

Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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Making it Work

Shiny Toys or Useful Tools?

Blogs and wikis aren't shiny new toys for libraries and librarians any more. They've moved from toys to tools. As with most tools, they're not magic, they're not right for everything or everybody, but they can be powerfully effective in many situations.

This article was written as a presentation for the 2009 OLA SuperConference in Toronto, Ontario—although the article includes more than the presentation (including graphs).

Definitions

I'm not going to tell you how to start a blog or a wiki. For blogs, where you don't need your own domain it's trivial: Go to wordpress.com or blogger.com and sign up. For wikis, it's a little more difficult, and since I've never actually installed a wiki (I may run one, but that doesn't count), I won't pretend to tell you.

I thought definitions might be useful, partly because common definitions of blogs and wikis tend to include *way* too much. You'll find longer and more thoughtful versions of these items on the PALINET Leadership Network, pln.palinet.org—which is itself a wiki and where these articles originated. (I wrote the articles and PLN operates under a Creative Commons BY-NC license, so we're good here.)

Lightweight publishing or content management

Blogs and wikis are both lightweight publishing or lightweight content management systems for the web. Let's go through that piece-by-piece:

- **Lightweight**—both wikis and blogs reduce barriers to online publishing:
 - **Technical barriers:** You can set up a blog with no technical knowledge and a wiki with very little technical knowledge. You don't even need to understand HTML.

- **Software cost barriers:** The most popular and respected software choices for blogs and wikis, at least in the library field, are open source programs available at no cost.
- **Hosting cost barriers:** Free hosting services abound for both blogs and wikis, although such free services may not be ideal (and are almost certainly not ideal for most library purposes).
- **Usage barriers:** Both a strength and in some cases a weakness.
 - If you have author permissions, it's trivially easy to create a blog post—either using WYSIWYG tools built into the popular software choices or, for major software options, using your own word processing program to create posts, then posting them directly to the blog.
 - Most blogs support comments and it's trivially easy to add a comment to a blog post.

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- Wikis are designed for collaborative content creation by anyone with edit access—every page has a clear way to modify it and the editing tools are usually simple.
- Unfortunately, ease of usage and modification also translates into easy spamming unless you take modest steps to protect your blog or wiki.
- **Publishing or content management for the web:** Blogs and wikis both consist of sets of pages, organized in some manner, that are primarily read directly on the web and typically

stable rather than ephemeral by nature. Blogs and wikis allow for various forms of navigation and organization.

Blogs and wikis both make content visible on the web as soon as it's created. Neither tool is primarily designed for layered editorial control.

Blogs and wikis are far from the only publishing and content management systems for the web. Full-fledged content management systems (e.g., Drupal) may offer more robust management options.

“Microblogging” systems such as Twitter may offer even lower bars to participation: you don't need to be able to write a coherent paragraph to use Twitter, but it helps if you're writing for a blog or wiki.

Blogs and wikis: The minimal definition

A blog is a web-based set of individual posts initially presented to readers in reverse chronological order—that is, newest first.

That's it. Add anything more and you're confusing the picture. Blogs don't need to be websites; some library blogs are embedded. Blogs don't need to use blog software—and websites built with blog software aren't always blogs. Blogs don't always consist of online personal journals, don't always have dated entries, don't always use journal style or have links. Many fine blogs don't allow comments; even more don't allow trackbacks.

What about wikis? That's even simpler: **A wiki is a set of web pages created and managed using wiki software.** But that's not very useful. A more common definition happens to be wrong: **A wiki is a collection of Web pages that anyone can edit.** That's simply not true—many good wikis do not have open editing, and in the days of spam it's a little dangerous to have fully open editing. Wikis may be *designed* to enable anyone to contribute or modify content, but they may not be run that way.

Which One to Use?

Which should you use? I'm not going to discuss that here because I'm particularly proud of “Blog or wiki—which tool to use?” at PLN, a 1,700-word discussion that even includes a comparison table. I can't do the article justice by summarizing it here; go read it.

Cautionary notes

The big yellow sign, the overall cautionary note to consider before starting either a blog or a wiki, is true for both: **Creating a channel doesn't create content.**

Ever seen a blog with one lonely post? I've seen dozens of them. Ever seen a wiki with one or two good articles, skeletal pages elsewhere, no sign of ac-

tivity in months—except, if accounts are open, tons and tons of spam? I certainly have.

In all cases, the problem's the same: Enthusiasm for the channel, for the medium, without strong indication that content would be forthcoming. Either the people or institution turned out not to have anything to say, or were too lazy to say it.

For your own personal liblog, that may not be a big deal. You start a blog, you post a few items, you get bored and stop. As a student of liblogs, I'd appreciate it if you removed your listing from the LISWiki blog list (if you added it), but otherwise no real harm has been done. It's just another vacant blog page. For that matter, if you have two great years and then get bored, that's your decision. You might choose to shut it down formally, or you might just let it rot in peace.

For a library blog, maybe you should think about it more. If you publicize an official blog and it goes for long periods with no new items, it makes the library look sloppy at best, moribund at worst. And if you *don't* publicize a library blog, nobody will be aware of it—and it won't do anybody any good. Of course, if it's an embedded blog—a blog that serves strictly to feed something else on your website—that may not matter, as long as the “something else” doesn't begin to look stale.

I'm *not* suggesting a multimonth planning process before you start a library blog. Such a process may yield another problem, as the planning may result in a whole network of mostly-empty blogs instead of one or two robust blogs. I'd suggest a lean planning process taking four things into account:

- **Purpose:** There's nothing wrong with a multi-purpose library blog—particularly in a smaller library—but you should define the general purpose of a blog before you start it. That may help guide your choice of name and even look.
- **Followthrough:** You should have clear commitments to prepare entries for the blog, frequently enough to make sense for your community, for long enough to give the blog a fair trial. I'd suggest commitments for at least six months of posts. Frequency depends on the size of your library and nature of the post, but the blog should be active enough to make your library look as vibrant as it actually is. Except for functional blogs such as new materials lists or mirrors of newspaper columns, you probably shouldn't aim for a fixed frequency. Posts should appear when they're appropriate, not when it's time according to an arbitrary schedule.

- **Publicity:** You need to let people know about the blog, unless it's an embedded blog (e.g., an events blog that appears part of your home page). While blogging can increase your web presence in unexpected ways, you won't gain a community audience without letting them know the blog's there.
- **Starting small:** Don't overthink library blogs. One lively blog will serve your library better than half a dozen rarely-updated blogs. It's easy to add more blogs. It's a little more difficult to shut down blogs that didn't work out.

On the other hand, you **should** shut down an official blog that isn't working, with an appropriate ending message and, if appropriate, link. If your library blog hasn't had a post in 240 days, there should be an obvious and visible explanation.

A few other cautions apply to all library blogs and many liblogs:

- **Think several times** before using eccentric templates, including anything other than black type on a white background. White on black or dark blue on light blue may look cool, but it's difficult to read and will drive some people away from your site.
- **Don't** assume people will *come* to your site. These days, the most common way to use a blog is via the feed (whether RSS or Atom).
- **Don't** force people to your site by using partial feeds. Partial feeds—where the feed user gets the first 50 words or just the title of your post—are massively annoying, and unless your content is spectacular, many of us will ignore you.
- **Don't** assume you'll get comments—and don't try too hard to get them. Comments are great; they're also unpredictable. Some great blogs have very few comments. Some mediocre blogs have loads of them. I've found that, other than birth, marriage, divorce and new jobs, it's nearly impossible to predict which posts will draw lots of comments—so I don't try.
- **Do** assume you'll get spam comments and even more spam trackbacks. If you're using WordPress, akismet and Spam Karma 2 both do excellent jobs of trapping most spam. Similar tools may be available for other blog software. If the tools don't work, moderation may be needed (although it's usually unfortunate). As for requiring registration for comments...well, are you *that* important?
- **Post when there's something to say.** Don't post just to be posting.

The State of Blogs in General

Between my own studies in the library field and Technorati's reports on blogging as a whole, I believe it's reasonable to conclude that the "shiny new toy" phase of blogging reached its peak in 2006. Since then, I believe we're seeing fewer new blogs (excluding forced blogs resulting from library school courses and 23-things exercises)—and a fair number of disappearing blogs.

That does *not* mean blogging has become irrelevant. It does mean blogs have moved to the useful tool phase—and, as always with useful tools, they're not right for everything or everybody. Since 2007, librarians and other people are considerably less likely to start up a blog "just because," even though they're not sure they have anything to say. That's healthy. I've heard assertions that everybody should blog, but that's as ludicrous as saying that every librarian should write at least one peer-reviewed article a year or that everybody should regularly publish books. The net effect of everybody blogging would be nobody reading, or rather that we'd probably still have around seven million healthy blogs and billions of empty shells.

Other trends also strengthen the core of blogging while reducing the number of blogs and, even more so, the number of posts. There are lots of alternatives for people who really just want to link to websites or have very little to say—Twitter, Facebook, Friend-Feed, delicious and who knows how many more? Those media don't replace blogs, any more than blogs replace journals or books. They do some things better than blogs, and I believe blogs are better off when those things migrate to more suitable tools.

Want a snarky reason to believe blogs will continue to matter, but as tools rather than as toys? *Wired* has run a piece saying blogs are dead—that you shouldn't start new ones and should drop the ones you have. The reasoning has something to do with how unlikely it is that you'll become a million-subscriber A-list sensation, as though immense popularity is the only reason to have a blog. For those of us living in the real world, this kind of *Wired* dismissal is a pretty good endorsement of continued significance.

Shorthand significance

When I did three books on library-related blogs, I shied away from judgmental terms like "healthy" or "robust" as applied to specific blogs. I'm still nervous about those terms, but for the purposes of this article and talk, I need some shorthand signifiers.

Technorati uses a cutoff of 120 days to separate "active" from "inactive" blogs—if you don't post at

least three times a year, your blog is essentially inactive, maybe even moribund.

I'll suggest two thresholds for library-related blogs:

- **Robust:** A blog averaging at least one post per week (no more than a 7-day lag on a spot check), with a Google Page Rank of 4 or higher.
- **Active:** A blog averaging at least one post every two weeks (no more than a 14-day lag on a spot check), with a Google Page Rank of 2 or higher.

Sure, lots of blogs have a lot more than one post per week, but with aggregators and alternative communications methods, one good post per week is enough to make for a healthy liblog or library blog, particularly when the blog is well-represented in the wider web (Google Page Rank serving as a quick surrogate for web presence).

Liblogs

The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008 is not only the biggest study of blogs in any niche (as far as I know), it's also the kind of book that *Academic Library Blogs* and *Public Library Blogs* **should** have been. I can *unequivocally* say it's worth \$35 as a trade paperback with a beautiful wraparound photograph from New Zealand as a cover, or \$25 as a PDF download. If it doesn't sell a few hundred copies, it's a shame—and, unfortunately, probably also the death knell for this kind of large-scale study of library-related blogs.

I'm not going to excerpt the book. The first 121 pages are thick with facts, figures, charts and correlations—a rich overall examination of the world of liblogs and how it's changing. The remainder offers a quick factual look at each of 607 liblogs.

Fewer new liblogs are being created, although older ones aren't disappearing at any great rate. Most liblogs have fewer posts in 2008 than in 2007—and most of those that are still active in 2008 have somewhat *longer* posts in 2008 than in 2007. For that matter, most of those that have any comments at all have more comments per post in 2008 than in 2007—they're more conversational. "Most" in all cases is a long way from "all," to be sure:

- 70% of blogs in the study had fewer posts in 2008 than in 2007.
- 44% had longer posts, 38% shorter posts (8% couldn't be measured).
- 40% had more comments per post, 38% fewer (22% had no comments).
- 15% of blogs fall into the category I regarded as most likely: fewer posts, longer posts, more

conversational. That's a minority, but it's the largest group of blogs.

- Incidentally, because a couple of people have posited that old blogs will have fewer posts, I found absolutely no significant correlation between the age of blogs and *any* other metric.

In March-May 2007, considering 523 blogs with countable posts, 338 (65%) were robust in terms of posting and 76 more were active (at least seven posts over 13 weeks), for a total of 414 or 79%.

In March-May 2008, where 533 blogs had countable posts, the percentages were a little lower, as you'd expect given an overall decline in posting frequency. 316 blogs were robust (59%) and 82 more were healthy, for a total of 398 or 75%.

I had occasion to scan the blogs again in mid-October 2008, looking at Google Page Rank and days since the most recent post—the same test I did for all 1,000+ blogs in mid-December. I've trimmed the list of 607 blogs down to 570, excluding non-English blogs and those that had disappeared by March 2007.

- 238 of the blogs—42%—were robust, that is, there was a post within the most recent week and Google Page Rank was at least 4.
- 327 of the blogs—57%—were active, that is, there was a post within the most recent two weeks and Google Page Rank was at least 2.

Those are tricky figures. That list of 570 still includes a fair number of blogs that were nearly moribund in March 2007. Let's look at a narrower list of 425 blogs—blogs that were around in March 2007, had at least two posts during March-May 2007 and at least posts in March 2008. What's the situation there?

- 206 of the 425—48%—were robust.
- 286—67%—were active. That's a substantially higher percentage.

Quick check around December 15

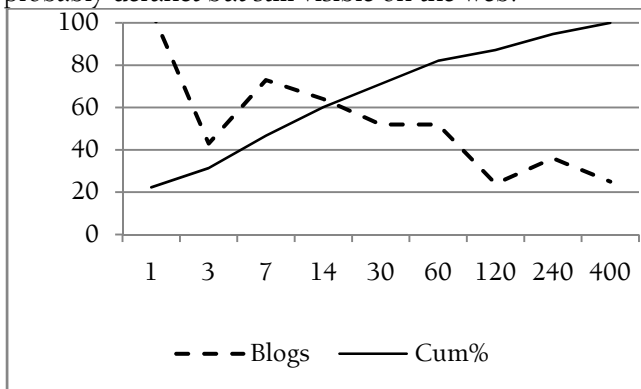
I did a status check in late December 2008 on the trimmed list of 570, looking at days since the most recent post (on or before December 15) and Google Page Rank. The first is a sign of life in general; the second is a sign that the blog has some visibility.

I chose December 15 because it's before most institutions shut down for winter break, so it's reasonable to assume an active blog would be active around that period. If a blog had a post on December 16 but hadn't had one since June, the June post would set the interval: Metrics require consistent rules.

I did the same set of tests for all three categories—liblogs, academic library blogs and public library blogs. These notes apply to all three.

- 227 (40%) appear robust. That's a very slight dropoff from October—only 11 fewer blogs.
- I'd characterize another 93 as active, for a total of 321 or 56%. That's nearly identical to the October figure, with six fewer blogs.

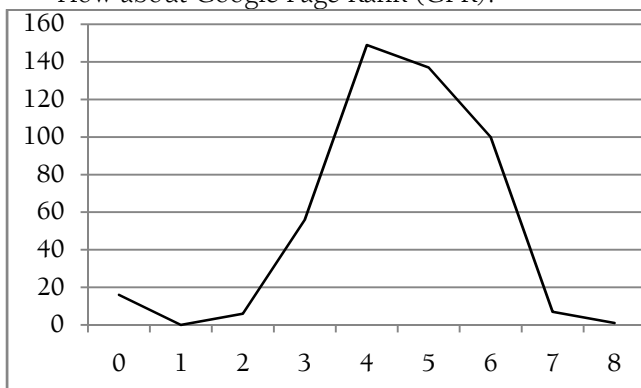
In order to provide some coherence with the other two books, I eliminated blogs that didn't have at least two posts in 2007—and also those that have disappeared since then. That leaves 475 blogs, some of which are probably defunct but still visible on the web.



This graph shows the number of blogs and cumulative percentage of all liblogs with a post within X number of days—that is, within 1, 3, 7, 14, 30, 60, 120, or 240 days. (400 is an arbitrary number meaning “more than 300 days, but there is a previous post.”) The horizontal axis—the freshness of the most recent post—is logarithmic. The dotted line shows number of blogs within each grouping; the solid line shows the cumulative percentage of all blogs.

These are good results. More than one-fifth of the blogs (22%) had posts on December 15 itself, and 47% had a post within the previous week. Just over 70% had a post within the month and more than 82% had a post within two months. Using the “120-day limit” for blogs to be alive, 87% qualified—leaving 51 that, while still visible, were nearly moribund.

How about Google Page Rank (GPR)?



This graph shows Google Page Rank along the bottom, number of blogs along the side. While 16 blogs

were essentially invisible (sometimes because of recent URL changes), 84% have a GPR of 4 or more, which in my mind is wide visibility on the web. This graph is not quite the same as the graph in *The Liblog Landscape*, based on a check two months earlier: GPRs do change, of course, although not rapidly. To wit:

- Eight blogs dropped a *lot*—three to five digits, in all cases dropping to GPR0. That almost always means either a URL change or that the blog went moribund a long time before. (One of those eight is peculiar—Google seems to have it in for one particular liblog!)
- Three liblogs dropped two places (always from 5 to 3) and 28 dropped one place (which seems to happen due to tweaks in the GPR algorithm).
- On the plus side, 54 liblogs increased by one, while six went up two, four went up three (one going from 3 to 6, three others going from nothing to 3), and two went up 4 (in both cases going from 0 to 4).
- That leaves 373, 79% of the total, that didn't change GPR between October and December.

Predictions and projections

I'm not sure how large the really active core of English-language liblogs is, although it seems to be somewhere around 300 to 400, depending on your definition of activity.

My best guess is that this number won't change much over the next year. A few semi-inactive bloggers will start blogging a little more; a few active bloggers will stop blogging entirely; a few newcomers will light up the liblog universe. Using my rule that I don't measure blogs that have been around for less than six months (to eliminate most class assignments and other truly ephemeral blogs), I'd guess the core in mid-2009 might be a little smaller than in mid-2008, but I'd predict a range of somewhere between 10% fewer and 5% more. That would yield around 270 to 420 active liblogs in mid-2009, and I'm comfortable with that broad projection.

How active will those blogs be?

- I think the big drop in posting frequency has already happened. I'd expect to see roughly comparable levels of activity across the board, although you'll certainly see big variations in individual blogs.
- If anything, I'd expect fewer very short posts (and fewer linkblogs) and more slightly longer posts. Or, in a few cases, maybe *much* longer: I encountered a 7,800-word post on one high-

profile liblog in January 2009, and that's more words than a full *quarter's* worth of posts for 251 of 404 currently-active blogs for which I could calculate post lengths in 2008.

- It's hard to predict anything about conversation intensity (number of comments per post). I see attenuated conversations happening in many different places, with stuff showing up on FriendFeed (or maybe Facebook or Twitter) that might previously have been in blog comments. I'm really not sure where things are going in this regard.

Academic Library Blogs

In 2007, I looked at more than 400 academic library blogs and studied 231 of them in some detail, resulting in the book *Academic Library Blogs: 231 Examples*. I chose the 231 based on simple baseline criteria: The blog had to be in English, it had to be reachable in mid-2007, it had to have started no later than December 2006, there had to be at least one post in two of the three study months (March, April and May 2007), and I wouldn't use more than five blogs from a single institution.

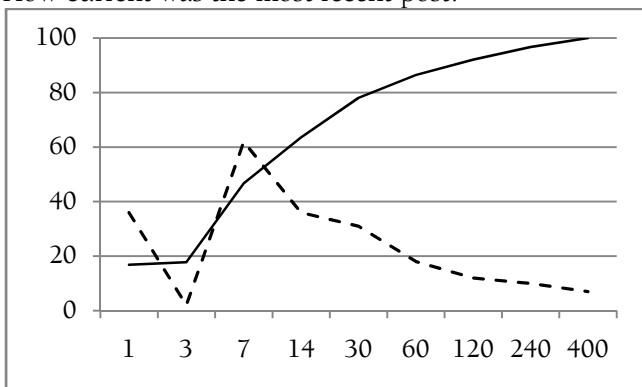
Quick check

Remember that all 231 blogs in this universe were reasonably active in early 2007 and had been around at least six months by the time I started working on the project. I'd be inclined to believe that these should all be survivors. Of those 231, using only post frequency, 124 (54%) were robust (averaging at least one post per week during the quarter studied) and another 52 (23%) were active, for a total of 76% active.

So what did I find in late December 2008, looking for health as of December 15, 2008?

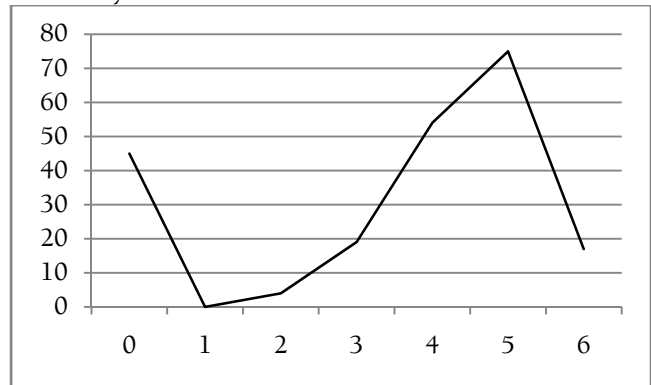
First, and perhaps most surprising, 17 of the 231—7%—*just weren't there*. I got 404 errors, missing servers, or just *nothing*.

That leaves 214 for which posts were still visible. How current was the most recent post?



This graph shows the number of blogs and cumulative percentage of all blogs with a post within X number of days. The dotted line shows number of blogs within each grouping; the solid line shows the cumulative percentage of all blogs.

These are good results. Omitting the blogs that disappeared entirely, one-sixth of the blogs had posts on December 15 itself, and almost half of them had a post within the previous week. More than three-quarters had a post within the month and more than 86% had a post within two months. Using the "120-day limit" for blogs to be alive, 92% qualified—leaving only 17 blogs that, while still visible, were essentially moribund.



In this graph, the horizontal numbers are Google Page Rank values and the vertical numbers are number of blogs with that value. While 45 blogs were essentially invisible, more than half were quite visible. I regard anything over GPR 3 as being broadly visible within the web, and 146 of the 214 blogs—68%—fall into that category. No academic library blog reached GPR 7 or above, but it's difficult to move past 6. (It's difficult to move past 5, actually, and it's hardly surprising that the two big groups here are 54 blogs at GPR4 and 75 at GPR5.)

This quick check says that a healthy percentage of academic library blogs are doing just fine—they're being updated fairly frequently and they're widely visible. (Is there a correlation between GPR and currency? Not really; it comes out at -0.18, which isn't enough to count.)

How many academic library blogs appear to reach my two suggested thresholds?

- 110 of the 214, or 51%, fall into the Active category—while another 21 (10%) are active in terms of posting, albeit with little web visibility. For a library blog, web visibility is only one measure of success.
- 72 of the 214, 34% of the total and 65% of active blogs, fall into the Robust category.

That's pretty good. Still, in both cases, it's a drop from 2007 levels.

A few success stories

I'd originally thought of including all Robust blogs—but that's too many blogs. Here are the 19 academic library blogs that were *very fresh* (a post within 2 days) and *visible* (GPR 5 or 6 as of December 2008), with quick notes, noting that in all cases “2007” means March-May:

- **Library News**, University of Iowa—a general blog that averaged one post every three days in 2007, with 223-word posts.
- **UBC Academic Search - Google Scholar Blog**—a blog devoted to Google Scholar, with only 8 posts in 2007, averaging 184 words, and with 1.25 comments per post.
- **Law In The News**, Lewis & Clark, a blog with enormous numbers of very brief posts (primarily links) in 2007.
- **Law Library Blog**, UBC, with few posts in 2007 (7), but long posts (621 words).
- **News from the PRI Library and Data Archive**, devoted to population research, with more than 100 posts in 2007.
- **PNCA Library**, Pacific Northwest College of Art, only four posts in the 2007 period, 49 words each.
- **Swem Government Information**, a government docs blog from the College of William & Mary, 468 posts in 2007, 83 words each.
- **Flow** : information for Okavango Delta planning—the only African blog in the study (Botswana). 55 posts in the 2007 study, 130 words each.
- **Business Blog** from Ohio University—15 posts in 2007 (122 words each)
- **..STCC Library 'blog..**, Springfield Technical Community College, 42 posts in 2007, 96 words each.
- **Ryerson Library News**, Ryerson University, six posts in 2007 study, 85 words each.
- **ZeffBrief**, University of San Francisco Law Library. 2007: 35 posts, 207 words.
- **UBC Physio Info-blog**—another blog from UBC, this one on physiotherapy! 2007: 35 posts, 167 words each.
- **Leddy News**, Leddy Library, University of Windsor. 17 posts in 2007 quarter, averaging 101 words each.
- **Hardin News**, University of Iowa, Medical library. 10 2007 posts, 320 words each.

- **Library Log**, Drexel, 32 posts in 2007, 147 words each.
- **reading girl speaks**, Oberlin College, 12 posts in 2007, 90 words each.
- **UW Libraries Blog**, University of Wyoming, 69 posts (and 66 comments) in 2007, 119 words each.
- **Government Publications Library – University of Colorado**, 73 posts in 2007, 324 words each.

The hot 19 includes two government documents blogs (out of six in the study), four very specialized blogs out of maybe 18 in the study, three law blogs out of *five* in the study—and five Canadian blogs out of 20 in the study.

Are these blogs exceptional in other metrics? To some extent, yes. Three were among the most visible academic library blogs in 2007. Nine—nearly half—were among blogs with the most posts. Six were among blogs with the most words overall (but only one had unusually long posts, while five had unusually *short* posts). Nine had more comments overall than most blogs, and seven had more comments per post than most blogs.

It's worth noting that not all of these 19 were robust in 2007. Two of them averaged less than one post every two weeks during the study period; four more averaged more than one every two weeks but less than one per week.

Predictions and projections

I don't have predictions or projections about academic library blogs. Clearly, quite a few of them are both useful and used. Clearly, some of them aren't. I suspect more of the former will emerge (but perhaps not *lots* more) and that some of the latter will disappear. Based on what I can tell of changes from early 2007 to late 2008, I wouldn't expect to see rapid disappearance—and I haven't looked at newer academic library blogs.

Public Library Blogs

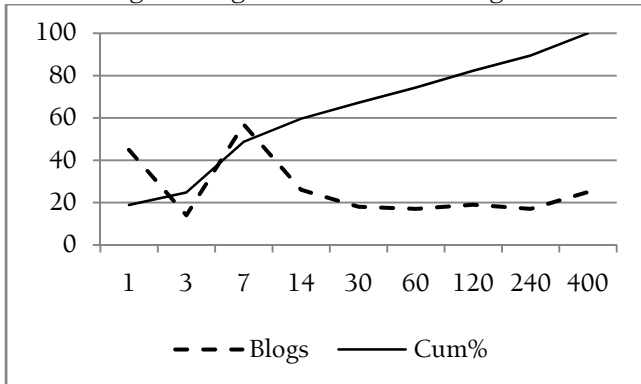
I also looked at public library blogs and their metrics for March-May 2007. Out of some 368 original candidates, 252 met the criteria—that is, begun in 2006 or earlier, English-language, at least one post in two of the three study months, no more than five blogs from any library.

Of those 252, 119 (47%) had robust postings in 2007 (an average of at least one post per week), and another 66 (26%) were active (at least one post every other week), for a total of 73% that were in pretty good health. That's a little lower than for academic libraries, but not terrible.

Quick check

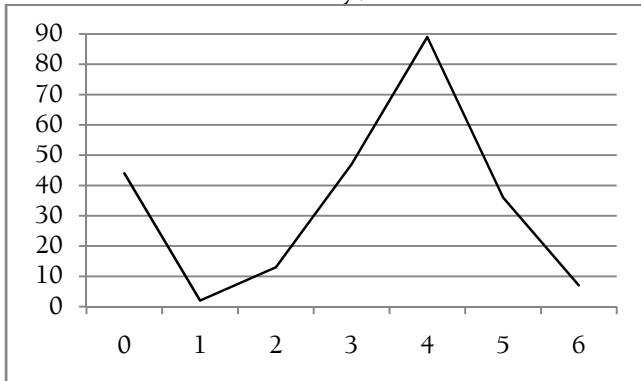
How were things in December 2008—noting that I was only checking for the most recent post?

As with every other type of blog, a few of them *just weren't there*—or, in a couple of cases, had been rendered invisible. Eleven simply weren't there (yielding 404 errors); two were protected (requiring passwords for access); one was now a parking page, meaning the domain hadn't been protected; and one was no longer a blog. That leaves 238 blogs.



Here's the same freshness graph as for other types of blog—and the news here, while by no means bad, isn't quite as good. Almost one out of five blogs was updated on December 15, and *almost* half had a post within the previous week (49%), but only two-thirds had a post within the month and not quite three-quarters had a post within two months. Using the 120-day limit for blogs to be alive, 89% qualified—leaving 25 blogs that, while still visible, were essentially moribund.

The next graph shows Google Page Rank—and, while the shape is similar to that for academic library blogs, it's shifted: The peak is at GPR4 rather than GPR5. (Note that while a handful of liblogs are *very* visible, with GPR 7 or 8, none of the library blogs achieved that level of visibility.)



The bottom line is similar: A healthy percentage of public library blogs are doing just fine. As for the two thresholds:

- 129 of the 238, or 54%, fall into the Active category—and another 13 (6%) are active in terms of posting but have little web visibility.
- 83 of the 238, 35% of the total and 64% of active blogs, fall into the Robust category. That's almost exactly the same as for academic library blogs.

Apparent success stories

Eighteen of the blogs were *very* fresh (a post within two days) and visible (GPR 5 or 6). Here's the list, with libraries added where not obvious, noting that comments are about March-May 2007:

- **Ann Arbor District Library.** 400 posts 2007, 134 words per post. Many comments and comments per post, long overall, quite visible in 2007.
- **Turning the Page...** (Cincinnati, Ohio) 92 posts, 458 words per post. Long overall and long posts, more comments than most.
- **Marin County Free Library Blog.** (California) 35 posts, 111 words/post. Fairly visible in 2007.
- **SJCPL Blog.** (South Bend, Indiana) 203 posts, 221 words per post. Many comments and comments per post. Quite visible in 2007.
- **Kids Lit.** (Menasha, Wisconsin) One of Tasha Saecker's blogs (see "Sites and Soundbytes" below). 105 posts, 179 words per post. More comments and comments per post than most, fairly visible in 2007.
- **Sites and Soundbytes.** Another Saecker blog. 83 posts, 96 words per post.
- **MADreads.** (Madison, Wis.) 80 posts, 255 words per post. More comments and comments per post than most, fairly visible in 2007.
- **The Perrot Memorial Library Blog** (Greenwich, Connecticut) 60 posts, 159 words per post. More comments than most.
- **Wellington City Libraries.** (Wellington, New Zealand) 60 posts, 53 words per post—very short posts.
- **Old Bridge Library Weblog.** (Old Bridge, New Jersey) 46 posts, 111 words per post.
- **Austin Public Library Blog** (both versions) (Austin, Texas). This blog has two identical versions—one on Blogger, one hosted by the local newspaper. Both had 28 posts averaging 244 words each.
- **Newton Reads.** (Newton Centre, Massachusetts) 16 posts, 158 words per post.
- **Buena Park Library District News.** (California) 10 posts, 227 words per post.

- **What's New in Newton Reference?** (Newton Centre, Mass.) 10 posts, 127 words each.
- **Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh – Teen** Eight posts, 243 words each.
- **The Atrium.** (Grand Rapids, Mich.) 55 posts, 194 words each. More comments than most.
- **The Short List.** (Essex, Connecticut) 47 posts, 120 words each. More comments than most.

Predictions and projections

I see roughly the same trends here as for academic library blogs. I'd expect almost all robust blogs to continue—and some of the moribund ones to disappear. Will there be a flood of new, robust, public library blogs? It's possible, but I'd be a little surprised.

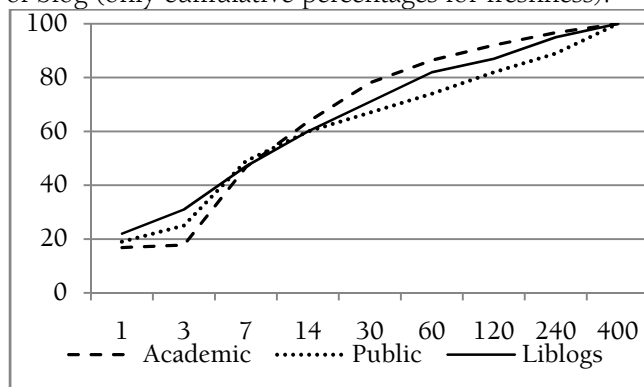
Overall Conclusions

We're out of the shiny new toy phase for blogs (and wikis). I'm guessing most libraries these days will only start blogs after making reasonably certain the blogs will serve real purposes *and will be updated regularly*. I'm guessing very few library people start blogs in the expectation of becoming rich and famous.

Blogs work well as tools, maybe better because they're not so shiny. With realistic expectations, blogs can serve librarians and libraries well. I don't see that changing rapidly.

Comparing liblogs and library blogs

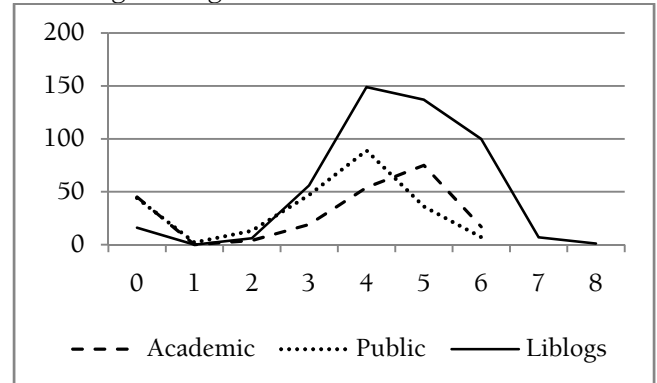
Just for fun, here are graphs combining all three types of blog (only cumulative percentages for freshness).



The first graph shows the cumulative percentage of blogs within a category that had a post within X days before December 16 (thus, December 15 is "1"), where "400" means "more than 240 but a post was visible." Note that academic library blogs actually start out a little below the others, but wind up strong.

The second graph shows Google Page Ranks. As noted earlier, you can have a useful academic or public library blog with no web visibility, possibly because it's feeding some other page on the library site, so it's not all that odd that a fair number of each (but very

few liblogs) have no GPR at all. Otherwise—well, it's hard for a library blog to get past GPR 5, but quite a few liblogs manage to do that.



That's the not-so-short form (and I obviously didn't cover all of this in a 45-minute talk with no visuals). For the *really* long form of how library blogs were doing in 2007 and how liblogs were doing in 2007 and 2008, you'll need to buy the books.

Perspective

Tech Trends, Trends and Forecasts

It's that time of the year, when trendspotting tends toward the short-term. Here are items I've encountered over the past few weeks, gathered into the three general categories above. I've added the trends I discussed at the OLA SuperConference.

Tech Trends

Some of these are from library people, some aren't.

My own take (prepared for OLA SuperConference)

In the Midwinter 2009 issue, I quoted from my 2004 mini-essay on the "top technology trend," quoting Cory Doctorow and *Boing Boing*. Repeating part of the beginning of Doctorow's entry: "The last twenty years were about technology. The next twenty years are about policy..." I believe that's still true—and maybe the economic reality that emerged last year and will be with us for some time to come demonstrates that better than anything. Technology helped get us into this mess; I don't see any way that technology will get us out of it.

Beyond that, I see these trends as vital for thinking about libraries, technology and life:

- **Limits:** They exist. Your financial resources are limited; you *can't* keep borrowing against tomorrow indefinitely. Deny them as we might,

limits—natural resources, time, attention—don't simply disappear. Denying limits and hiding them under various odd assumptions can lead to disasters of various sorts. (No matter how hard we all clap our hands, you can't spend 60%-110% of your gross pay for housing—at least not for very long. Eventually, the fairy dust falls to the ground.)

- **Business models:** They matter. When you're considering how various services for your own work and your library's work will work, think about business models. To what extent are you relying on free services that don't appear to have any source of revenue? What happens to your service if those services disappear? Do you have any rational basis to believe they'll continue to exist, grow and be developed without clear revenue sources? Your library *has* a business model, typically that of a community service: People pay in advance in order to fund a common good.
- **Trusting the cloud:** Set aside the jargon—the cloud's just software and services on someone else's servers. "Trusting the cloud" has three key aspects, one particularly important where library functions are concerned: Trusting that the services will remain (see "business models"); trusting that your data will be safe; and trusting that *confidentiality* will be preserved. I'm not arguing that you shouldn't use the cloud; I *am* arguing that you should think several times before relying entirely on the cloud.
- **Valuing existing users and services:** Yes, you need to see how you can serve emerging needs of your community (*your community*)—but times of limits make your existing services more valuable than ever. Don't ignore your existing users in order to court a minority of people living the digital lifestyle; find a balance. And if you find that some of the digerati really *do* have all the money to satisfy their instant-everything demands and have no intention of using your services—well, in fact, *you can't please everybody*, and there's a limit to how hard you should try.
- **Real communities:** What technologies and balances serve *your* users in *your* community? The answer's considerably different for a town in which 99% of residents are wealthy and have high-speed broadband and smart phones (if such a town exists) than it is for a city where many people aren't online at all (except at the

library), many more have only dialup at home, and \$100 a month for a smart phone data service is an outrageous expense. Where's *your* community—and how does your library serve *your* users effectively?

- **Taking back the language:** That's a group heading for a number of language-related issues. It means understanding that "Essentially free" means somebody somewhere is paying a *lot* of money. It means thinking to yourself "what you mean **we**?" when someone pronounces something that "we" or "we all" do or think. (The full phrase, from a brilliant song by Oscar Brown, Jr. regarding the Lone Ranger and Tonto, is politically incorrect—although, you know, a majority of those using unfounded "we"isms are indeed white men.) It means flagging "inevitable" as a typically nonsensical substitute for argument. It means honoring skepticism while trying to avoid cynicism.

Social software deathwatch

Steve Lawson uses that title for "my top tech trend to watch" in a February 4, 2009 post at *See also...* Portions of it complement portions of two of my trends above (business models and trusting the cloud), and it's possible that we discussed these earlier—but in any case Lawson offers a vigorous, important discussion. Lawson credits Jason Scott's *ASCII* blog (ascii.textfiles.com) for inspiring his thoughts—and notes that Scott uses strong language to make his points. Excerpts:

AOL Hometown shut down with very little notice to the people who still had their sites hosted there. Google is closing, stopping development or otherwise 86'ing Google Video, Notebook, Catalog Search, Jai-ku, and Dodgeball. LiveJournal laid off a bunch of people and sorta forgot to comment on it publicly for a while, leading people to suspect that they have something to hide and may not be long for this World Wide Web. Social bookmarking site, Magnolia, had "data corruption and loss" on Friday, and at the moment they still haven't recovered. Thomas Hawk has been blogging occasions where Flickr permanently deleted users' accounts with little notice or negotiation...

I admit that I'm conflating some not-entirely-related phenomena: sites where the owning company pulls the plug; sites that have one-time serious, possibly irrevocable losses; and sites that are too eager to not just suspend users' accounts, but to delete everything they have posted.

But it goes back to something I wrote about two years ago in a post called "When good sites go bad." It's great to put stuff on these sites to increase your media's visi-

bility or to find a more convenient way to share documents or something. But what happens if your free hosted wiki site suddenly goes bankrupt or your document sharing site's servers are accidentally sold for scrap, or the video hosting site you use objects to the hot book-on-book action you have posted?...

Libraries and librarians and archivists who care about preserving the world's cultural output: where are we now? Do we have anything to add to an effort to help keep online culture from going down the drain? I fear that most libraries can barely deal with the digital content we are directly responsible for, leaving the wilds of the Internet to people like Jason Scott and Brewster Kahle to deal with, but I'd love to hear examples of libraries taking on this kind of responsibility.

[To] quote from [Jason Scott's] "Cloud" post:

If you want to take advantage of the froth, like with YouTube or Google Video (oh wait! Google Video is [not accepting new content]) then do so, but recognize that these are not Services. These are not dependable enterprises. These are parties. And parties are fun and parties are cool and you meet neat people at parties but **parties are not a home**...

So that's my top tech trend for 2009. There's a reason it's called "cloud" computing. It looks beautiful now, but could be gone in a moment.

You might want to read the whole post—and, if you can deal with it, the Jason Scott posts Lawson links to.

LITA Top Tech Trends: Eric Lease Morgan

Morgan wasn't at the session. Excerpts from a January 10, 2009 post on the *LITA blog* (litablog.org), with my notes in brackets:

- **Indexing with Solr/Lucene works well.** [True—and library groups have been using both for some time now.]
- **Linked data is a new name for the Semantic Web.** [The Semantic Web just isn't happening, for good reasons. Linked data? Maybe.]
- **Blogging is peaking.** "There is no doubt about it." Morgan also believes the number of posts to existing blogs is decreasing, as well as the number of new blogs. [At most partly true. For many of us, blogging isn't "hard work."]
- **Word/tag clouds abound.** [A true observation. They're fun, but are they meaningful?]
- **"Next Generation" library catalogs seem to be defined.** [He doesn't think the definition goes far enough.]
- **The Digital Dark Age continues.** That is, digital preservation of *internet resources* stinks. [On the other hand, when Morgan says "Somebody is going to want to do research on the use of blogs and email"—uh, Eric, been doing it for

blogs for some time now, although I may have to give it up. I guess I'm not on your radar?]

LITA Top Tech Trends, Sarah Houghton-Jan

Houghton-Jan wasn't at the session. Excerpts from a January 24, 2009 post on the *LITA blog*, again with my notes in brackets.

- **The art of web presence maintenance:** With libraries extending their web presences out beyond the borders of their own websites proper, the coordination and successful maintenance of these presences has become a skill in its own right... Managing a library's extended web presence truly has become an art, and an art that each library needs to (and seems to want to) learn about. I see the future bringing more and more libraries focusing on this aspect, and the real skills that these tasks require, such as customer service, web skills and knowledge, writing skills, etc.
- **Plug-ins, widgets and hacks, oh my!** Websites are no longer stand-alone entities. They are segmented bits of code...all grouped together to make dynamic and interactive pages. The number of plug-ins, widgets, and hacks in the last year that can be used effectively on library websites has increased dramatically compared to previous years...The number of libraries taking advantage of these will continue to grow, especially in times of difficult budgets when "free" is the only choice.
- **My kumpyootur kan has a kloud:** Cloud computing as been discussed a lot in the information community in the last few years. Libraries have taken advantage of this already by using services such as Google Docs to offer services or enhance communication. When cloud computing becomes the norm (which I and others think it will in the next few years), this will be a boon for library users... [Apart from the overly cute title, this leaves out the whole issue of *trusting* the cloud for data security and confidentiality. I'm not among those who expect full cloud computing to become the norm—and, as I've noted elsewhere, it's odd that this is being pushed at a time when *local* computing power and storage have never been cheaper.]
- **Online training has its debutante ball:** To date, most libraries (and by libraries I mean library managers and supervisors) treat online learning like it isn't valid... Most libraries that I have visited (a mix of public and academic) have little

time for staff to go to training, and little funding at that. However, they will happily pay for an in-person class that also involves an hour of travel time for the attendee, but not give the same person time to watch a webcast on the same topic from his/her desk. It's almost as though there is an unwritten rule: "If you're at your desk, it's not real training." While as a trainer I completely agree that some topics require in-person classes, most topics can be covered through online screencasts, webcasts, written tutorials, and the like. Fortunately, in the last year I have seen more libraries opening up to online training as a valid training delivery method...

- **Less \$ = Less eResources (a disturbing trend):** It seems that eResources (databases and eBooks) budgets are being cut more than the traditional collection budgets are... Times are tough—which is precisely why eResources make more sense. They have a higher return on investment, examining cost vs. use, (up to 5 times as much in my studies)... Especially for periodicals, eResources make more sense than physical ones. And yet, this year, periodical budgets aren't being cut but periodical database budgets are... [Some informal anecdotes I've heard have suggested **low** use of licensed databases in public libraries. Is there hard evidence on either side? Houghton-Jan asks whether libraries have asked the users, always a good question.]

LITA Top Tech Trends, Karen Coombs

Coombs was at the session (and included in Landgraf's notes below), but also posted a commentary beforehand, in a January 25, 2009 post at Library web chic (www.librarywebchic.net/wordpress/). Excerpts, with my notes in brackets:

- **My personal A-HA trend:** Web applications that are extremely flexible, versatile and extendable... (Specific example: Drupal.)
- **The everyone's going to say it but it needs to be said trend:** Mobile technologies are changing society. They are here to stay, they are only going to get better with time, and we need to expect mobile devices to be a significant portion of our usage. [Since Coombs, unlike some others, sees "significant portion" rather than ubiquity and "triumph," I don't disagree. And yes, mobile came up.]
- **The one that scares the sh!t out of me:** The waking digital preservation nightmare. Whether it is books digitized by Google, videos post-

ed on the web, or Flickr photos the explosion of digital content for which there isn't a clear curation plan has created a void which few libraries seem to be willing to step up and fill...

- **The trend I think may empower smaller libraries the most:** Hosted supported open source software. There are an increasing number of companies both in the library and non-library world providing hosting and support for open source software...

LITA Top Tech Trends, overall notes

Excerpts from Greg Landgraf's "Midwinter Sunday: Top Tech Trends," posted January 25, 2009 at *AL inside scoop* (www.al.ala.org/insidescoop/):

Participants...focused on four topics: the management of open-source software, the growth of geolocation technologies, linked data, and the effect of the economy on technology choices in libraries.

Open source: Karen Coombs...observed the number of companies being formed to manage open-source software...

Geolocation: Karen Coyle sees the ability to deliver information based on where someone is on the earth; for example, seeing a building and having information about it delivered to them... Clifford Lynch and Karen Coombs focused instead on what Lynch termed "fine geolocation" to provide GPS-type data within an individual library. For example, a cellphone-based system that "can tell you you're in the wrong shelf; you need to be two shelves over," Lynch explained...

Linked data: Roy Tennant...said...linked data may make him "eat half of my hat" regarding his skepticism toward the Semantic Web, although there are not yet specific examples. "First we have to make it possible to do things and then see what happens," he said, noting that the Library of Congress is planning to put up a site using linked data in the next 4-6 weeks.

Economic considerations: [Paraphrasing: More libraries may install self-check; libraries may "get rid of the silly stuff," ignoring the question of who decides what's silly. Broadband access is still a problem—but as much a policy as an economic problem.]

I was at this meeting—atypically, because I thought it might inform my later appearance at OLA. While Landgraf's summary leaves out some of the more peculiar (in my opinion) moments, such as when I *thought* I heard an assertion that "all information should be geolocated," which strikes me as silly, it's a good roundup of some of the more cogent points. Did the session leave me hungry to rejoin the Trendsters? Not for a minute, but it did remind me why I left and have never regretted the decision.

One odd note: Clifford Lynch discussed the changing use of displays and asked for a show of hands of those who use multiple displays. Karen Coombs estimated “at least 85%.” I don’t believe I saw that many hands, but I’d agree it was a majority (and I had my hand up, to be sure). Does this mean libraries need to provide multidisplay public computer stations? That seems to me to run up against real-world economic limits in most cases.

Tame the web

It’s rare to cite a blog post that’s *longer* than the article it’s being cited in—but at 7,800 words (that would be ten pages of *Cites & Insights*), “Ten trends & technologies for 2009” (posted January 12) surely qualifies (the “Tech Trends” section of this article is just over 4,400 words). There’s even a link to a 17-page PDF.

If you read the Midwinter 2009 issue, you already know my opinion of a few of the buzzwords thrown in here. Here are the trends themselves, with a few comments here and there:

- **The ubiquity of the cloud.** [Throw in “the great jukebox in the sky” as an apparent universal certainty and preference, the usual “bloated software suites” snideness about anything beyond Google Docs and you have a veritable perfect storm, which ignores little things like the total loss of first-sale rights (and most fair use rights) as you give up physical media and saving your own stuff.]
- **The changing role of IT.** [Among other things, Stephens concludes that this means library schools “are no longer preparing people to be reference librarians or children’s librarians.” So libraries have no need for children’s specialists? Or is it just that LIS is and apparently should be too busy with “a more IT-focused skill set” and “an emphasis on communication, people skills and humanism”?]
- **The value of the commons.**
- **The promise of micro-interactions.** What’s that, other than another buzzword from another guru? “The everyday exchanges we have with a product, brand and service.” [I don’t have “exchanges” with products or brands—they’re not people. What this really seems to be about is how hot Twitter is and why every library should use it. Oh, and we get “workstream,” in case “lifestream” isn’t enough.]
- **The care & nurturing of the tribe.** [Whazzat? Another Guru, Seth Godin, and yet another theory of everything—this time our need to be

part of a “tribe.” Oddly, for all the talk of new interaction tools making us more human, what I’m finding as I experiment with FriendFeed and Facebook—and what I found with Twitter—is anything but a “tribe.” I find that, unless I’m militant about hiding, unsubscribing, refusing, etc., I wind up with so much noise from so many people I’m vaguely acquainted with that it all becomes mush, with the humanity pushed out of those tiny messages. For that matter, one of the comments in that section is oxymoronic: “The more people or customers participating in your network, the better the conversations.” I’d reverse that: Beyond some limit, the more people involved, the more the conversations are attenuated to the level of uselessness. Of course, “better” is in the eye of the beholder.]

- **The triumph of the portable device.** [People snicker when I mention “triumphalism,” but Stephens is honest enough to use the word. *Triumph*. Not significance, *triumph*. Oh, and another reminder that libraries aren’t *supposed* to be peaceful places: Stephens once more insists that you take down any signs about cell phone use.]
- **The importance of personalization.** [I’m not sure how this relates to putting more labels on books, but maybe...]
- **The impact of localization.** In this case, a definition may be needed: The concept here is location-based services, *not* assuring that your library primarily serves your local community.
- **The evolution of the digital lifestyle.** [You know the drill. Physical media: Dead. Newspapers: Dead (and, of course, Stephens doesn’t take one). Sigh. Do people losing their homes, finding that their resources really weren’t unlimited and otherwise dealing with real-world limits really need “digital lifestyles”?]
- **The shift toward open thinking.** [I’m not sure I see a close connection between open source software and “innovation and creativity.”]

I have to quote this sentence, the comment under one of “five related things we just can’t ignore,” namely Privacy: “We need to rethink our privacy concerns, offer varying levels of opt-in and educate all of our users about what it means to participate in the networked world where our lifestreams are saved throughout the cloud.” Gotta say, “networked world where our lifestreams are saved throughout the cloud” is truly prime NewSpeak.

Wired Magazine

This is, technically, a list of “top technology breakthroughs of 2008”—but the breakthroughs lead to trends, and the introduction ends up saying these breakthroughs “rocked our world in 2008—and will change yours in 2009.” (Emphasis added, noting how often it disagrees with what the article actually says.) Boldface trends followed by my comment if any. The list is in the usual TV-show “last to first” order. What’s strange is the mix of actual breakthroughs, items so far from production they can’t possibly change your world this year and items that are commodity-level technology by now—and that the #1, presumably *most important*, “breakthrough” is another way to spend lots of money on frequently trivial items. One wonders whether *Wired’s* writers can even *conceive* of an age of limits and choices.

- **Flexible displays:** Still in the “plausible” stage, as it’s been for years. Don’t count on much in the marketplace this year.
- **Edible chips:** Silicon chips that is—“tiny chips...that, once swallowed activate in the stomach” and send signals to patches outside to monitor vitals (or, the piece suggests, “track when patients take their pills.” Not even in clinical trials yet. I wouldn’t hold my breath (bad for your vitals).
- **Speedo LZR:** This one’s reality—the swimsuits that revolutionized Olympic swimming competition last year. Maybe this year you’ll be able to swim in your very own girdle. This constitutes one of the ten most important technology breakthroughs for 2008? Fancy swimsuits?
- **Flash memory:** There’s a hot new trend! Gee, you could have MP3 players that fit in your pocket and hold multiple gigabytes, or tiny little backup devices or... Oh, wait: These have been around for years and are nearing commodity pricing. The hook for this item is that the “star power” behind flash drives means “prices have nowhere to go but down,” unlike hard disk prices which, as you know, have been... nope, that can’t be it. The reality: Big flash drives use a lot less power than hard disk drives—but there’s still the limited-cycle issue, which isn’t mentioned here. (The piece says “faster response,” but the sector balancing that can make the typical 100,000-write lifetime more useful also slows down response.) Do I think flash memory will be more important in 2009 than in 2008? Of course: Bigger MP3

players, better netbooks, etc. But this is a commodity, not a breakthrough.

- **GPS:** Another commodity—but the *Wired* piece is about geoservices. Great—if they’re actually services and not new ad, spam and stalking systems. It’s not the technology, it’s the uses—and in 2009, I think we’re going to see that “free” only goes so far.
- **Memristor:** Ideally, a replacement for RAM that retains its memory when powered down—but the article says it’s at least five years away.
- **Video-capable SLRs:** Interesting, here now, high-def. Hard to say how important it is.
- **USB 3.0:** Even higher-speed USB—but saying “users need the increased speed” is only true for some subset of users.
- **Android:** Google’s smart phone OS. Since Google can do no wrong and never shuts down a product, and everybody loves them... Well, maybe, maybe not.
- **Apple’s App Store:** Since “we all” have iPhones, and since “we all” have unlimited funds to buy mobile applications, this is a sure-fire huge success that changes things forever. It’s nice that there are no limits on income, expenditure or silliness.

Paula Hane, Trends to Watch in 2009

Paula J. Hane posted “Review of the year 2008 and trends watch—part 2” on January 8, 2009 at *ITI NewsLink* (newsbreaks.infotoday.com/). I’m including a few trends that may be particularly relevant to the U.S. scene for libraries.

- Growth in the mobile web (increasingly location-aware services)
- Open source solutions looking increasingly attractive...
- Web apps...gaining traction over expensive software solutions
- Increasing traction for open access journals
- Increasing use of social networking services for communication (rather than email)
- More innovative web mashups
- Further developments in semantic technologies and applications, increasing context of content
- Increasing movement to enhanced library catalogs (reviews, ratings, tags, etc.)
- Ongoing book digitization projects—some partnering with Google, others making it on their own
- More options and improvements in ebook readers, increased adoption, and, hopefully,

lower prices (Amazon Kindle, Sony Reader, iReX suite, Foxit eSlick, Bookeen Cybook, etc.)

- Security and privacy remaining major concerns [a permanent trend].

These are trends Hane will be *watching*; she's not predicting massive adoption. It's a solid list.

Reid Goldsborough

Highlights from Goldsborough's "Future trends in personal technology" in the January 2009 *LinkUp Digital* (www.infotoday/linkup/). These are taken from a JWT report—that is, an ad agency. My notes in brackets. (Thanks to Paula Hane for this link.)

- **Use of email will decline.** An ad executive calls it "an increasingly outdated medium" because "younger people" prefer texting and social networks—and because "people of all ages are fed up with overflowing inboxes." [So email is like those nightclubs that nobody goes to because they're too popular? Somehow, "overflowing inboxes"—in mail systems with decent spam filters—and "declining use" is slightly oxymoronic. Even more amusing: the report from which this comes calls "email overload" a "serious productivity drain"—whereas, you know, texting and social networks hardly affect productivity at all, right? It gets sillier: Twittering and social networking are better than email because "communication can more easily be restricted to a specified group." What? Email systems automatically broadcast to everybody? Let me clarify: Yes, email might decline—but the reasoning and commentary here are, well, ludicrous.]
- **Computing will increasingly become unethered**—in other words, cloud computing will grow. [Likely right, within limits—and with a variety of unintended consequences.]
- **Use of mobile devices will continue to increase.** [Well, yes...]
- **Netbooks will increase in popularity.** [Well, yes...even as the definition of "netbook" gets increasingly fuzzy. Someday soon, someone's going to call the MacBook Air a netbook...]
- **Personal computers and TV will "continue to converge."** [Not really. TVs may gain more internet connections, but primarily for streaming media, not personal computing.]

Trends in General

The ever-trendy, neologism-happy trendwatching.com offers "half a dozen consumer trends for 2009" as their January 2009 Trend Briefing at www.trendwatching.com/trends/halfozentrends2009/ (hoping to entice you to buy their 150-page 2009 Trend Report for a low, low \$799). Here's the set, with trendwatching.com's ever-trendy names and my own brief summary of what it's all about:

- **Nichetributes:** They say "Low-cost, practical tributes to the zeitgeist." I say: an extended set of gimmicks appealing to your "niche lifestyle"—e.g., "iAnything" (gloves with metal dots on the fingertips), "social networking mobile phones" and, of course, more, more, more. We're assured the trend is "important and recession-proof" largely because these are supposed to be *practical* gimmicks. (OK, there's a clear marketing trend for 2009: Calling things you can *buy, buy, buy* "recession-proof" and desperately hoping that's true.)
- **Luxuryoury:** "In 2009, you define what constitutes luxury." We're told that luxury is based on scarcity. But good marketers should "focus on defining [luxury]," which says a lot about the idea that the individual defines luxury. Examples of the new luxury? A hotel with little "funky" rooms and shared bathrooms—but "fine wines, plush bedlinen, carefully curated art, and top-notch personal service." What a concept: Lacking a private bathroom is suddenly *luxury*. (One paragraph of this description is a veritable goldmine of marketspeak and neologisms—perkonomics, premiumization, etc.)
- **Feedback 3.0:** "Think we've reached full transparency?" This seems to be about companies talking back on review sites—and the example offered does not paint a pretty picture. (Someone using a pseudonym gives a truly bad review to a hotel. The hotel owner writes an even nastier response. Gotta say, the **owner** convinced me: I wouldn't touch that hotel on a bet.) Realistically, minus the neologisms and market-happy nonsense, this is both a real trend and a good one. It makes sense for hotels, restaurants, etc. to be able to offer both apologies and other responses to reviews, and a fair number of sites are doing it.
- **Econcierge:** Oh, please. "Savings are the new green." The idea's not bad though: Firms and services that help households "go green."
- **Mapmania:** "Why maps are the new interface." I don't know about all sorts of stuff coming together "in one **orgasmic** celebration of map-based tracking, finding, knowing and connecting" (sounds a little...weird...to me), but sure,

map-based stuff continues to be more important for online applications.

- **Happy ending:** What? A trend with an English name? “The silver lining of each downturn.” Somehow, even this one seems to turn into ways to *sell, sell, sell*.

Whew. Now that you’ve had just a taste of true trendiness, there are others to mention.

Ross Dawson: “Six important forces”

Dawson is a self-identified Very Big Deal, “globally recognized as a leading keynote speaker and authority on business strategy.” These six “forces” (his trends, my commentary except for quoted material) appear in a December 16, 2008 post at *Trends in the living networks* (rossdawsonblog.com/weblog/). Thanks to “tango” at *Libraries interact* for summarizing this.

- **Constant partial attention.** People “consuming 20 hours or more of media a day.” “Over two-thirds of people watch TV while reading.” “To be successful, we *need* to thrive on constant interruption.” [Emphasis added.] So CPA is *essential* to succeed (and presumably leads to the best-quality thoughts and products)? Right. (A commenter pushed back, noting “multitasking has proven to be less efficient than concentrating on one task at a time”—and Dawson says “it’s inevitable that our attention will fragment” and calls those of us able to focus “meditators.” I don’t see the difference between CPA and multitasking.)
- **Half of us expose ourselves; the other half watches.** Dawson really believes “half of us” will be “sending video updates of our every move” in 2009, and that people “living their lives online” will be the norm. Oh, and those of us who haven’t become exhibitionists will become voyeurs. I feel safe in saying this one is nonsense, at least at those levels. (Apparently Twitter’s rapid growth in 2008 is the basis for all this. Anyone else notice a Twitter backlash? If so, let me know—on FriendFeed, my blog, or via email.)
- **Gen Y wakes up to Gen Z.** Dawson defines Gen Y as those born in 1979-1990 (too bad—that won’t make it the largest generation ever, at least not in the U.S.) He also defines it as the “me generation,” whereas “Gen Z” (people no more than 19 at this point) is “sophisticated and with a social conscience.” I think it’s all gen-gen and increasingly divisive nonsense.
- **Outsourcing for the masses.** We’ll be using “assistants in India or Hungary to make travel

bookings, set up a personal website, or design a flyer for the school fete.” He does mean *we*—not companies but individuals in America and Australia. Dunno about you, but there’s a semi-retired 63-year-old guy in Mountain View who does my travel bookings (other than cruises), and would do so even without paying attention to real-world budgeting. Is anybody *really* going to pay for and cope with issues involved in passing such trivial stuff off to India and Hungary?

- **Companies become social.** “In 2009, companies will truly embrace social networks, blogs, and other Web 2.0 tools...” Dawson believes that corporate Facebook profiles and blogs will lead to “a transformation of how we work.”
- **Media industry shatters.** Ah, but “journalists themselves will prosper.” Really? Yes, it’s probably true that some media companies will go under (since that’s always happening). It’s still *also* true that most *local* newspapers still earn healthy profits. How do journalists make money without salaried outlets? Blogs? Really?

Forecasts and Scorecards

Short-term predictions are tough...because people will be around to see whether they were right. With that in mind, here are a few forecasts and scorecards on past forecasts.

ReadWriteWeb

This is a Very Big Deal blog—with loads of ads. They throw out so many forecasts I’d be unwilling to list all of them (I count 56 in all from various team members), but here are a few interesting ones:

- iTunes will add social networking features.
- Yahoo will get bought by some big media company, not Microsoft.
- Microsoft will release a “cool online version of Office” and Google will release an “amazing new version” of Google Docs.
- Twitter and Technorati won’t get acquired but FriendFeed will (probably by Google).
- Twitter will be acquired. (OK, one of these has to be right...)
- Lifestreams (sigh) will continue to evolve. (Alternatively, “lifestreaming” products—this person mentions FriendFeed—will remain niche products serving early adopters. I’m on FriendFeed: so much for *that* prediction!)
- Twitter will figure out a way to make money.
- An iPhone will appear with video recording capabilities.

- “Google backlash begins, Apple backlash does not.”
- Yahoo gains goodwill (and Google loses it).
- Twitter will start to embed ads into user streams.
- “Pro Twitterer” will be a real job.
- Microsoft buys Netflix and resurrects WebTV.
- Facebook Connect will become the de facto universal logon—or Gmail will be, once Google makes Gmail logons OpenID-compatible.
- eBay will be acquired by Amazon.

That’s a quarter of the forecasts, some of them at odds with one another. (One commenter nicely captured some of them in a trio of can’t-possibly-be-wrong alternatives.)

Ian Douglas

Douglas is head of digital production for *The Telegraph* (UK) and has the good sense to say, “No sensible commentator would go anywhere near predictions for the following year” before giving his. (You’ll find the whole post, “Next year in technology,” on December 23, 2008 at blogs.telegraph.co.uk/ian_douglas/blog/. Thanks to *Library stuff* for the pointer.) These are my paraphrases, with comments in [brackets].

- Computer sales will be down, but “the few computers sold will be higher quality items, intended to last a couple of years at least. Think Sony and Apple rather than Dell or Packard Bell.” [Packard Bell, maybe—but are Dell products really that inferior to Sony VAIOs? My last Gateway was still going strong after five years, and I never heard them touted as being markedly higher quality than Dell.]
- Microsoft will suffer as people skip the “ridiculously overpriced Office suite” and turn instead to free online word processors...and piracy of the software will increase. [I still cannot, for the life of me, see how \$130 for three users is “ridiculously overpriced” for Office 2007 Home & Student—particularly when it shows up for \$99 on sale. Maybe there’s no such animal in the UK?]
- Sales of “larger but essentially useless items” will dwindle, while “small but life-affirming purchases” will rise. What’s fascinating here: Douglas calls HD camcorders and netbooks “larger but essentially useless” items and iPhone apps, Wiis, iTune songs, DVDs and digital film downloads “small but life-affirming.” [So a \$250 netbook or \$160 camcorder is

“larger and essentially useless” and a \$300 Wii is small and life-affirming? Not to mention that to buy an iPhone app you have to have an iPhone and a data plan... OK, now that *that’s* clear...]

- “Blu-ray will die as HD downloads and super-fast broadband spread.” [Oh yeah, Blu-ray’s dying in 2009, y’know, ‘cause we’re all suddenly getting super-fast broadband. Maybe in the UK; sure as hell not in 2009 in the US!]
- “Your mother will follow you on Twitter, so you’ll have to find another community.” That one might be right.
- Battery life will take over from processor speed as the big number on billboards. [I haven’t seen CPU speed as a big number for some time, except for gaming systems, so it’s hard to comment on this.]
- At least one of the big three American car companies will become bankrupt. [Plausible.]
- Electric cars will begin to replace hybrids as the environmentalists’ choice. [In 2009? With the unlimited venture capital funds now available to make true electric cars factory items? Talk to Tesla about that particular short-term projection.]

Freedom to Tinker

“Predictions for 2009,” posted January 7, 2009 at www.freedom-to-tinker.com/blog/felten/, offers 38 predictions based on input from 13 people. Just a few of the 38...leaving out some really interesting ones. Except for [bracketed comments], these are all direct quotes.

- 1. DRM technology will still fail to prevent widespread infringement. In a related development, pigs will still fail to fly. [They predict this every year. So far, 100% correct.]
- 3. As lawful downloading of music and movies continues to grow, consumer satisfaction with lossy formats will decline, and higher-priced options that offer higher fidelity will begin to predominate. [I suspect and hope they’re right—and, actually, iTunes moving to 256K is already a sign: It’s still lossy but higher fidelity.]
- 6. Questions over the enforceability of free / open source software licenses will move closer to resolution.
- 13. There will be lots of talk about net neutrality but no new legislation, as everyone waits to see how the Comcast/BitTorrent issue plays out in the courts.
- 24. Shortly after the start of the new administration, the TSA will quietly phase out the ban

on flying with liquids or stop enforcing it in practice. [As a commenter notes, TSA's already announced this for fall 2009—this would just move it up a little.]

- 27. An embarrassing leak of personal data will emerge from one or more of the social networking firms (e.g., Facebook), leading Congress to consider legislation that probably won't solve the problem and will never actually reach the floor for a vote. [I'd say the odds of both are extremely high.]
- 30. The Blu-ray format will increasingly be seen as a failure as customers rely more on online streaming. [I think Blu-ray will do just fine in 2009, but not become dominant by a long shot. A lot depends on your definition of "seen as a failure."]
- 33. A hot Christmas item will be a cheap set-top box that allows normal people to download, organize, and view video and audio podcasts in their own living rooms. [Really? Do "normal people" care that much about podcasts in the living rooms? Streaming video, absolutely, and that's already happened.]
- 34. Internet Explorer's usage share will fall below 50 percent for the first time in a decade, spurred by continued growth of Firefox and Safari and deals with OEMs to pre-load Google Chrome. [Possibly—but are either Safari or Chrome major players? At PLN, where Firefox registers at 33% over a recent month, Safari looks like about 1%-2% and Chrome doesn't even register.]

Freedom to tinker is scrupulous about reviewing past predictions. Omitting #1, which is always the first prediction and always right, here are a few of last year's predictions. Again, direct quotations, with 2008 predictions in italics, hindsight in ordinary type, my comment if any in brackets. From a January 6, 2009 post.

- 2. *Copyright issues will still be gridlocked in Congress.* We could predict this every year, and it would almost always be right...
- 4. *DRM-free sales will become standard in the music business. The movie studios will flirt with the idea of DRM-free sales but won't take the plunge, yet.* This was basically right. DRM-free music sales are much more common than before. Whether they're "standard" is a matter for debate. [Right for 2009, a little premature for 2008. The blog's "mostly right" is generous.]
- 7. *Second Life will jump the shark and the cool kids will start moving elsewhere; but virtual worlds*

generally will lumber on. Second Life seems to have lost its cool factor, but then so have virtual worlds generally. Still, they're lumbering on. [Second Life never did gain massive numbers of return users. Still, "mostly right" is probably right.]

- 11. *A Facebook application will cause a big privacy to-do.* There were Facebook privacy issues, but mostly about non-application issues. Overall, interest in Facebook apps declined during the year. Verdict: mostly wrong.
- 13. *An epidemic of news stories about teenage webcam exhibitionism will lead to calls for regulation.* Verdict: wrong. [I'm pleasantly surprised that this projection was wrong.]

Last year, they only offered 14 projections and scored "six right, four mostly right, two mostly wrong, one wrong, one unknown." Not bad, although the scoring may be optimistic.

Interesting & Peculiar Products Beyond the Eee

Oddly enough, the ultramobile computer category has already split into different branches that aren't directly comparable. If you want a rugged device for modest on-the-road computing needs, chances are you want a machine without a hard disk—and chances are you won't mind a user-friendly Linux version. If you want something that can pretty much take the place of your whole system, you're in a different submarket. Maybe it's the difference between "netbooks" and ultramobile PCs?

In any case, *PC Magazine* gives its Editors' Choice for ultramobile PCs, as of October 2008 at least, to the MSI Wind, a \$480 unit that weighs 2.6 pounds and has a 10.1 inch screen. It runs XP Home, it's got an Intel Atom PC, the keyboard's 92%-size—and it has an 80GB hard disk. As a competitor to, say, the HP 2133 Mini-note PC, great. As a direct competitor to the two-pound ASUS Eee models that *don't* have hard disks...I'm not so sure. But for the UMPC market, this may be the model to beat as I write this.

Easy Home Theater

Not a library item as such, but dynamite for those of you who have the space for a home theater but neither the budget nor the mad skillz for a typical professional setup. Epson offers the Ensemble HD: a \$5,000 to \$7,000 package consisting of a front projector with rear speakers built in, big powered screen with front speakers built in and controller including DVD player

and receiver. There's also a subwoofer. The September 2008 *Home Theater* includes a long discussion of the combo and installation issues. (Epson also supplies installation materials.) If you're handy, you could install it yourself; otherwise, it should only take installers "a few hours."

Espresso Book Machine

This could be a library item—indeed, one of the first ones is in the University of Michigan's Shapiro Library—but it's probably not something you'll pick up as a casual purchase. I wrote about it in September 2008 (really August 2008) and, indirectly, in May 2002—but while there were supposedly eleven machines in use at the time, details were a little fuzzy.

Things firmed up a bit in September 2008. The University of Michigan announced installation of an EBM and that it would charge around \$10 a book. A Creative Commons blog post noted that two million books available were all in the public domain and added, "The espresso version is simply covering printing costs. Compared to the average price of books these days, especially textbooks, ten bucks is pocket change."

Both sentences are open to question. When EBM was announced, the cost was supposed to be about a penny a page, and I'm guessing a pretty small minority of Michigan's public domain collection is books close to 1,000 pages long. Remember when Internet Archive was promoting dollar books, printed using a similar system? As for "pocket change," I don't know of too many public domain textbooks—and most mass-market paperbacks cost less than \$10, last time I looked. On the other hand, the EBM is producing trade paperbacks, *not* mass market paperbacks, so \$10 isn't bad. On the gripping hand, presumably not a dime is going to royalties or publishers, since these are public domain books. I can't speak to the reality behind the pricing, but if I had to guess I'd guess a lease situation, with something like half the price going to maintenance and leasing. This is *not* a complaint: If you want an OP book, being able to get your own trade-paper-quality copy for \$10 with a seven-minute wait is a pretty good deal for all concerned...and Michigan, with its enormous digitized collection, is a great place to start.

Peter Murray's September 22, 2008 post at *Disruptive library technology jester* (dltj.org) may be the best place to start if you want more information; the post is rich with well-chosen links. (A comment at one such link notes that the University of Alberta installed an EBM in November 2007—but "Canada's

only Espresso Book Machine" is in the bookstore, not the library. Most other EBMs are in bookstores as well, as far as I can tell. Another comment, from Paul Courant of Michigan, notes that Michigan found Alberta's experience helpful as they decided to proceed.)

In the past, I've included material about print-on-demand systems (since that's what the EBM is) in the ebook category—but that's silly, since the EBM specifically produces *print books*.

What about the Supplies?

The September 2008 *PC World* has a half-page review of Polaroid's \$150 PoGo portable printer—"the first photo printer to use Zink, the zero-ink technology that Polaroid pioneered." It uses a thermal printhead and special glossy photo paper with "100 billion or so dye crystals." It's small enough to fit in your hand. It took less than a minute to print a 640x480 image from a Treo...and apparently uses 2x3" paper.

There's an absolutely essential element missing from this review, an element that might tell you whether it's an expensive toy (if the largest prints it can produce are two by three inches, "toy" is the right word) or an *ultra*-expensive toy: Namely, how much do those sheets of special glossy paper cost?

What about the Video Quality?

Maybe September 2008 was *PC World's* special "skipping the important stuff" issue. "The best TV on the web" offers the magazine's "choices for must-stream TV" in a six-page article. The article covers quite a few bases but seems curiously reticent on one issue: What does the video actually *look* like—and what does it measure like? They're talking about watching streaming video on your real TV, after all.

When there is something, it's internally contradictory. For example, referring to ABC's "high-definition" streaming, "The image quality falls far short of what you'd get on Blu-ray Disc, but it's still impressive." So it's not *really* high-def, but it's "impressive"? Or this: "*Star Trek Remastered* looked great, but the video playback was not smooth at full-screen."

I'm trying not to be snarky. When I missed an episode of *Pushing Daisies* because of travel, I watched it from ABC's streaming service. It looked pretty good—on my 19" computer display. Would it look good on a real TV? I have no idea.

Angled and Expensive

I'm not sure why you'd want to have your CDs playing at an angle. Doesn't that just impose extra stress

on the mechanics of the drive? Not a lot of extra stress, to be sure, but *what's the point?* That comes to mind more when it's part of an extremely high-end CD player like the Chord RED Reference CD player from BlueBird, an oversized solid aluminum structure "which provides a rigid support for the uniquely angled CD mechanism." The beast costs **\$29,500**. (No, there's no missing decimal point: That's just under thirty thousand dollars.) Of course, Bluebird doesn't build the CD drive itself: They use a Philips CD Pro 2 then add electronics and packaging. The CD Pro 2 has an excellent reputation and is used in other high-end CD drives (including one that sells for a little less than \$3,000), but it's usually horizontal.

What's the advantage of a diagonal slant? It's distinctive. Also, in my opinion, dumb. I can't believe the slant is going to *increase* the life of the bearings in the drive, and there's no suggestion that it somehow improves the sound.

"Budget" High-End Systems and the Rule of 10

Not PC-related, but here because I bitch about absurd audio prices so much in MY BACK PAGES. The September 2008 *Absolute Sound* lists seven "great-sounding systems that fit just about any budget"—ranging from \$500 to \$6,000. These are all high-end systems, just not priced that way.

The cheapest is specialized: It's a desktop system consisting of a \$169 Oppo universal player and a \$399 Razer Mako powered omnidirectional desktop speaker system. Somehow, the magazine believes that \$399 and \$169 add up to \$468—but you could also just hook the Razer Mako up to your computer's audio outputs.

The Oppo DV980H also serves as source component for the next one up, a \$767 system that adds an NAD C315BEE integrated amp and PSB Alphas B1 bookshelf loudspeakers, both of which have been glowingly reviewed. Note that the Oppo is "universal," which means it plays SACD and DVD-Audio as well as regular CDs...and, by the way, also plays DVDs with 1080p upconversion.

Those are the only two under \$1,500. Otherwise, it's interesting that you can assemble a high-end tube system (if you really believe tubes are more accurate as opposed to more "musical") for under \$4,000 (under \$5,000 with turntable).

It's not a full system, but it's worth noting a very positive review of Polk Audio's RTi A1 loudspeaker in the September 2008 *Stereophile*. "Rich, holographic,

uncolored, detailed" midrange. Great high end (but with "very subtle highlighting"). Very good bass—and an overall sound so good that the experienced high-end reviewer "wanted to mine my entire record collection, playing more and more different types of music." The price? \$350 a pair.

The rule of 10

I wrote the portion above a few months ago, but haven't had room for INTERESTING & PECULIAR PRODUCTS since October 2008. In the meantime, I've seen two very different takes on the same general subject, both from more recent issues of *The Absolute Sound*.

"The rule of 10"? My rough calculation that, in most areas, there's rarely more than a ten-to-one difference between the most expensive product that serves a specific purpose and the least expensive (reputable) product that serves that purpose—unless the extra money goes for something other than improved functionality, such as scarcity or glitz.

So, for example, the cheapest highly-rated, reliable, safe sedan or subcompact available in the U.S. costs around \$15,000—and I'll argue that, if you're paying more than \$150,000 for a sedan, you're buying exclusivity or extreme luxury, not simply a better car. You can buy a name-brand notebook computer for around \$600; pay more than \$6,000 and you're buying something pretty specialized. The cheapest name-brand 4GB portable players cost around \$50; I don't know of any 4GB player that costs anywhere near \$500 (unless it's a special celebrity model). You rarely see more than a 10:1 ratio between the cheapest reputable TV in a size and technology class and the most expensive TV in that class.

This rule is only for somewhat utilitarian devices. It obviously doesn't apply to artwork or perfume or anything custom-made. It *does* apply to houses, but only within general size categories and local areas: A 1,200 square foot house in Silicon Valley costs a *lot* more than ten times as much as a similar house in Detroit—but you'd be hard-pressed to find a 10:1 ratio among, say, 1,000 to 2,000 square foot houses within Silicon Valley.

Does it apply to sound equipment? Maybe not (and maybe it depends on subcategories)—but you have to wonder whether what you're buying past a certain price multiple has much to do with either sound or construction quality. The two instances below make me wonder even more.

Absolute Sound Products of the Year

This long section is the principal editorial feature in the January 2009 issue, and it's supposed to honor

“the very best products we’ve reviewed in the previous year.” So we’re not just talking “good enough for the high end,” we’re talking *the very best*.

But the editors chose three winners in many categories: One that represents good value, one that offers outstanding performance “without a mega-buck price tag,” and one that’s the best reviewed regardless of price. Still, in all cases these are legitimate high-end products and “the best of the year.”

What’s the range? If you want a two-channel stereo system playing CDs, DVDs, AM & FM, the “best of the year” will run you \$2,800—notably, a lot less than ten times as much as the bargain system listed earlier (which also plays DVDs but doesn’t include radio). That’s for the NAD VISO Two (a \$1,299 DVD-receiver) and a pair of Paradigm Reference Signature S1 speakers. The high end for such a system, within the regular awards? \$160,000 or so—more than 30 times as much.

Skipping over specialty awards, let’s look at the high-to-low ratio in various categories. For CD players, the price points are \$299, \$2,695, and \$59,995—less than 10:1 from budget to outstanding, but more than 22:1 between outstanding and cost-no-object.

For “digital separates” (digital-to-analog converters when the CD player isn’t good enough), the price points are \$1,575, \$4,995—and \$67,000, but the latter does throw in a CD/SACD player.

Phono cartridges? \$99, \$599, and \$8,000. What can I say, other than that the \$99 and \$599 options are actually variations on the same cartridge, the Ortofon 2m? Which leads us to turntables! No cheapo under-\$1,000 units here, even though some such units have received good reviews. The “budget” choice is \$1,150; the better one—where the reviewer says it “redefined what is possible in the playback of vinyl sources” runs \$5,200 to \$10,800. Ah, but if redefining what’s possible isn’t good enough, you go for “the cat’s pajamas”—the Clearaudio Statement, a mere \$150,000. (It *literally* weighs half a ton and appears to be very fussy to use, but it’s quite a sculpture.)

Apparently, there are no worthy budget choices for phono stages or integrated amplifiers: The two options are, respectively, \$1,500 in each case and a little more: \$19,250 for a phono stage and a mere \$6,500 for an integrated amp. Of course, *real* high-end folks don’t buy integrated amps (or \$1,299 receivers that include CD and DVD playback)—they buy separate preamps and amplifiers, probably monoblocks (one amp per channel). For preamps, the three options run \$1,800, \$4,000, and a piddling \$25,000—and the amps are a little surprising, given a

later review. To wit, for vacuum tube lovers, you can go from \$4,500 per channel (the “budget” option) to \$49,000 per channel, with a middle choice of \$17,000 per channel. If you prefer solid-state, you can pay \$2,699 or \$16,500.

As already noted, budget speakers will run you \$1,500 (or \$2,000 for floor-standing PSB Imagine Ts). But this time there are *several* more choices: \$3,695 Gershman Sonograms as mid-priced winners, \$1,200 Quad ESL-2905 for the upper-end and \$25,000 Magico V3 as cost-no-object. (But there’s also the \$1,995 MartinLogan The Source as one of two “budget components of the year.”)

But wait! There’s more! Two other speakers finish in a tie for “overall product of the year,” and they make the “cost no object” speakers seem like bargains. Your choices: the MBL 101 X-Treme at \$199,000 a pair or the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Series 2 at \$148,000.

The MBL 101 X-Treme is something else, as is made clear in a drooling ten-page review that’s half photographs and headlined “Zowie!” Each of the two channels consists of *two* huge enclosures, one of which has MBL’s peculiar-looking speakers, the other six 12” subwoofers. Total weight for the speakers: Just under two tons. As the review makes clear, if you want to get the most out of these speakers, you’ll spend a little more: \$200,000 worth of amplifiers (also from MBL), plus who knows what for cables, preamps and the like.

As I’ve noted elsewhere, I avoid claims regarding loudspeakers—given the nature of the beast, suggesting a 10:1 ratio is just silly. Can you justify an 8:1 ratio between the “cost no object” speakers of the year and these two-ton speakers? Well, nobody reading this eJournal is likely to be kicking in half a megabuck for speakers, so it may be a moot question.

Buyer’s guide ‘09

This one—a special issue of *The Absolute Sound*—was in some ways even more interesting. The cover says “the best products at every price,” and the issue is a combination of advice, alternative approaches to \$5,000 systems, and “the best” in various categories. Let’s look at some of those, noting the cheapest and most expensive “the best” in each category:

- **Desktop speakers:** \$199 for Acoustic Energy Aego M to \$1,590 for Ferguson-Hill FH007/FH008.
- **iPod speaker systems:** \$299 for Sierra Sound iN Studio 5.0 to \$2,999 for the Meridian F80, “the world’s coolest table radio.”

- **Earbuds:** \$50 for Skullcandy Titan to \$549 for Shure E5c.
- **Earphones:** \$69 for Grado SR60 to \$995 for Grado GS1000.
- **Stand-mounted speakers:** \$279 for PSB Alpha B1 to \$6,600 for ATC SCM20-2.
- **Floor-standing speakers:** \$800 for PSB T45 to \$16,900 for Vandersteen Model 5A
- **Planar speakers:** \$550 for Magnapan MMG to \$16,800 for Sound Lab M-1a
- **Subwoofers:** \$549 for PSB SubSeries S1 to \$5,400 for Wilson Benesch Torus Infrasonic Generator.
- **Turntables with arms and cartridges:** \$399 for Rega P1 to \$10,800 for Basis 2200 Signature.
- **Separate tonearms:** \$495 for Rega RB301 to \$1,899 for SME 309.
- **Cartridges:** \$89 for Shure M97xE to \$1,500 for Transfiguration Axia.
- **Phonostages:** \$499 for Simaudio Moon LP3 to \$4,000 for Aesthetix Rhea.
- **CD players:** \$299 for NAD C525BEE to \$2,695 for Bryston BCD-1.
- **CD and High-res (SACD etc.) players:** \$169 for Oppo Digital DV-980H to \$6,000 for Esoteric X-05. (Why is the cheapest “best” CD/SACD player \$130 less than the cheapest “best” CD-only player? Good question)
- **Integrated amps:** \$499 for Cambridge Azur 540A v2 to \$4,835 for Plinius 9200.
- **Preamps:** \$599 for NAD C162 to \$5,195 for Edge G2.
- **Power amps:** \$699 for NAD C272 to \$11,000 for Mark Levinson No. 433.
- **Speaker cables:** \$270 for Kimber Kable 8TC to \$4,600 for Synergistic Research Tesla Apex.

Yes, those are wide ranges. It looks as though you could assemble an excellent CD playback system for just under \$950 (not including cables)—or put one together for \$38,000.

But that’s not the story here. The story is *what’s missing*—all those megabuck items I’d been seeing in this magazine and its competitor. So I keep on reading, after lists of great LPs and CDs, and way in the back of the issue I see a little section: “Exotica.” Here they talk about “pride of ownership” and being hand-made. And here is where you get the *real* high end—speakers from \$22,000 to \$200,000; turntables from \$15,000 to \$150,000 (but for \$15,000 you don’t get a tonearm); tonearms from \$3,800 to \$10,650; cartridges from \$4,500 to \$8,000; phonostages from \$6,000 to

\$19,250; disc players from \$6,950 to \$65,000; digital separates from \$18,000 to \$67,000; integrated amps from \$6,500 to \$14,500; preamps from \$10,000 to \$25,000; amps from \$15,000 to \$86,000; speaker cables from \$11,000 (but that’s only 1.5 meters, not the usual eight feet) to \$25,000 (yes, that’s for one eight-foot pair of cables). In other words, here is where you assemble that CD playback system for \$46,000 (including speaker cables) to \$485,000 or more. But the magazine *calls* these exotica—at which point, the sky probably *should* be the limit.

The Gear *Everybody* Needs

The article title (in the November 2008 *PC World*) is “8 best buys for essential gear.” Not optional, not desirable, but *essential*. The title above appears in the subheading below that. A little further along, we learn that, if you’re traveling, “clean socks are nice, but the laptop is indispensable.” Not only are a laptop, a camera, a desktop and a cell phone all indispensable, but “it’s always the right time to upgrade your gear.”

Here’s what you *must have*—remember, you need all eight. (Why the number? The November issue is a “special list issue,” an especially lazy way to produce a magazine. But that’s another essay...)

- An all-purpose laptop; they recommend the \$1,299 Micro Express JFL9226.
- A power desktop: the \$2,000 Dell XPS 630.
- Even though they admit that a good multifunction printer gives you better all-around functionality, they tell you to buy a color laser: the \$400 Brother HL-4040CN.
- A cell phone: T-Mobile’s \$200 Blackberry Pearl 8120 (that’s \$200 with a two-year contract).
- Camera: Canon’s \$150 PowerShot A590 IS.
- External hard drive: SimpleTech Duo Pro Drive, no price given in the article. On the web, it shows up as \$280—but it’s also a one-terabyte drive.
- Monitor, and here 22" “feels right”: HP’s \$350 w2207h
- HDTV—and, oddly, they recommend a 42" unit, a cheap one, Vizio’s \$1,100 VO42L. I guess after you’ve spent \$4,700 for the rest of these essentials, you can’t come up with \$2,000 to \$3,000 for a first-rate big screen.

Editors’ Choices and Group Reviews

The general take on the original Apple iPhone was that it was a brilliant *product*—but a mediocre phone. (Thus, the iTouch, essentially an iPhone without the

phone part, was a great introduction.) By most accounts, the iPhone 3G is actually a good phone. The September 2008 *PC Magazine* gives an Editors' Choice to the iPhone 3G for improved phone quality and better internet speeds, along with bona fide GPS support. Unfortunately, 3G is a battery killer—and, in a refrain that should be familiar to many Apple “iWhatever” owners—the earbuds are still lousy. (But good replacement earbuds and other earpieces are cheap.)

The October 2008 *PC* gives Spyware Doctor with Antivirus 6 an Editors' Choice and it's reasonably priced (\$40 for a three-computer license)—but this feels like an odd category, somewhere between a specialized tool and a full protection suite. The November 2008 issue says the best security suite is Norton Internet Security 2009 (\$70 for a three-PC license)—and this version apparently has very little impact on computer performance, the issue that drove some of us away from Norton earlier. The most resounding endorsement: The reviewer, Neil Rubenking, closes by saying “I'll be installing it on my own systems.” I don't think I've ever seen that before.

In a not particularly surprising case, Dragon Naturally Speaking 10 Professional gets an Editors' Choice as speech-to-text software in the November 2008 *PC Magazine*. You can use Vista itself for speech-to-text, and Vista's interface is apparently better, but Dragon “beats Vista in accuracy, speed and customization options.” What's new here: A plausible built-in competitor to a \$350 program.

This one, I think, really is good news if you're in the market for a digital SLR. The November 2008 *PC Magazine* gives Editors' Choice honors to an \$800 camera, the Canon EOS Digital Rebel XSi. It's a 12MP camera with great image quality and includes image stabilization. \$800 buys not only the body but also an 18mm to 55mm lens (for another \$200 you get a 55mm to 250mm lens).

A very brief omnibus review on “hottest new PCs” includes several Editors' Choices. The \$449 Lenovo IdeaCentre K210 gets the nod among value desktops, the \$843 HP Pavilion Elite m9400t among mainstream desktops and the **\$6,999** Velocity Micro Raptor Signature Edition for gamers. (You want to play? You got to pay.) Among desktop replacement notebooks, HP's \$2,000 HDX 18 (with an 18.4” screen) gets the award, while the MSI Wind (see above) and Sony's \$2,500 VAIO VGN-SZ791N both get ultraportable awards—and the \$1,200 Dell Studio 15 and \$980 Acer Aspire 6920G-6071 are both award-winning mainstream laptops.

If you plan to modify digital photos but want to do it online, the group review in the October 2008 *PC World* may be interesting. None of these offers the range of tools you'll get in Photoshop Elements or Paint Shop Pro, but they're \$80 cheaper (as in free)—even if some of them won't even let you print pictures. Best Buy in the review goes to Picnik...although you'll need to pay \$25 a year for some features.

The January 2009 *PC World* has another roundup of inkjet multifunction printers—and Canon Pixma continues to rule the roost, with the top three of the “top 5” short list. Best Buy is the \$180 Canon Pixma MX700—but the second-choice MX7600 (\$400), while more than twice as expensive, offers superior (rather than Very Good) graphics and text. Third place is what appears to be the newer version of my own MFP, namely the Canon Pixma MP620, \$150 (I have the 610)—with superior text but only good graphics. (The 620 adds wifi and Ethernet, but lacks the 610's duplexer—which is convenient but so slow that manual duplexing makes sense for anything longer than 4-5 pages.)

Trends & Quick Takes Every Hundred Years

Setting the Wayback Machine (popcult reference, not Internet Archive) to November 6, 2007, we see “The social graft” on Nicholas Carr's *Rough type* (www.rough-type.com). The post is based on Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and his announcement of big advertising initiatives, but that's not the heart of this discussion.

Here's the key quotation (taken from Erick Schonfeld's *TechCrunch* post on the presentation—there's a layer of indirection here):

Once every hundred years media changes. The last hundred years have been defined by the mass media. The way to advertise was to get into the mass media and push out your content. That was the last hundred years. In the next hundred years information won't be just pushed out to people, it will be shared among the millions of connections people have. Advertising will change. You will need to get into these connections.

And some of Carr's commentary:

And it's true. Look back over the last millennium or two, and you'll see that every century, like clockwork, there's been a big change in media. Cave painting lasted a hundred years, and then there was smoke signaling, which also lasted a hundred years, and of course there was the hundred years of yodeling, and then there was the printing press, which was invented almost precisely 100 years ago, and so forth

and so on up to the present day—the day that Facebook picked up the 100-year torch and ran with it.

If Schonfeld's notes are trustworthy, Zuckerberg's making a broader claim: "mass media" was a century old in 2007. That's an odd claim. Either it's way too late (magazines and newspapers came a *lot* earlier) or it's too early (network radio came considerably later, to say nothing of network TV). Mostly, it's way too silly. Then comes the part that gets me—and Zuckerberg's neither the first nor the last to make this connection:

I like the way that Zuckerberg considers "media" and "advertising" to be synonymous. It cuts through the bullshit. It *simplifies*. Get over your MSM hangups, granddads. Editorial is advertorial. The medium is the message from our sponsor.

I don't believe I've seen a quarter go by in which someone didn't pontificate on the basis of (a) **all** media (not just mass) being, essentially, advertising surrounded by content or (b) all media being primarily paid for by advertising. My usual response is to cite sound recordings, DVDs, books and suggest that excluding them is an awfully narrow definition of "media."

Carr's on a roll here, though:

Marketing is conversational, says Zuckerberg, and advertising is social. There is no intimacy that is not a branding opportunity, no friendship that can't be monetized, no kiss that doesn't carry an exchange of value. The cluetrain has reached its last stop, its terminus, the end of the line. From the Facebook press release: "Facebook's ad system serves Social Ads that combine social actions from your friends—such as a purchase of a product or review of a restaurant—with an advertiser's message." The social graph, it turns out, is a platform for social graft.

He quotes a Coca-Cola sponsorship encouraging people to add "Sprite Sips" to their pages. Unclear why you'd want to do that, but much of Facebook is a little unclear to me. (Between the time I wrote that sentence and the time I'm editing it, I joined Facebook. The sentence still stands.) Carr closes:

Facebook, which distinguished itself by being the anti-MySpace, is now determined to out-MySpace MySpace. It's a nifty system: First you get your users to entrust their personal data to you, and then you not only sell that data to advertisers but you get the users to be the vector for the ads. And what do the users get in return? An animated Sprite Sips character to interact with.

Comments are amusing, as usual. One, defending Zuckerberg, cites "the unwillingness of media consumers to pay for media," which explains why no DVDs or books were sold last year (and why nobody pays for cable TV).

The specific technology involved here is Facebook's Beacon, a tracking system that not only tracks your activities within Facebook but also on other websites. It's been controversial, to say the least, but that's another story other people are writing. I just continue to be flabbergasted by the number of knowledgeable people who seem to think all media are ad-centered and ad-supported.

The Death of Lists (& Other Nonsense)

Remember email lists (typically called Listservs™, but that's L-Soft's trademark)? Once upon a time, they were widely used to communicate ideas among related groups of people—but, you know, that was *so* twentieth century.

Or not. Abigail Goben, the Hedgehog Librarian, wrote "Are email lists phasing out? Responding to KS" on November 7, 2007 (hedgehoglibrarian.blogspot.com). She's responding to an odd post on another blog saying "I'm getting the distinct impression that many newer librarians don't care for email discussion lists." The comment stream on that post is interesting, with some (younger?) librarians wanting email lists to die, others noting just how widely they're being used and so on.

Goben notes that she hasn't seen less traffic on the lists she subscribes to—and she subscribes to what I regard as a typical number (six plus some low-traffic organizational lists). She's not ready to discount lists in favor of—what? Twitter? blogs? online fora?

For me, it's education well beyond the classroom. I'm still shy of thirty and right now—some of these voices are like having an extra set of mentors. I get to see the opinions not only of the people doing library service in a public library, but also in highly specialized libraries. I get to follow along on discussions of where our future insofar as new catalogs are going (although a lot of it is right over my head...which annoys me some days). I get to have an opinion right up there with the movers and shakers.

There's more sensible commentary in this post.

Personally, I don't see myself leaving many of the lists soon. Certainly topics are repeated and occasionally beaten to death or point of ulcer. Of course there will be the one person who takes any post I make the wrong way and proceeds to completely spoil my afternoon (at least until I can find chocolate) but for me, it's a great way to find a discussion between people who are doing this stuff daily. Who aren't even professional writers. These are places I'm less hesitant to ask questions. And it's easier to watch from the sidelines than many of our other social networking tools, I think, where joining may restrict us to only those we know and can "friend."

I've used email lists for a very long time, but of course I'm not a younger librarian. It seems fairly clear that some lists still reach many more people than most blogs and *certainly* allow a more level playing field for conversation than any blog. So far, I haven't found many online forums that seem to do much for me. Twitter as a list replacement? Please. (As others have noted, Gmail's clustering methodology makes it easy to go through a set of related list posts as long as nobody changes the subject heading.)

Lists must die?

What I found oddest about some of the comments on the other post, and similar comments I've seen elsewhere, is people saying email lists *should* die. I always wonder why someone would be so emphatic about something that, in most cases, is entirely voluntary.

There are several genres of literature that have never appealed to me. Somehow, I've never seen a reason to wish that these genres would go away. Their existence doesn't bother me (and may help keep some publishers going).

I don't use Twitter at the moment. I've never seen much reason to say "Twitter must die!" After all, if I'm not using it, *why do I care* who is?

So why do some people feel the need to wish death on lists—even while other people clearly find them useful? The only answer I can come up with is that these people don't like lists, but also don't want to miss out on useful information. "Lists should die" seems to equate to "You should all be required to use *my preferred method* of communication." At which point, the natural response is "Who died and made you Supreme Ruler?"

Don't like blogs? Fine. Don't look at them—and don't bitch about missing good stuff on blogs. The same for lists, or wikis, or online fora, or Facebook, or Twitter, or chat rooms or FriendFeed. (If I hadn't compromised on HTML, I'd say "Don't like PDF? Fine, but don't bitch about missing good stuff in *Cites & Insights*.") The world does not owe you universal use of *your* preferred communication technique. Nobody can keep up with everything (particularly not if they expect to *do* anything). We make choices and live with the consequences. If library people *in general* stop using lists, lists will disappear. I wouldn't bet on that happening any time soon, although *some* lists will certainly shrivel.

It's interesting to see how different people view lists—and the decision to leave a list. For lisleck at *Biblioblather* (biblioblather.blogspot.com), it's a very personal decision after you've been on a list for a long

time. As noted in "Unsubscribe web4lib" (posted July 13, 2008), lisleck joined the list a long time ago—1995 or 1996.

The last time I was prime audience was when I was working on the digital collections at MFPOW around 1997-2001. I learned a lot from w4l then. The discussions were always interesting, and some of the best minds on the many related topics were there. They still are. In the last two years as a branch librarian, I'd let them pile up in my gmail. I'd drop in on threads when I saw familiar names, or really hot topics, or things that seemed really cogent for a branch librarian. That got less and less. I was far removed from that world...

For perfectly appropriate reasons, lisleck is pulling back on many "virtual" communities "to concentrate on the people who are right in front of me." Unsubscribing seems clearly the right thing to do in this case. But the extent to which active participants become an extended family, even on a "dying" medium, is clear:

All these years, I have loved web4lib, in that most abstract version of agape. I have not been an active participant ever, but I have followed countless links and arguments. Many of them taught me, or gave me food for thought, and I am grateful. Some gave me good laughs, or good sig files. Some exasperated or made me mad. But that's why it is such a human endeavor, and I have to be thankful for the chance to participate.... It is always wonderful to be part of something wondrous, something put together by the free will and labor of a group of people who want to share ideas. So farewell Roy, Thomas, Dan, Karen, Karen, Blake, Gerry, Walt, and all the countless other names that have graced all my various in boxes over the years. This may seem like navel-gazing, or inexplicable nostalgia, but I had to note my transition.

I don't consider myself an active web4lib participant, but I've been there almost since the beginning and do speak up from time to time...and I understand what lisleck is saying.

Listservs™ and students

Goben posted this on November 12, 2007. (She gets full credit for *not* using the trademarked term the first time around.) It's only related to the extent that, well, if Kids These Days didn't use lists the issue really wouldn't arise. An incident happened on a specialty library list:

Within the span of a couple of days, two library students posted—verbatim—the same assignment and asked for help. The assignment was about current resources being used by said specialty librarians, what they subscribe to, what kinds of issues they are fac-

ing, and other general questions. I've seen student requests that were basic details about the listserv that should have come up during the most rudimentary of search engine search too. This was slightly more specific than that but not much.

A little later, one student posted a thank you—and a discussion got started on how librarians should deal with “cold calls” like this. Most people felt that if people on the list had the time and had the information, they could and should provide it.

Overall a firm opinion was not really declared—there were a few “just ignore it if you don't have time” and a few “but we're here to help” although I think the majority of the responses I saw fell in the middle in a category of—please student, identify yourself, ask if you could interview a few of us off list for a class assignment, and go from there. I think it sounds fair.

There's the parental aspect: At what point is helping really doing the assignment? And, these being library students and a library list, there's a twist:

The final amusing touch to all of this came this evening. Someone tracked down the professor and said professor has already been speaking to these students because this was apparently not how the professor intended for them to go about this. His rather terse email was almost immediately followed by a lengthy explanation from the student with the more memorable name.

I suspect almost every open list has situations like this. I've seen posts that really do seem like someone asking the rest of us to do their research for them—and rarely have to wonder about the ethics because I'm rarely the target audience. My own instinct is to provide a response if I have one (and it's not an enormous amount of work), and I suspect that's not only the instinct of most librarians but an appropriate one. And I think the “middle ground” noted above makes a lot of sense.

Everything else is dead

Jumping forward a year (and, oh look, lists are still very much alive), Daniel Cornwall posted “Death watches worth reading” on November 23, 2008 at *Alaskan librarian*. It's mostly a summary link to Shel Holtz' “Death watch” on a *shel of my former self* (blog.holtz.com). Apparently, Dave Winer suggested “online advertising is dead,” which will come as a fatal shock to Google. Quoting Holtz:

I've caught no wind of Google scrambling to identify a new business model. That is, no doubt, because online advertising isn't dead. It is, however, just one of the many targets of such proclamations, many of which crop up every so often when somebody revisits

the meme. According to the oh-so-prescient pundits among us...

Holtz missed “Libraries are dead” (Cornwall says “replaced by the internet,” but some would say “because everybody just buys all the books they want” or “because books are dead”), but here's his list—noting that he has links to pundits stating each “death” (except for “Blogs are dead,” and I think *Wired* nailed that one):

- PR is dead (killed by social media)
- Blogs are dead (replaced by Twitter and other channels)
- Press releases are dead (replaced by blogs—but wait, aren't blogs dead?)
- Journalism is dead (replaced by user-generated content)
- Encyclopedias are dead (replaced by Wikipedia)
- Newspapers are dead (replaced by citizen journalism and, um, online newspapers)
- Print is dead (people will page through the paintings of Michelangelo on their laptops instead of high-quality coffee table books)
- Terrestrial radio is dead (whew! I won't have to listen to any more Raiders debacles in my car)
- Anything not digital is dead (replaced by, well, everything digital)
- Microsoft Office is dead (everyone's switching to SaaS and OpenOffice)

A few of the links lead to supposedly intelligent commentary (well, you get Jeff Jarvis on print being dead, so “supposedly” is a relative term). Some are typical “I don't do X, therefore nobody does X” universalist crap. Some are leavings of another sort.

Holtz' immediate take:

Of course, none of these things are dead, or even dying. Some are scaling back as alternatives enter the marketplace. Some are struggling to identify a new business model. But none of these will have completely vanished by 2012, or even by 2018. Or 2100.

Well...blogs may have disappeared by 2100, replaced by something with similar features but a different name. Other than that, I think I'm with Holtz on this one. (Big surprise, right?)

The first comment nails it: “‘death’ is nearly as magnetic as ‘free’ in a headline...Good copy, but only a fool would believe that we will give up on something that works.”

The first in the “Death Watch Case File” series appeared November 26, 2008: “Tangible Media.” It works from a pundit's claim that by January 2014 in the US “almost all forms of tangible media will either

be in sharp decline or completely extinct,” specifically listing books, magazines, newspapers and others.

Holtz doesn't buy the notion that print books will die in the next six years—and Holtz has a Kindle and likes it a lot, but uses it primarily when traveling.

But there's more to printed books. I can make notes in the margin. I can put it on a shelf and refer to it (and my margin notes) later. If the book has graphics, they are sharp and clear. Artwork—such as Gilbert Stuart's oil painting of John Adams appearing in a biography of America's second president—are reproduced with brilliant four-color process printing that simply cannot be duplicated with the limited palette of colors built into web browser technology.

In fact, coffee table books featuring photography and artwork still display the images with far better fidelity than you can get on the Web.

So at least these forms of books will survive because they are better at what they do than their digital counterparts. But print is also finding new life as a channel for creative expression through print-on-demand (POD) services like Blurb and Lulu... According to a friend who works there, POD's popularity is largely attributable to the ease with which people can channel their creativity into print without incurring the costs that once kept it off limits...

As to the pundit's claim on the death of magazines, it's a typical "since I don't" case: The pundit hasn't bought a magazine in a couple of years, therefore magazines are dead... Holtz notes that many popular magazines continue to grow in circulation. "The secret here is knowing your audience, producing compelling content, and creating a total package between the front and back covers that offers a self-contained experience you just can't get on the Web."

Apparently, this pundit really does mean *all* tangible media will be going digital—and Holtz notes that this would include artwork, billboards, direct mail, brochures... "[T]he point should be clear. The notion that tangible media will be gone by 2014—or even 2054—is ridiculous."

Holtz' series may be worth watching.

Shuffling Off to Online

It's a sad story, but one I should have seen coming. The January 2009 *PC Magazine* was the final issue. *PC* says it's the final *print* issue, marking a "monumental transition" to purely digital publication. "[T]his is not the end, but the beginning of something exciting and new." For me, it feels like the end—and a sad end it is.

The magazine grew slimmer over the years, then dropped from 22 issues a year to a monthly schedule. It

started offering fewer and fewer words, more and bigger pictures, and for a while was omitting technical summaries for products being reviewed. Want to know more? The constant drumbeat: **Go to PC's website**. Which is now all that's left. (I canceled my subscription, which had an autorenew feature; otherwise, I'm sure they'd keep charging me for the "digital magazine.")

The December 2008 issue was, as usual for December, the annual Technical Excellence awards. That's usually something to look forward to: A set of interesting essays on products and ideas that really are interesting, even if they're not always as wonderful as *PC* suggests.

This year? The article is *two pages long*, and half of the first page is that big Technical Excellence medal. You get a simple listing of fourteen products, with pictures of six—and about half a page of copy. (The bottom third of the second page is "Technology's top unsolved cybercrimes.") The great award essay of the year is a pathetic little feature with less than a full page of copy. I found nothing else in the issue worth commenting on—also pathetic, when I used to find three to ten items in each issue.

But surely for the *final* print edition, they did a big, blockbuster issue, right?

Wrong. It's a "special Windows report" featuring hands-on experience with Windows 7. There's the usual degree of columnist nonsense (Lance Ulanoff assumes anybody who likes Windows Vista "obviously" has SP1, John Dvorak continues to be John Dvorak).

The reality of that final print issue comes on page 84, where the required annual USPS ownership and circulation statement appears (in larger form than most magazines use). Remembering that *PC* used to have *way* more than a million paid circulation, we see that the average paid distribution for the last year was 670,925 copies—and for the most recent issue, it's down to 595,230 copies, which means *PC* can't even guarantee a 600,000-copy base rate for advertising.

It was a good run while it lasted, or at least the first 25 years were pretty solid. I believe I read every issue of *PC Magazine* since its inception. At one point, that could take a week of evenings. The last year or so, a good 90-minute slot was enough. I'll miss it. I think it's a shame it went out with such a whimper.

The HD Watch

When I was at PALINET08, staying in Sheraton University City in Philadelphia, I finally watched network TV in high-definition on what I suspect was a relatively inexpensive LCD widescreen (LG brand). Because

the TV got digital input on network channels, the picture was presented properly (unlike an earlier dismal experience). I was watching from fairly close up because of the room's layout. And I was impressed. Some day soon...

Meanwhile, more notes along the way:

- Name-brand Blu-ray player prices are now at or below \$299 as a starting point, with off-brand units considerably lower. The day after Thanksgiving did, predictably, see brief \$150 prices. The cost of a Blu-ray player for someone buying a Sony or similar name-brand big-screen TV these days is frequently \$0, since chains are bundling the players with the TVs for no extra cost.
- If you care, most of those off-brand players costing less than \$250 (e.g., Magnavox, Insighnia, Sylvania, Emerson) are made by Funai.
- The Criterion Collection, makers of the definitive laserdisc releases and DVDs, is starting to release Blu-ray discs—and Neil Young fans will be able to get all of his stuff on Blu-ray, with Reprise releasing the first ten discs (1963-1972) this fall. Neil Young always hated CD as having inadequate sound quality, and he's now releasing a lot of stuff he held back. (Blu-ray potentially offers much better sound quality than either regular DVD or CD.)
- Some studios are now releasing Blu-ray discs with one of two extras: Either a plain DVD copy on an extra disc or, interestingly enough, a "digital copy" you can legally copy to your iPod or other portable video player. To me, that represents a refreshing and unusual spurt of initiative and flexibility among studios.
- For a little while, it looked as though Toshiba was trying to challenge Blu-ray with its claim that the XD-E500 upscaling DVD player, \$150, gives you a picture almost as good as real high-def thanks to Toshiba's new XDE ("Extended Detail Enhancement") technology. Joshua Zyber's "Zyberspace" column in the December 2008 *Home Theater* considers the claim—and the player. He found "there was absolutely no mistaking the upconverted SD picture for real high definition. It was a night-and-day difference... In terms of quality, XDE seems to be more hype than substance at this point." The only possible exception is Pixar animated movies—but, as he says, "how difficult is it to make a Pixar disc look good?" The player doesn't (*can't*) actually generate extended detail, and the

processing, while making the picture apparently crisper, also results in visible artifacts ("edge ringing"). It's not a great player in other respects. Unlike the free (or \$20) DVD player we're using at the moment, the player won't pick up where you left off if you shut it off in the middle of a disc. It insists on stretching TV and other non-widescreen pictures if you're watching on a widescreen TV. And if you turn off XDE to avoid the ringing, you're left with a "very soft picture, even for standard def."

- That same December 2008 *Home Theater* includes reviews of three Blu-ray players at "the magic price point," which is to say under \$500—or under \$300. Two Panasonic players, the \$299 DMP-BD35 and \$399 DMP-BD55, get the magazine's "top pick" award for performance and feature set. What's the difference? The \$399 unit will decode surround sound and export up to 7.1 analog channels; the cheaper one will only export surround as a digital stream for your receiver to decode.

Quicker Takes

Think online video's overtaking DVD purchase and rental? Not so fast. As reported in *Media Life* on September 18, 2008, based on NPD Group's "Entertainment Trends in America" study, a mere **0.5 percent** of movie and video budgets is being spent on renting or buying movies or TV shows online. Where's the money going? 41% to DVD **movie** purchases; 29% to DVD rentals (including Netflix); 18% to movie tickets; 11% to purchases of TV on DVD.

- The USPS has a test service I'd love to see expanded: Special envelopes you can use to pack and return your old MP3 player or printer cartridge. You pay nothing and a recycler with a "zero waste to landfill" policy handles the stuff.
- Sascha Segan offers a frank and disturbing column in the October 2008 *PC Magazine*: "Product reviews: the problem." He notes that his review of the iPhone 3G "was wrong." As were others—and nobody yet knows just how wrong. Why? Quality control. The unit *he* got was great—but apparently lots of people are getting iPhones that have "freaky-deaky reception problems on 3G networks." Apple says there's no problem, but a support board has more than 600 messages on the topic. Segan mentions other examples of products that were well reviewed but had clear quality-control issues.

- Always interesting to see an “expert” respond to a question by answering some other question entirely. A reader asked a *PC World* expert about printing a photo onto a label sticker for a CD—“is that possible, and do I need to buy a special program?” The right answers: Absolutely, if you buy the right labels—and the software will probably be downloadable if you don’t have it already. But The Expert wasn’t having any of that. She nattered on about buying a “dedicated inkjet labeling system” or an inkjet printer that will print directly to expensive printable CD-Rs. “The printed output looks far more professional and attractive than a glued-on printed label would look; and the direct-printing approach is more reliable, too.” OK, lady, we know your prejudices (the second half of the statement is Common Wisdom that may or may not be true; the first is simply nonsense, as my dozens of CD-R labels with photos will demonstrate)—but couldn’t you also *answer the question*?
- Sometimes, the anti-Vista bias among PC journalists gets tiresome. The October 2008 *PC World* has an article on specs that matter and those that don’t, and the article *might* be interesting—if it didn’t have these two statements in graphical callouts in the first two pages: “Beware of ads that fail to identify the included GPU (you shouldn’t try to run Vista without a good one)” and “Considering how power-hungry Vista is, having a discrete GPU for the laptop is almost mandatory.” This is just plain nonsense, as my wife and I—both happily running Windows Vista Home Premium on budget notebooks with no separate graphics processor—can attest. Then on the next page, talking about TVs, a note on refresh rate says “Plasma sets don’t list refresh rates because they can handle fast-paced content.” While that may be true, it’s a wildly misleading statement. By that time, I’d pretty much given up on the article. (Later in that same issue, a “here’s how” piece talks about being “stuck with” Vista and how you can make it look like XP...with nary a nod to the possibility that you might find Vista preferable.) For that matter, we have Stephen Manes’ use of the word “dictatorial” for Office 2007’s ribbon mechanism...
- It’s frequently fun to look at survey results, reverse the cited percentages and see what new message we may get from that. Take a Pew In-

ternet & American Life report on daily internet activities. The touted results: 49% of all internet users use search engines daily—and 60% use email. But consider the flip side: That means that *more than half* of internet users *don’t* use search engines on any given day—not even as a shortcut to the sites they want. And 40% don’t check email on a given day. Hmm.

- So you say you have an HDTV, but also an upscaling DVD player and maybe even a receiver with video scaling capabilities? Al Griffith answers a reader’s question in the December 2008 *Sound & Vision*, suggesting a path to decide *which* upscaler of the two or three you have available you should use. Assuming you have a full HDTV (1080p), first set your DVD player *and* your receiver (if you use one in the middle) to output 1080p; look carefully at some tough DVD scenes (not animated: those are too easy). Then set the player to output 480i and view the same scenes. Finally, set the receiver to 480i and view the same scenes. (If you don’t use a receiver or “prepro” for video processing, there’s no “finally” step.) If the best-quality deinterlacer/upscaler is in your TV, you’ll get the best picture with the last test; conversely, if things look best with the DVD player set to do the upscaling, then it has better upscaling circuitry than the TV. Griffin says “it’s almost a sure bet that not all the components in your system [upscale and deinterlace] at the same quality level.”

My Back Pages Listening Continuously?

Yes, I know it’s too easy to poke a little fun at the pretensions of high-end audio, particularly when they might be right. But the comments of Jeff Rowland Design on its 312 power amplifier in the December 2008 *Absolute Sound* were unusually interesting.

First, like some speakers, these amplifiers need time to break in—to sound their best. How much time? “Several months.” It’s worse than that: “Some residual magnetization and electric fields may slowly build up during long overnight idle time, only to ebb gradually once more to a vanishing point during playback.” What it boils down to: Even if you keep the amplifier on all the time (and, since there’s unlimited electricity and other natural resources, why not?), you’ll need “just a couple of hours of *playing*

music” to have the amplifier “blossom once more into characteristic magnificence.” That’s new for me: A playback device that has to be listened to for a couple of hours before you can fully enjoy it!

Moving Parts Dead: Film at 11

Years ago, I tried *Fast Company* for a while and dropped it because it seemed cultish and strange. I picked it up again and it’s been much better...but “Have a Solid Holiday” in the December 2008/January 2009 issue is peculiar. The tagline: “The death of moving parts means your stocking will be stuffed with smaller, faster, stronger—and quieter—gadgets.”

A few years from now? Nope. The article begins:

On Christmas morning, or soon thereafter, your laptop will go silent. So will your family’s video camera. The quiet will spread worldwide. In Delhi, the huge data centers that store your customers’ information will fall into an electronic hush. Even your TiVo will go mute. There will be no more flywheels. No more fans. No more hard-drive platters spinning for data, gorging on electricity, and clattering to an apocalyptic stop whenever the power goes out. Because moving parts are dead. The new state of our union will be: solid.

On Christmas morning 2008. Triumphalism, much? The suggestion that we all buy brand-new TiVos and laptops and camcorders every year? There’s more—the suggestion that solid-state drives use “almost zero” electricity and require “almost zero” time to access data, unlike those poky hard disks.

The article includes a fair number of interesting current products—and I don’t doubt that solid-state drives will continue to become more important. I have to say, it’s now almost a month after Christmas 2008 and my laptop still has a hard disk and a fan—and most new netbook models (and virtually all new notebooks) have hard disks. The “seismic shift” will take a few years.

“You’re Not Really an Audiophile...

...if you don’t own a turntable.” That’s a direct quote, word for word, from the holiday gift guide in the December 2008 *Home Theater*. Well, now that *that’s* settled... After all, you’re not really a modern audio “journalist” if you don’t say foolish things.

10 Totally Overrated Products

As one of the many silly lists in the silly “Special List Issue,” November 2008’s *PC World*, there’s this one—“tech items that don’t live up to their hype” together with ten “underrated” options. For example:

- The iPhone 3G’s touch interface is “overrated”; instead you should get the T-Mobile Sidekick 2008 with a good keyboard.
- The Wii is “overrated” and the PlayStation Portable is underrated. Apparently, the problem with the Wii is not enough games (so much for those of you who love the Wii!).
- “Mini-notebooks” (netbooks?) are overrated, full-fledged notebooks are underrated. The discussion seems to entirely miss the point of a netbook, but maybe that is the point.
- The fourth one is mostly bad timing: iTunes downloads are overrated because of DRM, while Pandora and Slacker streaming is better. Maybe—but iTunes DRM is pretty much kaput, and some of us really do want to choose our own tunes, not rely on streaming. (As with the Wii/PSP and netbook/notebook comparison, the author really seems to be saying “oranges are better than apples,” since this is the third comparison between very different beasts.)
- Google Apps is overrated and OpenOffice is underrated—but, again, comparing cloud applications and desktop applications is an apples-and-oranges comparison.

I have to say I agree with the last two:

- Windows XP is overrated and Vista is underrated.
- Streaming video is overrated and Blu-ray Disc is underrated.

Masthead

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