s possible and, I believe, probable that we’ll retain longform text—and supplement it, *as we always have*, with a variety of shorter forms.

Books: here to stay

Terry Dawson posted this concise piece at *the New Cybrary* on August 31, 2009, quoting from an essay by Ursula K. LeGuin on the “alleged decline of reading.” Dawson’s noticed that, at his library, “although the use of media is increasing, more books are being used as well.” A bit of what LeGuin has to say (Dawson links to the original article):

I am far from dismissing the vast usefulness of electronic publication, but my guess is that print-on-demand will become and remain essential. Electrons are as evanescent as thoughts. History begins with the written word. Much of civilization now relies on the durability of the bound book—its capacity for keeping memory in solid, physical form. The continuous existence of books is a great part of our continuity as an intelligent species.

Dawson adds: “If I were interested in something like, say, building a library, I’d be paying attention.” Indeed.

The Future of Books

A small piece from *Marcus’ World* (by Marcus Banks), dated November 17, 2009, reporting on a Commonwealth Club panel with the owner of San Francisco’s Green Apple Books, Dan Clancy of Google Books, Pamela Samuelson of UC Berkeley, Brewster Kahle, Jared Friedman of Scribd and moderator David Hellman.

I’ll just quote the closing paragraph, which strikes me as eminently sensible, particularly given that a Google Books person and Brewster Kahle were among the panelists:

All panelists felt that a healthy commingling between print and electronic media is possible, if not inevitable. These discussions of the future often pit digital utopians against print-loving Luddites, and never the twain shall meet. The truth is more complicated, and more hopeful—print will likely remain the medium of choice for engrossing novels, but e-readers may gradually corner the market for some forms of non-fiction. We still have radio even though there’s TV, after all, so I think we will always have books in multiple forms.

The first commenter was also at the event and thought the summary was sound. “Eric” asked an interesting question and raised an interesting point about predictions (excerpting):

Has there been any measurement on the resale value of books, which might factor in to an assessment on their future? Many years ago I read that Amazon was going to put used bookstores out of business, yet they seem to remain—in fact I see more than ever here on my side of town.

The resale value of ebooks at this point appears to be \$0—which is a strength for some publishers and irrelevant for many books, but may be a factor elsewhere.

Patron’s Book Browsing Habits

Nicole Engard posted this on January 22, 2010 at *What I Learned Today...* and I think it’s relevant only because it discusses what I regard as a common public-library practice that (to date) doesn’t seem to work as well with ebooks. That is to say, *real* browsing, as described at the start of this excerpt:

If one goes to the library with no particular book or author in mind, is she influenced by the appearance of the book—pictures on the spine, looks new/old, likes the pictures on the cover?

The questions are from Engard’s cousin, who’s wondering whether there’s any research on the topic. The cousin goes on:

Do people pull the book off the shelf to see the rest of the words on the cover? Then there are the books on the top shelf above your head and on the bottom shelf down by the floor. Are they checked out as much as the ones on the middle shelves that can be viewed easily? Would you rather have a book that has something about the story on the back cover or one that doesn’t give you a hint?

Interesting questions—and, although I’ve shopped in ebook stores, I don’t see any equivalent of the richness of shelf browsing (which is how I choose 90% of the library books I read). Oddly enough, I pay no attention to the rear cover at all, but I *do* read the flap copy. Engard raised this as an open question, noting that she’ll sit on the floor to examine bottom-shelf books and *won’t borrow* books without summaries on the cover or flap. The comments are interesting.

The Role of the Library in the Future of Reading Chronology is significant here: This post by Peter E. Murray at *Disruptive Library Technology Jester* appeared February 11, 2010, about the time the iPad emerged. Murray’s engaging in the kind of thing I do: Citing other sources and offering his own comments. The first source decided to see whether academic libraries (Dartmouth in this case) had popular nonfiction and did so by taking

a list of 197 audiobooks and looking for print copies at Dartmouth.

To his delight, he found that the library had paper copies of nearly three-quarters of them. It was his second question, though, that got me thinking: “Should academic libraries supply borrowers with the book format that matches their preferences and learning styles (paper, e-paper, or audio)?”

If the answer to that question is “Yes,” then a multiplicity of “books” is the only plausible future, since it’s pretty clear that some people really do prefer paper, some prefer e-paper and some do better with audio. *Can* academic or public libraries “supply” ebooks in any economical and useful sense? That’s a tougher question.

The second, from Josh Greenberg, is one of those that makes me scratch my head: Greenberg, at NYPL, looks at self-destructing movie rentals from iTunes and suggests that libraries consider institutional iTunes subscriptions “where a given user would add a library card number to their iTunes account and their library would pick up the tab when they ‘rent’ books (or, plausibly, even other media).” Should libraries really be subsidized rental agencies?

The third is a set of interviews about the business of reading and raises a similar issue: How can libraries deal with multiple formats? Of course, libraries have offered audiobooks for many years and are handling some digital audiobooks and ebooks using models that map directly to book lending, but those may not be the only effective models.

Here’s Murray’s money paragraph, I think:

I think it is time to separate the cost of the content versus the cost of the container. From a bottom-up cost calculation, doing so would recognize that it takes a certain amount of effort—paying the author and editor, plus all of the overhead involved—to create a coherent chunk of text. That is a fixed cost that is independent of how the chunk of text is distributed. To this is added the cost of the format: paper/printing/binding/shipping for the physical version, bits-on-disk/infrastructure for the electronic version, and voice-talent / audio-engineer / distribution for the audio version. If one has paid for the content creation once, shouldn’t paying for the carrier of that content—paper, electronic, audio—simply be an incremental cost? In other words, if I buy the book in paper and find I want to have it read to me, shouldn’t I then just have to pay for the voice-talent / audio-engineer / distribution costs for that particular carrier?

Could book in different containers be priced as add-ons for libraries? Would publishers stand for that? As you should know by now, the “incremental cost” of print books isn’t that big a portion of their prices—at most one-seventh by most accounts. But that’s a secondary issue. I think Murray’s suggestion is a wonderfully appealing one that speaks directly to an “AND future” where people can have their preferred format:

[T]he library buys 100 copies of the intellectual work known as *Catcher in the Rye* and chooses 50 manifestations in the paper format and 50 manifestations in e-book format. The cost of switching, say, from a PDF e-book format to an ePub e-book format is just the cost of changing carriers—no “new” content has been purchased. Same thing would hold true if the library decided to convert 20 of its 50 paper carriers into audio book carriers.

That’s not Greenberg’s “just pay for the rental” scenario—as Murray says, in that case the institution gets nothing in the end for subsidizing the reader.

One Reason Why the Imminent Demise of Printed Books is Ridiculous (and Scary): Libraries

That’s the invigorating title of a February 12, 2010 post at *Mike the Mad Biologist*—written by Mike, who is an evolutionary biologist and prefers to stay pseudonymous. Here’s the second paragraph:

Maybe my reading habits are skewed*--or more accurately, my book acquisition habits are skewed—but about eighty percent of the books I read I check out from the library (it’s lower for fiction, nearly 100 percent for non-fiction). I don’t think most books, especially non-fiction, where it’s really hard to judge from reviews if a book is any good, are worth the full hardcover price (or even a twenty to thirty percent discount).

That asterisk leads to a footnote that Mike doesn’t have broadcast or cable/satellite TV, “so more time to read.” Getting back to the post itself, he *also* thinks *most* books aren’t worth \$9.99—or \$3. But that’s *on average*: “after reading some books in the library, I’m impressed enough that I’ll go buy them, even at hardcover prices.” Hey, 90% of *published* science fiction is crud (and 90% of romance novels, and 90% of mainstream fiction, and 90% of mysteries, and 90% of TV...), but I read plenty of first-rate science fiction.

I read a lot of books... but I wouldn’t read very many books if I had to pay \$9.99 for every book, including the many where I clearly don’t get my

money's worth. Somehow, electronic publishing will have to figure out a library model. Obviously, selling the Boston Public Library system one freely downloadable copy is unprofitable, although if there were a way to sell a digital version to the library that when downloaded from the library 'disappears' after a certain length of time, that model might work.

That model exists. Is it generalizable? Less clear.

I'm reading that title as *not* buying into "the imminent demise of printed books"—but whether Mike agrees or not, I buy his assertion that, if readers can't get books in the manner they prefer and at a workable price (including \$0 at the library), they're likely to read less, or at least fewer books.

Christina Pikas pointed out in a comment that libraries *do* have ebooks, some of them working as Mike suggests in the quoted paragraph above.

Observations of a Bookman on his Initial Encounters with an Ebook Reader

James Weinheimer posted this—also posted to the NGC4LIB list—on March 12, 2010 at *First Thus* (catalogingmatters.blogspot.com). At more than 3,000 words it's long for a list post...but it's also well thought out, carefully written and well worth reading. Weinheimer calls himself "a hopeless lover of books" with several thousand of them in the small apartment he lives in in Rome—and, by the way, most Italian libraries don't let you borrow books to read at home.

Weinheimer is interested in history and reads older publications—and loves the big scanning projects but finds the resulting online books too difficult to read online: "it is simply too hard on my eyes." He acquired a Sony ereader and absolutely loves it:

I have discovered that for the first time I can read—and enjoy—a digital book that I have downloaded. It turns out that I use the Internet Archive much more than ever, more than Google Books, but I have downloaded some beautiful publications from Gallica and other projects as well...

Naturally, there are problems. First, I would prefer better contrast control, and since it is only gray on gray, some pdfs are better than others... There are a few other minor problems as well, but they pale in comparison with what I can actually do...

Yet, the purpose of this essay is to discover how all of this has affected me personally.

The biggest surprise, and a very pleasant one, is that I am rediscovering the excitement I experi-

enced when I walked into a large library the very first time. When I stood alone in the stacks of that first large library, I suddenly understood that I was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of the greatest books ever written and any of them were now available to me...

An important sideline...is that I am an "expert" in information retrieval and most people are not. Therefore, I know about the existence of the Internet Archive, Making of America, Gallica, Scirus, the Digital Book Index, and a host of other sites on the web where I can download ebooks and edocuments. I know a lot of the problems to be encountered when searching these sites: their advantages and disadvantages. I understand the different formats; I have some experience to help me know where I can probably find--or not find--a specific publication, and what is probably available, and what is probably not...

There's more here about findability and the like, but also thoughts about the future of older texts. He believes that, if ebook readers become as cheap and plentiful as MP3 players, lots of people might choose to read some of the greatest writings from the past rather than today's best-sellers *because* the old books are free.

Wouldn't it be amazing if Thomas Paine's incendiary *Common Sense* caught on anew in the popular imagination and modern governments again tried to ban it? Or what if someone "updated" it? In any case, I think it may be possible that older works, out of copyright, may play a more vital role in our society than before.

It's a nice thought. I won't comment on it at this point. He does note some side issues around them. Then, I think, he goes a little off the track, when he asserts that cheap ereaders would mean physical libraries and print books would be largely abandoned *because readers are lazy* and, apparently, books are somewhat interchangeable. He says he's likely to be too lazy to go through *all that difficulty* of driving to the library, checking out a book and driving home, and thinks most others also are, if they can get *some* book in e-form for free. So, unfortunately, in the end he comes down as a "death of print/death of physical libraries" advocate because he assumes people are too lazy to go to libraries and will find books somewhat interchangeable.

I think there's much of value in this essay—but I shy away from the "inevitable death of physical collections" prediction. You might disagree.

A Rich Reading Ecology

Another short post from Roy Tennant at *Digital Libraries*, this one dated June 16, 2010 and quoting from an *ars technica* piece entitled “Whatever happened to the e-reader tsunami of 2010?” He quotes—and I requote—what he calls an “astounding paragraph”:

Now that I’ve gotten used to reading on the iPad, I’ve ditched my Kindle entirely. I’ve now gone back to buying my books in dead-tree format for at-home reading, both because print is more relaxing and because it comes without DRM. I also have a few Kindle copies of some of my books on my iPad for when I travel. So in some cases I’m paying twice for the same book, but the print copy is mine—I honest-to-God own it—while the electronic copy is more of a fee that I pay to be able to read the book on my iPad when I go on a long trip.

The writer (Jon Stokes) is clearly no Luddite, but he sees the virtues of multiple book formats. Or, as Tennant says:

We are not entering a period of digital only. We are entering a period of increased format options, increased interaction options, and a world of consumer choices at various price points and capabilities. So if you like to read as I do, you will welcome this rich reading ecology as do I.

The Short and the Long of It

Clive Thompson’s column in the January 2011 *Wired* is ugly to look at, since the page designers chose to set most of it as a single wide paragraph with paragraph marks denoting the *actual* paragraphs—perhaps snazzy to look at but a true disservice to the text. That grump aside (it’s better than the old *Wired*’s habit of setting type on backgrounds so dark or busy that you could barely read the text at all), this is an interesting little discussion—and the tease has the heart of it: “How tweets and status updates have increased our hunger for in-depth analysis.”

Thompson begins “We’re often told that the Internet has destroyed people’s patience for long, well-thought-out arguments.” After expanding that common alarum, Thompson concludes that “something much more complex and interesting is happening: The torrent of short-form thinking is actually a catalyst for *more* long-form meditation.”

He offers web examples—there are apparently *lots* of blogs that now have essay-length posts—and of course other forms. Unfortunately, he believes that this trend means that “the middle take” is done

for—coverage that is “neither fast enough to be conversational nor slow enough to be truly deep.” I think he’s wrong; I see no reason why tweets and essays should rule out the middle ground, and plenty of evidence that it doesn’t. (You know, there are still tens of millions of newspaper readers and *good* newspapers now fill much of the “middle ground” that newsweeklies used to. For that matter, *Time Magazine* does not seem threatened with imminent destruction, although the newsweekly may be the most difficult middle ground.)

Thompson definitely sees that some of his favorite bloggers are doing what I see some of the best libloggers doing: Blogging “less often but with much longer, more in-depth essays.” Apparently, there’s even a survey finding that the most popular blog posts are now those around 1,600 words long.

I’d argue with Thompson about the middle ground (I think that’s still where most blogs are), but at least he doesn’t fall into the usual *Wired* “only one thing” trap. I suspect he’s right; I certainly hope he is.

Open Books: The E-Reader Reads You

I’m only dealing with portions of this somewhat dystopian item by Rob Horning at *The New Inquiry*, posted January 3, 2011. The overall thesis is stated in the tease paragraph and it’s a future I’m not wild about:

E-books promise not a plenitude of ideas and narratives but a wealth of information to better rationalize the unpredictable behavior of readers. E-readers make us into the content.

That doesn’t have to happen—we don’t have to accept ereaders that provide detailed information to publishers about how we’re reading. I don’t think we should. On the other hand, I like a quote from Scott McLemee in a cited article:

McLemee rightly cautions against making e-books vs. their printed and bound counterparts an either-or proposition: “I am biased in favor of reading itself, rather than towards one format,” he explains. In the aggregate, more reading will likely happen thanks to e-readers. As they become more prevalent, they will make more books accessible to more readers....”

But Horning seems to be one of those who leaps from format to format. He claims that “the nature of the format nevertheless certainly affects the reading experience and the specific qualities of works that end up being tailored to it,” which is

only true if books are *only* e- or *only* p-, and then tells us he remembers vividly “throwing out my entire CD collection.” *Why would you do that?* I listen primarily from a Sansa Fuze these days, but I certainly haven’t discarded the CDs themselves. (If Horning *sold* those CDs while retaining the music, there’s an ethical issue, but that’s fodder for a different essay.)

I can’t yet imagine doing such a thing with my books, glossed as they are with my precious marginalia, but objects can be swiftly desacralized. Changes are sure to come to how we buy and keep books, and because of the nature of e-readers and our established ideas about the sanctity of reading, those changes may be more profound than anything that has happened to music.

Desacralized? For many of us, print books have no “sanctity” whatsoever; they just work. The analogy to music is mediocre at best. In fact, *unlike* books, listening to a lossless digital copy of a CD (which is *itself* digital, lest we forget) is *the same experience*—while reading an ebook is *not* the same experience as reading a print book. Sanctity has nothing to do with it unless you happen to be a book-sniffer.

The rest of the essay’s simply depressing. Horning views publishers as not caring much about content, only about numbers:

With the advent of e-publishing, books will become even more like arbitrary widgets to the people selling them. For publishers, books will be defined not by the words in them so much as by the comprehensive numerical data set capturing the contours of the market for them.

Horning says that the Kindle is busily communicating with “the mothership” at Amazon in communications over which “the user has no control short of shutting off its wireless function, the main means for adding content to it.” I don’t own a Kindle, but don’t most readers who care about battery life keep Wifi disabled *unless* they’re actually buying new books, since it’s a battery drain? (That may be a naïve question. So be it.)

Thanks to these innovations, publishers will know what books you’ve read; when you read them; what you chose to read next, or simultaneously; how long it took you; and what other books people read when they read what you have. The potential data mine this all represents may eventually divest readers of their need to discover anything. Instead, recommendation engines can take over, manufacturing serendipity for users as is al-

ready the case on Amazon’s website, only now with the not necessarily solicited advice being ported directly into the scene of reading. And if you shop through Google’s new bookstore, all that information and be joined with all the data derived from your search and browsing histories to further refine recommendations and circumscribe the scope of what is readily offered to you.

But perhaps more important, publishers will be able to draw from trends in this rich data for its editorial decisionmaking, exploiting connections this information reveals among various demographics in the reading public, calibrating their lists to actual reader behavior with more precision that dumb sales data once allowed...

Shudder. I think that’s an ugly future; I also think it’s as unlikely as an overall future as is the notion of ereaders completely replacing print books. Actually, my belief that small publishers will become more important and megapublishers will become less important argues against this future: Small publishers may still be *publishers*, not data-crunchers.

Some Good News from the World of Books

Let’s end this section on a more upbeat note: This essay, which appeared February 7, 2011 at *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*. It’s the lead for a group of essays, and what a lead it is. The first paragraphs:

This has been an interesting few years for the book industry. There have been many changes and realignments, and these changes have led many to predict that (a) reading is dead; (b) books are dead; (c) publishing is dead; (d) all printed matter is dead. Or that all of the above, if not already dead, will be dead very soon.

The good news is that there isn’t as much bad news as popularly assumed. In fact, almost all of the news is good, and most of it is very good. Book sales are up, way up, from twenty years ago. Young adult readership is far wider and deeper than ever before. Library membership and circulation is at all-time high. The good news goes on and on.

But still, perceptions persist that in a few years there will be no books printed on paper. That e-readers will take over the industry, and perhaps soon after, some other trend will kill books dead.

Given this gloom and doom, McSweeney’s started a project involving “fifteen or so young researchers” beginning in May 2010, looking into the health of the book.

Their findings provide proof that not only are books very much alive, but that reading is in ex-

ceptionally good shape—and that the book-publishing industry, while undergoing some significant changes, is, on the whole, in good health.

Do note the date on this item: I'm not quoting from some halcyon days of lore but from February 2011. There's a *lot* more in the piece itself and the linked items, most of which I'll leave for you to discover, but the overall picture is almost entirely positive. I checked in near the beginning of a multiweek series; it's probably worth your while to explore further.

I spent a little time on the three linked articles. I'm *delighted* to note that Ben Shattuck, who wrote "The Health of Libraries," recognized the tricky numbers behind Douglas Galbi's claim that per-capita book circulation from libraries has been declining (I discussed this in March 2008), specifically the massive increase in the numerator—the number of people with library cards, now up to 68% of the U.S. population. The piece on U.S. book publishing starts with a bang: *Publishers Weekly* lament on the huge number of book titles being produced—an "appalling flood" as *PW* called it. That lament appeared in 1911; there were 13,470 book titles in 1910. In 2010? One estimate is 288,355 titles, but that estimate may be far too low. As for literacy, the relevant article points out (correctly) that near-universal literacy is fairly recent and that literacy is still rising—making it likely that books *in all media* will be read even more in the future.

Issues with Ebooks and Reading

Most items in this section have less to do with *varieties* of reading and more to do with how ebooks and ereaders might, will, could or should affect reading and the texts themselves.

What's wrong with eBooks?

This piece by Mike Elgan was posted at *ComputerWorld* on September 21, 2009. He begins with a scenario in which you stay up late reading your hardcover copy of a new novel, then continue reading it on your Kindle over breakfast, then continue *listening* to it on your car radio on the way to work—and then read a little more of it on your iPhone while you're waiting in line at the DMV. "You're loving the fact that you bought all versions of the book in the \$34.99 bundled edition."

As Elgan notes, "this whole scenario is pure fiction"—although perhaps less so in 2011 than in

2009. In the case of the cited novel, you could buy all three versions, but you'd pay a total of \$76.34. Elgan thinks that's crazy:

Can someone explain this to me? Since 99% of the value of a book is created before it's spun off into multiple formats, why does that additional 1% of value cost between 30% and 300%?

I could—indeed, I *do* argue with the "since" clause. An audiobook has a significantly different value than a print book, and there are good arguments for the value of an ebook being different than the value of a mass-market paperback being different than the value of a hardback. But Elgan doesn't buy that and has the usual technologist's response:

[Publishers] think they sell paper, glue and ink over here, electronic documents over there, and way over yonder, audio recordings. They spend an inordinate amount of time trying to protect this media from that media. Publishers have forgotten what a book is.

Continued resistance by the publishing industry to change will soon be registered by the Internet economy as damage, and the world will route around it. Books are on the brink of revolution. Publishers won't be able to suppress progress for long.

Ten years from now, both paper books and dedicated eBook readers will be considered high-end luxury devices. The vast majority of reading will be done on cell phones and general-purpose tablet PCs, in both e-text and audio formats.

Ah yes, the lovely theme that the internet routes around damage—like censorship. That's why the people of China, Egypt and every other nation have full access to everything, because, you know, technology just "routes around" all this stuff. Why will paper books be "high end luxury devices" by 2019? Because Elgan says so, apparently.

My advice to publishers is to embrace innovation. We readers want to be thrilled by books in the same way that we're thrilled by our iPhones, and by Web 2.0 sites.

When Elgan says "We readers" I want to quote Oscar Brown, Jr.: "What you mean *we*, white man?" I'm a damn site more thrilled by a good book than I am by iPhones or "Web 2.0 sites," and I suspect that's true for most book readers. But Elgan tells us what "we" (that is, the Royal Mike Elgan) want, and it's an interesting list.

First, he thinks "bundled multimedia books" should be the *default*—that "we" will be delighted to pay \$10 *more* than the current hardcover price

for a combined hardcover, ebook and audiobook bundle. Sure we will. “Readers will be thrilled, and you’ll make more money because **most readers** will buy the ‘everything version’ at the higher price, rather than just picking one of the versions as they do now.” I assume Elgan believes most readers buy the hardback version of a book, as opposed to the sad handful who read library copies or wait for trade or mass-market paperback, and he’s asserting they’d happily pay another \$10. I believe he’s wrong on all counts.

The next one’s even more amusing: He *wants* ebooks to be “improved electronically, and on the fly.” Yep. I sure want somebody else “improving” my books after I’ve purchased them. It makes for a much braver new world.

He wants audiobooks that can be borrowed electronically—and apparently doesn’t believe any libraries actually lend audiobooks. He thinks *every* book should come “with its own social network,” or maybe that’s just every “major” book. Oh, and ebooks should appear first, as should audiobooks. For some reason, he seems to think physical production takes forever and a day even after all editing is complete, and seems to regard “a year” for editing and production as the norm.

Audiobooks should be cheaper, because “it’s a digital file, infinitely scalable,” and of course talent and engineering cost nothing. “If I can do a podcast with an under \$100 investment, you can sell an audio book for \$9.99.”

And, almost at the end, we get the final nail in the coffin for publishers: “Young people aren’t interested in books, and it’s your fault.” Except, of course, *that simply isn’t true*—young people *are* interested in books.

Kindle for the academic

Alex Golub contributed this to *Inside Higher Education* on November 3, 2009, based on his own experience spending two months in Papua New Guinea using a new Kindle for academic and non-academic reading while conducting fieldwork.

Based on that experience, my overall impression is that while the Kindle and other ebook readers might not quite be reader for prime time, they are going to be an important part of academic work in the future.

I copied-and-pasted without change, but I’m guessing “reader” instead of “ready” could be a copy-editing error. Still, since this is from a formal

publication rather than a blog post, I’m not simply correcting it on the fly.

He says the Kindle “is designed to let you read mystery novels, not academic books.” Oddly, others have said that ereaders are better for nonfiction books than for novels, but different people have different perceptions. He found lots of advantages to reading on the Kindle, but also some disadvantages—although there’s a touch of sneering in his recital of those “disadvantages”:

First, it is not a book. If one of the main reasons you read books is feel and smell the pages in order to gratify your self-image as a “reader” or “intellectual,” then the Kindle is probably not for you. But if, as an academic, you are interested in the content of the book you are reading, then the Kindle’s lack of pages offers a different set of challenges. Most obviously, you must give up being able to remember that the passage you are looking for is on the left or right hand side of the page. More substantively, though, the Kindle makes moving back and forth between endnotes, body text, and bibliographic material a tremendous pain—a key concern for scholars who read by moving through the main text of a book and its scholarly apparatus simultaneously. And I must admit, while it’s nice to be able to search the contents of your book, I somehow feel that flipping through it is a method of browsing that has some obscure but important utility that the Kindle hasn’t yet duplicated.

Bing bing bing: There it is, the booksmeller straw-man, right in the first “disadvantages” sentence. That and scare quotes around reader and intellectual offer nice touches of contempt for people who actually *like* print books. The other issues may be real ones, and he adds another paragraph about the relative difficulty of annotating books on a Kindle—and the real difficulty of dealing with some illustrations (the Kindle DX is probably better in this regard).

Now we get to Golub’s *real* opinion, foreshadowed by that “smell the pages” nonsense:

In fact, I must admit that I think the book as an artifact is already dead. The Internet has created a used book market in which different versions, printings, pressings, covers of books matter not at all. Each book is, in a way, a replica of all the other books of the same title. Getting “reading copies” of books is now so easy that the e-book feels like the nail in the coffin, not a game-changer.

Huh? The book as collectable is one thing; the print book as a good way to read is quite another. Oh, but

then he goes on to say that Academics read niche books and libraries can't afford them, so ebooks should help a lot. (That may oversimplify.)

But he doesn't want digital textbooks, and I find his swoony language about the importance of students manhandling their textbooks bizarre. He's really unhappy that students don't underline their books enough. It also becomes pretty clear that, to Golub, "the library" is the set of books a person owns—he doesn't seem to care much about shared libraries.

There's more here. Overall, I find it a somewhat sad piece. But that may be me. I think I won't comment on the comments, some of them reasonable, some of them "young people are..." nonsensical and some of them typical "ebooks will supplant printed versions real soon now" futurism.

what is lost

Barbara Fister on her own blog, *Barbara Fister's Place* (barbarafister.wordpress.com) on December 26, 2009. She purchased and read her first ebook in 2009 on an iPhone.

I don't plan to repeat the experience, not because it was horrible but because I know too many booksellers personally and until it's easy to buy from them I'm not planning to purchase e-books. But I felt as if I needed some experience with e-books.

I know no booksellers personally (and, as far as I know, Livermore doesn't have a general-purpose bookstore) and rarely buy print books, but Fister's in a different place. Still, it's interesting to see her pros and cons, spelled out in some detail. The pros are easy:

It didn't weigh much when traveling and I could read it in the dark on the long shuttle ride from the airport.

The cons? That's where the post title comes in, and this is a different list than some others would have—it's an unusually thoughtful set of discussions. Excerpts:

First, the pages look ugly. There's no other way to put it... The design of a page in a printed book is a nearly invisible pleasure. Page design is something I appreciate more since seeing what is lost when it's absent.

Second, reading on a phone is fine for e-mail and for short form texts on a web page, but it's hard to get lost in a book when you have to turn pages every paragraph or so...

Third—I don't like a future for the book in which sharing is disabled and ownership of an immuta-

ble copy no longer exists. It bothers me that a corporation could reach into my personal library and pluck a book back or alter it. I don't like the fact that there is no such thing as fair use in a world of licensed content and that I can't give a friend or family member a book I read and loved...

Fourth [a discussion of implications of always-connected or -connectable ebooks for personal privacy, one that you need to **read in the original**].

The second drawback doesn't apply as much to dedicated ereaders and tablets, to be sure—and the first one isn't *quite* as applicable to PDFs. The third and fourth are real problems. Fister quotes Cory Doctorow, certainly a friend of ebooks:

Anyone who claims that readers can't and won't and shouldn't own their books are bent on the destruction of the book, the destruction of publishing, and the destruction of authorship itself. We must stop them from being allowed to do it. The library of tomorrow should be better than the library of today. The ability to loan our books to more than one person at once is a feature, not a bug. We all know this. It's time we stop pretending that the pirates of copyright are right. These people were readers before they were publishers before they were writers before they worked in the legal department before they were agents before they were salespeople and marketers. We are the people of the book, and we need to start acting like it.

Or, you know, just go read the whole post and think long and hard about Fister's points.

In An Era Of Immediacy, Why Fear The E-Book? This item (which appeared January 27, 2010 at npr.org and is by Eric Weiner) is the text version of a four-minute story on *All Things Considered*. From what I've seen and heard in general, NPR is certainly not anti-ebook; if anything, some of their people seem happy to sign on to a postprint future. (Of course, if new media *did* replace old media, NPR *would not exist*, being wholly replaced by PBS, but never mind...)

Weiner saw a woman in a café using a Kindle. She loves it, calling it "a library at my fingertips." He was brash enough to ask whether his book was one of the 200 on her machine.

She punched a few keys on her Kindle, and up popped my book. Well, not my book exactly, but the same words that appear in my book. There's a difference. The printed word has a permanence, a finality to it that digital "ink" lacks. Digital words are provisional, always subject to change...

Weiner is confident he'll get his fair share from ebook sales, but he says he's not only after the reader's money:

I have my sights on a much more precious commodity: your time. We enter into an unspoken pact, you and I: Give me a few hours, stolen moments on the subway or after the kids are asleep, and I promise to inform and entertain you. Frankly, that's always been a tough sell, given the sundry ways you can spend your time, but at least I had a fighting chance.

He thinks multifunction reading devices take away that fighting chance: if his narrative starts to drag even a bit, readers will be off to news sites. Here, I think, is the most cogent comment, one I really haven't seen discussed much.

...I suppose I could take the I-don't-care-how-they-read-me-as-long-as-they-read-me approach. But that would be naive. Technologies are not neutral. They come with a bias. Not a political bias—a narrative bias. A news story broadcast on television, an acutely visual medium, is different from the same story published in a newspaper or broadcast on radio. Form is function. Someone reading a book on a Kindle has a fundamentally different experience from someone reading the same book the old-fashioned way.

Weiner doesn't believe people will regard ebooks with the same honor they give print books. Is he right? I'm not sure, but it's worth thinking about.

Yes, it's wonderful to have a library at our fingertips. But the digital library is a noisy, crowded place, filled with sports stars and politicians and celebrities. I'm afraid the reader might not even notice I'm there.

The Amazon/Macmillan spat

No, that's not the title of a blog post (it might be, but not one I'm citing). You may have forgotten about the little incident on January 29, 2010—when Amazon “delisted” all Macmillan ebooks *and print books*, apparently because Macmillan objected to the \$9.99 price point for Kindle ebooks.

Cory Doctorow commented at *boingboing* that same day, in an item entitled “Amazon and Macmillan go to war: readers and writers are the civilian casualties.” Doctorow gives away (some of his) ebooks, but he was directly affected in any case: His publisher is Tor, a Macmillan imprint. He looks at this as “a case of two corporate giants illustrating neatly exactly why market concentration is bad for the arts”:

If true, Macmillan demanding a \$15 pricetag for its ebooks is just plain farcical. Although there are sunk costs in book production, including the considerable cost of talented editors, copy-editors, typesetters, PR people, marketers, and designers, the incremental cost of selling an ebook is zero...

Unfortunately, Doctorow—while absolutely correct in saying that physicality *does* account for some of the price of a book—says this in a way that overstates that cost. \$15 as a pricetag for an ebook that's available at the same time as a \$25 hardcover book may be a more than reasonable price. (He does update the post to say that ebooks “should be cheaper than print editions.” Some commenters take issue with that as well, since there are cases—e.g., programming books—where ebooks have *added value* compared to print books.)

If true, Amazon draping itself in the consumer-rights flag in demanding a fair price is even more farcical. Though Amazon's physical-goods sales business is the best in the world when it comes to giving buyers a fair shake, this is materially untrue when it comes to electronic book sales, a sector that it dominates...

There's more useful information in the full paragraph: Doctorow approached Amazon about removing DRM from Doctorow's ebooks; Amazon flatly refused.

The rest of the post is about Doctorow's primary worry: Concentration. That's a worry because of Amazon (and, now, Apple). That's a worry because there are basically *five* (or six) publishers controlling the bulk of trade publishing. (Doctorow says “almost all of publishing,” and that's just wrong—the enormous difference between AAP sales figures and BISG sales figures, *billions* of dollars, is accounted for by tens of thousands of small publishers. As to the “four or five titans that control almost all ebook publishing,” I don't know enough to comment, although I think that also involves a tricky definition of “almost all.”) But while I may disagree with some of Doctorow's facts, I don't disagree with his conclusions and arguments.

That being a *boingboing* post, there are plenty of comments (117 in the first week). Some of them raise an interesting variety of additional points—including the suggestion that people upset about Amazon's actions should, you know, buy from local booksellers. There are also, of course, a bunch of technological determinists, only too happy to bow down to the masters of the day—but, of

course, Doctorow was never suggesting ebooks would or should go away, so there are a lot of strawmen on fire here. (I also wonder at people's absolute insistence that the name of the publisher is McMillan or MacMillan when Doctorow consistently uses the correct name, but hey...) I don't know what to say about the person who claims new novels should cost \$5, of which the author gets "his 5%"—a person who's asserting that *a quarter a copy* is reasonable reward for writing a novel worth reading. Another commenter notes the \$2/copy physicality cost that seems to be the typical stated figure these days. On the whole, I found the comment stream worth reading...and the "Anon" comments more prone to stupidity than the signed comments.

Barbara Fister also commented on the Amazon/Macmillan situation at *Barbara Fister's Place* in the post "another fine mess—Patterson, Amazon, and the commodification of reading." Fister is also published by Macmillan (**full disclosure**: several of my books *were* published by Macmillan's G.K. Hall imprint; all are now out of print with rights back under my control). Fister writes crime fiction; she doesn't anticipate making a living from it. She notes some of the topics that seem to dominate comment threads regarding stories like this and offers her own comments—bringing in the situation with "James Patterson Inc.," regarding the "author" who does for writing what Jeff Koonz does for "art" but with even more success. Her primary topic in a fairly long post is "the ecosystem of books and reading" and the extent to which big publishers have become like McDonald's: filling, fast, *predictable*—but not enough. Fortunately, the analogy doesn't hold up in part because a lot of readers want something more than fast books (just as many diners want something beyond fast food)—and because public libraries offer a whole lot more than James Patterson. (Another disclosure. I've never read a book "by" James Patterson. I have no particular desire to do so.)

Do Kindles and Nooks affect reading habits?

My off-the-cuff answer would be "almost certainly: how could they not?" but Chris Rippel wanted to know more. He did three surveys in early 2010 (on various Kindle and Nook forums). Given a total of 109 responses, this is decidedly anecdotal—and Rippel's bias is pretty clear in the introduction:

If these devices are here to stay then I feel libraries must provide content and, possibly the devices themselves, to remain relevant to future readers.

This goes neatly from the first half—whether ebooks will be part of the reading landscape (yes, of course they will) to the single-minded second half ("to remain relevant to future readers," lacking *any* qualification such as "some" or "many" on "future readers"). And, to be sure, the post appears in *eBooks in public libraries*. Those caveats aside and noting that the results are heavily biased (all respondents are so involved with their ereaders that they participate in online forums), the results aren't terribly surprising: Of a hundred or so heavily involved ebook readers, most read more books, are happy with their ereaders and read differently.

To make sense of the results, I think you need to go to the linked items. I'm not surprised that most of these ereader owners read more books (actually, that only 76% answered "many more" or "more" is a little surprising) and it certainly isn't surprising that ereader owners think the extremely varied sets of changes in how they read are likely to be permanent. I'm a little surprised that the links are to Word documents; would it have been that difficult to translate them to HTML?

Books Are Becoming Fringe Media

Maybe I shouldn't bother with this *gigaom* post by Kevin Kelleher on February 10, 2010—although there are certainly dozens, nay, hundreds of articles and posts with the same "As I do, so does everybody" logic and "If it's not The Biggest, it's Trivial" approach to the world.

Kelleher just finished a book—and he doesn't read many books these days. Oh, and most Kindle buyers are over 55, and...oops, there's the NEA study again, and the post heads downhill from there. (When anybody cites NEA "reading" studies these days as serious sources of information, I assume a comprehension problem on the part of the writer.)

Whether published in ink or pixels, books are facing tough competition from updates, posts, and a blizzard of free, brief and ephemeral writings that distract eyeballs from the task of digesting 300 pages of text.

Whereas radio, TV, music, newspapers and magazines posed no distractions at all, back in the good old days. Kelleher goes on to say that, since "books will change to adapt to the new readers" (but the new readers don't read books, do they?), there will

be less nonfiction. Oh, there might be a few novels even as “the web takes up an ever larger portion of our mind share,” but they’ll have to “fight their way back from the fringe.”

Kelleher makes one good point: Many “business books” are really pamphlets “puffed out to book length with heroic amounts of filler.” When he expands that to “the majority of non-fiction books,” he loses me—and I’ll state confidently that Kelleher has no idea whatsoever of what’s in the majority of nonfiction books.

The heart of this nonsense is the concept that being something other than the dominant medium (which, from a time-spent perspective, books haven’t been at least since TV became popular) means being “fringe” which, as far as I can tell, means to Kelleher “unimportant.” It doesn’t help that the first commenter who notes that the number of book titles is expanding is also a death-of-print absolutist, but then this blog presumably has a self-chosen audience.

Will eBooks Create An Elite Reading Class?

Karin Slaughter wrote this on February 22, 2010 at *The Huffington Post*—and it’s peculiar but interesting. She claims the South has so many great writers because public libraries were the only places in town with central air conditioning, but that’s a diversion from her main point (which follows the correct note that public libraries are fairly recent notions):

On one hand, here [in an ereader] is a device that can put a limitless supply of books at your fingertips. On the other hand, here is a device that is so expensive that only a select few can afford it. It seems to me that with digitized books, we are taking a giant leap into the past, when access to literature was available only to those of means.

The possibility of a new “reading class” isn’t that far-fetched. If the great prognosticators are to be believed, we will be looking at a completely digitized book industry within the next ten to fifteen years. Understandably, publishers and booksellers are worried about their place in this future. As for me, I am worried about my readers.

“The great prognosticators”? I look down from my self-driving flying car and laugh at the great prognosticators—and even at worst, there is *no* consensus among prophets that print books are entirely doomed “within the next ten to fifteen years.”

Slaughter then offers an odd argument:

According to the latest census statistics, the more affluent the members of a household, the more

likely they are to own a computer. When income, race and education come into play, the percentage of people without a computer is cut by almost half. One can assume these skewed demographics translate to eBook readers. Minimum wage still trails behind the price of most paperbacks. Do we really expect a person who has to work roughly three and a half hours a day in order to earn the price of a hardcover book to shell out the money for an electronic reader?

To paraphrase Ebenezer Scrooge, “Are there no mass-market paperbacks? Are there no public libraries?” Oh, and what on earth does “When income, race and education come into play, the percentage of people without a computer is cut by almost half” *mean*? I mean, Slaughter’s a “bestselling author of nine novels”—which isn’t quite as good as being an author of nine bestselling novels, but she should be able to write a coherent sentence. (Or is this HuffPo’s editorial process?)

She accepts that “prices on readers are bound to drop.” Currently, to either \$139 or \$50, depending on your definition of “reader.” In any case, she’s out to make a different argument—one that apparently ignores the existence of these institutions she began with:

[W]hich books are we going to offer people who cannot afford readers? That seems to be the Sophie’s Choice looming on the horizon. Surely, even with an eBook in every pot, there are still going to be actual paper books in the marketplace. Who wants to bet only a certain type of author will be on offer to paper book buyers? Who wants to bet that education, race, and economics will play an even larger role in deciding who has access to certain types of books?

If I was a betting person, I’d cheerfully bet *against* either of those two propositions—particularly if I’m reading her meaning correctly (that is, that only books aimed at po’folk will ever appear in paper). That’s followed by a series of questions that only make any sense if all future *and existing* print collections vanish into thin air, so I won’t bother with them.

There are real, legitimate, difficult questions about ebooks and ereaders. And then there are pieces like this, which go to show that there really *are* extremists on both sides of an issue that shouldn’t *have* sides.

There were 21 comments before they were closed. The first one’s from a bookseller—but a bookseller who doesn’t know the difference be-

tween “its” and “it’s” and *moves new books around from room to room* before reading them to feel the “promise.” Hokay. And, sigh, another pseudonymous commenter cites the NEA nonsense as gospel.

No jacket required

Here’s one that’s charming enough that I’m mostly pointing rather than commenting: A discussion of four book-related books posted by Tim Martin on February 27, 2010 at FT.com, the online arm of the *Financial Times*. I’ll just quote the first paragraph of a fairly long essay (for an online site):

The demise of the venerable codex, or bound book, has been predicted at least since 1899, when HG Wells in *The Sleeper Awakes* envisaged the entire corpus of human literature reduced to a mini-library of “peculiar double cylinders” that would be viewable on a screen. More informed commentators have been arguing since the computer became domesticised in the 1980s that it would herald the end of print but, each time, the predicted end of days has rolled around with no sign of an apocalypse. As the joke goes, books are still cheap, robust and portable, and the battery life is great.

Martin thinks change is afoot (correctly)—and doubts that print books are on the verge of vanishing (also, in my opinion, correctly). He also—perhaps correctly—criticizes one of the four “books,” a two-volume 1,400-page work, because it’s largely a reference work and “reference is the one area in which electronic texts really excel.” But, as he notes, an e-version is on the way.

To Judge a Nook By Its Cover

Here’s an odd one worth a brief note: Melanie Benjamin, July 19, 2010, *The Huffington Post*. It’s odd given various commentaries about the social nature of reading and how ereaders and online forums could enhance that social nature.

This is the flipside, from someone who commutes (sometimes) by mass transit. She makes a point of looking around to see what other people are reading, which she thinks of as a “form of literary eavesdropping.” But she saw a standing woman wholly engrossed in reading—on a Kindle. Which means Benjamin couldn’t ~~snoop~~ eavesdrop on the title of the book.

This made me sad. The community of reading seemed, at that moment, to disappear entirely. I know that’s an overreaction; I know that if I really wanted to, I could have asked the young woman the title of the book she was reading. But that seemed like an invasion of her privacy, and be-

sides -- it’s not practical or probably socially acceptable to run up to every person with a Nook and ask him what he’s reading. One might argue this will lead to even more community among readers; personally, I think it will lead to an increase in restraining orders.

So, let’s see, ~~snooping~~ “literary eavesdropping” is a socially beneficial thing, while actually *asking* what somebody’s reading is “an invasion of her privacy.” Maybe. The next paragraph is more interesting, as she assumes that, if she *did* engage the reader in conversation, it would be all about the device, not the content.

I will add no further comment...except to say that, if I spent a lot of time on mass transit and really thought other people made a point of seeing what I was reading, that might encourage me to buy an ereader. (Truth: If I was still flying eight to ten times a year, I would almost certainly own some sort of ereader, albeit possibly a netbook or iPad.) As it is, I’d probably be catching up on science fiction magazines.

To Be Continued

Once again, a PERSPECTIVE is too long for one issue—but was written in its entirety. Look for the considerably shorter second section in the next *Cites & Insights*.

Trends & Quick Takes

Bonus Predictions

I didn’t get these into the earlier roundup, but the January 2011 *PC World* includes ten “tech predictions to take to the bank” from the editors of *PC World*, who are of course *the experts*. They’re not consensus views, they’re from individual editors:

- By the end of 2011, “a sizable chunk” of the population will use smartphones to make payments.
- All tablets not named iPads will be massive flops. They won’t work well and they won’t sell well.
- 3D TV will take off...
- Flash (drives) will shake up the PC market...
- In two years, “compact interchangeable lens” cameras will outsell DSLRs.
- *All* e-readers will be color by the end of 2011.
- Conventional “feature phones” will “fade away” in favor of smartphones.

- Some company (probably Google) will launch a cloud-based OS that makes sense for the average user. (Steve Fox says “most of our computing now takes place in the Web browser,” to which I can only say “speak for yourself.”)
- IPv6 will be the acronym of the year. (It won’t, but only because *it’s not an acronym, it’s an initialism/abbreviation.*)
- Facebook versus Google will become the most relevant rivalry in tech. Oh, and Google Me will tank.

We shall see.

It’s Not the Gear, It’s the Talent

There was a refreshing post title in the *Wired* blog “Raw File” on November 19, 2009: “Hi-Def DSLRs May Be Cheap, But Talent Is Priceless.” The piece is by Brendan Seibel. It concerns the most overlooked aspect of media for those proclaiming that we’re all moviemakers, or should be.

The story notes a short film by Vincent Laforet shot entirely on a prototype Canon EOS 5D Mark II, a camera with “extraordinary low-light sensitivity and HD video capabilities.” At the time, “It appeared to be an all-in-one movie studio replacement”—and portions of the video community cheered.

It seemed that a few big Hollywood studios would no longer dominate our viewing agenda, that an indie revolution was imminent and that the dam on a reservoir of creativity had been destroyed. But that has not been the case. So why are we not awash in studio-quality, low-budget flicks? The answer is complex, and it zeros in on an ever more important relationship between the tools of production and the actual talent of filmmaking—the two of which people often confuse.

A group of indie filmmakers shot a feature-length movie using a different DSLR (the Nikon D90)—and this time, when trailers were put online, people were “torn between criticizing the movie as much as the quality of image.” Yes, the new equipment means anybody with a couple thousand bucks to spare can capture high-def images (although there are issues with shooting high-def video on what’s essentially a still camera)—but so what? Now you have the raw images, which may or may not be movie-quality video. How do you create a worthwhile movie from that? Set aside one curious issue: some “prosumer” equipment shoots at 30 frames per second—but many popular video-editing pro-

grams assume the traditional movie rate of 24 frames per second, and converting from one to the other smoothly is a bitch. That’s just the start.

Experienced filmmakers are accustomed to long hours spent in post production, but most dabblers in video will probably lack the time or initiative to fully understand the process involved.

And, of course, making a movie requires *talent*—not just from the videographer but, for movies with plots and actors, from a whole host of others. Those costs don’t go down just because the considerable cost of film goes away entirely and the new cameras are a whole lot cheaper. The underlying issue remains: This stuff is hard.

(One really good comment: “Give a man a hammer and he will believe he is a carpenter.” Another: “The greatest word processor in the world will not make you Charles Dickens.” Except that, with fiction, one creative genius *can* do the whole thing; with video other than possibly documentaries, that’s just not the case.)

Information Wants to be Free?

Not Meredith’s blog—but, in this case, one of Nicholas Carr’s more pointed pieces in *Rough Type*: “Information wants to be free my ass,” dated January 18, 2010. He starts: “Never before in history have people paid as much for information as they do today.” And, after noting the likely reaction from lots of “everything’s free” folks, he says “Sorry, sucker. The joke’s on you” and suggests that you *do the math*—something I’ve suggested from time to time. Namely, add up what you spend for internet service, cable TV or satellite, all cell phone costs, landline phone, Netflix, wifi hotpots, TiVo and “other information services.”

So what’s the total? \$100? \$200? \$300? \$400? Gizmodo reports that monthly information subscriptions and fees can easily run to \$500 or more nowadays. A lot of people today probably spend more on information than they spend on food.

Have you done that calculation? \$100 is certainly on the low side for a typical American household, I’d guess (lots of people pay more than that just for cable TV—and these days lots of families pay a *lot* more than that in cell-phone bills).

Do your own calculations. I come up with \$119 for our household—but that doesn’t include print subscriptions. I’m pretty sure we’re outliers on the low side for households with heavy computer use

and plenty of entertainment. Can you come in at less than, say, \$200?

The reason we fork out all that dough is (I'm going to whisper the rest of this sentence) because we place a high monetary value on the content we receive as a result of those subscriptions and fees.

That's not *entirely* true. We pay \$60/year for cell phone service in order to have emergency services available; some folks who basically use cell phones retain a landline for similar reasons. Here's the money paragraph, though, particularly given the widespread sense that "information"—that is, actual content—*should* be free:

It's a strange world we live in. We begrudge the folks who actually create the stuff we enjoy reading, listening to, and watching a few pennies for their labor, and yet at the very same time we casually throw hundreds of hard-earned bucks at the saps who run the stupid networks through which the stuff is delivered. We screw the struggling artist, and pay the suit.

Is Carr wrong? At least one commenter seems to miss the whole point, arguing that we're paying less *per bit* than we used to—but that's really not the issue. And, to be sure, this person thinks we'll eventually get Everything as part of those subscription fees.

One commenter does raise useful objections. Much of what you pay for Netflix or cable TV goes through to "content creators" (or, rather, copyright owners). Several seem to focus on the fact that you can get a lot more these days, but Carr isn't saying otherwise. He's saying that *in absolute terms* people pay more for "information" today than ever before. And, sure enough, some commenters justify their reluctance to pay for quality content creation by saying they've already paid for transmission.

Quicker Takes

According to Shane Buettner in the December 2010 *Home Theater*, Blu-Ray "is now officially mainstream." Over six million copies (out of 20 million total) sold of *Avatar* were Blu-Ray; about 17% of U.S. households have Blu-Ray players.

➤ Christopher Elliott offers an interesting perspective in "The Insider" column in the January/February 2011 *National Geographic Traveler*: "Savor the Trip, Don't Tweet It." Elliott believes an overload of tech gadgets is ruining vacations—that you'll get more out of a vacation if you shut down the gadgets,

at least some of the time, and just enjoy. Time enough for FB status updates and tweets later. I'm inclined to agree.

- I just love letters to the editor. Two letters in the December 2010 *PC World*, both about "The E-reader Wars," are great examples. The first says that iPads offer a much nicer reading experience than e-ink—because this reader does most of their reading "in dim rooms where the LCD shines (literally)." The second says that e-ink "is much easier on my eyes" and couldn't take the iPad for extended reading. "I'm not sure why...maybe the problem is *too much* contrast, or maybe it's the fact that I'm staring into a light for an hour?" (This reader also finds multifunction devices too distracting.) In a world of multiple choices rather than The Single Future, of course, they're both right.
- It's been a while, but you can still read "Kick-startup" by Jason Scott at *ASCII*, posted November 24, 2009. The easiest way to find it is directly: ascii.textfiles.com/archives/2381. It's about how Scott, newly laid off from his day job, managed to fund his own sabbatical using Kickstart to the tune of \$25,000 (he actually got \$26,658.) It's an unusual use for Kickstart, since that crowdfunding system is normally project-oriented, but Scott's an unusual person (profane and a genuinely talented computer historian). He realized that he was actually asking people to fund a startup, namely "Jason Scott Historian." It's quite a story. You might find it inspirational. You might not.
- It's probably worth noting (belatedly!) that December 2009 marked the final issue of *Internet Resources Newsletter*, another one of those strange gray eperiodicals (you're reading one of the few that remain). This one lasted 178 issues. The archives are still available as I write this, at www.hw.ac.uk/libwww/irn/irn.html. In this case, the newsletter died when the editor, Roddy MacLeod, took early retirement. It was a good run for roughly 16 years. Sixteen years...that's a *lot*—even *with* sponsorship. (If you include *Crawford's Corner* as a direct ancestor, C&I has been going even longer—but I'm not sure that you should include it.)

- To finish off items from 2009 I tagged for T&QT (OK, I'm behind...), here's "From Cinepak to H.265: a brief history of video compression" by Anders Bylund at *ars technica*, dated "about a year ago" and tagged in late December 2009. It's an interesting walk through the recent history of video compression—which, one way or another, is the only way HDTV can exist but also one reason so much streamed and online video looks so crappy. (One item in the story claims that H.264 compression, pretty much the standard for Blu-Ray and requiring a *lot* of computer power for decompression, can provide "broadcast-quality" video at 1.5 megabit rates. That may be true, but not on *my* 1.5mbps-3mbps DSL line, unless you take a very generous view of what broadcast quality should mean.) At some point, to be sure, compression must yield visible loss of quality: you can only go so far. How big is the problem? Consider how much data is actually in true HDTV pictures with surround sound, quite apart from multiple soundtracks, captioning and the like. The numbers are straightforward: Each frame is 1920x1080 pixels, each pixel requiring three bytes for color information. That's 6.22 megabytes per frame. At 24fps (film rate), that's 149 megabytes per second (**megabytes**, not megabits)—although broadcast TV is actually 60fps, but broadcast TV is never 1080p. Oh, let's not forget the sound: six channels of CD-quality sound is a little more than four megabytes per second—so let's round up to 155 megabytes per second. Blu-Ray, the only true 1080p medium around, requires 30 megabits, that is, 3.75 megabytes. So even at 24fps, the *least* compressed video you're ever likely to see these days has about a 41:1 compression ratio—in other words, more than 97% of the original information has been thrown away.
- Hoping to replace your hard disk with a solid-state drive [SSD] (or "flash drive" if you prefer)? Yes, SSDs can be faster than hard disks (depending on the software used to control them—they can also be a lot *slower* than hard disks). They're also a lot more expensive, and they're not actually closing the curve (that is, hard disks get cheaper faster

than SSDs do: SSDs basically follow Moore's Observation, and hard disk capacity-for-price has typically improved at a much faster rate). Oh, but they're more reliable, right? Not so, according to one review of data, noted in the February 2011 *PC World*—2.05% of SSDs were returned as nonfunctioning as compared to 1.94% of hard disk drives.

The CD-ROM Project Sometimes They Just Don't Work

Six CD-ROMs from two companies, all related to leadership, reviewed at two different times (the first group review was delayed). I'm hoping and expecting to see some better results next time around—but this time, I'm afraid there's very little good news.

ABC-CLIO Leaders Series

This review covers four titles, all from 1998: *Women Leaders: Rulers throughout History*; *Founding Leaders: Shapers of Modern Nations*; *Current Leaders: Rulers of Nations in the 1990s*; and *American Leaders: American Political Leaders, American Social Leaders, American Cultural Leaders*. I installed and tested *Women Leaders*; I'm fairly confident that my comments on it apply to all four discs, since they're all basically the same software with different resources.

That I reviewed these four CDs (and two ABC-CLIO ResourceLink CDs) at all is curious, as they were primarily intended for classroom use. So, for example, there are single-copy prices (\$49 each for three of these, \$129 for the fourth—which includes the equivalent of three titles), five-copy prices (no more than half as much as five single copies) and unlimited-use network prices.

When I originally reviewed these (in the February/March 1999 *Database Magazine*), I gave most of them low "excellent" ratings and the *American Leaders* title a "very good" rating. None of the four supports AutoPlay properly for installation or operation; installing several discs means installing "the same large files" repeatedly ("large" is a relative term—the entire installation for *Women Leaders* is about 10MB in 641 files); the forced install of ActiveX took a long time to check com-

ponents back then. Also, the programs would only run at 640x480.

Otherwise, I thought these were “fine products for their intended audience” and might work well in public libraries. They weren’t flashy (text and pictures), but they had a lot of good brief biographies accessible through several different paths, including timeline and searches (even text searches).

American Leaders includes 1,205 biographies totaling roughly a million words, “the equivalent of a 1,000-page biographical encyclopedia.” Biographies include some hyperlinks to maps, glossary items and other biographies and end with brief bibliographies. There are tools for printing and export and a notebook tool. Text is sans serif on a patterned background, impeding readability, but in general I thought these worked well.

As for the other three discs, *Founding Leaders* includes 304 biographies totaling some 300,000 words; *Current Leaders* includes 514 biographies totaling 250,000 words; and *Women Leaders* includes 380 brief biographies totaling some 140,000 words. That disc also has a few overviews. I liked these three better because they were more focused.

Installation and operation today

The install—done by double-clicking on Setup.exe on the CD-ROM—was fairly typical and took very little time.

Then I clicked on the program name in Start...and watched as my primary screen turned black or dark gray, with the taskbar nowhere to be seen. My secondary screen was also blank. The cursor worked just fine, and changed to a little hand in some areas of the screen, but nothing seemed to happen if I clicked on one of those invisible areas.

Right-clicking on my secondary display brought back the taskbar. From there, I could right-click on the program’s icon and apply compatibility settings. I did that, choosing XP compatibility, 640x480 resolution and 256 colors (since that’s what the user manual calls for). I can say that a novice user would be pretty freaked out at this point—especially with the taskbar gone (if it’s in Autohide mode) and *nothing* on the display.

Once I added compatibility settings, it worked. Sort of.

At first, the primary screen was filled with ghastly versions of color graphics, “dotty” as all

get-out but just good enough to see the control areas—and clicking on stuff finally got me to a biography. Within the biography, text was fine (sans and dull, but readable), while everything else was a mess. Then, for reasons I still don’t quite understand (maybe compatibility settings work in phases?), the screen flashed again and became a perfectly acceptable oversize VGA display—still 640x480, 256 colors, with no window controls and no taskbar (and certainly no ability to move the fixed window), but it looked fine.

Exiting and restarting yielded erratic results: Sometimes the ghastly version, sometimes the good if crude version. I also noticed that navigation through the system now seemed unintuitive—you could get places, but not necessarily along “natural” paths.

In practice, I can’t imagine using this disc for long. It’s too disruptive on a modern computer (these four are Windows-only but don’t run in contemporary windows—and how many people still use 8-bit color or 640x480 displays?) and feels clunky by contemporary standards. I didn’t try the other three, but since they all behaved identically in 1999, I doubt there would be significant differences now...except that biographies were considerably longer in the others.

Too bad, in a way. *Women Leaders* offers quite a list of women who were, at some level, rulers—from Adelaide of Salona through Begum Khaleda Zia (although the list actually runs from Ada through Zoë).

Contemporary alternatives

I only checked for *Women Leaders*. It’s not available, and it seems unlikely that the others are. This is a case where you’d expect online resources to provide far better alternatives, presumably for free.

Do they? Let’s stick with women leaders, an area that’s probably not covered as well as it should be. Both Bing and Google show www.guide2-womenleaders.com as the first plausible general resource for the phrase “women leaders.” That site seems to be a personal effort of Martin K.I Christensen, a Danish journalist, editor and PR person who is interested in women as leaders. The site does a credible job, although the biographies are even briefer than on the CD-ROM. Looking at the timelines, this site appears to have *more* women than the CD-ROM. I made no attempt to compare the two, although some names certainly appear on both lists. In fact,

this site is fairly impressive, including not only “rulers” but also presidential candidates and other important women in politics and religion.

For longer biographies, the obvious free online resource is Wikipedia. I checked four women leaders who had brief but useful biographies on the CD-ROM: Æthelflæd, Hinematiaro, Tiy, and Adelaide of Salona.

I came up empty on Hinematiaro: Apparently she was either not important enough for Wikipedia or appears under another name with no cross-reference. There’s not *much* of a listing in [guide2womenleaders](#) (“17??/18?? Paramount Chieftainess Hinematiaro of the Ngati Porou Tribe” in the page on New Zealand/Aotearoa leaders), but she does appear.

The others do better. Æthelflæd’s biography is probably comparable in length to that on the CD-ROM but has better links and bibliography. Tiy—appearing as Tiye—has what I suspect is a longer and better biography, with more photos and *many* more links. Adelaide of Salona—appearing as Adelaide del Vasto—has a biography that’s probably similar to the CD-ROM, with no photo, but does have more links and sources.

All in all, I’d say the combination of [guide2womenleaders](#) and Wikipedia is a more useful contemporary resource—and the price is right. For the other discs, I suspect there are combinations of resources that serve the same needs. These CD-ROMs would probably be well past their useful life...even if they worked a little better.

Worldcat.org shows 46 libraries holding *Women Leaders: Rulers Throughout History* and 26 or fewer for each of the other titles. I suppose those copies could potentially be useful, but only with some difficulty.

American Presidents

I reviewed these two Mentorom CD-ROMs (along with a couple of others) in the October/November 1997 *Database Magazine*, giving them a high “Very Good” score of 89. The two, sold at the time as a \$30 package, are *American Presidents: Shaping Modern America* and *American Presidents: The Cold War*. Each one is, in essence, a half-hour documentary narrated by Walter Cronkite—but with a “research mode” that links to lots of primary materials and historical summaries, with most material from presidential libraries and NARA. The

CD-ROMs lacked bibliographies and suggestions for further reading, and *Shaping Modern America* covered too much ground for much depth—but I thought they were a wonderful bargain and worthwhile as additions to American history collections, “providing a kind of history that enriches (but does not replace) books.” Do they still have any value 14 years later?

Installation and operation today

The booklet—which combines installation and overview with ads for other Mentorom titles—says you need a 486 with 8MB RAM, 3MB hard disk space, Windows 95 or Windows 3.1—and either an MPEG card (remember MPEG cards?) or Active Movie software. The CD-Rom comes with “a free copy of the Web browser Internet Explorer v.3.0” and, of course, Video for Windows if you have Windows 3.1. Will it even run on Windows 7?

No. Installation bombs out almost immediately with a mysterious error message—some obscure file with nothing to associate it with. Hmm. In the process, it managed to shut down a program I’d intended to leave running—without notice. Isn’t *that* special!

I could have pursued the issue, but chose not to. In 2011, frankly, a “half-screen” (320x480, probably) 15fps monaural documentary just isn’t going to excite anybody, especially not run full-screen.

Contemporary alternatives

Remarkably, there’s still a website for these CD-ROMs, copyright 1996 by International Thomson Multimedia and presumably not updated in many years. Ah, it *must* be 1996: a professional website has *blinking red text* as part of a centered-text paragraph. And various chunks of text have different colors, sometimes on a white background, sometimes on colored backgrounds—including a magnificent cluster, one part in grey-on-blue, one in black-on-red...and one, all underlined, in gold on purple. That third item (“Internet Hotlinks allow many records to link to World Wide Web sites containing related information”) *should* be a hotlink, since it’s all underlined...but it isn’t.

Otherwise a websearch for the product turns up a surprising variety of Russian sites and others like “American Corners Serbia”—and a community college site that appears to have a downloadable version of the video (I believe they also came out on VHS). It’s fair to say that this product has disappeared.

There's no lack of web resources on presidents, and I suspect that many of these primary materials (and probably many, many more) are readily available. All things considered, I don't regard the unworkability of these CD-ROMs as much of a failure.

My Back Pages Snobbery Ascendant

Long-time readers know that Michael Fremer writes for *Stereophile*, is adamantly pro-analog and anti-digital, and has a true love for *incredibly* expensive equipment, which always—to his mind—makes an enormous audible difference (his turntable sells for more than \$100,000, as one example).

He also reviews equipment for *Home Theater*, where he's nowhere near as resolutely anti-digital—but he's just as snobbish. In reviewing a modest speaker system (a mere \$58,390 as tested, but if you just want a stereo pair you could squeak by for \$27,000), he feels the need to comment on less grandiose speaker systems:

No wonder we live today in a world of fist-sized, tinny-sounding cubes augmented by puny, "long-throw" fart boxes posing as subwoofers.

Naturally, after Fremer got the usual kid-glove installation treatment from the manufacturer that helps assure that a reviewer will be wholly objective, he describes the system's bass as "stomach-churning" (in a *good* way) and seems to accept the manufacturer's claim of 13Hz lower limit, with the main speakers good down to 22Hz. Oddly enough, the magazine does do a little testing (independently of the reviews)—and the tests showed the -6dB point for the main speakers at a slightly less impressive 41Hz (not bad, but that's an octave higher)...and the subwoofer at 36Hz, barely any better at all.

I won't comment on the system's overall price—with speakers, it's hard to say whether there is any limit to potential performance improvements if you have an unlimited budget. Otherwise, you know, there are always fart boxes.

Vinyl's Back, CD's Gone

Speaking of Michael Fremer, he gives us the low-down on physical formats in his *Analog Corner* in the December 2010 *Stereophile*:

True, vinyl has come back, and spinning digital discs will either become extinct (CDs) or even nicher than vinyl (SACD)...

Got that? Vinyl *is back, baby!*—and CDs are becoming extinct. Anyone care to wager when vinyl LPs will actually outsell CDs? There's a song "The Twelfth of Never..."

Incandescence!

From that same December 2010 *Stereophile*, that's the title of Art Dudley's "Listening" column—and my, what a heap it is! Dudley's on about the importance of really good AC cords, and refers to those of us who doubt that AC cords make a huge difference in playback quality as "technocoders." By which he means, I guess, people who regard technology as something other than a belief system made up of unicorns farting rainbows.

He goes into elaborate descriptions of a \$600 power cord, with its "140 individual conductors, all drawn from CDA-101 copper" that are "wound in a patented counter-rotating, RFI-canceling helix pattern...and cryogenically treated at the factory."

Skipping all the blather about how much these fancy cords improved his system—"in every case, with every record I tried, my turntables sounded markedly better when their AC was conditioned by the Shunyata"—we get to the *really* fun stuff: When he decides to plug his iMac into the \$5,000 "V-ray power distributor." And there was a *big difference*—"Singers had more body, instruments more substance and texture." Then it gets a little loony: He adds the \$600 AC cord and notices that the wallpaper on his iMac suddenly *improved markedly*: "The resolution and contrast apparent in that image had increased, unambiguously and without doubt. I was stunned." Who needs a faster or better PC? Just buy a \$5,000 power distributor and a \$600 AC cord and watch everything look and sound better!

He was stunned. So was I, stunned enough to write "Bullshit!" in the margin.

Why Your Next PC Will Be a Tablet

That's an actual story title and it's enough all by itself to land this January 2011 *PC World* article in the snark section of *Cites & Insights*. No "might be," not even an absurdly overstated "should be." Nope—it's *all over* for every other form factor, according to this ridiculous article. When the second sentence says "The primary computer for most us-

ers today is not a PC; it's a phone," we're in strange territory anyway.

That Ain't No Subwoofer

The writeup of the Pioneer XW-NAS3 iPod Dock (\$449) in the December 2010 *Sound & Vision* is just one example of a growing trend I find bizarre: Labeling speakers "subwoofers" when they can't even be very good midwoofers. In this case, it's a 4" lower-midrange speaker with a 30watt amplifier, to add a little oomph to the two 2" "full-range drivers" in the device. The writeup doesn't include an actual frequency-response display, to be sure; if it did, I would bet that there would be no useful response anywhere within the range that an *actual* subwoofer handles (typically 20 to 80Hz).

The Perils of Plasma

I sometimes wonder why PC magazines review TVs at all. A big article in the December 2010 *PC World* doesn't provide an answer, particularly when there's a paragraph on plasma sets like this one:

Plasma screens are less expensive to manufacture, and they look okay, but even plasma sets from veteran TV manufacturers like LG and Panasonic fall short in comparison to LCD screens. Stick to plasmas if you want a big TV at a relatively low price, but don't expect the set to deliver color or motion nearly as well as a good LCD would.

Wow. Since the best LCD sets are finally delivering motion with a smoothness that *approaches* that of plasma sets, "or motion" seems to have come directly out of left field. As for color—well, if you're sitting more than a few feet away from dead center, you start to lose color on most LCD displays, but other than that I can only assume the writer's talking about *brightness*, since good plasma sets are at least as pure in color rendition as good LCD sets. What is clear: Most LCD sets are *brighter* until you tone them down a lot. This paragraph is simply nonsense, but gave them an excuse for reviewing only the cheapo plasmas and not the high-quality ones that aren't significantly cheaper than LCD. (Yes, we own a plasma, purchased after direct comparison with the best LCDs. The only reason we weren't planning to buy plasma, excess power consumption, has largely disappeared with contemporary sets.)

Nobody Blogs Anymore

I could comment on the February 2011 *PC World* "46 Sites You Can't Live Without" in general—apparently PC journalists are prone to die for the most trivial of reasons, if they actually can't live without all 46 of these sites—but I'll focus on one prime piece of nonsense in the writeup of Social Sites and Aggregators (where *you can't live* without Tweetdeck, Meebo, Posterous and Tumblr): "Thanks to Facebook, few people bother to maintain a traditional blog anymore."

Really? *Thanks to Facebook?* Because it's such a great tool for essays and for people being able to read your stuff without establishing a reciprocal "friends" relationship, right? I've heard Twitter blamed for a decrease in blogging, but *Facebook?* What's next? "Thanks to Facebook, few people read *PC World* anymore." "Thanks to Facebook, few people watch TV anymore." Seems equally reasonable to me.

A Million Little Wikipedias

Lore Sjöberg does it again with this September 23, 2009 *Underwire* piece at *Wired.com*, with "Grass Is Always Greener on a Million Little Wikipedias." He notes that, not only are there Wikipedias in many different languages (including, at times, some created ones), there's the *Simple English Wikipedia* (simple.wikipedia.org) for people who can't deal with big vocabularies or complex sentences.

Simple English Wikipedia uses short sentences. It uses a simple vocabulary. Here are the first two sentences from the article on vocabulary: "Vocabulary means a list of words. Someone's vocabulary is all the words that he or she knows." (I hope that article is a bad example of editorial quality—here's one remarkable paragraph in full: "A way of looking up unknown vocabulary can be done with a Dictionary or a Multi-word dictionary." That's not Simple English; it's just plain wrong.)

Lore compares the first paragraph for "grass" in the regular Wikipedia with the start of the simple version. Since Wikipedia articles change all the time, I'll quote the first paragraph of each one as of March 3, 2011.

English-language Wikipedia:

Grasses, or more technically graminoids, are monocotyledonous, usually herbaceous plants with narrow leaves growing from the base. They include the "true grasses", of the Poaceae (or Gra-

mineae) family, as well as the sedges (Cyperaceae) and the rushes (Juncaceae). The true grasses include cereals, bamboo and the grasses of lawns (turf) and grassland. Sedges include many wild marsh and grassland plants, and some cultivated ones such as water chestnut (*Eleocharis dulcis*) and papyrus sedge (*Cyperus papyrus*). Uses for graminoids include food (as grain, sprouted grain, shoots or rhizomes), drink (beer, whisky), pasture for livestock, thatch, paper, fuel, clothing, insulation, construction, sports turf, basket weaving and many others.

No question: That's *not* simple. Here's the first paragraph of the Simple English version:

Grass is a type of plant. A common kind of grass is used to cover the ground, in a lawn. If it gets too cold or dry, lawn grass turns brown.

That's certainly simpler. (Yes, both paragraphs have changed since September 2009. The Simple one originally included deeper information now part of the second paragraph: "There is a family of plants called the 'grass family.' The plants in the grass family are called grasses.")

Lore notes that the Klingon Wikipedia was "given the kibosh," regrets that, and offers some other Wikipedias he'd like to see, such as the Sullenly Sarcastic Wikipedia, the Limerick Wikipedia, the Digression Wikipedia (hmm—I could contribute to that one!), the Hand-Drawn Yard Sale Sign Wikipedia...and what I sometimes think may be the ultimate goal of Wikipedia, the Excessively Neutral Point of View Wikipedia. The first paragraph on grass from ENPV Wikipedia:

Grass, according to many people who are scientists, or who are at least defined as scientists by what many people consider the scientific community, is a plant, although there are those who consider the distinction between plants and animals an artificial distinction and would classify them as "living things," or "objects," or "observable ideas." There appear to be up to five or more people, give or take up to four or more, who post to Plant Conspiracy, which most people would consider a message board, who claim to deny that grasses exist, and who say that what we call grass is actually a very unusually shaped species of terrier. Most people would agree that many people think that these people are what would normally be considered nuts.

The Wikipedia Paradox

Since we're having a little fun with Wikipedia, here's Michael Nielsen on November 16, 2009 at

Michael Nielsen (michaelnielsen.org), noting that Wikipedia uses the criterion of notability to determine whether a subject deserves an entry.

Question 1: What's the most notable subject that's not notable enough for inclusion in Wikipedia?

Let's assume for now that this question has an answer ("The Answer"), and call the corresponding subject X. Now, we have a second question whose answer is not at all obvious.

Question 2: Is subject X notable merely by being The Answer?

If the answer to Question 2 is "no", then there's no problem, and we can all go home.

If the answer to Question 2 is "yes", well, we have a contradiction, and in a manner similar to the interesting number paradox, it follows that Question 1 must have no answer, and so every conceivable subject must meet Wikipedia's notability criterion.

Take that, deletionists!

Nielsen then shows what makes the question so amusing—and notability such an odd concept: The answer to Question 2 depends on where something appears. If it's on your blog, the answer is No—it's not notable. If you convene a conference on the topic and have published proceedings in a prestigious journal, the answer is certainly Yes. So, for this paradox itself, whether it's a paradox depends on where it's been published.

There's more to the discussion...and there's a long, long stream of comments getting into some fairly deep logical and philosophical issues. I'd call this nerd humor.

Masthead

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