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Perspective

Public Library Blogs: A Limited Update

Two years ago, I set out to see how public library blogs—that is, blogs *officially* associated with public libraries—were doing. I published the results in a book that was, in retrospect, poorly conceived—both because the market was smaller than I’d hoped and because the book devoted most of its space to profiles of individual blogs, with a small portion devoted to metrics and comments on the entire population—and, deliberately, no subjective comments on blogs.

The book, *Public Library Blogs: 252 Examples*, will go out of print at the end of August 2009 (it’s still available from Lulu.com and Amazon, for those in search of a rarity). The first portion—the part devoted to metrics and overall comments—appeared in the May 2009 *Cites & Insights* (volume 9, number 6, citeandinsights.info/civ9i6.pdf).

Where Are They Now?

If the book had been more successful or I had found sponsorship, I believe it would have been interesting and valuable to follow the progress of these blogs. While no study of blogs can be comprehensive, the 2007 study was a broadly representative sample of active English-language public library blogs.

2008 came and went. I did carry out a lateral study of liblogs—but not of library blogs, since the silence that greeted the first effort was nearly deafening. (That’s not quite fair. In all, 80 copies of the book were purchased, most recently in March 2009. In fact, it’s the academic library equivalent that was almost wholly ignored, with 45 copies purchased to date.) I’m now convinced that any *major* study of library blogs needs to be carried out by library school faculty or students, or someone else paid up front to do such

research. At the end of this article, I’ll provide a link for the final spreadsheet from my own work. You’re welcome to use it, but I’d appreciate credit as the creator of the original research.

I wasn’t *quite* ready to give up on that data without one more look—and it’s possible to do a limited update without too much effort. That’s what I’ve done (all web research took place July 17-20, 2009). Here are the results.

Late-breaking caveat: In rechecking pioneer blogs and “intriguing” blogs for notes at the end of this article, I find one or two cases where a blog moved without a link, leaving behind a 404 error or other situation that counted as a “defunct blog.” I rechecked all 29 blogs that might be involved and adjusted the article and quintiles appropriately.

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Survivors and Currency

All 252 blogs in the 2007 study originated in 2006 or before—and each blog had at least two posts during the March-May 2007 study period, with at least one post in two of the three months.

Here’s the situation in July 2009:

- Twentyseven of the 252 blogs—11%—have disappeared. Of those, 11 yield 404-error (or equivalent) pages; nine are unreachable or have no apparent server; five have been explicitly removed or deleted (from Blogger or another hosting service that protects the “removed” status); and two, unfortunately, are now parking pages offering ads and links.
- Two more have been protected—they’re unavailable except with password.
- Five have no dates attached to posts; it’s impossible to tell how recently they’ve been up-

dated. (Two more don't have readily available dates for each post, but have posts arranged in such a manner that it's clear there were posts in May 2009. Those are included below.)

- That leaves 218 (87%) that still yield visible, dated posts—although not always at the same URL. Eighteen of the 218 have new URLs, usually with links from the old archived blogs, sometimes only findable through searches.

For the 218 with visible, dated posts, I looked at *currency* as of May 31, 2009: How many days before that the most recent post appeared. There are anomalous cases, blogs with no posts between February 1, 2009 and May 31, 2009 but at least one post since then—but it's hard to know what to make of blogs updated so rarely.

Of those 218:

- Twenty (9%) had posts on May 30 or 31.
- Forty-two more (19%) had posts on May 28-29; thus, more than a quarter had posts within the most recent half week.
- Twenty-three (11%) had a post within a week but not half a week. That's a total of 85 (39%) updated within the week.
- Thirty-three (15%) more had a post within two weeks, and 31 more (14%) within May. That's a total of 149 (68% of blogs with visible dated posts, 59% of all blogs) with at least one post within the month. Let's call those "active blogs" (although you might reserve that term for the 118 with at least one post in the second half of May 2009).
- A mere 21 more had a post in March or April; using a 90-day cutoff. That yields 78% (or 68% of all blogs) that could be considered semi-active.
- Extending the period to 120 days, Technorati's generous cutoff for "active," yields five more blogs.
- Eighteen blogs had not been updated within 120 days but *had* been updated within a year—that is, sometime since May 31, 2008.
- Twenty-four blogs had a post sometime between May 31, 2007 and May 31, 2008.
- Two blogs had their most recent post within the earlier study period, between March 1 and May 31, 2007. In all, that's 44 blogs (17% of the total population) that appear entirely moribund but have visible archives.

I did a similar quick-check in December 2008, using the term "robust" for blogs updated sometime within the week before the check and "active" for those updated sometime within the two weeks.

- In December 2008, 83 of the 252 blogs (32%) were robust; May 2009 was a little better with 85 (34%).

- In December 2008, 66 were active but not robust; that was down considerably, to 33.

A more meaningful comparison may be with the 2007 study, comparing average posts per week in May 2009 with average posts per week in March-May 2007:

- In 2007, 119 (47%) of the blogs averaged at least one post per week. In 2009, that was down to 80 (37%).

- In 2007, another 66 (26%) averaged at least one post every other week. In 2009, that was down to 31 (14%).

I think of active and robust blogs as being in "pretty good health," a description that fit 73% of the blogs in the 2007 study. Only 118, or 47%, fit that description in May 2009—and even if you leave out blogs that have disappeared entirely, a small majority (54%) meet the standard.

Conclusion? Most public library blogs that began before 2007 aren't very active in 2009—only about half manage even one post every other week.

What about comments—that great promise of community involvement that never did work out for most library blogs? Dividing 2007 figures by three, we get a total of 589 comments per month—and only 118 blogs with any comments at all. For 2009, noting that the design of Ann Arbor's blog makes it nearly impossible to calculate comments, only 49 of the blogs had any comments at all during May—and there were a total of only 224 comments. (Ann Arbor's blog had an average of 130 comments per month during the 2007 study, so a better comparison might be 459 comments for 2007 and 224 for 2009, still a drop of more than half.) Conclusion? There's even less community feedback showing up directly in blogs.

The Quintiles

I didn't introduce quintile analysis until the liblog project, and did it retrospectively for library blogs in a series of posts on *Walt at Random*. Quintile analysis—describing the population in fifths of the whole—seems particularly useful for something as heterogeneous as blogs.

This time, I looked at total posts and total comments. I didn't study length of posts or number of illustrations. This study yields three metrics: post count, comment count and posts per comment. For each of those three, I offer the 2007 quintiles, 2009 quintiles and change quintiles. Some caveats:

- For *changes* from 2007 to 2009, I've included only the 218 blogs for which posts and comments could be counted in both cases, leaving out five with counting difficulties and those that have disappeared entirely.
- Quintile sizes aren't always one-fifth of the blogs (50 or 51 for 2007, 44 or 45 for 2009) because of clusters with the same value—that is, there's no way break a quintile between two blogs both having 3.3 posts per month in 2007.
- The differences are extreme in 2009, because so many blogs (33%) had neither posts nor comments; as a result, Q1-Q4 are relatively small, representing segments of blogs with non-zero numbers. That's also true for comments and conversational intensity in both years, where Q1-Q4 represent segments of the minority of blogs that had any comments at all.

Post Frequency

To make the comparison reasonable, I divided 2007 figures by three, yielding average posts *per month*—comparable to one-month figures for 2009.

For the 252 blogs with posts in the 2007 study, there were an average of 1,992 posts per month—which works out to an average of 7.9 posts per blog, but the median blog had four posts (one per week).

The quintiles for 2007:

Count7	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	133.7	0.7	252	4.0	1,992
Q1	133.7	11.0	50	19.3	1,231
Q2	10.7	5.3	50	7.3	375
Q3	5.0	3.3	52	4.0	211
Q4	3.0	2.0	45	2.3	109
Q5	1.7	0.7	55	1.3	65

The 20% of blogs with the most posts represented 62% of all posts (well below the Zipf 20:80 mark).

Compare that with quintiles for 2009:

Count9	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	41	0	218	2	948
Q1	41	8	37	14	606
Q2	7	4	43	5	229
Q3	3	2	31	2	77
Q4	1	1	36	1	36
Q5	0	0	71	0	0

Here, the top 20% (actually 16%) represent 63% of all posts—but note how much lower the numbers are across the board, with the median dropping from one post per week to one every other week.

Standouts

Here's the list of public library blogs averaging at least two posts per week in May 2009—37 of them, one-sixth of all the blogs in the study. I'm including the zip code (or postal code or country abbreviation) because some blog names are a little mysterious.

Blog name	Zip	#
What's New @ Eastern Regional Libraries	AU	41
Kids Lit	54952	38
ICARUS... the Santa Fe Public Library Blog	87501	32
Wellington City Libraries	NZ	32
Albert Lea Public Library	56007	27
Birmingham Public Library's Latest News, Reviews & Info	35203	27
The Atrium	49503	25
Dover Public Library news	03820	23
Sodus Free Library blog	14551	19
Sellers Library Teens	19082	17
SJCPL Blog	46601	17
Berkeley Heights Public Library Book Blog	07922	16
Connections – Events	06820	16
Hibbing Public Library	55746	16
MADreads	53703	16
Old Bridge Library Weblog	08857	16
Marin County Free Library Blog	94903	14
The eStory	19380	14
West Long Branch Public Library	07764	14
Austin Public Library Blog	78701	13
The Blog @ ppld.org	80903	13
The Perrot Memorial Library Blog	06870	13
Austin Public Library Blog	78701	12
Turning the Page	45202	12
Galway Public Libraries Blog	IE	11
Mansfield Public Library	02048	11
Westport Public Library MOVIE & MUSIC blog	06880	11
Connections – Books	06820	10
Sutherland Shire Libraries News	AU	10
Wilmette Public Library Staff Book Reviews (Children's Books)	60091	10
Burbank Library Blog	91502	9
Johnson County Library	66212	9
What's New @ Coloma Public Library	54930	9
YA KNOW @ BCL	97005	9
Check out the Lyons Public Library!	14489	8
Teen Zone Blog!	80903	8
Westport Public Library BOOK blog	06880	8

Changes from 2007 to 2009

Although posts in May 2009 declined more than half from a typical 2007 month *in general*, that doesn't mean every public library blog had fewer posts. In fact, nearly a third had *more* posts. Here are the quintiles (or, rather, the quarters of the top two-thirds):

Change	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	950%	-100%	218	-57%
Q1	950%	36%	37	74%
Q2	35%	-22%	37	17%
Q3	-23%	-57%	38	-48%
Q4	-59%	-93%	35	-77%
Q5	-100%	-100%	71	-100%

A note here: I may have posted a comment on Facebook that was more negative than necessary—the first time I did these calculations, I was comparing May 2009 to March-May 2007, yielding terrible results.

The real results are neither wonderful nor terrible. Of the 218 blogs that still have visible and countable posts, 65 (30%) have at least as many posts in May 2009 as in the average 2007 month. Of those, roughly half have at least half again as many posts in May 2009 (that is, at least a 50% growth):

Blog	Zip	Change
Whitley County Public Library	40769	950%
Teen Blog	98446	500%
Teen Blog@Brooks	05301	400%
The eStory	19380	282%
Highland Park Public Library Teen Blog	08904	275%
Juneau Public Library Book Blog	99801	250%
Hibbing Public Library	55746	243%
Brooks Public Library	T1R 1B9	200%
Teen Zone Blog!	80903	200%
What's New @ Coloma Public Library	54930	200%
Delphi Public Library's Read Spot	46923	100%
S. W. Smith Library	16743	100%
What's New @ Eastern Regional Libraries	AUa	98%
Mansfield Public Library	02048	94%
eBranch Blog	77054	91%
Henderson Libraries Novel News	89012	80%
Kewaskum Public Library	53040	80%
Madison-Jefferson County Public Library - Library-Buzz	47250	80%
Galway Public Libraries Blog	IE	74%
Yarra Plenty Library Local History Blog	AU	67%
Lane Memorial Library Blog	03842	62%
Wellington City Libraries	NZ	60%
Business Lines	46410	50%
Check out the Lyons Public Library!	14489	50%
Library Leader	32801	50%
Monroe Township Public Library	08831	50%
SAPL Book Clubs	T8N 3Z9	50%

Wetmore Public Library	66550	50%
acpl.info	46802	50%
Johnson County Library	66212	50%
Library Staff Weblog	20912	50%
What's New in Newton Reference?	02459	50%

Comments

Blog it and they will respond? That was never a reasonable assumption for library blogs, and it hasn't worked out very well in practice.

In March-May 2007, fewer than half the blogs had any comments at all. Dividing by three to reflect a typical month, we get 589 comments for the whole set of blogs. Here are the quintiles for 2007:

Comm7	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	130.7	0.0	252	0	589
Q1	130.7	4.3	30	7.2	481
Q2	4.0	1.7	27	2.3	66
Q3	1.3	0.7	35	1	34
Q4	0.3	0.3	26	0.3	9
Q5	0.0	0.0	134	0	0

In this case, the Zipf formula applies with a vengeance: the 12% of blogs with the most comments included 82% of all comments.

The quintiles for 2009:

Comm9	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	30	0	218	0	224
Q1	30	5	13	9	160
Q2	4	3	8	4	29
Q3	2	2	7	2	14
Q4	1	1	21	1	21
Q5	0	0	169	0	0

Only 49 of the blogs with posts in May 2009—22%—had any comments *at all*. The blogs with at least five comments during the month—6% of the universe, roughly a quarter of those with any comments—had 72% of all the comments.

Standouts

The dozen blogs with more than four comments:

Blog	Zip	#
SJCPL Blog	46601	30
Kids Lit	54952	29
Worthingteens	43085	24
Sellers Library Teens	19082	15
MADreads	53703	10
Birmingham Public Library's Latest News, Reviews & Info	35203	9
Brooks Public Library	T1R 1B9	9
The Atrium	49503	7
Teen Blog	98446	6

Wellington City Libraries	NZ	6
Connections - Books	06820	5
ICARUS... the Santa Fe Public Library Blog	87501	5
Reading Public Library	19602	5

Note again that Ann Arbor's blog resisted easy counting because of the way it's presented. It's *certainly* worth noting that three of the dozen blogs with significant numbers of comments are teen blogs.

Changes from 2007 to 2009

Since a change from no comments in 2007 to one comment in 2009 is, effectively, an infinite percentage increase, I forced the value "1000%" for any blog that had comments in 2009 and didn't in 2007. On the other hand, if a blog had no comments in either year, there's no (0%) change. Here are the quintiles, with notes following:

Change	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	1400%	-100%	218	0%
Q1	1400%	1000%	14	1000%
Q2	500%	0%	16	124%
Q3	-25%	-97%	18	-55%
Q4	-100%	-100%	70	-100%
Q5	0%	0%	100	0%

What this table shows:

- Thirteen blogs with no comments in March-May 2007 *did* have at least one comment in May 2009 (recorded as 1000%). Additionally, one blog, *Connections—Books* (06820)—had 14 times as many comments in May 2009 as in the average 2007 month. (It had 0.3 comments per month in 2007, that is, a single comment during the three-month study, and five in 2009.)
- Sixteen blogs had at least as many comments in May 2009 as in the average 2007 month.
- Eighteen more blogs *had* comments in both 2009 and 2007, but had fewer comments in 2009 than in 2007.
- Seventy blogs had comments in 2007 but not 2009.
- One hundred blogs had no comments in either year.

Conversational Intensity

My term for a secondary metric: Number of comments divided by number of posts. Quintiles for 2007:

CI7	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	13.50	0.00	252	0.00
Q1	13.50	0.56	29	0.94
Q2	0.55	0.27	28	0.40

Q3	0.25	0.15	28	0.20
Q4	0.14	0.02	33	0.10
Q5	0.00	0.00	134	0.00

Very few library blogs averaged even one comment per post in 2007—13 of them, one *fewer* than in 2009. On the other hand, no blog came close to the sheer intensity of 2007's top scorer, *Teen Blog* (98446) with its 13.5 comments per post. The most intense blog for 2009 had fewer than four comments per post, as shown below:

CI9	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	3.43	0.00	218	0.00
Q1	3.43	1.00	14	1.25
Q2	0.88	0.28	11	0.33
Q3	0.25	0.15	12	0.21
Q4	0.14	0.05	12	0.11
Q5	0.00	0.00	169	0.00

Standouts

The 14 blogs averaging at least one comment per post in May 2009:

Blog	Zip	CI
Worthingteens	43085	3.43
Brooks Public Library	T1R 1B9	2.25
City of Monterey Monterey Public Library Blog	93940	2.00
Richards Free Library News from Richards Free Library	03773	2.00
SJCPL Blog	46601	1.76
Teen Blog	98446	1.50
Kid's Blog	80903	1.50
Reading Public Library	19602	1.00
Fahrenheit 451: Freedom to Read	L0S 1E0	1.00
CLP Teensburgh	15213	1.00
Stuff for Teens	74003	1.00
In the stacks	27203	1.00
Lansing Public Library Teen News & Reviews	60438	1.00
SAPL Teen Corner Reviews	T8N 3Z9	1.00

One possibly-interesting item here: Three of the 14 blogs are from Canada. Unsurprising: **Six** of the 14 are teen blogs.

Changes from 2007 to 2009

Finally, here are the quintiles for changes in conversational intensity between 2007 and 2009, using the same rules as for changes in comments themselves:

Change	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	1000%	-100%	218	0%
Q1	1000%	1000%	13	1000%
Q2	950%	0%	20	166%

Q3	-4%	-92%	16	-47%
Q4	-100%	-100%	69	-100%
Q5	0%	0%	100	0%

What this table says:

- Thirteen blogs with comments in May 2009 but not in March-May 2007 appear as Q1.
- The second group, Q2, includes 20 blogs with at least as much conversational intensity in 2009 as in 2007—including one “true 0%”: a blog with exactly the same ratio of comments to posts in the two studies.
- The third, Q3, includes 16 blogs with comments in both periods but lower conversational intensity in 2009.
- The rest either had comments in 2007 but not in 2009 (Q4) or lacked comments in both years (Q5).

Conclusions

Some public library blogs that were around in 2007 haven't fared that well lately. Quite a few of them appear to be doing just fine. For some public libraries, one post every other week is healthy; for tiny all-volunteer libraries, it's remarkable.

Are they engaging the community? There's no good way to know from outside, except for the minority that get significant numbers of comments. Comments aren't the only measure of engagement; a library blog can succeed without ever getting (or even allowing) comments.

I believe the days are over when libraries were counseled that they needed to have blogs—at least I hope they are. What's been said of scientists may be equally true for libraries (and librarians): While each one could *potentially* benefit from a blog, not every one should *have* a blog.

Source Data

The spreadsheet including the raw data for this study and a list of library names by Zip code, is available at <http://waltcrawford.name/publibblogs95.xlsx> (no hyphens in the URL). It doesn't carry an explicit license, but as far as I'm concerned, anyone can use it at will, for commercial or noncommercial purposes, with credit for my work if that's appropriate. I'm done with this particular line of inquiry.

Pioneers and Intriguing Blogs

As I was gathering information on these blogs in 2007, which typically included reading or at least skimming three months of posts, I was impressed by the variety, personality and vitality found in blogs.

I jotted down some of the blogs I found particularly intriguing for one reason or another in 2007—in Zip order, since I gathered them as I made the last pass through the profiles.

The brief commentaries that follow include some “intriguing” blogs I'd noted in 2007 and pioneering public library blogs—those started before 2004 that were still present in 2007.

Pioneers

h20boro lib blog

Waterboro Public Library, East Waterboro, Maine 04030. One of the oldest—perhaps *the* oldest—public library blogs, and apparently doing quite well in 2007, with quite a few posts and good visibility.

The blog's still there, but the most recent post is dated August 16, 2007. The library's website uses a different mechanism to provide current events and does not point to the blog.

LibLog

Redwood City Public Library, Redwood City, California 94063. Another very old library blog—and, again, the age could only be asserted through external knowledge, since there was no archival function when I studied public library blogs in mid-2007. (I thought the blog began in 2002.)

Now I *do* find an archival function—dating back to November 1999, which *might* make this the oldest public library blog. Unfortunately, the most recent post is January 1, 2008: Once again, a very old library blog appears to have run its course. The library's website does not point to the now-dead blog.

TCPL News

Tompkins County Public Library, Ithaca, New York 14850. Another pioneer from 2002, but this one's still running. There were four posts in May 2009, a considerable decline from the monthly average in 2007—but ten more in June 2009 and four in July 2009.

This is a solid example of a blog that continues to provide detailed items about news and events at the local library on a regular basis.

Sites and Soundbytes

Elisha D. Smith Public Library, Menasha, Wisconsin 54952. One of four blogs from this library in a community of 24,000, this blog—which came to Menasha with the director—was very active in 2007 (83 posts, among the top 12).

While it wasn't *quite* as active in May 2009, there was still an average of nearly two posts per week. After six years, Tasha Saecker still produces a healthy stream

of well-written first-person posts on aspects of libraries and technology, with an emphasis on the web.

FPL Teen Blog

Framingham Public Library, Framingham, Massachusetts. 01702. Certainly one of the earliest teen/YA blogs, dating back to June 2003.

In 2007, this blog was lively, averaging three posts a week covering books, library activities and other areas. Since then, the URL changed—and, on September 12, 2008, the “virtual YA librarian” left. That was the last post on the old site (the last post there was dated September 6, 2008) or the new one.

Kids Lit

Elisha D. Smith Public Library, Menasha, Wisconsin 54952. “Kids” in this case includes teens, and this blog began two months after *FPL Teen Blog*. But there’s a difference: *Kids Lit* continues to be active, indeed the second most active blog in this followup study.

Another Menasha blog—and another one Tasha Saecker brought with her from a previous library. It’s also another lively, well-written, first-person blog that’s a pleasure to read and seems to serve its community well. It was one of the most prolific blogs in 2007 (averaging 35 posts per month, and with a reasonable number of comments). Now, Saecker’s posting a little *more* often and still getting a fair amount of feedback (second highest number of comments for May 2009).

PaperCuts

Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, Topeka, Kansas 66604. In 2007, I characterized this as “a complex, rich combination of essays, new book listings, reviews and what have you.” It was also a frustrating blog to study, since the format blocked cut-and-paste at the end of each post. Still, it was clearly a busy (159 posts over three months), interactive (72 comments), in-depth (average length 315 words, based on sampling 10 posts) blog, with good visibility.

Where is it now? That’s not clear. The server won’t respond at the given URL. Searching for the blog yields an RSS page that only seems to have one live link and doesn’t mention the blog. The T&SCPL home page doesn’t mention blogs at all. As a result, this one isn’t included in the May 2009 study. Whatever the current status, it was a lively and worthwhile blog for several years.

Marin County Free Library Blog

Marin County Free Library, San Rafael, California 94903. This blog began in late 2003 and was quite active in 2007.

It still is in 2009—with an average of a post every other day, a higher frequency (20% more) than in 2007. The light-blue on medium-blue/gray typography may be a little hard to read, but as an RSS feed, this blog offers a steady, varied stream of notes about the library and its services.

Children’s Department Paperless Notebook

Bethel Park Public Library, Bethel Park, Pennsylvania 15102. Reasonably active in 2007, one of the earliest children’s blogs *may* still be around—but if so, it’s invisible to the outside world, an invitation-only blog. That may make sense for a children’s blog, but prevents inclusion in an external study.

Actually, it’s more confusing than that. The URL from 2007 now yields a “PROTECTED” page—so I stopped right there. The Bethel Park website has a list of blogs, which does not include this blog at all.

But, if you click on the Children link, one of the listings under “Children’s Services” is for another blog (not listed on the blog page), bpkids.blogspot.com. That blog doesn’t include the charming “Paperless Notebook” subtitle. Posts have dates but not years—but since the most recent post is dated “Friday, August 1,” it would appear that the new blog hasn’t been updated in a year.

Off the Shelves

La Grange Park Public Library System, La Grange Park, Illinois 60526. Another pioneering library blog, dating back to December 2003. While the posts tended to be short in 2007 (averaging 49 words), the blog averaged one post a week—not bad for a library serving 13,000 people.

Because the URL yielded a flat 404 error when checked, I didn’t search further, and this blog also **isn’t in the 2009 study**. Checking further, it turns out that the blog was recreated as a Typepad blog (lplibrary.typepad.com/offtheshelves/), with no link from the previous site. The new blog incorporates the old archive. It still consists of very brief entries—almost always links to some outside source—and had 22 such brief posts during May 2009. It’s about as close to a pure linklog as you can get.

eBranch Blog

Harris County Public Library, Houston, Texas 77054. This pioneering blog had somewhat less than one post per week in 2007 but included lots of illustrations. The blog’s still there; the frequency’s nearly doubled.

This is a lively, varied blog, including post titles such as “Top 10 Excuses for Not Joining HCPL’s Summer Reading Programs”—which appeared shortly after a similar list of reasons *to* join the program.

Hmm...

Eleven pioneers. Three moribund, three disappeared or morphed in ways that are difficult to trace. But nearly half of them are still going strong, now for at least five and a half years. That's good news.

Other Intriguing Blogs

Why did I find these blogs intriguing? (Three pioneers were on this list, but I've already covered them.) To the extent that it's still apparent, I note the reasons below. It's fair to say that libraries in the northeast are overrepresented, since I started jotting down interesting blogs as I did the final, Zip-code-ordered, investigation, and typically marked only the first case of an "intriguing" category.

Newton's Quick Job Search Blog

Newton Free Library, Newton Centre, Massachusetts 02459. This blog struck me as interesting because it was—and is—an active blog with a very specific purpose a little outside the usual blog categories (book reviews, library news, teens, genealogy): "Helpful Web sites for the job searcher."

With a mission like that, you don't expect a flood of posts; you do expect posts to be focused. They are—and it appears to be appreciated.

From the Reference Desk

Nashua Public Library, Nashua, New Hampshire 03060. In 2007, this blog had lots of posts (74), long posts (an average of 371 words) and a fair number of comments. It was a lively, varied blog.

In 2009, it still is—even though, oddly enough, "From the reference desk" appears only in the browser page title, not the banner itself. It's nowhere near as active (down to one post a week in May 2009, compared to six a week in 2007), but it's still lively and interesting, with posts that encourage you to think.

Dover Public Library news

Dover Public Library, Dover, New Hampshire 03820. In 2007, I called this "a robust, varied blog offering a variety of voices on a variety of topics"—almost one post a day (and 23 comments over the quarter) in a library serving a relatively small population.

Still there, still frequent (23 posts in May 2009), still drawing occasional comments (4 of them on these 23 posts)—and still lively and varied. The library's on Twitter and Facebook too.

The Short List

Essex Library Association, Essex, Connecticut 06426. This struck me in 2007 because it was a fairly active book-oriented blog with a striking, unusual design

that didn't get in the way of the content. It was a young blog (begun October 2006) with 47 posts during the March-May 2007 period.

It's still there, with the same striking and very readable design. It's also one of those blogs for which a one-month mini-study is terribly misleading. There were only three posts in May (and only one in June 2009)—but there were a dozen in July 2009, a dozen in April 2009 and 14 in March 2009. For a book blog that rarely focuses on individual books, this one continues to be strong.

Connections - Books

Darien Library, Darien, Connecticut 06820. Darien had *ten* blogs in March-May 2007; this one, primarily book news and reviews, was active and well read.

It wasn't the Darien blog that I flagged in 2007 as "intriguing"—but it's as good an example as any. In 2009, it's active and getting community response. (The Darien site is fed by a blog, providing the center column of events.) Oddly, I can no longer find a list of blogs—and the "RSS Feeds" page offers a video *explaining* RSS Feeds, but not a list of them. Indeed, the "On the web" list of services includes a bunch of web-sites—but no blogs.

Westport Public Library MOVIE & MUSIC blog

Westport Public Library, Westport, Connecticut 06880. One of two active blogs full of notes and reviews (the other's the WPL BOOK blog). It was an all-star in 2007—in the top quintile for post frequency, number of comments, illustrations and post length. The posts were also *interesting*.

Come May 2009, and the posts are just about as frequent, although there aren't as many comments. They're still interesting posts; this is still a fine blog.

West Long Branch Public Library

West Long Branch Public Library, West Long Branch, New Jersey 07764. One of those cases where a small library uses a blog as the library website, with the address in the banner, hours and resource links on the side and current items (the posts) down the middle.

In 2007, there were 54 posts over three months—not bad for a library serving 7,600 people. In 2009, the blog-as-website continues with a steady stream of functional posts—14 of them in May 2007, similar numbers in other months.

Highland Park Public Library Teen Blog

Highland Park Public Library, Highland Park, New Jersey 08904. I may have marked this teen blog because the posts, while not particularly frequent in 2007, were unusually **long**—863 words, second long-

est in the 2007 survey. The blog also used a lot of illustrations (five per post).

In 2009, the name's changed (to *Michelle's Blog*) and the posts are more frequent—five in May 2009 as compared to four in March-May 2007. (While post frequency is erratic, there are more posts in January-July 2009 than in all of 2008 or 2007). Still lots of photos when appropriate, still fairly long posts (maybe not *as long*), still seems to be a good teen blog in a relatively small community.

Administratively Speaking

Goshen Public Library & Historical Society, Goshen, NY 10924. That's the first (alphabetically) of *ten* blogs in 2007, from this library with 17,000 service population—and I was marking the set of blogs as a group. This director's blog didn't have many posts (three over the quarter) but they were fairly long (596 words).

As of July 31, 2009, the most recent post was November 14, 2008. The posts in late 2008 appear to be monthly messages from the director, interesting and detailed. (The director's up front about things: The About page includes this comment: "Of late I've not had as much time to dedicate to it as I might like, but I'll do my best to keep you apprised of pertinent news and information.")

A page of Goshen blogs still shows nine—but two of those yield 404s, and only two of the nine have 2009 posts. The blogs don't link to the library's website. That website, which seems to be in a state of slight flux, doesn't point to the list of blogs.

Sellers Library Teens

Upper Darby Township & Sellers Memorial Free Public Libraries, Upper Darby, Pennsylvania 19082. A *very* active teen blog in 2007 (averaging more than a post a day), with lots of comments and an extremely varied set of posts. Identified as a group blog *by the teens* and librarians.

Not *as* active in May 2009, but more than a post every other day and with quite a few comments (15 comments over 17 posts). Still a varied, interesting, clearly effective teen blog.

Birmingham Public Library's Latest News, Reviews & Information

Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, AL 35203. I probably flagged this blog because it was a standout in 2007 in almost every respect—frequency (60 posts in three months), comments (13 comments), illustrations (essentially one per post), length of posts (273 words). I called it "lively and personal."

In 2009? More posts (27 in May 2009), more comments (9), higher conversational intensity. This

continues to be an active, varied group blog with interesting posts (still "lively and personal") that appear to reach the community.

Worthingteens

Worthington Public Library, Worthington, Ohio 43085. Teen blogs *should* draw comments. This one had fairly strong conversational intensity in 2007 (0.9 comments per post).

2009? The highest conversational intensity by quite a margin, with 24 comments on seven posts. It's one of those where a post can include a question—and get answers. (Note that, although there were seven posts in May 2009, there were 20 in June and 22 in July; it's an active and highly variable blog.)

Turning the Page...

The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Cincinnati, Ohio 45202. This blog featured "lengthy, thoughtful posts by several staff members." I extrapolated length from the first 10 of 92 posts in March-May 2007, yielding 458 words per post. There were also a fair number of comments.

The frequency was down considerably in 2009, but the reviews are still long and interesting.

SJCPL Blog

St. Joseph County Public Library, South Bend, Indiana 46601. Back in 2007, this blog was *busy* (203 posts, third highest frequency in the study), had many comments (153, second most) and loads of illustrations (814, most in the study)—and appeared to reach a lot of people.

In May 2009, it was much less active but still had more than one post every other day; it had the most comments of any blog in the study. It still appears to be a solid, well-received blog.

MADreads

Madison Public Library, Madison, Wisconsin 53703. A "well-rounded" book-oriented blog in 2007—not the highest on any particular measure, but *among* the top group on all metrics, and with good visibility.

Although there are fewer posts in May 2009, it still stands out in most respects, including comments. Post titles such as "Using the Veg-O-Matic while listening to my victrola" are enticing, and the essays rarely disappoint.

What's New @ Coloma Public Library

Coloma Public Library, Coloma, Wisconsin 54930. In 2007, this blog stood out for one specific reason, undoubtedly the reason I flagged it: *Long* posts—averaging 865 words, longest in the study. There weren't that many posts but they were definitely essays.

There were nine posts in May 2009, three times as many per month as in 2007, in this blog serving a small community (under 2,000). But there's been a big change in approach for this "What's new" blog. In 2007, it was all text, no illustrations—and in 2009, it's essentially all illustrations (book and DVD cover) and links to catalog records, with almost no text. That's true all the way back for the new blog at the new URL, with no redirect from the old one.

ICARUS... the Santa Fe Public Library Blog

Santa Fe Public Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501. Another very active (112 posts in March-May 2007), wide-ranging blog.

Still very active in May 2009 (32 posts, third highest in the study)—and now, unlike 2007, there are some comments as well. The posts continue to be varied, signed and with clear voices and interesting, and May 2009 clearly wasn't a fluke. Except for a slight dip in 2008, the blog's had more than 300 posts each year since it began in 2005—and with 200 posts through the end of July, it's on track for a similarly active 2009.

The Librarian's Own Grove

Riverside Public Library, Riverside, California 92501. My comment in 2007 makes it clear why I tagged this one: "An unusual and rather lovely set of untitled essays by various librarians." The essays weren't all that frequent (12 over three months) or long (averaging 244 words), but they were lovely.

More recent essays continued to be interesting—but the last one appeared June 27, 2008. These later essays were signed. The writer of the final essay announced his departure from the library in that post; the others have apparently chosen not to continue.

Seldovia Public Library

Seldovia Public Library, Seldovia, Alaska 99663. Those who have heard me speak about library blogs **know** why I marked Seldovia's blog as intriguing: The blog is the website for this "all-volunteer library serving the Seldovia, Alaska community since 1935"—and it's highly unlikely that this tiny library (serving a population of fewer than 400) would have an active website at all otherwise.

The blog—the website—is a solid example of WordPress as a content management system, with pages for a range of library issues along with the central blog, primarily describing (and linking to catalog records for) new items in the collection. There were 14 posts in March-May 2007, most of them fairly long. The site continues to average one post per week. It continues to be a shining example of how a well-

thought-out blog can make a tiny, underfunded library more functional at little or no cost and with relatively little effort.

Fahrenheit 451: Banned Books

The Town of Pelham Public Library, Fonthill, Ontario, Canada L0S 1E0. In 2007, this was an *active* blog (45 posts and 45 comments) devoted to banned and challenged books and resources. At the time, I noted: "An astonishing depth and variety of posts, including local banned book challenges (for people to read challenged books)."

In May 2009, there were a lot fewer posts (three) but still an average of one comment per post, and still a stream of challenging posts on the general topic of book challenges and censorship.

Offtopic Perspective

Alfred Hitchcock: The Legend Begins

This four-disc DVD set is part of Mill Creek Entertainment's "Legends Series" and a 20-movie pack. In this case, that means 18 early Alfred Hitchcock movies, all b&w including six silents, and two episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. There's an extra: 55 minutes of trailers from movies throughout Hitchcock's career. This isn't some beautifully-remastered retrospective—but you're getting 18 movies, two TV episodes and an hour of trailers for \$8 or so. As with some other newish Mill Creek sets, this one uses double-layer single-sided discs rather than double-sided single-layer discs, so the labels are a *lot* easier to read. Also, the menu's are more "DVD-like," not the old set of stills.

Since Alfred Hitchcock directed everything here, I don't note the director in each mini-review.

Disc 1

The Lady Vanishes, 1938, b&w. Margaret Lockwood, Michael Redgrave, Paul Lukas, Dame May Whitty, Cecil Parker, Linden Travers, Basil Radford, Mary Clare, Emile Boreo. 1:37 [1:35]

What a start for a set! I'd only vaguely heard of this first-rate movie before.

The movie begins in some Central European hotel, where too many people are stuck because the train's snowed in. Lots of comedy with two stuffy English types forced to share the maid's room, three apparently-wealthy young women having a final get-together before one of them goes off to marry someone with title and money who she may not love, and a young man rehearsing heavy-footed folk dancers in the floor

over the young woman's room. Oh, and the former nanny for some children, headed back to England.

Next day, they all head for the train—but the nanny's mislaid a bag and the young woman helps her out. In the process, a flowerbox pushed off a ledge from above, *quite clearly intended for the nanny*, and strikes the young woman on the head, not quite knocking her out...but she's swooning as the train pulls away. She and the nanny find themselves sharing a first-class compartment with an Italian couple and a stern older woman. At one point, the two go off to have tea, using a special tea the nanny always carries with her, and there's interaction with the Britishers.

All of which is setup—because when the young woman wakes from a nap, *the nanny's gone*. And everybody says she was never there.

What a start for an intriguing plot, enriched by a psychiatrist on the train (picking up a patient at the next station to take to a hospital), the young man's presence in the crowded, smoky coach car, and lots more. Throw in a nun in high heels, magic boxes, adultery, two people who think cricket is more important than possible abduction, international intrigue... The plot turns out to be intricate, confusing, suspenseful, enriched with humor and the kind of thing that requires a master director—which, fortunately, it has. There's even a little romance.

Any time I feel the need to watch the last quarter of a movie on our regular TV because I'm too intrigued to wait another day, I know I've got a winner. In this case, the story's interesting, the direction is...well, Hitchcock, the acting is good, the photography is...well, again, Hitchcock. Great stuff, pretty much a masterpiece and enormously entertaining. The print's about as good as "VHS-quality" ever gets. A winner and a classic: As good as they get. An easy \$2.50.

The Farmer's Wife, 1928, b&w, silent (with music). Jameson Thomas, Lillian Hall-Davis, Gordon Harker, Ruth Maitland. 2:09.

Hitchcock wasn't always devoted to suspense, not even suspense hybrids such as *The Lady Vanishes*. This early silent (with music at least partly specific to the movie, since the only vocal portion, a men's chorus, arrives at the point where a male glee club is starting up in the movie) is pure comedy—a cross between romantic comedy and British rural comedy.

Here's the plot, in its entirety. A farmer—that is, the master of the farm—is a widower. After his daughter weds (some years later?), he decides he should marry again. With the help of his housekeeper, an attractive younger woman who's intelligent and has a good personality, he draws up a list of possibilities. Then he goes after each one—basically arriving at their doorstep (or in one case confronting them during a party at another previous possibility's house), saying he wants

to get married again, and telling them they're the one. Maybe a trifle more of an actual request, but not much. He gets turned down, in some cases with laughter, in one with a hysterical fit (after he says something mean about the woman after she rejects him). Finally, dejected, he comes to realize that he should have been looking closer to home...and finds his wife. (Who, notably, is by far the prettiest, nicest and most suitable of the lot.)

That's it. Oh, there's lots of mild comedy turns along the way, including an extended party sequence involving his handyman, who he's loaned to one of his potential mates to announce people at her party—and the outfit the farmhand's required to wear, with pants that he can't close and is holding up all the time. But that's it. You've just read the entire plot, spoilers and all.

I like the more natural pacing of some older movies. I'm not quite sure that this story is enough to hold up for more than two hours, even with Jameson Thomas' remarkable facial expressions. It's one of those silents where I wonder whether sight-readers would get a lot more dialogue—or whether all that stuff that doesn't show up on cards is just nonsense. (One IMDB review says this version was recorded at "the wrong speed," but that seems unlikely given the natural pace of everything in the film. I should learn never to pay any attention to IMDB reviews...)

Well-directed, to be sure, also well photographed, well acted and generally a good print. But it's a bit slight to get more than \$1.50.

The Manxman, 1929, b&w, silent (orchestral score, not apparently related). Carl Brisson, Malcolm Keen, Anny Ondra, Randle Ayrton. 1:30 [1:50].

A fisherman on the Isle of Man is best friends with a rising young barrister—and is wooing a barmaid, but her father forbids that because he's poor. So he goes off to Africa to seek his fortune, telling the barrister to take care of her in the meantime. Which the barrister does, with predictable results—especially once they get a telegram saying the fisherman's dead.

He's not. He later returns with his fortune. He marries the young woman (apparently she's too gutless to say she doesn't love him, or maybe that's Just Not Done on the Isle of Man), who turns out to be expecting, albeit not with *his* child. Some time after the child is born, she leaves and convinces the barrister—on the road to becoming Deemster, which is apparently what the magistrate is called on the Isle of Man—to hide her away. But she pines for more affection, tells the Deemster he has to make a choice, and goes off to take the child away from the fisherman. Who won't give up the child.

She jumps into the ocean but is saved—and shows up in court (on the Deemster's first official day) on the minor charge of attempted suicide. The fisherman

also shows up...and the father finally figures out what's going on. As you might expect, there is no happy ending.

Or maybe that was all that was happening. This silent really requires you to read lips to get much out of it, with titles few and far between. The leads seem to emote mostly with their eyes, and the barrister and woman both seem perpetually semi-hysterical. I think this is one primarily for Hitchcock completists; it's not terrible, but it doesn't have a lot to recommend it. \$1.00.

The Cheney Vase (Alfred Hitchcock Presents), 1955, b&w. Darren McGavin, Carolyn Jones, Patricia Collinge, Ruta Lee. 0:25.

Remember when half-hour TV shows actually had 25 minutes and 30 seconds of *show*? In the case of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, that seems to mean a 22-minute pocket drama and lots of time for Hitchcock to do his schtick before and after.

A ne'er-do-well gets canned from his job at a museum and, using a forged letter of recommendation (his girlfriend is the museum head's secretary), gets a job caring for a disabled elderly art patron and amateur artist—who has *The Cheney Vase*, which the museum (and a shady German art dealer) wants to buy. He figures he can nab the vase, sell it and take off...and for some reason feels he needs to isolate the woman while trying to find it.

There is, as you might expect, a twist.

Darren McGavin is good in the role, but despite Hitchcock and "golden age" credentials, I thought this was pretty ordinary stuff. The print's decent. Given that it's less than half an hour, I'd never give it more than \$0.75 unless it was a masterpiece; being generous, I'll say \$0.35.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice (Alfred Hitchcock Presents), 1962, b&w. Diana Dors, Brandon De Wilde, David J. Stewart. 0:25

A carnival magician with a devilish appearance steps out of his trailer and sees a person sprawled unconscious over a grating—and discovers it's not a drunken bum but a sick teenager. Rescued, the teen turns out to be an escapee from some institution, a little simple-minded. He thinks the magician is the devil and his wife (and assistant, in the usual short outfit) is an angel.

She's no angel. She's carrying on with a highwire artist. The kid watches the magic act and is terrified when the magician's sawing her in half. Later, she confides to him that the magician really *is* the devil and the magic's in the wand. Somehow, this is enough to convince him to kill the magician—and, in what ensues, leave the boyfriend passed out, drunk, in the magician's trailer, and, eventually, well, if the assistant in the saw trick is unconscious...

There have been many nasty little stories based on the sawing-the-woman-in-half trick. This is one of them. Yes, Robert Bloch wrote it; yes, it's Hitchcock. But it's basically a nasty piece of work. Give the show's sponsor credit: This episode was deemed unsuitable and never shown as part of the series (until syndication). It should have stayed lost. Not worth a dime, and a blemish on the disc.

Disc 2

Rich and Strange, 1931, b&w. Henry Kendall, Joan Barry, Percy Marmont, Betty Amann, Elsie Randolph. 1:32 [1:23].

I'm not sure what to make of this, but I do know that without Hitchcock's name, I'd write it off as a pointless, sketchy picture with mostly unlikable characters and a plot that makes little sense. It involves a married middle-class couple (with a blowhard husband) of little means who suddenly acquire an inheritance. They go on a cruise on which he's terribly seasick for many days and she befriends a dashing Commodore (Marmont). When he gets better, he's befriended by (and takes a liking to) a supposed princess. (There's an absurd "old maid" also [Randolph], interfering with everybody.) The princess is a gold-digger and after digging all his gold (there wasn't that much), departs. The woman *should* leave with the dashing man who clearly loves her and will take care of her, but she's devoted to her unfaithful, boorish husband. Then, on their return voyage (on a lesser vessel), there's some sort of accident, they're trapped in their cabin and abandoned, but they get out and are picked up by a Chinese junk. And wind up back at home.

Hitchcock makes heavy use of title cards as transitions. I found them reminiscent of silents but a poor substitute for flow, in a movie that feels like a set of isolated incidents. Some IMDB reviewers call this a dark comedy, but I found nothing particularly amusing, unless it's the annoying overplayed "old maid." All in all, this was more irritating than enjoyable, but Hitchcock completists might enjoy it. At best \$0.75.

The 39 Steps, 1935, b&w. Robert Donat, Madeleine Carroll, Lucie Mannheim, Godfrey Tearle, Peggy Ashcroft, Wylie Watson. 1:26 [1:23].

This is more like it. A proper thriller that plays fair with the viewer and is good, solid, well-directed entertainment. I won't give you the whole plot just in case you haven't seen this one, but it involves a female spy-for-hire, a mysterious alien protagonist (he's Canadian!), espionage within Britain by foreign agents, police misunderstandings (quite understandable ones), feats of prodigious memory and a lot of Scotland. You get murder (but no gore), shooting, trains and bridges, political humor, music halls...and charming innkeepers.

I could probably poke tiny holes in the plot, but no more so than in any good thriller. The acting's fine—low-key, which suits the plot. The print's not perfect, but pretty good, and this one's a classic--an easy \$2.

Secret Agent, 1936, b&w. John Gielgud, Peter Lorre, Madeleine Carroll, Robert Young. 1:26.

In this delightful romantic comedy... OK, it's an espionage thriller—although there is comedy and romance. Set in World War I, it involves a hush-hush British spy organization (but with “R” rather than “M” as the head), a returning soldier who's conveniently “died” as reported in the press as he's being recruited to do a little counterespionage, a beautiful woman posing as his wife...and Peter Lorre being Peter Lorre, as over the top as you'd expect.

Well directed, lots of interesting camerawork and segues, well acted, suspenseful. The final third is action-packed, with much of it on a train (always great for thrillers). The climactic point seemed a bit contrived, but only a bit. Another classic and another easy \$2.

Champagne, 1928, b&w, silent (unrelated music). Betty Balfour, Gordon Harker, Jean Bradin, Ferdinand von Alten. 1:26 [1:25].

Another very early silent (this time with wholly unrelated classical music, some of it Elgar). The madcap daughter of a wealthy New Yorker flies off in his plane to meet up with her boyfriend (the father does not approve, thinking the boyfriend a gold digger) who's on a cruise to France. She gets over to the ship, apparently abandoning the plane in the process. They argue (he feels that she's calling all the shots), he's seasick a lot (Hitchcock seems to love *mal de mer*), she meets a sinister man...

Next, we're in Paris, where she's entertaining a bunch of young flapper-types, changing gowns every two minutes, generally living it up. Her father shows up and tells her he lost all his money; they're penniless. Let's see...she goes to sell jewels and has the case full of them. The young man shows up, with a good job, and offers to take care of her and her father but she refuses. She's sharing a dismal little apartment with her father. The sinister man shows up from time to time—especially in the club where she gets a job as a hostess.

It all winds up with a romantic-comedy ending (the father was just teaching her a lesson, the young man's really OK, the sinister man...well, I won't reveal that one). All in all, I found it OK as a bit of fluff. Not much more than fluff, though. There's a problem shared with other Hitchcock silents: If you don't lip read, you're missing a lot; there are relatively few intertitles. Let's say \$1.00.

Blackmail, 1929, b&w. Anny Ondra, Sara Allgood, Charles Paton, John Longden, Donald Calthrop, Cyril Richard. 1:24.

At first, I wondered whether this was a mislabeled silent: There's no real dialog for the first eight minutes, although lots of conversations take place for lipreaders in the crowd. I guess that's a mannerism, as is the frequent use of old ahooga car horns in the music track. (Checking IMDB, this was apparently Hitchcock's first talkie, which may explain it.) The plot: Scotland Yard detective's girlfriend is a little bored with him, goes walking with an artist, winds up in artist's flat, stabs (and kills) artist when he misreads her intentions. She walks around in a seeming daze for some time—actually, she seemed to be in a daze throughout the picture, or maybe she's just a very subtle actress.

Scotland Yard investigates the murder but come up with nearly nothing—and her boyfriend is one of those investigating. He removes a glove from the scene that he thinks (correctly) belongs to her. Next thing we know, a stranger who was nearby the murder scene is walking in to the shop where she works (and lives?), aiming to blackmail them based on having the *other* glove. But the stranger's an ex-con, and...well, he flees, he dies in the chase, she wants to confess but there's nothing to confess *to*, and the movie ends. Sorry if these are plot spoilers, but it isn't much of a plot.

It also isn't, to my mind, much of a thriller, despite some Hitchcockian visual devices. The actors seemed remarkably flat and uninteresting, the blackmail peril never really developed, she was—in fact—acting in self-defense and... I guess you have to be a Hitchcock fan. (Reading the first few of many enthusiastic IMDB reviews, it does seem clear that I'm insufficiently fond of early Hitchcock.) I'll give it \$1.25.

Disc 3

Easy Virtue, 1928, b&w, silent (with possibly-related music). Isabel Jeans, Franklin Dyll, Eric Bransby Williams, Robin Irvine, Violet Farebrother, Frank Elliott. 1:29 [1:20].

Another silent, another non-thriller. This time, the focus is on a woman who becomes a symbol of “easy virtue.” First, she's divorced by her apparently-abusive husband because she might have spent time unchaperoned with a painter as he was preparing her formal portrait. This is *scandalous*—particularly because the painter died and left her his estate. Did she actually commit adultery? No indication, and it seems not to matter.

She goes off to the South of France to hide. She meets and falls in love with another Englishman, and it's mutual. He doesn't want to know her background. They marry. He brings her back to his family's country estate. His mother, a wildly overdrawn harridan, despises her with a passion. (His mother also keeps pushing his former girlfriend in his way...) The hus-

band is, unfortunately, a mama's boy; the mother manages to turn him against his wife even before *The Truth Emerges*.

As you'd expect, the mother eventually figures out that Larita, the wife, is Larita, *The Scandal*. The father thinks that's all irrelevant. The old girlfriend, remarkably, wants to make things right between the couple. And there's a climax with a houseparty at which Larita's first husband shows up. It all ends with an uncontested second divorce ending with paparazzi (they weren't called that then) facing her down and her telling them to go ahead and shoot, because there's nothing left to kill.

It's melodrama. The mother overacts so badly as to be ludicrous—she's the Wicked Witch of the Manor, but in this case triumphant. Larita mostly smokes and doesn't seem to have a wide range of expression. There are nice touches, however. The price that follows is generous—for true Hitchcock completists only, but it is a good print. \$1.00.

Jamaica Inn, 1939, b&w. Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Hara, Leslie Banks, Marie Ney, Robert Newton. 1:48/1:38 [1:30].

Hitchcock's fan letter to Cornwall—or not so much. A newly orphaned young woman (O'Hara) travels to live with her aunt at the Jamaica Inn on the Cornish coast—but the coach won't even stop there, instead leaving her off at the local squire's mansion down the road. He takes her to the inn, and the real plot begins.

The innkeeper (who has no guests) has a pirate gang that deliberately causes shipwrecks (by hiding the nearby light), loots the ships and kills any survivors. But, as it turns out, the innkeeper reports to...well, if you've seen many older Westerns, you can guess: The most respectable local citizen, which is to say the squire. There's suspicion among the cutthroats because they don't seem to be getting as much loot as they should, and the innkeeper manages to turn that suspicion against the newest member—who, as it turns out, is from *The Authorities*, trying to crack the case. We find that out after they hang him, the young woman rescues him (don't ask), they make their way to the squire's house...

Lots more plot, a fair amount of suspense, loads of bad-weather scenery and a mixed ending. Charles Laughton overplays the self-satisfied squire to the extreme (no scenery left unchewed), but that might be right for the occasion. It's no masterpiece, but it's worth \$1.50.

The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog, 1926, b&w, silent (unrelated score). Marie Ault, Arthur Chesney, June, Malcolm Keen, Ivor Novello. 1:23 [1:29].

The box says this is Hitchcock's first thriller. It certainly has some Hitchcock trademarks—in-camera

special effects, for example. Otherwise, "early Hitchcock" may be the most important thing to say. That, and that this is a mediocre-to-poor print. Frankly, I almost gave up part way through: Between repetition and other effects probably meant to create a mood but done in a way I found maddening, and the visual quality, it barely seemed worthwhile. Some of the plot devices were *obvious* devices, the kind of thing a spoof movie would highlight.

The basic plot: "The Avenger" is shooting fair-haired women every Tuesday (or every other Tuesday) evening in London, following a geographic pattern. A lodger shows up at the home of one fair-haired "mannequin" (model? entertainer?) (acted by "June," no other name given) with one apparent aspect of the killer...and the girl is sort of involved with a high-handed police detective who's assigned to the case. As things progress, we get stupidity on all sides, a lynch mob and a happy ending. Thrilling? Well, maybe I'm not the right audience. I found it mostly annoying and wildly overacted (but, of course, it's a silent). I'd only recommend this for completists, and given the print quality I'll say \$0.75.

The Ring, 1927, b&w, silent (with apparently-unrelated orchestral music). Carl Brisson, Lillian Hall-Davis, Ian Hunter, Forrester Harvey, Harry Terry, Gordon Harker. 1:56 [1:29].

The plot's simple enough. We start in a carnival (lots of carnival fun scenes), part of which is a challenge for anyone who can stay in the ring more than a round with a boxer billed as "One Round" Jack Sander. Handsome man charms the ticket-taker (who, as it turns out, is the boxer's fiancée) and cold-cocks Sander—and later reveals that he's *The Champ*, and if Sander's good enough, the champ will hire him as a sparring partner.

That happens, the couple marries—and it's obvious from the start that the wife has eyes as much or more for the champ as for her husband. Husband fights his way up the card. Along the way, we get typical early Hitchcock special effects, a wedding-party scene with Sander's trainer (Gordon Harker, one of Hitchcock's early regulars) chugging beer until he passes out, a much later party scene in Sander's flat with crazed flapper dancing (would they really be playing a phonograph record, piano, and ukulele simultaneously while gesticulating as though they'd gone mad?) and more.

I don't know quite what to make of this one. Extended boxing scenes. Over-acting from the hero (and others, but he's got the wild eyes also typical of silent Hitchcock). Another movie for lip-readers. A fairly good print most of the time. Some gratuitous racism (including the n-word in one of the few titles, there for no reason at all). Not a thriller as such, and really not much of a plot. Hitchcock wrote as well as directing.

This version appears is missing nearly half an hour, which might make a big difference. Call it \$1.00.

Young and Innocent, 1937, b&w. Nova Pilbeam, Derrick de Marney, Percy Marmont, Edward Rigby. 1:23.

Sort of a thriller, sort of a romantic comedy. Guy sees drowned woman from cliff, runs down to see what's what, runs off to find help—just as two women stroll along and see her (strangled with a raincoat belt), and assume he was fleeing the scene. Police make the same assumption, find that the woman had purchased a story from him (he's a writer), turn this into "victim was paying off suspect," and assert they have a fool-proof case, enough so no further investigation is required.

He escapes, going out to try to find the raincoat (he knows where he lost it) and prove he's innocent by returning with raincoat and belt (what? you can't buy another raincoat and substitute belts? they're uniquely identifiable?). The daughter of the chief constable gets involved, driving him hither and yon after first finding him annoying. Long scene in a posh hotel with a Gentleman of Low-Cost Leisure putting on the ritz. In the end, only a wildly implausible situation saves the day. There's never any sort of resolution as to *why* the murder happened or why the suspect was framed: As a murder mystery, it's a washout. (Also, I find it hard to accept that having a band perform in blackface *for no reason at all* was so normal in 1937 that it doesn't even deserve comment in most reviews.)

Good mostly for the humor, although I suppose it's suspenseful enough. Enjoyable on the whole. I'll call it \$1.00.

Disc 4

Juno and the Paycock, 1930, b&w. Barry Fitzgerald, Maire O'Neill, Edward Chapman, Sidney Morgan, Sara Allgood. 1:25 [1:34!].

I honestly don't know what to make of this one—a family drama set in Ireland during The Troubles, occasionally punctuated by gunfire, but with seemingly little going on except steady drinking and broad Irish accents. The print's decent, the soundtrack's very noisy, and the picture—well, I found it hard to watch all the way through without nodding off and, indeed, may have missed part of the second quarter. (It doesn't help that people's heads were frequently cut off—which could be a remastering problem, but otherwise reflects really poor cinematography.) I clearly wasn't the target audience—I read "taut" in an IMDB review and just didn't see it. Of course, I haven't read the play it's based on. Charitably, \$0.75.

Sabotage, 1936, b&w. Oskar Homolka, Sylvia Sydney, Desmond Tester, John Loder. 1:16.

I'd already seen this—but that was on a movie set that came with a failed DVD magazine, not one of the

50-classics sets. So I watched it again. Probably just as well: This print was better quality, although the sound's damaged. A movie theater owner—"Verloc," played by Homolka—is also a saboteur in London. His American wife doesn't suspect anything, but the greengrocer's assistant next door to the theater is actually a Scotland Yard agent. At the climax, Verloc manages to get his wife's much younger brother blown up in act of supposedly delivering a film canister and package (on a slow-moving London bus)—and shows the banality of evil in his attempts to justify or ignore his actions to her.

Not great Hitchcock, but it is a thriller. I was not at all enthralled last time around (particularly because the movie was *supposed* to be DOA, which sounded like a much better movie). This time? It's taut and well-directed; I'll give it \$1.50.

The Skin Game, 1931, b&w. C.V. France, Helen Haye, Jill Esmond, Edmund Gwenn, John Longdon, Phyllis Konstam, Edward Chapman. 1:17.

An odd one, dealing with property conflicts and morality. One family's been established in a rural area for generations and has tenant farmers. A brash upstart businessman buys out a neighbor and moves to oust their tenants—and then moves to buy another property that would effectively surround the family, vowing to build factories to make their lives miserable. In the process of an auction that the upstart wins (paying too much for the property), the businessman's daughter-in-law faints after one of those special effects that Hitchcock liked so much he'd repeat it until you were sick of it (the face of someone else at the auction keeps swooping towards her as though it was a ghost). Turns out the daughter-in-law Has A Past.

All turns out badly for almost everybody involved. The noble family head has abandoned his principles to save his view (and, although he'd forgotten entirely about them, his tenants); one life's been lost; a whole family's been driven out of the area.

This one moves right along, with a fair amount of suspense. It has some of the awful cinematography of some other early Hitchcock sound pictures, with heads cut off and the like, and there are problems with the soundtrack—at times making dialogue nearly unintelligible. Still, I'll give it \$1.25.

Number Seventeen, 1932, b&w. Leon M. Lion, Anne Grey, John Stuart, Donald Calthrop, Barry Jones, Ann Casson, Henry Caine, Garry Marsh. 1:03 [1:05].

This is a strange one, slow in parts, heavy on comic turns and problematic identities, with some thrilling aspects—and in the end seeming, well, odd. There's a vacant house that may be a safe house, a corpse who isn't a corpse, a squatter who's a pickpocket but also honest as the day is long, a bystander who's not all

that innocent, a neighbor girl who—I never did figure that one out. A remarkable, if long, climax set on both a speeding train and a speeding bus, hammering home the lesson that it may be a bad idea to kill the entire crew of a locomotive if you don't know how locomotives work.

In the end, this seemed more heavy-handed comedy than deft thriller—and there are a few more of the “heads? Who needs to see heads?” shots. The sound's not great. Odd though it is, it's always interesting, so I'll give it \$1.25.

The Man Who Knew Too Much, 1934, b&w. Leslie Banks, Edna Best, Peter Lorre, Frank Vosper, Hugh Wakefield, Nova Pilbeam. 1:15.

The last movie in the set is also one of the best, ending on a high note. A thoroughly satisfying thriller with a consistent plot, reasonable complexity, a seemingly-incident bit near the beginning that turns out to be crucial to the finale, and Peter Lorre as a villain. (What? You expected Lorre as romantic lead?)

The plot involves a possible political assassination and a child held for a form of ransom. Other than that, there's little reason to discuss the plot—and good reason not to, if you haven't seen this one. Occasional problems with sound in a generally-solid print are all that reduce this to \$1.75.

Bonus: Hitchcock Trailers. 0:55.

The last movie wasn't the last thing on the set. Instead, although not listed on the disc label, there's this remarkable bonus—19 trailers for Hitchcock movies, nearly an hour in all, with 19 chapter marks in case you want to find a specific one. (Given Mill Creek's usual practice of having four chapters per film, this is special treatment.)

Quite a range of trailers (including one for the *remake* of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*), including a few narrated or introduced by Hitchcock—with a *six minute* item for *Psycho* that includes maybe three seconds of footage at the end. None of the trailers is for a film in this set. Excluding uncredited war movies and Hitchcock's TV stuff, IMDB shows 32 Hitchcock movies later than the ones in this set, so it's a broadly representative collection, including most of his most famous movies. Good sound, good picture, good fun. Even though it's not a movie at all, it's easily worth \$1.00.

Summing Up

A few true classics here: *The Lady Vanishes*, *The 39 Steps*, *Secret Agent*. One classic weakened by occasional sound problems: *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Six more possibly worth a second viewing, and another six on the cusp at \$1. That's \$22.50 for fifteen movies and the trailers.

Then there are the others. One TV episode that made me want to wash my hands after watching it, another that I'd never watch again and three movies just not very good. They total \$2.60—and yes, I would take *The Lady Vanishes* over all five put together.

So let's just say \$22.50, or \$16.50 if you leave out the “on the cusp” group. Either way, at \$8 the set's a bargain. I would say “all the more so if you're a true Hitchcock fan,” but in that case you'll be out buying the “approved” DVDs with, presumably, higher-quality prints.

I thought it would be interesting to see what you'd have to do to buy “legitimate,” fully restored, name-brand versions of these movies.

- Criterion offers *The Lady Vanishes* for \$26.99 and *The 39 Steps* for \$27.49. Criterion's reputation is solid, so I'm sure these are far superior.
- Lions Gate offers *The Ring*, *The Manxman*, *Rich and Strange*, *The Skin Game* and a fifth film, *Murder!*, in a three-disc \$22.49 “Alfred Hitchcock Box Set” mastered from 35mm stock that should be much higher quality.
- MGM offers *Young and Innocent*, *Sabotage* and *The Lodger* for \$17.99 each.
- A few are available as \$9.99 DVD-Rs, manufactured on demand. I have no idea whether these “Synergy” discs are significantly restored.
- There's a \$24.99 “enhanced edition” of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (the 1934 version), also on DVD-R, from Triad Productions.

So it looks as though you can buy *definitely* superior, remastered, probably restored versions of ten of these movies for a total of \$155.93. For a completist and Hitchcock fan, it's probably worthwhile.

Perspective

Academic Library Blogs: A Limited Update

In 2007, when I completed the study of public library blogs (see PUBLIC LIBRARY BLOGS: A LIMITED UPDATE), I did a similar study of academic library blogs—those officially associated with academic libraries.

As with public library blogs, I published the results in a book that was, in retrospect, poorly conceived. The book, *Academic Library Blogs: 231 Examples*, will go out of print soon (it's still available from Lulu.com and Amazon, at least through September 30, 2009, for those in search of a rarity). The first portion—the part devoted to metrics and overall com-

ments—appeared in the May 2009 *Cites & Insights* (volume 9, number 6, citeandinsights.info/civ9i6.pdf).

Where Are They Now?

If the book had been more successful or I had found sponsorship, I believe it would have been interesting and valuable to follow the progress of these blogs over time. While no study of blogs can be comprehensive, the 2007 study was a broadly representative sample of active English-language academic library blogs.

I wasn't *quite* ready to give up on that data without one more look—and it's possible to do a limited update without too much effort. That's what I've done (with all web research taking place July 26, 2009), and here are the results.

Survivors and Currency

All 231 blogs in the 2007 study originated in 2006 or before—and each blog had at least two posts during the March-May 2007 study period, with at least one post in two of the three months.

Here's the situation in July 2009:

- Fourteen of the 231 blogs—6%—have disappeared. Of those, 11 yielded 404 pages, two couldn't be reached or showed a server error and one was explicitly deleted.
- Five others couldn't be analyzed. In one case, the archive is broken. In another, the blog closed in June 2009, linking to a *personal* blog cleansed of all official posts—and with all prior posts deleted. One blog showed no posts or any way to find archived posts. One appears to have posts—but the screen flashes for half a second, followed by a forced redirect to a splash page, with no way to return. And one has posts, but the posts don't have year dates.
- That leaves 212 (92%) that still yield visible, dated posts—although not always at the same URL. Eighteen of the 212 have new URLs or titles, usually with links from the old archived blogs, sometimes only findable through searches (in three cases, the URL redirect is so fast and so transparent that you'd barely note there is a new URL).

For the 212 with visible, dated posts, I looked at *currency* as of May 31, 2009.

Of those 212:

- Eleven (5%) had posts on May 30 or 31.
- Forty more (18%) had posts on May 28-29; thus, 24%—just under a quarter—had posts within the most recent half week.

- Twenty-three (11%) had a post within a week but not half a week. That's a total of 74 (35%) updated within the week.
- Thirty-seven (17%) more had a post within two weeks, and 44 more (21%) within May. That's a total of 155 (73% of blogs with visible dated posts, 67% of all blogs) with at least one post within the month. Let's call those "active blogs" (although you might reserve that term for the 111 having at least one post in the second half of May 2009).
- Twenty-eight more had a post in March or April; using a 90-day cutoff, that yields 86% (or 79% of all blogs) that could be considered semi-active.
- Extending the period to 120 days, Technorati's generous cutoff for "active," yields six more blogs.
- Fourteen blogs had not been updated within 120 days but *had* been updated within a year—that is, sometime since May 31, 2008.
- Eight blogs had a post sometime between May 31, 2007 and May 31, 2008.
- One blog had its most recent post within the earlier study period, between March 1 and May 31, 2007. In all, that's 23 blogs (10% of the total population) that appear entirely moribund but with visible archives.

Here's a quick comparison with December 2008:

- In December 2008, 72 of the 231 blogs (31%) were robust; May 2009 was a little better with 74 (35% of visible blogs).
- In December 2008, 59 were active but not robust; that was down considerably, to 37.

A more meaningful comparison may be with the 2007 study, since I can compare frequencies:

- In 2007, 138 (60%) of the blogs averaged at least one post per week. In 2009, that was down to 89 (42% of visible blogs).
- In 2007, another 56 (24%) averaged at least one post every other week. In 2009, that was down to 38 (18%).

I described active and robust blogs as being in "pretty good health," a description that fit 194 or 84% of the blogs in the 2007 study. Only 127, or 60% of visible blogs, fit that description in May 2009.

What about comments—that great promise of community involvement that never did work out for most library blogs? Dividing 2007 figures by three, we get a total of 192 comments per month—and only 86 blogs with any comments at all. For 2009, only 33 of the blogs (16% of visible blogs) had any comments at

all during May—and there were a total of only 150 comments. On the other hand, for the few blogs with *any* comments, there were more comments per blog (per month) in 2009 than in 2007.

The Quintiles

This time around, I looked at total posts and total comments; I didn't study length of posts or illustration counts. That yields three metrics: post count, comment count and conversational intensity. For each of those three, I provide 2007 quintiles, 2009 quintiles and change quintiles. Caveats:

- For *changes* from 2007 to 2009, I've included only the 212 blogs for which posts and comments could be counted in both cases.
- Quintile sizes aren't always one-fifth of the blogs (46 or 47, 42 or 43 for changes) because of clusters with the same value—that is, I couldn't break a quintile between two blogs both having 3.3 posts per month in 2007.
- The differences are extreme in 2009 because quite a few blogs (27% of visible blogs) had neither posts nor comments. As a result, Q1-Q4 are relatively small, representing segments of blogs having non-zero numbers. That's also true for comments and conversational intensity in both years, where Q1-Q4 represent segments of the minority of blogs that had any comments at all.

Post Frequency

To make the comparison reasonable, I divided 2007 figures by three, yielding average posts *per month*—comparable to the one-month figures for 2009.

For the 231 blogs with posts in the 2007 study, there were an average of 2,076 posts per month—which works out to an average of 9.0 posts per blog, but the median blog had 4.7 posts.

Quintiles for 2007:

Count7	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	254.0	0.7	231	4.7	2,076
Q1	254.0	11.3	48	17.3	1,301
Q2	11.0	6.0	54	7.7	340
Q3	5.7	4.0	47	5.0	230
Q4	3.7	2.3	49	3.0	145
Q5	2.0	0.7	44	1.3	60

The 20% of blogs with the most posts represented 63% of all posts.

Compare that with quintiles for 2009, including only visible blogs, where Q1-Q4 are quarters of those blogs with any posts at all:

Count9	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	147	0	212	3	1,207
Q1	147	9	34	15.5	767
Q2	8	5	40	6	254
Q3	4	3	37	3	126
Q4	2	1	44	1	60
Q5	0	0	57	0	0

Here, the top 20% (actually 16%) represented 64% of all posts.

Standouts

Here's the list of academic library blogs averaging at least two posts per week in May 2009—43 of them, 20% of the visible blogs. I'm including the zip code (or postal code or country abbreviation) because some blog names are a little mysterious.

Blog name	Zip	#
Swem Government Information	23187	147
Burlington Textiles Library	27695	47
Physical & Engineering Sciences News	27695	44
Homeland Security Digital Library Weblog - On the HomeFront	93943	43
Economics Library Blog	NZ	37
iPortal News	S7N 5A4	27
News from the PRI Library and Data Archive	16802	26
Flow : information for Okavango Delta planning	Botswana	25
Government Publications Library -- University of Colorado	80309	24
Law In The News	97219	23
WisBlawg - From the UW Law Library	53706	21
North Carolina Miscellany	27514	19
..STCC Library 'blog..	01102	19
Cog 'n Blog - Engineering Library news	NZ	19
K-State Libraries: Staff Bulletin	66506	18
BoleyBlogs!	97219	18
Instructional Resource Center, Ashland University Library	44805	16
MIT Libraries News	02139	15
University Centre Oldham - LRC Blog	England	15
spineless?	Scotland	14
View from the library	30102	14
What's New at the Auburn Libraries	36849	13
Ohio University Libraries News	45701	13
Library News	52242	12
K-State Libraries: Conference Reports	66506	11
Wendt Library Blog, UW College of Engineering	53706	11
Education News	30303	11
UGA Libraries News & Events	30602	10
Ball State University Libraries' News	47306	10
UBC Academic Search - Google Scholar Blog	V6T 1Z4	9
Business Blog	45701	9
ISEL Update	01003	9
ZiefBrief	94117	9

reading girl speaks	44074	9
GovBlog: UC Berkeley	94720	8
Carmichael Library's Blog	35115	8
@thelibrary	83725	8
Drake Memorial Library	14420	8
Library Log	19104	8
VT Library News	24062	8
Library News	60465	8
Library News - Georgia State University Library	30303	8
Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences News	35205	8

Changes from 2007 to 2009

Here are the quintiles (or, rather, quarters of the top two-thirds):

Change	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	800%	-100%	212	-54%
Q1	800%	36%	39	119%
Q2	33%	-23%	37	0%
Q3	-25%	-61%	40	-40%
Q4	-63%	-92%	39	-74%
Q5	-100%	-100%	57	-100%

A fair number of academic library blogs had more posts in May 2009 than in the average month March-May 2007, but a lower percentage than for public libraries—57 in all, or 27% of visible blogs. The top group, those with at least 36% more posts in 2009 than in 2007, appear below.

Blog	Zip	%
University Centre Oldham - LRC Blog	England	800%
tclibrary Blog	55404	800%
IU Medical Library News	46202	400%
Kresge Library News	48109	400%
Hyde Collection Catablog	02138	350%
Ohio University Libraries News	45701	333%
Burlington Textiles Library	27695	315%
Get It At Gutman	19144	275%
BoleyBlogs!	97219	238%
UBC Academic Search - Google Scholar Blog	V6T 1Z4	238%
ISEL Update	01003	238%
UNLV Libraries News Blog	89154	200%
AIDallas Library	75231	200%
Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences News	35205	167%
What's up at Lemieux Library	98122	140%
Levy Library	10029	133%
Carolina Blawg	27599	125%
Northeastern State University Libraries -- What's New at the Library	74464	125%
reading girl speaks	44074	125%
North Carolina Miscellany	27514	119%
Homeland Security Digital Library Weblog - On the HomeFront	93943	119%

Hardin News	52242	110%
BU Library News & Exhibits	13902	100%
Business Blog	45701	80%
E. H. Butler Library Blog	14222	75%
Alkek Library News	78666	71%
LaGuardia Community College Library Media Resources Center Blog	11101	71%
Law Library Blog	V6T 1Z4	71%
Connections	49001	64%
What's New at the Auburn Libraries	36849	63%
School of the Coast and Environment	70803	62%
Library News - Georgia State University Library	30303	50%
Science News	30303	50%
CPCC Libraries Blog	28235	50%
Ryerson Library News	M5B 2K3	50%
Langsdale Library News	21201	38%
Flow : information for Okavango Delta planning	Botswana	36%
National Art School Library	AU	36%
..STCC Library 'blog..	01102	36%

Comments

Blog it and they will respond? That was never a reasonable assumption for library blogs, and it hasn't worked out very well in practice.

In March-May 2007, only 86 of 231 blogs—37%—had any comments at all. Dividing by three to reflect a typical month, we get 192 comments for the whole set of blogs (roughly one-third as many as for public library blogs). The “quintiles” for 2007:

Comm7	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	22.0	0.0	231	0.0	192
Q1	22.0	2.7	21	3.7	131
Q2	2.3	1.3	21	1.7	36
Q3	1.0	0.7	23	0.7	17
Q4	0.3	0.3	21	0.3	7
Q5	0.0	0.0	145	0	0

In this case, the Zipf formula *does* apply: the 20% (roughly) of blogs with the most comments, which is more than the first “quintile” here (it's the combination of Q1 and Q2) include 87% of all comments.

“Quintiles” for 2009, including only visible blogs:

Comm9	High	Low	Blogs	Median	Total
All	45	0	212	0	150
Q1	45	6	9	6	105
Q2	5	3	5	4	19
Q3	2	2	7	2	14
Q4	1	1	12	1	12
Q5	0	0	179	0	0

Only 33 of the 155 blogs with posts in May 2009—22%—had any comments *at all*. The dozen blogs with

at least four comments during the month—6% of the universe, roughly one-third of those with any comments—had 79% of all the comments.

Standouts

The dozen blogs with at least four comments:

Blog	Zip	#
North Carolina Miscellany	27514	45
GovBlog: UC Berkeley	94720	11
Ryerson Library News	M5B 2K3	11
UBC Academic Search - Google Scholar Blog	V6T 1Z4	8
..STCC Library 'blog..	01102	6
K-State Libraries: Staff Bulletin	66506	6
spineless?	Scotland	6
Carmichael Library's Blog	35115	6
CSB/SJU Library Blog	56374	6
Auraria Hot Topics	80204	5
WisBlawg - From the UW Law Library	53706	4
@thelibrary	83725	4

One note on comments: A couple of academic library blogs aren't sufficiently protected from spam comments. Those spam comments (cleverly done, but clearly existing to promote other websites) were ignored in these counts.

Changes from 2007 to 2009

I forced the value "1000%" for any blog that had comments in 2009 and didn't in 2007. On the other hand, if a blog had no comments in either year, there's really no change. Here are the "quintiles," with notes following:

Change	High	Low	Blogs
All	4400%	-100%	212
Q1	4400%	1000%	11
Q2	650%	80%	11
Q3	50%	-95%	11
Q4	-100%	-100%	58
Q5	0%	0%	122

What this table shows:

- Eight blogs that didn't have any comments in March-May 2007 *did* have at least one comment in May 2009 (recorded as 1000%). Three other blogs (*North Carolina Miscellany*, *GovBlog UC Berkeley* and *Ryerson Library News* had more than ten times as many comments in May 2009 as in the average 2007 month.
- Although not clear from this table, 17 blogs had at least as many comments in 2009 as in a typical 2007 month.
- Five blogs *had* comments in both 2009 and 2007, but had fewer comments in 2009 than in 2007.
- 58 blogs had comments in 2007 but not 2009.

- 122 blogs had no comments in either year.

Conversational Intensity

A secondary metric: Number of comments divided by number of posts. Quintiles for 2007:

CI7	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	2.20	0	231	0
Q1	2.20	0.36	22	0.57
Q2	0.33	0.19	21	0.26
Q3	0.18	0.12	22	0.14
Q4	0.10	0.01	21	0.04
Q5	0	0	145	0

Very few library blogs averaged even one comment per post in 2007—five of them, four *fewer* than in 2009. There were no blogs with lots of comments per post in either case, but the most intense blog for 2009 at least exceeded three comments per post (admittedly on only three posts), as shown below:

CI9	High	Low	Blogs	Median
All	3.67	0	212	0
Q1	3.67	1.00	9	1.00
Q2	0.89	0.33	10	0.46
Q3	0.32	0.19	7	0.25
Q4	0.18	0.04	7	0.14
Q5	0	0	179	0

Standouts

The nine blogs averaging at least one comment per post in May 2009:

Blog	Zip	CI
Ryerson Library News	M5B 2K3	3.67
North Carolina Miscellany	27514	2.37
GovBlog: UC Berkeley	94720	1.38
Auraria Hot Topics	80204	1.25
CSB/SJU Library Blog	56374	1.00
livelibrary	67042	1.00
Western Kentucky University Libraries Blog	42101	1.00
Digitization Projects at UNLV Libraries	89154	1.00
K-State Libraries: Kudos	66506	1.00

Changes from 2007 to 2009

Finally, here are the quintiles for changes in conversational intensity between 2007 and 2009, using the same rules as for changes in comments themselves:

Change	High	Low	Blogs
All	4713%	-100%	212
Q1	4713%	1000%	12
Q2	700%	8%	16
Q3	-11%	-90%	5
Q4	-100%	-100%	57
Q5	0%	0%	121

What this table says:

- Q1 includes four blogs with more than ten times the conversational intensity in 2009 as in 2007—and eight more with comments in 2009 but not in 2007.
- The second group, Q2, includes 16 blogs with more conversational intensity in 2009 than in 2007 (there were none with “true 0%” changes).
- The third, Q3, includes five blogs that did have comments in both periods, but had lower conversational intensity in 2009.
- The rest either had comments in 2007 but not in 2009 (Q4) or lacked comments in both studies (Q5).
- As with comments themselves, it may be noteworthy that only 29 blogs out of 231 studied—or out of 212 with countable posts in both years—had comments in both years.

Conclusions

Most academic library blogs that were fully operational in 2007 are doing OK in 2009—but quite a few are nearly moribund and posting in general has declined by more than half.

Comment counts didn't decline that much—but there were very few comments and very few blogs with comments in 2007, even fewer in 2009. For many academic library blogs, that's not surprising—they serve functional roles that wouldn't call for responses. There's not a lot else to say.

I hadn't started a list of “intriguing” academic library blogs in 2007. The comments at the end of this article include pioneering blogs and a few standouts in 2007 for post frequency, comments and average length of posts.

Source Data

The spreadsheet including raw data for this study, tables used here and a list of library names by zip code is available at <http://waltcrawford.name/aclibblogs95.xlsx> (no hyphens in the URL). It doesn't carry an explicit license, but as far as I'm concerned, anyone can use it at will, for commercial or noncommercial purposes, with credit for my work if that's appropriate.

Pioneers

The cutoff for this list is 2002, because too many academic library blogs began in 2003 (18 more).

WVU Libraries News

University Libraries, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506. While one other blog

shows archives back to 1998, that one didn't become a blog until 2007. This one apparently began, *as a blog*, before the turn of the century. It shows up as the News section of the library website. Posts are signed; longer posts (and the posts here in 2007 were fairly long) require links for the full story.

Activity in May 2009 is just a little greater than in March-May 2007: Three posts for the month as compared to seven for the quarter. Posts are still varied, with some of them fairly long. No feverish activity, but a steady flow all these years.

Library News - Georgia State University Library

Georgia State University Library, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia 30303. Another one that appears to date back before the turn of the century—and one of almost two dozen library blogs in 2007. A fairly typical news blog, notable primary for longevity, with 16 posts in March-May 2007.

Going back in May 2009, what you get is “University Library Blogs”—the specific News blog was folded into a new blog with a migration to WordPress. That overall blog shows 16 posts in May 2009—roughly one every other day. Other blogs have been pared down to a set of eight subject blogs with varying levels of activity.

..STCC Library 'blog..

STCC Library, Springfield Technical Community College, Springfield, Massachusetts 01102. The blog began in January 2002 and was active in 2007, with 42 posts and seven comments in March-May 2007.

Well now! In May 2009, there were 19 posts and six comments—a significant increase in both activity and community response.

Hardin News

Hardin Library for the Health Sciences, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242. The blog began in August 2002. While most posts had comments closed, one of the ten March-May 2007 posts left them open for feedback on how to improve the library—and got a healthy five comments on the post.

The blog's still active, with seven posts in May 2009 (and no comments, as you'd expect). Hardin's also tweeting.

In the Spotlight

Northwestern University Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208. This blog was a pioneer, starting in January 2002, but wasn't all that active in March-May 2007, with three posts.

It's still around, with three lengthy and interesting posts in July 2009, two posts in June 2009 and one in

April—but, as it happens, there were no posts in May 2009. Posts are frequently essay length.

iPortal News

University Library, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A4. This indigenous studies blog began in August 2002 and was *very* active in March-May 2007, with 73 posts (most quite short).

It's a little more active in May 2009, with 27 posts—not quite one a day, but close. It's clearly a well-maintained portal, most days providing an annotated link to some story related to indigenous issues.

Library Newsletter

Library and Learning Resources, Empire State College, Saratoga Springs, New York 12866. Begun in October 2002, this blog isn't enormously active but offers a stream of news, research tips and resource comments. There were 16 posts in March-May 2007.

That was down to two in May 2009, and only a couple since then, most of them resource-related.

MIT Libraries News

MIT Libraries, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139. Begun in January 2002, this blog was quite active in March-May 2007, with 56 posts in all. It was also one of the most visible library blogs, with subscriber numbers similar to those of an A-list blogger.

The blog wasn't *quite* as active in May 2009, with 15 posts (down 20%), but it's still a source of varied, well-written, signed posts by a range of writers.

Science News

Georgia State University Library, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia 30303. Another early arrival among Georgia State's panoply of blogs, this began in December 2002. It wasn't hugely active in March-May 2007 (eight posts).

May 2009 saw four posts, and this seems to be a healthy ongoing blog.

Other Standouts

These blogs are among those with the most posts, the longest posts, the most comments or the highest conversational intensity in 2007. They're arranged alphabetically. (I omitted one or two blogs where "long posts" were really unannotated lists of new books.)

BRAIN_blog

Library@Mohawk, Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology, Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3T2. In 2007, this blog specifically said "every two weeks" and had some of the longest essays of any blog (averaging 872 words).

Those long fortnightly posts on a variety of topics appeared into April 2008, followed by one post in November 2008—and then nothing. There's no active link to the library website from the blog; searching for the library yields "The BRAIN," the library's website, which does not have a link to the blog. For now, at least, it appears to be gone.

Children's Literature at the Education & Social Science Library.

University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois 61801. One of many UIUC library blogs, notable primarily for the length of its posts—an average of 897 words in 2007.

In May 2009, the blog was exactly as active as in March-May 2007, which is to say, one post per month. That seems to be the pattern: A monthly essay highlighting one particular aspect of children's literature in a carefully-prepared annotated bibliography.

Cites & Bytes @ Bailey 16057

Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania 16057. In 2007, this was an active blog (50 posts) with lots of comments (37 comments)—including comments I flagged as "priceless."

The blog is still there and still offers interesting posts, but fewer of them (two in May 2009, two in June, none in July) and with fewer comments.

DACC Library BlogSpot

Library, Danville Area Community College, Danville, Illinois 61832. This blog was noteworthy in 2007 for its post length, averaging 653 words for the 14 posts in March-May 2007. It was unusual for an official library blog as a LiveJournal blog.

Posts in September, October and November 2008 continued to be long and interesting—but that was the end of it. A new blog—not referenced from the old one, and not directly available from the library's website—began on blogspot in December 2008. (Hmm. The old LiveJournal blog was called "BlogSpot." The new blog, at dacclibrarylines.blogspot.com, is called *DACC Library Lines*.) That blog, not tracked in the study because it wasn't readily discoverable, seems to be averaging two fairly long essays each month.

Economics Library Blog

University of Canterbury Library, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. A departmental blog with lots of posts (89) and a fair number of comments (7) in March-May 2007. One of eight blogs from the Canterbury library.

This blog is *more* active in May 2009, with 37 posts—more than one a day and about 25% more than

in a typical 2007 month—although fewer comments (none). Most posts consist of nothing more than a link to a particular journal article—giving just the journal title and article location, not the article title.

Gargoyles Loose in the Library

University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois 61801. This one's unusual: It's from the University Laboratory High School Library. In March-May 2007 it was active (42 posts) and had *loads* of comments (61 or 1.5 per post; second highest comments in 2007).

Fewer posts in May 2009 (seven, roughly half the posting rate) and fewer comments, but on its fifth anniversary this blog is still lively, heavy with photos and interesting.

Law In The News

Paul L. Boley Law Library, Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon 97219. *Lots* of posts—762 in March-May 2007, by far the most of any blog. *Short* posts—an average of 11 words, basically just enough for a headline and a link.

Still around in May 2009 and still active, but with somewhat less than one post a day instead of the eight-per-day rate of 2007. Except for one thing: Now, each post is a *collection* of headlines and links. If anything, this unusual linkblog is *more* active in 2009.

spineless?

Heriot-Watt University Library, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland. Apart from the unusual title, this was a busy blog in March-May 2007 (53 posts, 17.7 per month) with quite a few comments (20).

It still is—May 2009 had 14 posts and six comments.

Temple University Library News

Temple University Libraries, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122. Active and conversational—43 posts and 18 comments in March-May 2007, with a broad mix of posts.

The pace slowed in May 2009, with six posts and no comments, but that was an unusual month: other 2009 months have ranged from nine to 23 posts. It's still a broad mix of informative posts.

UBC Academic Search - Google Scholar Blog

UBC Library, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z4. The name's changed to *The Search Principle blog*; the focus has broadened to "health libraries + web media."

Other than sheer specificity, this blog was noteworthy for the conversational intensity in March-May 2007: 1.3 comments per post. The broader scope has

resulted in more posts—nine in May 2009 as compared to 2.7 per month in March-May 2007—and more overall comments (8 as compared to 3.3 per month), although a lower conversational intensity.

UW Libraries Blog

UW Libraries, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071. I'm not sure what happened here. In March-May 2007, this was an active blog (69 posts) with lots of comments (66 comments). In May 2009, it was unreachable.

There's another blog at a different address, *Dusty Shelves*, that's fairly active (eight posts in May 2009, but not included in the study). I think it's the same blog—the archives appear to include posts from the old blog—but there's no clear link.

WisBlawg - From the UW Law Library

UW Law Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin 53706. In 2007, I used the tag line "Law with a distinctive voice"—posts are signed and the librarian's picture appears in the sidebar. There were 90 posts and 11 comments in March-May 2007, an average of one post per day.

In May 2007, the pace was down slightly to 21 posts—but with four comments, more than in the average 2007 month. Bonnie Schucha continues to write interesting, varied posts on a regular basis.

My Back Pages

Impure Silliness

Some controversies I've covered in other sections of *Cites & Insights* may, in retrospect, belong here instead. Always a tough judgment to make, but at times the only reasonable way to approach a situation is to poke fun at it.

Take, for example, the eternal SCO vs. The Known World lawsuits, which in one way or another claim (or claimed) that bits of Linux were stolen from Unix—and that SCO owned the Unix code. I covered the suit (or suits) at one point, most recently in early 2005. I was particularly fascinated by a claim that the Gnu Public License (GPL) was unconstitutional—in essence, that a copyright owner *had no right* to reduce their copyright protections. I salted away an August 2007 news report that undermined yet another basis for SCO's endless lawsuit: a judge ruled that SCO doesn't even *own* the copyrights it was claiming infringement on—Novell does. Some shadow of SCO is still around, and it's still possible that the case could rise again. Still, the more I think about it, this situa-

tion doesn't deserve even my level of inspection: It's impure silliness. (In the latest act, as reported August 6, 2009 at *Ars Technica*, a bankruptcy judge blocked an asset sale aimed at continuing the endless lawsuit and suggests that SCO's hopes for winning the suit "reminded the Court of Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*.")

Some silliness is so impure it can't be dismissed with an offhand paragraph, but might also not deserve *serious* attention. Take the Kindle text-to-speech feature and the Authors Guild attack on it. Briefly, the Kindle 2 (and, presumably, the Kindle DX) implements—or, rather, implemented—computerized text-to-speech technology so you could have the Kindle "read" your book to you. There's nothing terribly special about text-to-speech technology; it's a feature of both Vista and OS X, and it's also included in recent versions of Adobe Reader.

I wrote this up for the Library Leadership Network, as part of the article "Ebook reader problems and issues," and that discussion may serve here:

After Amazon announced Kindle 2 features, including text-to-speech capabilities, Paul Aiken of the Authors Guild asserted that "They don't have the right to read a book out loud. That's an audio right, which is derivative under copyright law." (The link on the LLN page, to a thoughtful commentary on this issue by Tim Spalding, links to a direct quote in the *Wall Street Journal*).

Neil Gaiman heard that argument from his agent and responded:

When you buy a book, you're also buying the right to read it aloud, have it read to you by anyone, read it to your children on long car trips, record yourself reading it and send that to your girlfriend etc. This is the same kind of thing, only without the ability to do the voices properly, and no-one's going to confuse it with an audiobook. And that any authors' societies or publishers who are thinking of spending money on fighting a fundamentally pointless legal case would be much better off taking that money and advertising and promoting what audio books are and what's good about them with it.

While Spalding thinks the Authors Guild—possibly emboldened by its "victory" over Google—might have a case, others are less convinced (unless that case is based on contracts between Amazon and publishers rather than copyright). As Iquilter puts it in a comment:

Basically none of the six "exclusive rights" of the copyright holder are violated:

* It's not a reproduction because there is no fixation.

* This isn't a "derivative work" because there is no original expression added to it (and it's not fixed).

* This isn't a "public performance" because it's not performed in public.

No exclusive right, so no copyright infringement. No need to get to the various exceptions and exclusions—the fact that this is arguably an accommodation for the blind, or fair use which is also a pretty good argument in this instance.

I'll repeat my own comment on that post:

This absurdity is one reason I've never seriously considered joining Authors Guild. Every Windows XP, Vista, and Mac OS X computer comes with text-to-speech capabilities; so does Adobe Reader; and there are free Linux text-to-speech capabilities. Saying they're all illegal if used on copyright text (and all text is technically copyright as soon as it's stored on a PC) is so far beyond the pale...

The National Federation of the Blind issued a response, noting particularly the Authors Guild suggestion that its members negotiate contracts explicitly prohibiting use of the Kindle 2 text-to-speech technology. Portions of that response (by Dr. Marc Maurer, president of NFB):

Although the Authors Guild claims that it supports making books accessible to the blind, its position on the inclusion of text-to-speech technology in the Kindle 2 is harmful to blind people. The Authors Guild says that having a book read aloud by a machine in the privacy of one's home or vehicle is a copyright infringement. But blind people routinely use readers, either human or machine, to access books that are not available in alternative formats like Braille or audio. Up until now, no one has argued that this is illegal, but now the Authors Guild says that it is. This is absolutely wrong. The blind and other readers have the right for books to be presented to us in the format that is most useful to us, and we are not violating copyright law as long as we use readers, either human or machine, for private rather than public listening. The key point is that reading aloud in private is the same whether done by a person or a machine, and reading aloud in private is never an infringement of copyright.

It's also worth noting that Authors Guild appears to be arguing for limits on first-sale rights (that is, preventing readers from using the book they've purchased in the manner they prefer), which is probably consistent with the group's overall policy.

Unfortunately, what could have been an interesting discussion and attempt to stand up for both assistive technology and common sense was cut short. Amazon caved in to the Authors Guild—saying that authors

and publishers could determine whether the text-to-speech feature would be enabled for each book. Oddly enough, Amazon announced that it was caving in (not using those words) while stating that the text-to-speech feature was legal. As Rick Mason commented in “Confusing assistance with performance,” a March 1, 2009 post on *Libology blog* (www.libology.com/blog/):

To state that a feature of your product is legal, and to understand the benefit that the feature would bring to users of the product, but to then allow it to be disabled arbitrarily by third parties strikes me as a company that is attempting to placate the “squeaky wheels” simply because they threaten legal action.

There’s a good discussion of Amazon’s decision, with *many* comments, in a February 28, 2009 post at the *Lessig blog* (www.lessig.org/blog/), “Caving into bullies (aka, here we go again).” But I’m not going to afford it more space or seriousness than it deserves.

Now, then, Amazon did something a little more...interesting...later in the year, when it responded to real (if slightly bizarre) copyright problem by making it manifestly clear that when you pay Amazon for ebooks for your Kindle, you’re not buying the ebooks—you’re buying access to something that Amazon can remove or modify at will. That case deserves a little more treatment elsewhere...

Networking or Not Working?

I love the way Peter Bromberg began his *Library garden* post on this study:

A new study by a bunch of Australians with too much time on their hands confirms what Library Garden has previously reported: Not working makes you a better worker.

The study, at least as reported in a Reuters report as published on *Wired.com* (with atrocious copy-editing or lack thereof) on—hmm, on April 1, 2009—claims to show that short, unobtrusive breaks “such as a quick surf of the Internet” will sharpen concentration and yield about 9% more productivity. The study involved a mere 300 workers, but those are exactly the results you’d expect. *Short* breaks now and then almost always help—whether that means getting a cup of coffee, going outside for a breath of fresh air, just turning away from the computer for five or ten minutes or indulging in a quick check of a website or two.

Bromberg also notes the new “pseudoscientific euphemistic acronym” WILB, “workplace internet leisure browsing.” He also suggests “wilbful behavior.” *The centered librarian* also picked up on this April 1 study and sees what I see: It isn’t that they’re using the internet, it’s that they’re taking *some* sort of break.

“We’ve long been keen on buckling down for a productive dash, followed by a little break, so an 80/20 split seems pretty reasonable.”

Twelve minutes an hour may be on the high side—but if you’re really spending 10-hour days, why not? The problem arises when you always have one Twitter window open, another mail window, another Friendfeed window, you’re being alerted to Facebook messages every five minutes...and, at best, you’re giving half of your attention to what they’re paying you for when you *are* “focused” on it.

Where there’s a Channel...

Most likely, this item really belongs in MAKING IT WORK or a discussion of social media, but I think it’s a narrow enough case that I’ll cite it here. There’s a more general issue hinted at in the subheading above, but maybe this isn’t a typical case.

Here’s the case, as recounted by Brian Herzog in an April 14, 2009 post at *Swiss army librarian*. He’d ignored Twitter because he wasn’t interested—but an unusually severe winter at Herzog’s library meant quite a few early closings or delayed openings. One way to get that message out is to announce it on the library’s homepage—but the library director makes the closing decision and doesn’t have an easy way to update the homepage from home.

I signed up for a Twitter account, learned how to customize the feed display, and added it to the library’s homepage. I set the feed to only display one message, and after some trial and error figured out how to send a blank message (use the html code ` `). That way, after the storm passes, we could send a blank message to remove the announcement from the homepage.

Then, to make it as easy as possible for my director to update from home, I also created a Twittermail account. Using Twittermail, all she needs to do is send an email message to our account, and whatever she types into the subject line will then display on our website (centered on the very top of the page). Neat.

When I demo’ed it for her, it worked like a charm, and she was very happy.

If I was using this in a MAKING IT WORK roundup, I’d applaud Herzog for seeing a problem and looking for a solution—rather than seeing Twitter and looking for uses. That’s not the story here. There’s the little irony: “But of course, we haven’t had a snowstorm since.” Then there’s the other story:

And see, that’s the problem—I created this Twitter feed for a very specific purpose, and we haven’t had much of a need for it yet. However, since I created it, seven people have started following the library on Twitter.

We don't promote it, so how'd they find it? They must have gone looking. If our patrons are expecting us to be on Twitter, and voluntarily pay attention to us, doesn't it make sense that this is a tool we should be using? To me, it does.

So, in addition to storm closings, I've lately been trying to think of other "announcements" that deserve top billing on the library's homepage—just so I don't feel guilty about these Twitter followers not getting their library tweets.

This is very much a case of "if you build it, they will come." Now I need to live up to the implied second half of that saying, "when they come, make sure it's worth their while."

To put it another way, "where there's a channel, there should be content."

It Ain't the Heat, It's the Notion?

That's backwards, along with being an awful variation on a great old song (originally recorded by The Swallows, but Maria Muldaur may have the best recording). In this case, it ain't the notion—it's the heat.

The notion: It's reasonable that Rek-O-Kut would sell a stylus-force gauge for \$24, serving the growing niche LP market, even though an apparently identical stylus-force gauge was included *free* with AR XA turntables in the 1960s. Art Dudley discussed the \$24 gauge in the February 2009 *Stereophile*, and lots of people pointed out the price differential.

The first part of Dudley's response is entirely reasonable. Quite a few things are many times as expensive in 2009 as they were in 1964. Even if we assume that AR would have only charged a buck for the gauge as a separate item, a 24:1 ratio for a precision physical object isn't outrageous. (The comparison's silly anyway—in the 1960s, you had to buy the turntable to get the gauge. If you want to compare the price of an AR XA turntable in 1964 to that of today's high-rated turntables, the AR XA cost \$63 when introduced, \$100 when its initial run finished, \$300 when it was reintroduced in the early 1980s. \$63 in 1964 is about \$490 in 2008. Today's high-end turntables typically cost thousands of dollars, frequently more, with more than one over the \$100,000 mark.) He's also right in pointing out that Rek-O-Kut probably can't expect to sell more than a few hundred gauges in 2009, if that.

Then he goes a little off-track, which may relate to the tone of letters we *didn't* see. **The heat:**

So what would you have Rek-O-Kut do? Give it away? Cool! Then, when they go bankrupt, you'll have one more reason to grouse about the erosion of a once-great industry.

The letter quoted does not condemn Rek-O-Kut's pricing. I can only assume others were harsher. The best rejoinder to Dudley: What Rek-O-Kut *might* try to do is get high-end turntable makers to bundle the gauge, just as AR used to do—after all, \$24 isn't even a rounding error in many of the prices.

Typefaces You Love to Hate

Sometimes, the great gray *Wall Street Journal* can be a source for great stuff—such as an April 17, 2009 story about Vincent Connare and a little software project at Microsoft 15 years ago, in which Connare designed a casual script designed to look like comic book lettering. That's right—**Comic Sans**, one of few typefaces to spawn a worldwide movement to ban it.

The font...is the bane of graphic designers, other aesthetes and Internet geeks. It is a punch line: "Comic Sans walks into a bar, bartender says, 'We don't serve your type.'" On social-messaging site Twitter, complaints about the font pop up every minute or two. An online comic strip shows a gang kicking and swearing at Mr. Connare.

As people who know me certainly know, I'm no fan of certain typefaces. I could do nicely without ever seeing **Arial** or **Helvetica** again. (Purists may note that my sample of "Helvetica" is actually Arial, since you don't get Helvetica with Windows. If you can tell the two apart, you're a more acute typefancier than I am.) I'm not a great fan of **Times New Roman** either, but mostly because it's not very interesting. I love Connare's comment about Comic Sans:

"If you love it, you don't know much about typography," Mr. Connare says. But, he adds, "if you hate it, you really don't know much about typography, either, and you should get another hobby."

I didn't realize just how widely used Comic Sans actually was. To me, it's a jokey little typeface that never belongs in regular text and should be used sparingly for effect. I don't hate it—heck, I don't *hate* Helvetica.

There are 235 comments on the WSJ article—beginning with attacks on *Souvenir* and **Verdana**. (A reply to the second comment notes that Verdana was designed for a specific purpose—readable body type on low-res screens—and works well *for that purpose*.) There are people who *love* Comic Sans (including some who think "it's the easiest font to read") and others who are offended that anyone thinks about this stuff at all when, you know, There Are Serious Problems To Be Dealt With. Several elementary school teachers praised Comic Sans because it uses a "correct letter a" (that is, a lower-case **a** similar to cursive writ-

ing)—but one said “correct letter **A**,” which is just strange, since Comic Sans’ A is like almost every other capital A. (If the teacher wants other “correct” small-As, most *italic* faces—including this one, Berkeley Oldstyle Book—are “correct” in that sense.) One even claims that other lower-case **as** (and **gs**) are “distorted”—an odd assertion for someone involved in education. I was surprised at the number of people who are adamant about using Comic Sans for *everything*; I wonder how their resumés are received?

I didn’t read all 235 comments. Life really is too short. I’m learning that the chances of getting people to use “typeface” instead of “font” for a type design (12 pt. *Garamond italic* is a font; Garamond is a typeface) are roughly zero. Presumably, you all know that *Cites & Insights* uses Berkeley Book for body type (Berkeley for bold, since there’s no boldface version of Berkeley Book) and **Friz Quadrata** for most headlines and subheads. I’m also fond of **Constantia** (extremely readable and free with Vista), notable for its non-lining numbers (look at all the numbers except 1 and 2 in this Constantia string: 123456789).

How seriously do I take all this? For putting together books or *C&I*, pretty seriously. Otherwise... geez, folks, this is MY BACK PAGES.

Exotica

In a recent MY BACK PAGES, I suggested that some audio writers really might believe that more expensive, or more exotic, automatically equals better.

Here’s the first paragraph in Michael Fremer’s “Analog corner” in the May 2009 *Stereophile*:

In 1998, on learning that Aquafina, Pepsi’s entry in the bottled-water market, was nothing more than purified *municipal* water, I shook my head and continued drinking the far more exotic Fiji water.

Certainly far more exotic. Surely far more expensive. Fiji can claim “carbon negative” all it wants, but that’s still fossil fuel being used to transport water thousands of miles in bottles made from imported plastic.

Is Fiji water *better* than purified (or unpurified!) municipal water? The website claims that *being distant* makes the water “so much more pure and so much healthier than other bottled waters.” So purification is a scam?

Maybe Fremer’s an edge case. Maybe not.

Just Squeeze it a Little More

Have I mentioned Mark Chu-Carroll before? He works at Google—and writes the wonderful *Good math, bad math* blog (scienceblogs.com/goodmath/). I

was reading that blog long before I moved *Walt at random* to scienceblogs.

“The return of the compression idiot” was posted on April 15, 2009. It concerns magic compression systems—or, rather, claims that a compression system can compress *any* file, making it smaller each time. Chu-Carroll calls one correspondent who’s claiming such a system a “crackpot,” and that seems right.

Carroll offers a lucid 4,000-word explanation of why universal compression *can’t* work, but you can do your own quick thought experiment or even just take the end case: What happens with a one-byte string? OK, so that’s ludicrous; what about a two-byte string? And so on...

Chu-Carroll is considering fully reversible (“lossless”) compression, but the same is true of lossy compression (e.g. MP3). At some point, compression algorithms will either render the results useless or will yield “compressed” files as large as, or larger than, the originals. You’ve probably seen the latter if you accidentally zip a file that’s already zipped: The second file’s likely to be larger than the first.

Chu-Carroll offers elegance and generality. Here’s the key pair of paragraphs:

Think of the strings of N bits. Suppose we want to compress them to one-half of their original length. How many of those strings can be compressed that small?

There are $2^{n/2}$ strings of length $n/2$; and there are 2^n uncompressed strings. So, at best, $1/2^{n/2}$ strings are compressible to a string of length $n/2$ —any more, and the compression function isn’t invertible—you can’t uncompress!

If you find the superscript numbers too small to read or this discussion incomprehensible, go read the original post. If you find that incomprehensible, Chu-Carroll may not be the blogger for you. But trust me on this: Universal compression schemes don’t, *can’t*, work. And if you find that compression sometimes doesn’t do much or yields larger results than the originals, particularly for relatively small files, don’t be surprised: “You can’t ever get around the basic facts of compressibility: most strings aren’t compressible. They can’t be.”

[So: How many of you noticed what I did with the subhead? How many care?]

Pfui to my Pfans

I really need to read some of John Scalzi’s novels. He doesn’t write enough short science fiction for me to be familiar with him *as a fiction writer*. (I’m woefully behind on novel-length SF; I’m reasonably current on

“mainstream” short SF because I subscribe to, and read, the “big” three magazines.)

As a blogger at *Whatever* (whatever.scalzi.com), he clearly has a big and engaged audience—I mean, the man gets **comments**, mostly literate comments. And why not? He writes good stuff.

Including “On the subject of to whom to address your literary kvetch,” posted July 21, 2009, with 226 responses as of this writing. Quite apart from that remarkable title, it’s a great post—telling people to *stop* forwarding a post by Adam Roberts (who, I take it, is also an SF writer).

Roberts’ post is a diatribe about the items and people nominated for this year’s Hugo awards. It’s somewhat remarkable, asserting that the nominations are full of mediocrity, where “mediocrity” seems to mean “insufficiently experimental for my taste.” Or maybe just not hard enough to read? Roberts says:

[T]he very heart’s-blood of literature is to draw people out of their comfort zone; to challenge and stimulate them, to wake and shake them; to present them with the new, and the unnerving, and the mind-blowing. And if this true of literature, it is doubly or trebly true of science fiction. For what is the point of SF if not to articulate the new, the wondrous, the mindblowing and the strange?

Gotcha. If it’s entertaining, it’s not *literature*. Roberts goes on for about 2,000 words. He attacks all but one of the artist nominees as “dull, dull, dull.” There are lots of comments, some noting that any clown with \$40 can be a Hugo voter and nominator, others going further to deride anything popular as poor. One Rich Puchalsky basically says there’s *never* been a good year for Hugos—and says *Stand on Zanzibar* and *Ringworld* (among others) are not “good works of SF.” Puchalsky differentiates between SF fans and “literate people.”

Ah, but that’s the post itself. Scalzi’s in an interesting situation: One of his novels is a Hugo nominee and explicitly labeled “mediocre” by Roberts. But Scalzi also has an engaging attitude toward negative criticism—he’s run posts consisting of one-star reviews of his books from Amazon. He basically labels Roberts’ post as “This Year’s Model of the Annual Hugo Kvetch,” and would give it three stars out of five as an Amazon reviewer.

But...Roberts addresses the complaint to “Science fiction fandom” as a whole. Here’s Scalzi’s recasting of how Roberts’ post comes across:

Dear Science Fiction Fandom:

Hey, you know those books you loved enough this year to nominate for awards? The ones that made you happy or made you cry or made you think or had cha-

acters you liked, in situations that thrilled you? Yes, well, they actually kinda suck. So, despite the fact that you’ve made science fiction a foundational part of your life, follow and support the genre, and are grown-up, accomplished people who are on average both smarter and better read than the average Joe, you are somewhat full of FAIL. Please try to be less fail-tastic in the future, or I will be forced to once again assume that the reason you select the Hugo nominees you do has in fact nothing to do with the fact you actually like the books, because that would just be silly.

KTHXBYE,

Adam Roberts

Scalzi calls this a “major unforced error”—because Roberts writes science fiction. And, as Scalzi says,

If you take the time to squat and pinch off a steaming ass-loaf of condescension onto the heads of the people most committed to the genre of literature you happen to write in, you may find *they will remember that fact* when they see your books in the stores. As in “oh, here’s the book of that guy who thinks my taste in literature sucks.” How motivated does that make the average science fiction fan to buy a book? Well, you know: How motivated would it make you?

Roberts is an academic—an English Professor, in fact. So he may not care—but, as Scalzi notes, “In the real world, people don’t like being told, while being gently and paternalistically patted on the head, that they’re goddamned idiots. Especially from someone who then turns around and hopes to sell them a book.”

There is no way I can even begin to summarize the comments; that little tiny handle in the scrollbar is too intimidating. It appears there’s a novella’s worth of comments...and you may find them entertaining.

Masthead

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