

Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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Bibs & Blather

Coming Soon: A Special Offer

The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008: A Lateral Look is almost ready. As I'm preparing this issue of *Cites & Insights*, I'm also doing final readthroughs of the book. Before or shortly after this issue appears, I'll complete that process, upload the book and cover files and order my proof copy from Lulu.

With luck, the book should be available for sale in very late November or early December. I'll announce it on *Walt at Random* as soon as it is available.

The special offer

The book will be priced at \$22.50—but only for a few weeks. At some point before the 2009 ALA Midwinter Meeting, I'll reset the price to \$35.00. If and when there's an Amazon/CreateSpace edition, that edition will cost \$35.00.

Even with Lulu's shipping charges, most of you will save money by ordering from Lulu between now and January 16, 2009. (The reprice might not happen that day; it will definitely happen by January 22, 2009 unless something goes badly wrong.)

I think it's a good book, easily worth the \$35. Not that I'm biased or anything...

There will, of course, be lots more information about the book on the blog when it's published and probably in the January 2009 *Cites & Insights*, probably with a cover shot. Meanwhile, watch the blog and save some money.

Writing about Reading

This issue could have been a single-essay special, and in some ways it is. The primary essay takes up most of the issue, with a few pages devoted to the continued RETROSPECTIVE and a couple for MY BACK PAGES.

Even at that length, I covered less than half the material I planned to. Does that herald a new section? I'm not sure. With the growing overlaps I'm seeing among the various running sections of *C&I*, I'm beginning to wonder whether it would be easier to drop most of them entirely—but that seems a little radical. (How much overlap? Consider the Google lawsuit settlement: It fits in the ongoing Google Book Search/Open Content Alliance thread, has huge copyright implications, relates in some ways to libraries and scholarly access—and certainly plays a role in making it work. More about all that later; just how much later isn't certain.)

Volume 8: Not Done Yet

If you're inclined to bind the year's *Cites & Insights*, hold on—the volume isn't quite complete yet. The index and title page should appear in two or three weeks, maybe sooner.

Or you can buy a paperback version of the whole volume with a snazzy cover...probably.

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Other Book News

I suspect there will be a Lulu version of *Cites & Insights* Volume 8, probably \$29.50, and maybe it will sell as well as previous volumes (two copies each—but I wasn't anticipating much more). Will volumes 6 and 7 continue to be available? Unclear.

What is clear: *Public Library Blogs* and *Academic Library Blogs* are going away fairly soon, at least in print form. The PDF downloads from Lulu might stick around for a while, possibly at a slightly lower price. But if you want either book, I'd suggest buying them before the end of the year.

Sponsorship and Research

After some thought, I went forward with the research for *The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008* on my own—because it was a fascinating project and one I thought would be worthwhile.

I believe it would be worth continuing that project in future years. I'm not sure I can justify doing that on my own, when I could be doing freelance writing, designing courses or seminars that could yield income or greeting folks at some big-box store. (Well, maybe not the latter, at least for now.)

There are other potential projects where I believe the results would be worthwhile, but they're not interesting enough that I would even *consider* doing them as labors of love.

The obvious answer is sponsorship. Such sponsorship would:

- Make it feasible to release *The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008: A Lateral Look* as a free PDF or print version priced marginally over production cost.
- Make it feasible to publish key conclusions (and, indeed, portions of most chapters) in *Cites & Insights* (or in a sponsor's venues).
- Assure an ongoing project to see how English-language liblogs fare in the future, with annual updates.
- At some levels of sponsorship, make it feasible to carry out useful studies of library blogs and publish the results free as PDF or at marginal cost in print. (Those studies just won't happen without sponsorship: I think they'd be useful, but don't find them nearly as fascinating as the liblog studies. Then again, without sponsorship, I don't know whether I'll keep on with the liblog study.)

I've done a quick writeup of what various levels of sponsorship would involve. You'll find it at waltcrawford.name/sponsorship.htm; I won't repeat that text here. (It doesn't include dollar amounts. Those are available on request. They're not big figures by most standards. They may be negotiable.)

Possible sponsors could include regional networks, library vendors of almost any stripe, foundations, library schools, publishers... But, frankly, I'm rarely sure just who I'd approach.

If you happen to think this is a good idea and know someone who would be a plausible sponsor (and I wouldn't rule out any name in advance), please let them know about this post.

I love doing this stuff and I'm good at it. I'm also dealing with the economic realities of a decimated retirement fund and where my time and energy are

best spent (outside of my existing part-time job). Maybe this will help clarify matters. Maybe not.

Perspective

Writing about Reading

Warning: This essay is more than ten thousand words long. It may contain long and complex sentences offering up a variety of ideas, some of which are not resolved neatly into simple black-and-white conclusions or catchphrases, in a sequence that's not neatly linear but involves a number of digressions and semi-related topics. There may be words of more than two syllables. I may quote writers who tend toward sesquipedalian polysyllabic styling more than I am inclined to do even in my most rococo moods, and I have very little motivation to reduce such writers' eloquence to my own relatively simplistic verbiage. (I tried to work "rodomontade" into that sentence—which is only 49 words long—but failed. Those whose redundancy detectors went into the red zone on "sesquipedalian polysyllabic" are hereby congratulated and excused from reading this warning.) If you believe any worthwhile topic can be encompassed in a neat series of bullet points or a 750-word commentary, if novellas strike you as too long for fiction, you may find this PERSPECTIVE and some of the comments included on the indigestible side. In short, heed the title of Dorothea Salo's blog. **You have been warned.**

They're at it again.

The doom-cryers who assert we don't read any more—or, if we do, it's not the right *kind* of reading, not the literary reading we all used to do every single day back in the Golden Age of universal literacy.

The heavy internet users who think "we" (they?) can no longer think deeply—and blame Google.

The gleeful mediaphiles who hail the end of print literacy as not only happening (and inevitable) but a Very Good Thing.

The lovers of history who believe we'll all be better off once we get back to man's natural state of entirely oral/aural communication.

And those who somehow became convinced that the Big Publishing approach to book publishing in the 1980s and 1990s is the only way publishing can or should work—and decry the "death" of New York-centric commercial publishing as an event of grave cultural importance.

The names may be new. Some of the arguments may be novel. A number of the basic ideas, which

might be summarized as either **GTHIAH** if you're one of that crowd or **TWPLF** if you're in another crowd, go back decades. (Going To Hell In A Handbasket; The Wonderful Post-Literate Future. Next question?)

This end-of-year issue seems like a good time to note and comment on a few of these discussions over the past 12 or 13 months, harking back as well to some of the predecessors. I do so with a couple of caveats which *do* belong in bullet points:

- For the last few months and probably the next week or two, I've been a poster child for reading fewer books. I haven't been to my library in weeks (months?) and, other than reading an entire preliminary book from the screen in order to prepare a foreword, I haven't done much book reading since our cruise in June. My excuse? I've been *writing* a book along with everything else—and doing a few hundred hours of research in order to write the book. When the book's done, I expect to get back to more long-form reading.
- It would seem reasonable that the most cogent arguments for a post-literate world would be offered as videos (and not just talking heads) or in some other non-textual fashion. For all I know, that may be true—but I'm only citing text sources. That feels wrong, just as reading long essays about our inability to cope with long text forms has an odd feel to it.

The NEA Strikes Again

It's called *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*. You'll find it at www.arts.gov/research/ToRead.pdf. It's 98 pages long and came out a year ago (November 2007). It claims to add "vastly more data from numerous sources" to the 2004 *Reading at Risk*. Here's the key message:

The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. These negative trends have more than literary importance. As this report makes clear, the declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications.

How does one summarize this disturbing story? As Americans, especially younger Americans, read less, they read less well. Because they read less well, they have lower levels of academic achievement. (The shameful fact that nearly one-third of American teenagers drop out of school is deeply connected to declining literacy and reading comprehension.) With lower levels of read-

ing and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement. Significantly worse reading skills are found among prisoners than in the general adult population. And deficient readers are less likely to become active in civic and cultural life, most notably in volunteerism and voting.

As a sidenote, one wonders *how* this report was prepared, given that the capital "T"s in the PDF come out as "s" or "sh" when I copy-and-paste...much as though the PDF is a scanned image of a printed document, which is so bizarre for a contemporary publication as to almost defy belief. But that's irrelevant to the discussion at hand.

Another quote from the preface: "Whatever the benefits of newer electronic media, they provide no measurable substitute for the intellectual and personal development initiated and sustained by frequent reading." The number one activity on one of those "newer electronic media," namely the internet, is...reading. At least it's reading as *I* understand the term: Taking in a stream of words visually with the expectation of drawing meaning from them.

Dana Gioia is now certain he's won over any of us doubters from 2004: "**It is no longer reasonable to debate whether the problem exists.** It is now time to become more committed to solving it or face the consequences. The nation needs to focus more attention and resources on an activity both fundamental and irreplaceable for democracy." (Emphasis added.) Apparently people (certainly including me) concluded that the 2004 report wasn't convincing; the job of the new report is to overcome any doubts. Unfortunately, to do so, it appears that NEA "cooked the data," as one knowledgeable commenter notes.

Digging in to the details

First, let's browse through the report noting a few items. Starting with the executive summary, the "clear" picture painted in the introduction becomes fuzzier. "Americans are reading less" suddenly translates to "young adults are reading *fewer books*"—which actually translates to "fewer books not required for work or school." We soon see "read for fun" repeated as a key measure...intermixed with "read a book" and "literary reading."

Which is it? Reading *at all*, reading *for fun*, reading *a book*, or reading "literature" (with NEA's famously narrow definition of what constitutes literature)?

How bad is the crisis? If we accept the numbers at face value, there's an asserted *sales* decline from 2000 to 2006 of 100 million books from 1.6 billion

books in 2000: A six percent decline over six years. Wouldn't it be interesting if libraries showed an *increase* of more than 100 million circulation over those six years? (Interestingly, official government figures show roughly 2.3 billion trade books sold in 2006 in the U.S., out of a total 3.08 billion books sold—but I'm sure there's *some* set of numbers that backs up NEA's assertion.)

Guess what: According to ALA's figures, public library circulation in the U.S. increased by nearly 300 million items from 2000 to 2004—and I'm nearly certain it's continued to rise, even before the current economic problems. Even if only half of those items are books, that means increased library circulation more than makes up for any decline in book sales.

There are lots of tables in this report, all crying doom—and some of them use interesting tricks. One table showing distress about declining “average prose literacy scores” of adults between 1992 and 2003 carefully uses a *numeric* decline rather than a percentage decline, possibly because the asserted declines for people with bachelor's and graduate degrees are on the order of 4% or less (over 11 years)—and claimed declines in “prose literacy” for adults with less education are on the order of 2% to 3%. At that level of decline over more than a decade, you want to start asking questions about sample size and probable error, while noting that “-13” sounds a lot more impressive than “-3.8%.” The next table wholly befuddles me: One that claims that only 31% of people with bachelor's degrees are “proficient in reading prose.” At that point, don't you want to know more about what “proficient” actually *means*?

Lots of stuff in the report is likely to be true but not very startling. If you read for fun more often, you're likely to be a better writer: I don't doubt that. People who read proficiently are more likely to have white-collar jobs: Seems likely. “Literary readers” are more likely to “enrich our cultural and civic life”—that is, to attend The Right Kind of Event (art museums, concerts, plays: while jazz and sporting events make it into the list, rock concerts do not). People who don't read well are more likely to drop out of high school: I believe that.

Since when isn't it reading if it's not a book?

As noted earlier, I haven't read a lot of books in the last few months. I suspect I haven't read anything since July 2008 that NEA would count as a literary book. Does that mean I haven't been reading? Absolutely not—and it doesn't mean I haven't been reading literature (I read all three of the most widely-

distributed science fiction magazines, although I suppose proper NEA types would dismiss science fiction as Not Really Literature).

The deeper I go into the report, the more I wonder about the mix of sources and what was actually being asked. At times, it seems clear that only books count. At times, it's clear that only “reading for fun” or “leisure reading” really *counts* as reading—and I'm not sure I'd classify time spent reading the NEA report, for example, as either of those. (It's surely not fun, and although I'm not being paid directly for reading it, I wouldn't call this leisure either.) I'm guessing—and it's a guess I can't resolve—that most teenagers don't count reading on the web as “reading for fun” because they don't *think* of it as primarily reading. Certainly, the frequent discussion of “pages” seems to discount anything that's not print.

Much of this seems to come from a Kaiser study, *Generation M*, which dates back to 2005. I read that study and commented on it briefly in the Mid-Fall 2005 issue of *Cites & Insights* (5:13)—and what I gleaned from the report was that most teens were doing quite a bit of reading. Ignoring reading for school purposes, 47% of them read a magazine on a typical day, 46% read a book, 34% read a newspaper—and they spent almost as much time reading *print* for purposes other than school as they did playing videogames.

“In a typical day, nearly three out of four young people report reading for pleasure.” That's what I took from the Kaiser report, and I found it hard to read that as “reading is doomed” or anything of the sort. But I don't have NEA's mindset. Table 1E in the NEA report chooses a different source, a UCLA study comparing 1994 and 2006—which, oddly enough, concludes that (ahem) three out of four high school seniors read for pleasure every week. But that's down from 80% a dozen years earlier (1994)—and NEA emphasizes the 25% increase in “non-readers.”

Negativity will see you through

I am impressed (but not surprised) at the report's ability to twist any *positive* study to show a negative outcome. Indiana University runs a poll on leisure *book* reading (note again: *book* reading)—and found that college seniors surveyed in 2007 reported considerably more leisure book reading than did college freshman. Somehow, this becomes bad news because they're not reading *enough*.

You won't be surprised that there's an approving quote from Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which 23 years ago concluded that print was dead:

“Print is now merely a residual epistemology, and it will remain so, aided to some extent by the computer, and newspapers and magazines that are made to look like television screens. Like the fish who survive a toxic river and the boatmen who sail on it, there still dwell among us those whose sense of things is largely influenced by older and clearer waters.”

In 1985, Postman said “To be sure, there are still readers and there are many books published” just before issuing the dismal comment above. In 2008, there are *many more* books published and sold than there were in 1985 (for example, public library circulation rose from 1.07 billion to 2.01 billion between 1985 and 2004, and has continued to rise since then; U.S. book sales apparently grew from 2.36 billion in 2001 to 3.08 billion in 2006). There are also, to be sure, many more titles published each year. Perhaps Postman or NEA believes nobody’s actually reading all those books sold and circulated, but I’m unwilling to do so—and the numbers indicate strongly, to all but the most devoted Cassandras, that book reading has expanded quite substantially from 1985 to 2006. (Even NEA can’t help but note that there were three times as many new titles in 2005 as in 1995—but only after highlighting a tiny drop in new titles from 2004 to 2005. After that, it’s interesting that NEA chooses book sales figures that are substantially lower than the BISG figures the Census Bureau regards as authoritative, reducing sales from around \$50 billion to around \$29 billion. I wouldn’t say there’s a bias toward negativity here but...well, yes, I would say that.) Oh look: Here’s a graph with a non-zero baseline, to dramatize a supposed drop in “consumer book” unit sales—a drop that is, in general, a slow rise. (There are lots of defective graphs in this book.)

When slow growth equals disastrous decline

What constitutes a dramatic drop in book sales? A compound annual **growth rate** for unit sales of one category of books that’s projected at 0.2%...even though the growth rate was 1.3% (per year) from 1997 to 2002 and 2.4% from 1992 to 1996. Slowing growth in an old, relatively mature industry only constitutes a disastrous decline in very special thinking.

A bit later, NEA’s special definition of “reading” becomes clearer: “A sustained act of participation with a text, an act requiring great resources of memory, imagination, and intent questioning.” NEA only cares about *the right kind* of reading, the kind that’s part of The Arts (as NEA defines The Arts). Reading *Cites & Insights* doesn’t count. Reading even the longest essays on blogs *really* doesn’t count. Reading Churchill or Emerson is not *real* reading.

A few pages later, we get a nice slap at blogs—including blogs maintained by newspapers. Ah, and here’s good old Sven Birkerts to assure us We’re All Doomed. It’s clear that “screen reading” is an inferior beast. (Maybe, maybe not, but it’s still reading.)

Later, the report gets back to those “reading scale scores” for 17-year-olds. Just how bad has the “decline” been from 1984 to 2004? The number (whatever it means) has gone from 289 in 1984 to 285 in 2004—which doesn’t even make a dramatic drop when you start the plot at 275 points (as NEA does). After all, that’s a 1.3% drop over 20 years. Even if you start at the supposed high point (290 in 1988-1992), it’s only a 1.7% drop. The caption claims that a change of 1.3% is “significant.” Really? Statistical significance and real-world significance aren’t the same thing, and I doubt the real-world significance of a 1.3% drop over 20 years. (But see later: Turns out that even the 1.3% drop is cooked data.)

Another chart manages to be much more alarming—showing *huge* increases between 1999 and 2004 for 9-year-olds and pretty dramatic decreases for 17-year-olds. How? By reporting the *point change* from 1984. This isn’t chartjunk: It’s crisis-mongering.

Admittedly I just find some assertions unbelievable—such as the one that only 13% of adults were “proficient” at prose literacy in 2003 (as opposed to 15% in 1992). I’m sorry, but I flat-out disbelieve a definition of prose proficiency that excludes 87% of American adults. But then, part of it is “compare and contrast the meaning of metaphors in a poem,” so maybe I’m just too stupid to appreciate what’s happening here. I will cheerfully admit that I spend very little time comparing and contrasting poetic metaphors. I resent any suggestion that I’m semi-literate.

Libraries? Unreliable

The report simply *ignores* library circulation—and sweeps it away with a comment about the lack of reliable national figures on book circulation as opposed to other media. That’s a nice tactic to avoid the clear indication that Americans read a *lot* of library books and that those numbers are growing.

Similarly, NEA has cherry-picked the most negative possible sales figures, interpretations and graphic presentations to make this as much of a Crisis Report as the 2004 jeremiad—so that Gioia can assert that there can no longer be any debate.

Maybe that’s right. Maybe NEA—at least under Gioia’s leadership—is so intent on its message of declining literacy (as NEA defines literacy) that there’s no point debating NEA’s reports.

Some blog comments

Barbara Fister posted “Kindling debate” on November 19, 2007 at *ACRLLog*. She notes that “the new NEA jeremiad, er, report on how reading is going to hell in a handbasket (again)” came out on the same day as Amazon’s Kindle. “So, if nobody reads anymore, is Kindle—or, as *Newsweek* puts it in swooningly glowing terms, ‘the future of reading’—doomed?”

Doesn’t matter. “According to the NEA, using a Kindle isn’t reading... The only reading that counts is in print and for no particular purpose other than pleasure.” She notes that NEA’s report is ahistorical: It cites a supposed decrease over the past decade but that’s almost certainly higher than fifty years ago. (A 1955 Gallup poll showed all of 17% of Americans reading books.)

Fister concludes that there’s more skepticism this time around than in 2004, “the last time they reported the sky was falling.” I think that’s true. I think there was less commentary in general. “And given the vigor with which the Kindle gadget is being debated, the death of reading—and books—seems to be greatly exaggerated.” (I added the first comment on the post, noting that I *should* be dissecting the NEA jeremiad but, given its length, “I’d rather, you know, read a book”—and that whenever I went to the local library, I saw loads of people checking out lots of those antiques and bringing them back. “I guess they must have really interesting bindings.” Kim Leeder objected to the idea that an hour a day reading blogs and news online isn’t real reading—and Roger Hiles suggested the “1475 edition” of the NEA report, lamenting the decline in reading illuminated manuscripts.)

Fister points to a post that same day by Linda Braun on YALSA’s blog, “Defining reading.” Braun questions the definition of “reading” and how it weakens the NEA report. “If we as a society don’t seriously investigate how we define reading, and recognize that reading formats other than books is reading, we are going to alienate many teens...”

Be careful not to make teens feel that just because they are reading something online, and not reading a traditional format such as a paperback book, that that reading doesn’t count. Let teens know that reading in a variety of formats is something you respect and value.

It’s not just teens. I resent any implication that I’ve become aliterate because I haven’t gone through a print book in the last few months. I’ve probably read the equivalent of at least two books a week (that is, 100,000 to 200,000 words), between newspapers, magazines, blog posts and other online sources—including the drudgery of that 98-page NEA PDF.

Fister followed up on December 1 with “Ketchup is a form of exercise,” also on *ACRLLog*. She notes a couple of *if:book* discussions on the NEA “threnody” and that one very common form of academic reading is “lateral” rather than linear—“comparing texts, following footnotes, pursuing leads from one line of thought to another, books spread out for easier access.” But that’s not *real* reading, Barbara: If you’re not immersed in a novel, poem, short story or play (which should be performed, not read—but never mind), you’re not *really* reading.

We’ll get to the *if:book* pieces (and the article linked to) in a moment, but first a couple more library posts. Alice Snearly at *It’s all good* posted “Morte de reader?” on January 21, 2008 and wondered about NEA’s definition of reading. The comments are delightful. Patricia Martin offers a lovely comment on both NEA reports:

The NEA has had a hard time selling the data in both reports to researchers who find that the results are mixed. Certainly reading has increased across formats. Whether book reading has declined, in particular the classics, or reading in digital platforms is declining is not clear. *The NEA is using a tried and true tactic for increasing its budget, which succeeded.* They created a lot of anxiety around a supposed middle-class illiteracy crisis and earned a budget increase to solve it. Not that more funds to the NEA is a bad thing, it just tells us something about NEA’s intentions with the research. [Emphasis added]

That comment explains a lot. George Needham is irked by other aspects of the NEA reports and others of that kind:

The thing that irks me about these “death of reading” jeremiads is that the authors always seem to assume there was some halcyon era when all people did was sit around reading for pleasure. That is such a silly notion, and so patently false to anyone with a sense of history or sociology, that you wonder why anyone takes these people seriously.

Stephen Abram posted “Reading down or up? Not” on November 25, 2007 at *Stephen’s lighthouse*. It’s a long post on the NEA report, mostly citing some of Stephen Krashen’s comments on NEA’s figures and the surveys behind them. Krashen has done deeper study of the numbers than I have here and reaches similar conclusions: NEA’s cherry-picking years, graphical methods and other means to establish a crisis.

if:book on the NEA report

On November 29, 2007 Ben Vershbow posted “the NEA’s misreading of reading,” pointing to Matthew G. Kirschenbaum’s *Chronicle of higher education* critique of NEA’s report (which I don’t have access to). Some quotes from Vershbow’s post:

Though clearly offered with the best of intentions, the report demonstrates an astonishingly simplistic view of what reading is and where it is and isn't occurring. Overflowing with bar graphs and charts measuring hours and minutes spent reading within various age brackets, the study tries to let statistics do the persuading, but fails at almost every turn to put these numbers in their proper social or historical context, or to measure them adequately against other widespread forms of reading taking place on computers and the net.

If we're to believe Patricia Martin, the first clause in that paragraph may be far too kind. But never mind...

The study speaks, as Kirschenbaum puts it, "as though there is but a single, idealized model of reading from which we have strayed"—a leisurely, literary sort of reading embodied by that classic image of the solitary reader hunched over a book in deep concentration. Kirschenbaum rightly argues that this way of reading is simply one of a complicated and varied set of behaviors that have historically operated around texts. More to the point, many of these alternative forms — skimming, browsing, lateral reading, non-linear reading, reading which involves writing (glossing, annotation etc.) to name some — today happen increasingly in digital contexts, constituting what Kirschenbaum refers to broadly as a grand "remaking of reading." The NEA document takes little of this into account...

There's certainly cause for concern about what might be lost as deep extended reading of deep extensive books declines, and in their crude way the NEA's stats and figures do tell a worrying tale of shifting cultural priorities. Indeed, the most appealing aspect of *To Read or Not to Read* is its passionate commitment to a set of humanistic values: sustained thinking, personal and moral growth, a critical outlook, the cultivation of knowledge. Few would disagree that these are things that ought to be held onto in the face of relentless technological change and a rapacious commercial culture, but to insist that the book and one particular romanticized notion of reading must be the sole vessels for transporting these values into the future seems both naïve and needlessly limiting.

Among commenters, Nancy Kaplan gets back to the data—and as with others who poke at it, finds curiosities. The treatment of 17-year-old reading proficiency tests distorts the data, showing a trend "where none exists" and dramatizing that non-trend. She links to a proper presentation of the same data over the entire span of the tests—but that accurate, even if non-zero-baseline, graph simply won't support a crisis theory. Another source used to claim a decline in reading proficiency says, in the original report, that there *were no statistically significant changes* in adult prose literacy between 1992 and 2003, a quote that distinctly does *not* appear in NEA's use of the data. Kaplan ends:

There is ample evidence that people are reading many, many words. Just not, perhaps, so much in printed

books. The Center for the Future of the Book is pursuing important directions for digital reading environments and it is vital that many such experiments take place. It is equally vital that we not get ourselves bamboozled by distorted and cherry-picked data.

Cherry-picking and distortion became obvious even to my unsophisticated eyes and without going back to source data. "Bamboozle" is a nice term for what NEA seems to be doing.

On November 30, 2007, Vershbow posted a longer critique by Nancy Kaplan (who, for the record, is Executive Director of the School of Information Arts and Technologies at the University of Baltimore) under "reading responsibly: nancy kaplan on the NEA's data distortion." It's quite a post. A few excerpts:

The [NEA's] entire argument...depends on the ability to demonstrate both that reading proficiency is declining and that the number of people who choose to read books in their leisure time is also declining. From those two trends, the NEA draws some inferences about what declines in reading books and declines in reading proficiency mean for the nation as a whole...

Despite the numerous charts, graphs and tables in *To Read or Not to Read*, a careful and responsible reading of the complete data provided by the NAEP and the NAAL [source data for the NEA report] undermine the conclusions the NEA draws. Two examples of problematic uses of primary data sets will illustrate the issues.

Her first example, also given in her comment, shows the distortion in the 17-year-old proficiency graph. If you look at the original data, you find that the 2004 score is *the same* as the 1971 score: There simply is *no* downward trend over the long term. Her second example is one that also struck me: Taking a truncated set of data for 17-year-olds and 9-year-olds and changing the scale to exaggerate differences.

Misleading graphs based on manipulated data are not the only fudge factor the NEA employs...

Expanding on the NAAL report's summary that "between 1992 and 2003, there were no statistically significant changes in average prose...literacy for the total population ages 16 and older..." Kaplan notes that the report even explained the supposed declines among adults with bachelor's degrees and graduate degrees, declines highlighted in the NEA report:

How could prose literacy scores decrease at every level of education beyond high school without a decrease in the overall score? This pattern is called Simpson's Paradox. The answer is that the relative size of the groups changed. From 1992 to 2003, the percentage of adults with postsecondary education increased and the percentage of adults who did not complete high school decreased. The increase in the percentage of adults with postsecondary education, who, on average, had higher prose scores than

adults who did not complete high school, offsets the fact that average prose literacy scores declined at every level of educational attainment beyond high school.

Could one suggest that pushing more people through college may result in more people who don't compare metaphors in poetry with great proficiency?

There is little doubt that modern information economies require many more proficient readers than older industrial economies did. Because of changes in the nature and conditions of work, declining proficiency in reading among American adults might cause some concern if not alarm. It is surely also the case that educational institutions at every level can and should do a better job. Yet there is little evidence of an actual decline in literacy rates or proficiency. As a result, the NEA's core argument breaks down. Even if we assume that high school seniors in 1971 spent more of their leisure time reading books than today's high school seniors do (although there is no data going back far enough to support the case one way or the other), there simply is no evidence that today's youngsters don't read as well as Mr. Gioia's peers did at a comparable age. From the information available, we simply cannot construct any relationship, let alone a causal one, between voluntary reading of books and reading proficiency.

Reading well, doing well, and doing good may exhibit strong correlations but the underlying dynamics producing each of the three effects may have little to do with what Americans choose to do in their leisure time. Read responsibly, the data underlying the NEA's latest report simply do not support Mr. Gioia's assertions.

Like many other federal agencies under our current political regime, the National Endowment for the Arts seems to have fixed the data to fit its desired conclusions.

We may be going to hell in a postliterate handbasket—but, as in 2004, NEA hasn't made the case. And, even though this report states "It is no longer reasonable to debate whether the problem exists," it's less dystopian than the 2004 report—which said reading itself was "at risk" and projected that "literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century."

I devoted just over 2,000 words to that 2004 report. I think it's worth repeating that essay in its entirety, since the new report builds on the earlier one:

The Reading Disaster (or Not)

This section originally appeared as the lead Perspective in *Cites & Insights* 4:10, August 2004.

You can hardly have missed the report. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) says that only 47% of Americans read "literature" in 2002—a drop of 7% from 1992. "Those reading any book at all in 2002 fell to 57%, down from 61%," according to Hillel Italie's

July 7 AP story. NEA chair Dana Gioia, a poet, called this shocking and "a reason for grave concern."

The report blames the internet, TV and movies. Gioia: "I think what we're seeing is an enormous cultural shift from print media to electronic media, and the unintended consequences of that shift." Fair enough—but I'm not sure I buy this: "We have a lot of functionally literate people who are no longer engaged readers. This isn't a case of 'Johnny Can't Read,' but 'Johnny Won't Read.'"

I'm not sure what Gioia thinks Johnny's doing on the internet. It may not be "engaged" reading, but it sure is reading. By the way, "literature" includes westerns but not philosophy, history, or any nonfiction. "Literature" is poems, plays and narrative fiction. The 18-24 cohort shows the sharpest decline: 60% described themselves as reading "literature" in 1992, but only 43% did so in 2002.

The NEA has an odd way of stating numbers: "In 1992, 76.2 million adults in the United States did not read a book. By 2002, that figure had increased to 89.9 million." Here's another way of stating those facts: In 1992, 113.8 million adults in the United States read at least one book. By 2002, that number had changed to 125.2 million.

The first statement might reasonably be thought of as "a call to arms," as Mitchell Kaplan of the American Booksellers Association says about the NEA survey. The second? It's true that the number of book readers may be growing more slowly than the U.S. population as a whole—but to call that a "drop in reading" oversimplifies a complex situation.

Gioia adds another comment that I find bemusing: "There's a communal aspect to reading that has collapsed and we need to find ways to restore it." A communal aspect to reading, particularly reading book-length narrative? I would have said book reading is one of the most private, solitary pastimes available. But then, I've never been much for book clubs. Maybe I'm doing it wrong?

The study's title is even more dramatic than the oddly stated numbers: *Reading at Risk*. Not "a bunch of young adults aren't reading books, and that's interesting," but *reading itself* is "at risk." The AP story even works in the dramatic fall in book sales in 2003. Remember? Book sales increased slightly in revenue but numbers sold declined—to the tune of one percent. Those few remaining readers in the U.S.—a mere 125 million adults plus some number of younger readers—managed to buy 2.22 billion (thousand million, for non-U.S. readers) books.

Don Wood forwarded a report to PUBLIB from PW Newline referring to the “grim state of books and literature.” *Grim*. That goes along with reading being “at risk.” The *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a long story with lots of unhappy quotes, including another one from Gioia: “The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain.” *More people are reading books now than did 10 years ago*. That’s good news, given the amount of doom crying there’s been about attention spans and lack of interest in reading, even if the *proportion* of book readers has declined slightly. (Yes, I am calling 4% over ten years “slightly,” particularly given the increase in other demands for time and attention over that decade.)

The *Chronicle*’s Scott McLemee uses statistical manipulation to make that drop look even worse. He calls it “a decline of 7%”—and it’s true that 56.6% is 7% less than 60.9%. He also calls the drop in literary readers 14% by using the same percentage-of-percentage methodology.

Here’s where I think the NEA report goes off the deep end. In crying with alarm about declining literary reading among young readers it says, “Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century.” I don’t know what to say about an assertion like that. It seems to say that, not only will the percentage of young adults who read literature continue to decline at an arithmetic-percentage rate, but those who *do* read now will stop reading as they get older. The 43% of people now 18 to 24 who read literature will, by the time they’re 68 to 74, have abandoned literature altogether, and nobody younger will be reading literature either. (Those kids who love Harry Potter will all have learned better, for example, and stop reading literature as soon as Harry graduates.)

Gioia starts out saying that the NEA “shouldn’t try to tell the culture what to do, or not to do.” But he certainly wants “the culture” to *do something*. He points out the report’s finding of high correlations between reading literature and attending museums, supporting the performing arts, and volunteering for charity organizations. “The decline that we see in reading has not only cultural consequences, but social and civic consequences that are very frightening for a democracy.” NEA doesn’t want to tell us what to do? “If literary intellectuals—writers, scholars, librarians, book people in general—don’t take charge of the situation, our culture will be impoverished. When you look at the figures for young readers, that says to me that we don’t have a lot of time.”

Librarians Comment

After the cries of alarm from NEA and the *Chronicle*, and various alarmed editorials and columns elsewhere (including a *Newsweek* piece that seems to blame the “decline” in reading on the huge *increase* in number of new book titles published each year), it’s been refreshing to see some reactions within the library community. Anne McVea used the subject heading “Logic at Risk” to note that people just might be reading nonfiction, magazines, newspapers—or even listening to audiobooks. “I don’t think I’m striking at the heart of literary culture if I read Churchill’s memoirs instead of Margaret Atwood.” Others also note that nonfiction books show growing circulation.

Miriam Bobkoff cited my citation of Bowker’s press release on the growing number of new titles—and that new title growth was greatest in juvenile and *nonfiction* areas (biography, history and religion). “Somebody is reading. Lots of somebodies...”

Finally, there was a thread on the ALA Council list, initiated by Michael Gorman—who thinks “the NEA is crying ‘wolf!’ in its report on reading.” Gorman notes that the major decline is in reading of “literature” and that poetry and plays (in written form) have always been specialized tastes. (For that matter, isn’t reading a play false to the form itself? Aren’t plays written to be performed?) Gorman also notes the lack of data to show an *overall* decline in reading—since there’s lots of reading outside the book (and especially the literary) market. Karen Schneider notes that *she* reads lots of material on the screen (“articles from many major newspapers”) and listens to books. There was more to the thread (which probably continues—I don’t habitually track the list and picked up these items from *Library Juice*), including Nann Blaine Hilyard’s note that some “narrative nonfiction” *should* count as literature, even though it doesn’t as far as NEA is concerned.

Reading at Risk?

Do I believe the NEA report identifies a crisis? Not really. The NEA did not identify a decline in reading. It *may* have identified a decline in the *percentage* of adult Americans who read what the NEA identifies as literature. It’s *possible* (but a good deal less certain) that the NEA identified a slight decline in the percentage of adult Americans who read books in a given year. That one’s tougher. While 17,000 is generally a large enough sample for statistical accuracy, book reading (and reading in general) is such a wildly varied pastime for most people that a 4% “decline” over ten years may or may not have any significance, and

may or may not even be real. (Actually, if the margin of error for the survey was 2%, then the survey shows nothing at all about book reading in general. There's also a broader issue: Is it *possible* to do broadly-representative surveys of well-educated people these days? I know I don't have the time or credence for phone surveys at all; how about you?) But let's assume for the moment that it is real—not that reading has declined (NEA demonstrated no such thing) but that a slightly smaller percentage of American adults read a book in 2002 than did in 1992.

The possibility that less than half the adult population reads literature each year fails to fill me with dismay. Can anyone identify any period prior to World War II in which a majority of the population of *any* nation read book-length literature each year? (I'm ignorant, so that's a legitimate question, but my sense is that there have been very few periods prior to the last century or so in which more than half the adult population was even literate, much less had the leisure, income, and awareness to read book-length literature on a regular basis.)

I think the NEAs probably wrong to blame the "decline" on television and the movies. Both have been around for quite a while. By most accounts, TV viewing is declining slightly. But then there's the internet. In 1992, it's fair to assume that most adult Americans spent little or no time on the internet, particularly outside work. By 2002, most Americans were acquainted with it and many—particularly those in the 18-24 age range—were spending a significant amount of leisure time on it. There were also a lot more magazines in 2002 than in 1992 and the widespread acceptance of DVDs had made movie watching at home both more engrossing and more active. Most of us had less *time* at home in 2002 than in 1992, given increased work hours.

The number of hours in a day has not increased. As more of us pay attention to health warnings about losing sleep, the number of *available* hours in a day may have declined slightly. Given the increase in things we want to do—areas to engage our intellects as well as provide pleasure—it's only probable that some of us will devote less time to other areas. It's hard to read a book while you're doing something else; books—and particularly "literature"—don't fit multitasking lifestyles very well.

Most activity on the internet involves reading and writing. Despite my general dislike for reading long text on a screen, I do a lot of it—skimming, perhaps, but still reading. Indirect internet reading—that is, reading longer items that I've printed out—certainly

equals a book a month. I read a *lot* of magazines, certainly more than I did ten years ago. Add the newspaper and I'm pretty certain *my* overall reading has increased. Do I take as many books out from the library as I did 10 years ago? Probably not, but *Cites & Insights* is largely to blame for that. I almost never read plays (I'd rather see them performed). I almost never read poetry (and haven't since college). I do read fiction, mostly when traveling, although it's rarely "literary" fiction. I don't claim to be typical in any regard.

Most public libraries in the U.S. show increased usage—and most public libraries do more than check out books, although books (fiction *and* nonfiction) continue to be the heart of good public libraries. Major bookstores are doing just fine, as are many well-run independents. When you're talking about what Amazon does well or badly, it's useful to note Amazon's primary business: Selling books.

The sky has not fallen. I sincerely doubt that America will be a nation of aliterates in 50 years. [This ends the repeated section.]

Let's move on from distorted research to stupidity...and "post-literacy" as another form of aliteracy.

Stupid Googlers

Nicholas Carr is an interesting writer and thinker. I subscribe to his blog *Rough type* (www.roughtype.com). He published a controversial article in the July/August 2008 *Atlantic*, "Is Google making us stupid?" You can read it at www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200807/google. It's about 4,250 words long—a little more than half as long as this essay up to here, and Carr's a much better writer than I am.

A few excerpts from Carr's commentary:

Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going—so far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading... [M]y concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do...

For more than a decade now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet... Even when I'm not working, I'm as likely as not to be foraging in the Web's info-thickets, reading and writing e-mails, scanning headlines and blog posts, watching videos and listening to podcasts, or just tripping from link to link to link...

For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. The

advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they've been widely described and duly applauded... What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles...

When I mention my troubles with reading to friends and acquaintances—literary types, most of them—many say they're having similar experiences. The more they use the Web, the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing...

After citing other anecdotes—an online media blogger who's given up books altogether, a pathologist who can't absorb longish articles or even blog posts more than three or four paragraphs long—Carr refers to a study of online research habits that finds a pattern of skimming activity rather than any long-form reading. (That study is apparently based on examination of computer logs at two research sites, which draws into question assumptions about *overall* habits. I don't normally go back to a long article to read it in full online; I save it. When the study, or Carr, says "there's no evidence that they ever went back and actually read" long articles, I say "why would there be?" But that's arguing with the "evidence.") Maryanne Wolf believes "the style of reading promoted by the Net" may be "weakening our capacity...for deep reading."

Carr manages to take this back to Nietzsche, who switched to a typewriter when his vision began failing. This supposedly changed his writing style: "His already terse prose had become even tighter, more telegraphic." Hmm. I can probably write something like 10 words a minute with pen and paper, 70 words a minute with electric typewriter, maybe a bit faster on the computer. I suspect my style is both more fluid and less terse on the computer than it was on the typewriter, since cutting and revision is so much easier—and I could never write well enough in longhand to have anything like a style. Different strokes as usual, I guess, but in any case I'd assert that word processing should tend to reverse any tendency toward terseness brought about by typewriting.

Carr seems to say that our brains are *literally* changing, with a quick and apparently unsupported pair of sentences: "The changes, neuroscience tells us, go much deeper than metaphor. Thanks to our brain's plasticity, the adaptation occurs also at a biological level." Really?

Carr suggests that Frederick Winslow Taylor's industrial efficiency techniques are mirrored in the net:

The Internet is a machine designed for the efficient and automated collection, transmission, and manipulation of

information, and its legions of programmers are intent on finding the "one best method"—the perfect algorithm—to carry out every mental movement of what we've come to describe as "knowledge work."

Then we get to Google, beginning with the assertion that the Googleplex is "the Internet's high church" and "the religion practiced inside its walls is Taylorism." Carr equates Google's aim to index the internet (or, sigh, Brin's and Page's notion that Google becomes AI) with "the idea that our minds should operate as high-speed data processing machines." He asserts flatly that Google and other companies *want* us distracted:

The faster we surf across the Web—the more links we click and pages we view—the more opportunities Google and other companies gain to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements. Most of the proprietors of the commercial Internet have a financial stake in collecting the crumbs of data we leave behind as we flit from link to link—the more crumbs, the better. The last thing these companies want is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. It's in their economic interest to drive us to distraction.

This presumably makes the Google Book Search project a remarkably large red herring—it's not *really* designed to lead us to books, it's just masking Google's true intentions.

Carr knows enough history to recognize that we "should be skeptical of my skepticism." But what I see in this article is *not* skepticism. It's an undeserved acceptance of the notion that Carr's inability to focus is a general societal disease—that we're becoming "stupid." I'd agree with much of the paragraph beginning with his admonition to be skeptical of his "skepticism":

The kind of deep reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author's words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. Deep reading, as Maryanne Wolf argues, is indistinguishable from deep thinking.

The last sentence is nonsense: Deep thinking can be and frequently is a creative act, with the deepest thoughts arising when you're *not* reading, deeply or otherwise. Is deep reading *related* to deep thinking? Probably. Is Google out to scuttle deep reading and deep thinking? I don't believe so—and I don't believe most people are so entranced with the internet and Google that it represents a major obstacle to deep reading.

The essay ends with this sad statement: "as we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that

flattens into artificial intelligence.” I, for one, have no intention of relying on computers to mediate my understanding of the world. Google is a tool. A computer is a toolkit. Even including Gmail, I rarely spend more than half an hour a day in Google—and rarely more than an hour a day “surfing” the internet. (Yes, I spend a lot of time on the computer and online: My part-time job is entirely dependent on the internet and I do all my writing on the computer. But that time is mostly spent reading, thinking and writing—not jumping from place to place.)

If we're getting stupid, it's not Google

None of this has anything to do with stupidity. People who do not think deeply aren't stupid; they're just not deep thinkers. Philosophers and thinkers of great thoughts have never been more than a tiny minority in any society, and ours is no exception.

Oh, there are definitely enticements for those wishing to be distracted from deep reading and deep thinking. The biggest of those enticements, in terms of time consumed, continues to be what it has been for decades: Television. (I just typed “The tube” and realized that's an obsolescent name for TV.) I'll suggest that multitasking in general tends to discourage deep thinking—but multitasking is as likely to involve iPods, cell phones and TVs as it is the internet. And if the internet is involved, Meebo, Twitter and other social interaction tools seem much more distracting than Google. Google is a portal: You use it to go somewhere else. If you've become addicted to going lots of places, I don't believe you can blame the tool.

Anyone still with me? Maybe not. It's been a lot more than two to four paragraphs since this essay began. Maybe you've already skimmed enough to say “Oh, Walt just doesn't get it—let's go do some Googling...or maybe there are tweets to catch up with.” The drastic drop in book reading certainly suggests that we can't handle...oh, wait, there is no drastic drop in book reading.

Reactions

I didn't see a lot of reactions to Carr's article in library blogs. Elsewhere, reactions were all over the map, with some people reacting strongly to the silly title of the article or to other reactions.

John Battelle's reaction to Carr's assertion that search and browsing are making us stupid boils down to one word: “Balderdash.” But he does go on (in a June 10, 2008 post at *John Battelle's Searchblog*):

What Carr is really saying is this: People are not reading long narrative anymore, and that makes me and my pals sad. So let's blame the Internet!

Battelle feels quite the opposite to Carr:

[W]hen I am deep in search for knowledge on the web, jumping from link to link, reading deeply in one moment, skimming hundreds of links the next, when I am pulling back to formulate and reformulate queries and devouring new connections as quickly as Google and the Web can serve them up, when I am performing bricolage in real time over the course of hours, I am “feeling” my brain light up and “feeling” like I'm getting smarter. A lot smarter, and in a way that only a human can be smarter.

Personally? I know I find things out more easily because of the internet. But I also know that I rarely spend hours doing the kind of stuff Battelle seems to do. I'm fairly certain I can think as well and as deeply now as I could before Google existed; I know for sure I'm more productive, but only others can judge the quality of that production.

Battelle gets lots of comments. One here is excellent—and Carr's silly title leaves him open to this kind of rejoinder. The commenter talks about buying a tractor after learning a lot about what kind of tractor to buy—from other people via the internet:

When I was young I didn't get stupid when I got access to things like the public library where I could find and consume more information, faster and less expensively than on my own. The internet is no different.

Charles Cooper came to Carr's defense at Cnet, starting out by dismissing his critics as “not-so-bright guys” responding to “a very bright guy.” (Clearly we're dealing with a deep thinker here.) Cooper *correctly* says some critics “caricatured Carr's nuanced thesis”—but Carr himself caricatured that “nuanced” thesis through his title. (I don't find Carr's thesis especially nuanced, but maybe I'm getting stupid.) Cooper dismisses the title as a “headline” (which may be right if *The Atlantic* has become a newspaper) and irrelevant to the article itself—and that's simply nonsense.

Edge has a “Reality Club” discussion on the article. Kevin Kelly specifically questions the Nietzsche anecdote, noting that the author wasn't just going blind—he was ill and slowly dying, which might have had more impact on his writing style than switching to a typewriter. Kelly thinks the growth of short writing is because there's a vehicle and marketplace for short things that wasn't there in the past. But then, this is Kevin Kelly—who believes “jacking in all the time” makes you smarter, even if you lose your ability to think deeply.

Larry Sanger says Carr's wrong to present this as a collective issue beyond our individual control.

If some of us no longer seem to be able to read a book all the way through, it isn't because of Google or the vast

quantity of information on the Internet. To say that is to buy into a sort of determinism that ultimately denies the very thing that makes us most human and arguably gives us our dignity: our ability to think things through, particularly in depth, in a way that can lead to our changing our minds in deep ways.

Sanger specifically attacks Carr's suggestion that computer engineers and software coders are to blame.

To pretend that you can blame others (programmers, no less!) for your unwillingness to think long and hard is only a sign of how the problem itself resides within you. It is ultimately a problem of will, a failure to choose to think. If that is a problem of yours, you have no one to blame for it but yourself.

George Dyson believes we'll lose some ways of thinking but that new generations will find other ways. "The present generation has no childhood immunity to web-based stupidity but future generations will." But Dyson also seems happy enough for people to give up books—as long as they can tie bowlines and sharpen hunting knives. (He also mentions rebuilding carburetors, a skill I would regard as worthless unless you collect old cars.)

Jason Lanier sides with Sanger:

The thing that is making us stupid is pretending that technological change is an autonomous process that will proceed in its chosen direction independently of us...

The one thought that does the most to make technology worse is the thought that there is only one axis of choice, and that axis runs from pro- to anti-

There's more to this discussion, but I'll let it go at that.

Library reactions

While there may not have been scores of liblog reactions, there have been some.

Daniel Freeman posted "On the internet and the new dark age" at *ALA TechSource* on September 23, 2008. He links to a *Wired* piece—but that piece, in classic *Wired* fashion, seems to ignore the real theses in Carr's article, responding to the silly title with typically overheated *Wired* prose. Freeman says:

There can be no question that librarians as a profession have had an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the Internet revolution. The Internet has given us multitudes of new and better ways to serve and connect with our patrons. The Internet has helped us tremendously, and I think most librarians would agree with that even while acknowledging that technology has cost some of us our jobs and forced others to learn a completely new set of skills mid-career.

Frankly, in my corner of the library world, we're so pro-Internet that I wonder if there is anyone in our profession who might share the sentiments voiced in Nicholas Carr's piece. So I put it to you, my fellow librarians—how has the Internet had a negative effect on your job?

In what ways is the Internet having a negative impact on our profession as a whole?

Like the *Wired* piece, Freeman's comment speaks more to Carr's title than to the article itself—and at least one of the comments on the post seems to do the same. Another comment identifies one negative impact: teenagers (and their teachers) who can't distinguish between Google results and licensed databases. Actually, *most* of the comments seem to say there are problems with the internet—not surprisingly.

Peggy Madison offers this:

The information that came to us in the media before the Internet also was full of misinformation. The basic problem is that so many people do not critically think, do not judge the material as truthful or misleading. But critical thinking is not taught in an educational system that is more interested in what is being taught rather than how students should best use their brains. Wouldn't it be great if librarians could teach critical thinking in their daily work?

A sentiment, I think, that Carr would wholly applaud. Freeman agrees with her in a manner that, frankly, left me wondering whether he read Carr's article or, ahem, skimmed it after reading the provocative title.

If there is truly a breakdown in critical thinking in our society, the answer is definitely far more complex than "The Internet did it."

I doubt that Carr would disagree. (It's odd to find myself *defending* Carr in this context, since I don't much care for his article.)

Kim Leeder offers a fairly long and deeply thoughtful commentary in "Google, stupidity, and libraries," the October 22, 2008 article at *In the library with the lead pipe*, that new experiment in refereed blogging. Leeder points out early on what became obvious as I was going through comments: Many of those who wrote about Carr's article didn't actually *read* it. "There's something amazing and a bit disturbing about a culture in which everyone's opinion is equally important and valid, no matter whether or not one has even a basic knowledge of the subject."

As an academic librarian, I'm particularly interested in the implications for libraries of Carr's article. Hand in hand with Carr's concern about a growing inability to engage in deep reading is the equal possibility of a growing inability to engage in sustained research. Google leads us to believe that searching for information is easy when library research is complex, often frustrating, and full of twists and turns. So the next question is: does it have to be that way? It's a given that library systems tend to be overly complicated, even for simple searches. The common refrain is: how can we be more like Google?

The followup question is: do we want to?

Leeder thinks about student interest in and ability to conduct complex research. Once again, I'm reminded that in my own undergraduate career, few of us seemed much interested in doing a lot more than was necessary to get by—at least outside of the few courses we were passionate about. I blame, oh, I don't know, electric typewriters: In 1962, you could scarcely blame computers.

I grew up with computers, but I grew up knowing that they were fickle, fallible, and constantly changing. I still have a collection of old floppy disks with files I will never be able to access again. I greatly enjoy technology, but I maintain a certain skepticism about it.

That said, I had to make a conscious effort to read Nicholas Carr's article all the way through. The first time I linked to it, I skimmed the first few paragraphs and bookmarked it. The second time, I skimmed further into the text. I didn't actually read the whole thing until I chuckled at Darlin's observation on how few had read it and realized that I was not one of them.

What happens to our libraries in a culture where sustained reading and deep research are skills that our students and patrons increasingly do not value? There is no easy answer, but the most critical thing we can do is reflect passion for our work and share it with our students. Benton writes, "Effective teaching requires embodying the joy of learning—particularly through lectures and spirited discussions—that made us become professors in the first place. It's extremely hard, but teachers have been doing it for generations."

The comments are worth reading; I won't summarize them here. One or two of those commenting had even read Carr's article.

I was going to cite Leslie Johnston's "digital is not to blame," posted August 19, 2008 on *Digital eccentric*—but although Johnston cites the *Wired* essay, there's no mention of Carr's essay. Instead, Johnston focuses on Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation*—and, although I'd originally intended to bring that into this discussion (as some essays deal with Carr's article and Bauerlein's book together), I've decided that's a bad idea. I haven't read Bauerlein's book, and, frankly, when you have someone who says "dumbest" and then *concedes* that today's students perform no worse than those of a previous generation (but says that's bad, because they should do much better), I have no particular desire to. Bauerlein's reasoning is even worse than NEAs: You're "the dumbest" if you're not sufficiently *smarter*. I'm old enough to not be dumb enough to waste reading and thinking time on that, so I won't deal with careful critiques of it. It's fair to say that Johnston doesn't care for generational generalizations—and, of course, neither do I.

We'll end this section with notes from Wayne Bivens-Tatum's July 22, 2008 post "Before I get old" on *Academic librarian*. Since we're dealing with issues related to long text, and since Bivens-Tatum brings it up himself, I should note that the post is just under 1,500 words long—far too long for casual skimming, and many paragraphs beyond the "two to four paragraphs" some folks seem to find appropriate. (That this note comes nearly 11,000 words into an absurdly long PERSPECTIVE probably doesn't mean anything.)

B-T talks about gloom selling, Bauerlein's book (and an earlier article) and Carr's article. After noting that it's possible today's students—and the rest of us—are becoming "ignorant mouthbreathers panting for the next Facebook status update" and pointing out that "you are now reading a blog. Blogs may be hazardous to your mind," B-T makes the same mistake I do when faced with the clear evidence that not all of today's students and adults are contemporary versions of Emerson or Socrates.

I might be more gloomy if I couldn't remember the state of my own self when I was eighteen. It pains me now to think how woefully ignorant I was, how few books I'd read, how little I knew about all the subjects that I now love knowing about. Wait, no it doesn't...

How ignorant that eighteen-year-old was about all the subjects we claim are important! Perhaps most critics of the younger generation were always brilliant, erudite high achievers, even when young, like some of the wunderkind I see coming to Princeton. Not me. "Underachieving" was a label frequently applied to my meager efforts in school. Though now I have two college degrees in English literature, I'm not sure I ever managed to finish a book I was assigned to read in high school, and I vaguely remember sleeping through a number of my English classes... I was a lackadaisical student with little interest in learning what all my no doubt well-intentioned teachers thought I should be learning. I wasn't letting my schooling get in the way of my education...

After citing some ways he avoided deep reading and thinking (he read a lot, but he also watched "a ton" of TV, played guitar, went to parties, drank...) he notes:

Despite all this, I seem to have come out okay, or at least I think so. The child is not always father of the man, it seems. I made it through college and two graduate programs with excellent grades. I've got a pretty good job, a loving family, a decent house. Despite almost completely ignoring my studies until college, I'm what most people would probably consider well read... I'm now more than twice the age of our incoming college students, yet I don't feel particularly old. I know almost nothing about contemporary youth culture and I certainly wouldn't celebrate it, but I can't bring myself to fault teenagers for doing the things kids do.

Perhaps all of us really are getting stupider, and this blog post is longer than most of us can read. Somehow, I just can't get that concerned about it... It might be that culture is always carried on by a remnant, and there are always bright and passionate people in every generation who manage to carry on and contribute to our knowledge of the world despite the odds.

Finally, referring to The Who's "My Generation" (which eventually became a deeply ironic song with its lyric "hope I die before I get old"), he says:

Are we old when we can no longer understand these kids today? When we think it's like they're from another planet, as I recently heard a librarian say? Are we old when we judge the inadequacies of college students by our matured standards? When we no longer remember what unformed youths most of us were? When we actually believe that it's more important for a teenager to know who the Speaker of the House is than to know the latest television shows? If that's the case, I don't want to get old.

That's more a comment on Baeurlein and his ilk than on Carr's age-neutral grump, but it's hard to get away from the key points. Most of us don't spend a lot of time on deep thought; most of us never have. Many of us were *teenagers* when we were teenagers. Some of us think more deeply at some ages than at others.

And those who blame their own inability to focus on internet tools are, to put it bluntly, fooling themselves. I have yet to see a computer without a shutdown capability. I'm thoroughly frustrated with Firefox's current apparent notion that it should always be on (it's sending a "crash report" almost every time I shut it down deliberately), but it's still remarkably easy to logoff.

I'm guessing at least 200 of you are still reading, nearly 12,000 words in. Are you thinking about what you're reading? Does this material *require* deep reading? I don't know—but if you got here, you're doing some "deep skimming" since there hasn't been a sub-heading for 2,000 words.

The bottom line for this section? I don't believe Google's rewiring your brain or that the internet prevents deep reading or deep thought. If you lament an inability to read deeply and think deep thoughts, *turn off the damn computer*. Turn off the cell phone. To be sure, turn off the TV. Find a good chair with a good light and a good book. Read. Think. You can do it—and if you can't, it's absurd to blame it on Google, the internet or anybody else.

It's Happened Again

The manila folder had eight groups of printouts I wanted to discuss in this PERSPECTIVE, primarily first pages organized by subtopic.

I've gone through two of those eight groups—admittedly two of the three largest, but still.

I can't—I *won't*—make this a full-issue PERSPECTIVE, for two reasons:

- I want to finish the RETROSPECTIVE series, and there are three more installments to do.
- The book needs advance flogging, particularly since I'm making a Special Offer.

There's also the likelihood that this is reaching a length where even devoted readers are getting bored. So this is it—for this installment. For your amusement and possibly my inspiration to return to this topic (probably not next month, but soon), here are the six other clusters:

- Comments on post-literacy and aliteracy and the related "death of writing."
- Notes on ebooks and "the future of books"
- A different set of notes on the future of reading and related topics
- Slow reading
- "The end" of book business "as we know it."
- A few other notes on literacy and book buying.

By the time I return to the topic and deal with these, some of those may disappear, others may be added, still others might wind up in some other C&I essay. For now, I've written too much about other people writing about reading. I hope some of you have read all the way through and found it worth thinking about, if not perhaps worthy of deep thought.

Retrospective

Pointing with Pride Part 8

Truly observant readers (if anyone's reading these things) may note that I screwed up somewhere along the way: One issue that should already have been covered hasn't been. I'll try to remember to check in two months and assure that it gets included in the final episode.

I'm trying to take one telling piece from each issue. Hope it works.

July 2001: Number 8

Here's part of an ebook roundup:

Keeping the Faith

Kendra Mayfield's January 11, 2001 column started with a Forrester Research study and added a range of industry comments. As I've noted elsewhere, Forrester Research now projects a grandiose \$7.8 billion in "ebook" revenues by 2005—but most of that figure is either PoD

or digital textbooks, with \$674 million estimated for downloaded (non-textbook) ebooks and reading-appliance books. The introduction strikes an overstated opposition: “With the advent of the e-book, many predicted the death of print books. Now, after a page-turning year of mounting hype, some are forecasting the death of e-books.”

Now that so many in the ebook field are rewriting history to claim that nobody *ever* suggested that ebooks would replace print books, it’s useful to keep track of a few (of the many) instances in which people did precisely that. Some counterpoints to Forrester’s study offer examples. (I’m looking for examples of the “many” people who, according to Mayfield, now forecast the “death of e-books”—ruling out even niche markets and digital textbooks. So far, I’ve come up empty. Help me find those straw men!)

Roland Laplant of Xlibris: “Ultimately e-books will eclipse paper books. It’s just not convenient now... There needs to be a lot of change in actual consumer behavior for that shift to occur.” (Emphasis added.)

Thomson Multimedia (the RCA dedicated readers) scoffed at Forrester’s forecast: “Those numbers are ridiculously low.” But then, Thomson asserts sales of three to seven million REB appliances for 2001 (which I mistakenly read as 2000). Any bets on the likelihood of that happening?

Accenture forecast a \$2.3 billion consumer ebook market by 2005, “with 28 million people likely to adopt dedicated e-book devices.” They get there partly by an interesting technique: when consumers were asked whether they’d buy an e-book device *if features improve*, two out of three said yes. I suspect no prices were named and Accenture’s pollsters studiously avoided issues of book pricing—didn’t we all assume that ebook appliances would pay for themselves through book discounts? In any case, the question is essentially meaningless. It’s like projecting the growth of high-definition television by asking people “Would you buy cinema-quality widescreen TV at the right price and with the right features?” Of course I would, particularly if I get to define “right price” and “right features”!

Half of the article discusses e-textbooks, where there should be substantial potential—if the appliances are cheap enough, high enough quality, and pay for themselves. It’s a substantial potential market, but getting there may not be trivial.

I don’t believe further comment is required—except, maybe, that the ludicrous projections for ebook sales seem much more moderate now that serious companies have serious ebook readers on the market.

March 2002: Number 18

Just a historical note as a reminder that prices change faster in the storage arena than they do for computers. It appeared under “Why hard disks survive”:

Shouldn’t flash RAM have replaced old-fashioned electromechanical disks years ago? That was certainly the projection some years back, and flash RAM prices have been coming down. Michael J. Miller excitedly informs us (in his January 29, 2002 “Forward Thinking” column in *PC Magazine*) that, in a few months, you’ll be able to buy a *one gigabyte* CompactFlash card. For \$799.

That’s remarkable, and Miller’s probably right that the RAM card is more durable than IBM’s 1GB Microdrive (which also fits in a CF slot). But for more general use, how much high-speed disk storage can you buy for \$799? I can’t answer the question for a few months from now, but as of late January the answer’s clear enough: at least 320GB (in two drives), with money left over. That’s more than a 300-to-one price differential—much *worse* than in the bad old days.

It’s now roughly seven years later. Checking Office Depot prices on November 5, 2008, you can buy a 1GB CompactFlash card for \$14—but you can buy a 4GB name-brand card for \$40, and that may be a better comparison (particularly since you can get an SD flashRAM card for \$8). So we’ve gone from \$800 for a gigabyte to \$10 for a gigabyte.

Meanwhile, what will you pay for a hard disk? You can’t buy one for \$10, but you can for \$50, which gets you a 250GB name-brand internal drive—or bump it up to \$75 for a 500GB drive or \$150 for a 1TB drive. That range comes out to anywhere from \$0.15 to \$0.20 per gigabyte, so the current differential is something like 60 to 1. That’s a *lot* less than seven years ago.

A more plausible comparison looks even better: USB 2.0 flash drives to external USB 2.0 hard disks. The best price per gigabyte I find for name-brand flash drives is \$30 for an 8GB drive or \$3.75 per gigabyte; the best price *per gigabyte* I find for name-brand external hard drives is \$212 for a 1TB drive or \$0.21 per gigabyte. That’s a differential of less than 18 to 1—and may explain why it’s becoming plausible to sell inexpensive “netbooks” relying entirely on flash storage. (Still unanswered: Can flash storage *really* go through enough read-write cycles to hold up to, say, four years of use as primary storage for a notebook?)

You can look at it another way: CompactFlash cards cost one-eightieth as much per megabyte as they did seven years ago—and internal hard discs cost one-sixteenth as much. Will the two cost slopes cross? They could—but probably not for a few more years.

November 2002: Number 28

Sticking with a technology theme, I was a bit upset by the ignorance of an item in *PC World*:

Technology and Magic

Maybe it's just me, but I would assume that staff writers for personal computing magazines would have rudimentary understanding of scientific principles. Apparently not. In an October 2002 *PC World* section of "dynamite downloads," the writer recommends MP3 WAV Converter 2.6, a \$20 download. Here's the beginning of the writeup:

When it comes to digital music, sometimes you want the compactness of MP3s, and sometimes you want the quality of a CD. MP3 WAV Converter makes it easy to have both. By changing .wav music files into .mp3 files, the program reduces them to roughly a tenth of their original size; it converts MP3s to .wav format for playback on standard CD players.

Never mind that any ripping-and-burning program also converts both ways, and that the same \$20 will buy the Plus upgrade to MusicMatch JukeBox, providing far more flexibility. The "have both" claim is pure nonsense. MP3 conversion involves lossy compression. You cannot, *cannot* reverse lossy compression through decompression. Once the information is gone, it's gone. If you rip at one-tenth the original size (basically the default 128K MP3 rate), when you "restore" the files to CD Audio form (.wav on a PC), anyone with good hearing and a good stereo system should be able to tell the difference. There's nothing wrong with MP3; at a higher data rate (192K), my aging ears don't hear the difference from CD on most music, and you still get 7-to-1 compression. But claims that reconverting restores lost information are ignorant at a level I find disturbing.

One update: My aging ears found that they *do* hear a difference at 192K—mostly that I find I want to stop listening after a while. I ripped all my CDs at 320K, the maximum rate for MP3, and except for some orchestral music I don't hear differences that matter.

While there are new products that claim to restore some of what's lost in low-bitrate MP3 compression, it's still partly handwaving: You can't restore lost information. Period. You may be able to make good guesses, but that's not the same thing.

Midsummer 2003: Number 38

This was a single-theme issue: COPING WITH CIPA: A CENSORWARE SPECIAL. CIPA is still the law of the land, and I believe this issue is still a worthwhile resource—particularly since some trolls are still going around claiming that responsible libraries won't unblock filters on request by adults.

As the Supreme Court decided CIPA, that would appear to be an absolute requirement—and it's worth noting that CIPA only affects images, not text.

I won't quote anything from the issue; you need to read the whole thing for context. I continue to be proud of the special issue.

April 2004: Issue 48

Oddly enough, this was also a special issue, or very nearly so: Except for a brief BIBS & BLATHER, it was all about the proposed Broadcast Flag—which is *still* the proposed Broadcast Flag, if only FCC could get Congress to allow it absurdly increased powers.

I'll quote two parts of the "NAQ" (never-asked questions) from the BIBS & BLATHER:

Why should I care about the Broadcast Flag? I try to answer that at the end of the major essay. On its face, it represents a significant lessening of fair-use and other citizen rights for future high-definition television broadcasts. Any additional cuts into fair use should concern librarians and thoughtful citizens (or even "consumers"). But the bigger issues, I believe, are that the FCC's rule-making represents a huge claim of additional authority by an appointed commission—among other things, giving the FCC power over how personal computers and recording devices are designed and whether they can be modified by users; that the MPAA already says this is just a first step, with the next planned step far more injurious; and that the whole FCC proceeding appears to be an end-run around Congress.

Why haven't I heard more about this elsewhere? I'm not sure, except perhaps that it's arcane and there have been other things to worry about.

January 2005: Issue 58

This issue opened with the following in BIBS & BLATHER—and I think it's worth thanking YBP again for its continuing support of *Cites & Insights* over the last four years:

Sponsored by YBP Library Services

That's the big news for this issue. Thanks to YBP Library Services, *Cites & Insights* won't be running more "monetization" nonsense. Nor will *C&I* be going away. As discussed in the Perspective that follows, this issue is the end of one era—and the beginning of another. I hope to see strong program and conference reporting. I plan to strengthen the ongoing portions of *C&I*.

Many readers probably know YBP already, as your library's book vendor. Their headquarters is Contoocook, New Hampshire, where the company was founded in 1971, and their office in the UK, where they do business as Lindsay & Howes, is located in the town of Godalming, outside of London. From those two sites they provide books and supporting technical services, alongside access to their GOBI database, to many academic libraries in North America and around the world. YBP also sponsors *E-Streams*, an online publication for sci/tech book reviews edited by Bob Malinowsky of the University of Illinois at Chicago. The YBP website is at www.ybp.com.

YBP Library Services approached me with a reasonable offer. The arrangement is straightforward, satisfactory,

and poses no danger to my editorial independence or varying plans. (I'm no more likely to write hard-hitting editorials on library book suppliers than I am to start doing in-depth coverage of integrated library systems or mean-spirited commentary on regional library networks. Those just aren't areas that I'm either knowledgeable about or prepared to take on.)

YBP Library Services will have no say in the editorial policy of *Cites & Insights*. I've invited them to contribute a "word from the sponsor" from time to time, although I don't expect to see many of those. It's a pure sponsorship situation, not the only one from YBP Library Services. Thanks to YBP Library Services, I won't be hunting for a new paid writing gig. For now and the immediate future, *Cites & Insights* will be—from my perspective—the most important writing I do in the library field.

Special thanks go to those who saw fit to contribute donations over the past year. The level of donations convinced me that free-will offerings would not yield enough revenue to give *Cites & Insights* priority over finding paid replacements for writing I no longer do, but I do appreciate each donation. That channel is now closed: I've removed the links from the *C&I* home page.

YBP has never taken me up on the offer of a "word from the sponsor." On the other hand, I am providing four or more essays a year from *Cites & Insights* for use in YBP's online magazine *Academia* (www.ybp.com/acad/).

Other things have changed—a lot—since January 2005, primarily the loss of my primary income source. I'd dearly love to establish a sponsorship for the other research and writing I'd like to keep doing (see BIBS & BLATHER). So far, I haven't found a partner for such sponsorship. Such is life.

November 2005: Issue 68

OK, so the missing issue is apparently somewhere in 2005. Just where, I'll figure out later...

Here's part of an essay—one that reflects thoughts that keep popping up from time to time but still haven't gone much further. Maybe there's something about an abandoned book that just won't *stay* abandoned, even though it may never get written:

Net Media and Physical Media

Most of us rely on analogy to understand new things and phenomena and explain them to others. "It tastes like chicken"—I've heard that said about rattlesnake meat, fried ants and other exotic foodstuffs. TV is just "radio with pictures" (a little too true of most TV shows). A blog is "like an electronic diary that anyone can read." Except when it isn't.

Helpful as analogies are to familiarize and explain, they can also be traps—particularly when combined with the natural tendency to oversimplify. A blog is *just* an elec-

tronic diary. (Well, no, it isn't.) An ejournal is just a journal that doesn't appear in print form. (Maybe it is, maybe it isn't.) An ebook is just like a print book but with a dedicated reader instead of dead trees. (Wrong on so many counts...)

To make matters worse, many of us love to create oppositions and assumed replacements. Ebooks *or* print books. Electronic journals *or* print journals. Blogs *in place of* newspapers and magazines. Now that we're in the third decade of widespread digital phenomena, it gets worse, as new digital phenomena are proposed as replacements for old ones. Email and lists must die, replaced by blogs, wikis, and IM!

We need to differentiate within net media, just as we should be better at differentiating within traditional media. Some listeners have been puzzled when I've said in speeches (and print) that there is no serials crisis for most public libraries, but it's a simple matter of differentiation. Magazines (the bulk of serials in most public libraries) have very little in common with scientific, technical, and medical scholarly journals (the heart of the journal pricing-and-access crisis, which is real) other than that both appear on a more-or-less regular schedule and both may appear in print form with consistent issue-to-issue cover and internal design. Magazines have different financial models than STM journals. Magazine prices increase much more slowly than STM journal prices (if at all). Most magazines rely far less heavily than STM journals on library subscriptions for their survival.

But that also oversimplifies the situation. There may be a quarter million current periodicals, only 10% of which are refereed scholarly journals. Lumping the other 90% together as magazines may be right in some ways but is terribly misleading in others.

Similar problems arise when people discuss blogs as though all blogs were the same thing—and go on to lump ezines and eournals in with blogs.

We need analogies. But we also need to recognize the limits of analogy. Blogs *aren't* all just like diaries. Blogs don't all fit into any single medium with any clarity of definition. Blogging software is lightweight content management used to create several different kinds of net media that we find it convenient to lump together. Maybe we shouldn't.

These are half-finished thoughts, part of a continuum that began with a book proposal in early 2001: *A plurality of media: Stories in libraries*. That proposal resulted in a contract, which became the only book contract I've ever cancelled. At the time—2003—I was so involved with various columns and this journal that I couldn't focus on the book-length project. When I did focus on it, I found it was no longer a book I wanted to read, which meant it was a book I couldn't write.

That was then. The more I work with and write about various net media, the more I see the ideas in the book proposal coming back to life. With luck, there may be a series of commentaries, some as disorderly as this section,

some more coherent. Over time, those commentaries could turn out to be a serial version of *A plurality of media*.

Or not. Remember my series of retrospective CD-ROM reviews?

Here it is three years later. I still have stacks of CD-ROMs sitting around waiting to be re-reviewed—now under Vista rather than XP, which may simplify the review for quite a few of them. (“Won’t load. Forget it.”—but Vista has lots of compatibility tricks.) When will I get around to them? Well, if I line up sponsors for other stuff, maybe never...

June 2006: Issue 78

The best essay in this issue may be “Thinking about Libraries and Access,” but I’ve used that as part of the PALINET Leadership Network’s open access cluster, so I won’t repeat it here.

Instead, I’ll include part of a copyright essay for its pure amusement value, although it’s a vaguely bitter amusement:

Put that Frosting Gun Down Slowly...

Ever had a cake custom-frosted? Traditional bakeries can do remarkable things; those with frosting-jet printers (I don’t know what else to call them) can go truly wild, since they can scan a photo or drawing you provide and produce a fairly high-quality rendition. All of it edible.

But here’s the sign at College Bakery, as noted by Clay Shirky in a June 16, 2005 *boing boing* posting: “College Bakery no longer accepts edible images from any outside sources.” Why? Because the bakery had been told it might be sued for copyright infringement if a recognizable image of, say, Dora the Explorer or Thomas the Tank Engine showed up on a cake. Shirky’s interpretation of College Bakery’s statement: “The risk of being sued is so high that we’ll give up on helping paying customers create their own cakes.”

Shirky thinks it’s stupid. “First of all, disappointing children is a lousy tactic for a media company. If a child loves Nemo so much she wants a clownfish birthday cake, it’s hard to see the upside in preventing her from advertising that affection to her friends.” And, to be sure, it’s a chilling effect.

Consider the infringement, if there is one. We’re not talking distribution here—“the image is designed to be eaten...within hours of its creation.” No unlimited copies. No easy transition to other media. “And what happens? The same grab for total control, and the same weak regard for side-effects on non-commercial creativity.”

One law clerk managed to get *very* confused about IP law in a long comment attempting to justify this. “Companies don’t run around trying to enforce their copyright because it brings them joy, they do it because they have to.” That’s *trademark*, not copyright; and even there, one wonders just how heavy-handed you have to

be. (Yes, Lsoft has to gripe at people once in a while to retain “Listserv™” as a trademark for its list processing software, because it’s one that’s on the verge of being aspired—of losing trademark status. Still, I’ll guess that if you said “Congrats on the new listserv” on a celebratory cake, Lsoft lawyers wouldn’t be in your entryway.) The law clerk equated College Bakery’s cake decorations with “stealing from another company,” and seemed to think it reasonable for this little bakery to “negotiate with each of the companies involved to pay for the right to SELL the images those companies created.”

Jason Schultz commented at length suggesting a balance—that those who love copyrighted and trademarked characters should have *some* rights, e.g. fair use rights. You shouldn’t be able to do your own commercial Dora the Explorer cartoons or books without a license—but a cake? Even for trademark, it’s a reach: “[N]o one would ever start calling cartoons ‘Doras’ and birthday cakes aren’t even in the same class of goods.” As Schultz suggests, it’s really about total control: “The idea that someone other than the creator might actually make use of the character without permission is what drives copyright maximalist authors, owners, and advocates crazy, not loss of rights or even, often, compensation.”

I haven’t tried to do a photo cake recently. Do you need to fill out a form asserting that you took the photo and it contains no trademarked images?

April 2007: Issue 88

That’s when my first Lulu book came out and the first time a photo appeared in *Cites & Insights*, much less a color photo. (For the book version of Volume 7, also a Lulu product, I converted the photo to grayscale.) That book has sold something over 200 copies so far—neither a failure nor a great success—and is still, I believe, worth the money.

Why a book? Several reasons:

- I believe the fifteen essays that make up *Balanced Libraries* work better as a book than as fifteen different *Cites & Insights* Perspectives. Some chapters can stand alone; some require the context of earlier and later chapters. It’s really too long for the ejournal.
- I believe the book adds value to the ongoing set of discussions, experiments and changes in libraries and librarianship. While *Cites & Insights* clearly adds value, books work differently than ejournal articles.
- The time seems right. Several books are coming out or have just appeared explaining various aspects of social software and “Library 2.0” tools and ideas for libraries. I suspect they’re all worthwhile. I list five in the bibliography even though I’ve only read one of the five, based on what I know of their authors’ writing and thinking. *Balanced Libraries* should complement these other books, working at a different level.
- Print-on-demand publishing makes it feasible to do a timely book that I don’t anticipate huge sales for.

“Timely” is a relative thing, but I can say that revisions to the text continued up to the end of February 2007.

As for the “what,” that’s simple. *Balanced Libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change* is a 247-page 6x9" trade paperback (including bibliography and index). \$21.95 plus shipping. Only available at www.lulu.com/waltcrawford/. There’s no ISBN. (That story was told at *Walt at random*.)

The book’s just over 71,000 words long, of which some 20,000 words are quotations from other people’s blogs, reports, articles and list posts. The rest is my commentary, interpretation and thinking.

I think it’s a handsome book, but of course I’m biased. The typography is similar to (but larger than) that in *Cites & Insights*. Thanks to my wife (not only the professional librarian in the household but a fine amateur photographer), there’s a lovely wraparound cover. It was taken July 20, 1996 in Papeete, Tahiti.

The price went up to \$29.50, still less than most comparable books in the library field, a necessary increase when I decided to offer it through Amazon as well (the CreateSpace version, with an ISBN).

This issue includes a preliminary announcement about another book, one I also regard as worthwhile...and two books in between will disappear come January 1, 2009 or thereabouts. So far, the rush to buy collector’s copies has been, shall we say, extremely moderate (not zero, not double-digit).

January 2008: Issue 98

I wasn’t prescient when I wrote “A Time of Limits?”—you didn’t need special powers to see that too many of us were living beyond our means and taking the attitude that there was always more money. It’s a 5,000-word essay, one I believe is well worth reading. Here are the last few paragraphs:

A Time of Limits?

Are there limits? If so, will more of us come to recognize them? To bring in another long-time theme, will we seek lives in balance?

I hope so. I’d like to think so. I’m not arguing for budgeting (unless your spending really is out of control). For many of us, that’s a needless annoyance. I’m *not* telling you to change your ways—unless your ways are causing you to lose sleep or worry about your ability to sustain your lifestyle.

Lifestyles are overrated. There’s a difference between maintaining a lifestyle and living a good life. One is a matter of recognition, status, consumption; the other is a matter of balance and inner peace. It’s tough to maintain a given lifestyle if your income slumps a little or you have unexpected expenses: Those daily “needs” hurt when they’re gone. It’s easier to keep living a fulfilling

life when your circumstances change slightly. Living within your limits can be *good* living, even if it doesn’t match an assumed lifestyle. There’s a funny thing about living within limits and paying less attention to status: You may find that you have *more* disposable income for things that would improve your life, even if only for an hour or two.

People who live within limits are more likely to make good use of shared assets, I suspect. They’re more likely to appreciate parks, to take walks...and to use their public libraries. I’m hoping more people will recognize the need for limits without having that need forced upon them through foreclosure or bankruptcy or an inability to retire...ever.

My Back Pages Audio or Art?

I’ve grumped in the past (and will in the future) about what seem to be absurdly high prices for some audio equipment—and the ability of audio reviewers to find that they’re worth every cent, always substantially improving the sound quality (frequently of vinyl LPs). The absolute refusal of high-end magazines to consider blind reviewing (where the reviewer can only judge a product by its sound quality, not by the reviewer’s feelings about the company or the look and price of a product) also gives me pause. I’m inclined to believe that, in many cases, what’s being sold at the ultra-high end is not so much sound quality but a form of manufactured art and exclusivity. I don’t see anything wrong with paying high prices for something you view as an art object of sorts—whether it’s a \$25,000 watch or a \$100,000 turntable. It’s only when you try to convince me you’re *not* paying for art and exclusivity, and that I should buy these overpriced goods, that I become skeptical.

Here’s another example. *Stereophile*’s lead “analog” reviewer just *loves* a \$100,000 Continuum Caliburn turntable/stand/arm combination (now \$125,000), so much so that he purchased the review copy (at some unstated “accommodation price”). Meanwhile, *The Absolute Sound*—*Stereophile*’s primary competitor in the price-no-object audiophile publishing arena—didn’t think the Caliburn was a great turntable.

I thought there might be a price-reward issue. Silly me. The June/July 2008 *Absolute Sound* has a glowing review of the Clearaudio Statement “playback system” (turntable/stand/arm), which clearly is a stunning piece of sculpture. It costs \$150,000. The reviewer calls it “just awesome, and immediately so, from the first listen on.”

Not that it's the most expensive turntable out there. Goldmund has a new "reference" turntable for \$300,000, and there's another competitor (Swiss Transrotor Artus) for \$150,000.

We may be entering an era of limits, but that only affects those who haven't bled the rest of us dry.

An editorial in the September 2008 *Stereophile* attempts to make a counter-argument: That once you adjust for inflation, \$12,500 to \$17,500 in today's dollars is in the same economic "sweet spot" as \$1,900 or so would have been in the mid-60s. Which might be true, but omits two key elements:

- By that reasoning, a midrange computer should properly cost \$5,900 today. Inflation calculation just doesn't work for electronics.
- By *Stereophile* standards, \$12,500 to \$17,500 is inexpensive—where the editorial labels the equivalent \$1,900 system as a "dream system."

Speakers Are Different

When it comes to loudspeakers, it's hard to suggest that any price could constitute a "reasonable" limit. So I just note an interesting irony within a single issue of *Stereophile*, the June 2008 issue.

Beginning on page 70, there's a long, glowing review of the Revel Ultima Salon2 loudspeaker—a sizable (53x14x23", shipping weight 178lb.) speaker that's so good the reviewer calls it "a new reference standard in floorstanding loudspeakers" and it gets the cover, with a groanworthy line saying it "Revelutionizes the state of the speaker art." It sells for \$22,000 a pair. That may *not* be an outrageous price.

Then there's the next review, by Michael Fremer, of the Cabasse La Sphère Powered Loudspeaker. It's a strange-looking beast, like some huge alien eye, and because it's a sphere on a stand it's got unusual (but large) dimensions: 55x28x28" (shipping weight 220lb.). That does include the eight amplifiers you need to power it—but the reviewer says you *really* need ultra-high-end speaker cables and interconnects for the speaker to sound right, and those will set you back \$100,000. But that's OK: The speakers cost \$165,000 a pair, and at that level, what's another 100 big ones? Total effective price: **12 times** that of the Revel Ultima Salon2 (or a mere **7.5 times** as much ignoring cables).

The review's a strange one...particularly because it comes from the analog maven who finds mediocre LPs vastly superior to the best CDs—and the amplification system is digital. That lovely analog LP sound gets converted to harshly unnatural digital before amplification. Oh, but it doesn't matter, apparently. "Eve-

ryone who listened" to these speakers agreed that LPs, converted to digital and back, still sounded better than CDs put through the same process. Since this reviewer will not admit to the possibility of euphonic distortion, I can't suggest what's really happening here ("faith" is one possibility).

Of course these speakers aren't incrementally better—they're "in many ways vastly superior to anything else I've experienced at home." For piano and voice, it's "light-years ahead of anything else in my experience." And yet...it didn't get the cover story and apparently is *not* a "new reference standard."

Digital Audio: Only the Mac?

I was struck by a long "Special Digital Focus" section in the August 2008 *The Absolute Sound* for several reasons—primarily the sense it conveyed that there's only one digital download service (iTunes) and only one way to deal with computer-based digital audio—Macs, Airport Express and the Apple TV. Eventually a Logitech unit shows up, notably "also iTunes-friendly." I don't doubt that Apple makes good digital audio products. I *do* doubt that it's the only game in town—and, for high quality DRM-free downloads, it's late to the game, although it's there now.

I'll just slide in a note on one of the product commentaries, once we get past the MacRoolz section and into other (non-computer-based) digital audio stuff. The review is for the UltraBit Platinum Optical Impedance Matching Disc Treatment System—liquid you spread over CDs and DVDs to improve the sound or picture. The reviewer says it does great things. Along the way there's this paragraph:

Similarly, it's **incontrovertible** that a CD-R burned from a CD sounds better than the original CD. Clearly, something in the disc's optical properties affects the sound, even if the bits remain unchanged. (Emphasis added.)

Incontrovertible. Wow. A couple years ago, we got the suggestion. We also got a possible explanation—one that's not based on "optical properties" but on error rate. I don't remember seeing many real tests, but then *true* audiophiles detest anything like double blind or scientific testing (just ask the writers!), so maybe that's not a surprise. Still, I wouldn't expect to see this stated as *incontrovertible*—particularly since it takes just one case, where a group of experts listening to a CD-R and the original CD can tell no difference, to make it very controvertible indeed. (On this theory, by the way, I'm up in the air. I **do** believe that the CD-Rs I burn from CD originals—or, rather, from 320K MP3 versions of the originals—may, in some cases,

sound better. What I can't tell is whether that's euphonic distortion or reality.)

No Limits Here!

This one's interesting because it's *not* in a high-end audio magazine. It's a full-page feature in the "randomplay" (new items, blurbs rather than reviews) section of *Sound & Vision*, formerly *Stereo Review*, the mass-market mag reviled by high-end folks.

What is it? The Goldmund Media Room, from the same Goldmund with the \$300,000 turntable. This is for folks who prefer home theater to stereo: Goldmund "will design the theater to accommodate your space, supervise the construction, and install Goldmund's custom-built screen, A/V components, and speakers." The price—in a mass-market magazine: "from \$500,000." Sure, there may be lots of "millionaires next door"—but how many of them have half a very big one lying around to use for a home theater?

Bad Ideas That Just Won't Die

Once upon a time, there were two really bad DVD-based ideas. One was the disc that didn't cost much—but that you could only play once without paying more, since you could only play it with permission from an internet site. Remember DivX? That scheme cost Circuit City a lot of money (and a lot of disgusted customers). There was also a disc that began to self-destruct as soon as you opened it to play it, yielding an unplayable disc after a day or two. It was introduced, denounced, sold very badly and disappeared.

Or did it? The October 2008 *Home Theater* announces that Staples is marketing a new kind of self-destructing DVD from Flexplay Entertainment. This time it's a disc bonded with a patented adhesive. When you remove the disc from its airtight pouch, oxygen attacks the adhesive and makes the disc unplayable after two days. Then you mail the disc to a recycling center in a postage-paid envelope. For this marvel of absurdity you pay a mere \$4.99, "the same price Blockbuster charges for a full-price rental."

As far as I can see, this is DVD for people who are too stupid to use public libraries or join Netflix (where you have to work really hard to spend \$4.99 per movie viewed—and can keep a movie as long as you want), or who live in an area that has Staples stores but has neither any libraries with DVD collections or any of the \$1.00 Redbox DVD rental kiosks (well, there are only 10,000 of those and they're in obscure places like McDonalds and Wal-Mart, but there are also thousands of DVDPlay \$1.00 rental

kiosks in Safeway, Albertson's, Kroger and others). Does \$4.99 at one of 1,800 Staples stores really beat \$1.00 at one of more than 10,000 other grocery and fast-food stores you'd be going back to anyway?

I looked at the Flexplay site. The company says "All Flexplay discs are recyclable and no different in their environmental impact than regular DVDs." If, of course, regular DVDs are only used once, unlike the DVDs at Netflix, Redbox, DVDPlay...

We're Doing It For Your Own Good

I'm fascinated by a letter from Naveen Maddali of IEEE, in the September/October 2008 *ONLINE Magazine*, about Scitopia and a review of that service in an earlier issue. Here's the key portion:

The review points out a discrepancy between patent searches on Scitopia and on the USPTO, with the latter delivering a much larger number of results. Scitopia's lower number of results is purposeful: Because of the breadth of digital libraries it scans and its focus on end-user researchers, Scitopia limits search results to the 100 most relevant results from each source. This prevents the user from being overwhelmed and encourages diversity of sources, exposing users to multi-disciplinary research they might never have discovered.

Right. After all, you can predict that the 101st "most relevant" result from one source will always be less significant than the 50th "most relevant" result from another source—and, after all, why would an "end-user researcher" need a comprehensive overview?

I could suggest alternate wording. "Look. We only pick up 100 records per source. The service is free, remember? Quit complaining and trust our relevance algorithms." But that would be mean.

Masthead

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