

Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

Libraries • Policy • Technology • Media

Sponsored by YBP Library Services

Volume 9, Number 5: April 2009

ISSN 1534-0937

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Making it Work Perspective Thinking about Blogging: 1

Where would we be without metamedia—newspaper stories about problems with newspapers, movies about movie-making, TV shows about TV shows (consider *30 Rock*), an endless array of websites devoted to building better websites and, of course, metablogging: Blogging about blogging.

This essay isn't metablogging but it's primarily based on metablogging, taking some of the more interesting posts about aspects of blogging I've seen over the past months. Most of the posts are from liblogs but some are from elsewhere—and most of them aren't specifically about liblogs or libraries.

Themes and Attention

I see several themes in this mass of metablogging. Some of those themes make this a followup to the February 2009 "Shiny toys or useful tools?":

- Do comments make a blog a blog—and can you deal with the realities of comments (and lack thereof)? Have conversations moved elsewhere?
- Are blogs here to stay? Is the "blogosphere" imploding? If blogging is a maturing medium, how does that affect individual bloggers?
- Why do we blog?
- How should we blog—and what about the auxiliary tools?
- Are blogs plausible replacements for journals?

While there could be a section for each of those themes, it's not that simple—the threads of an odd multiway conversation run through many posts, and a post about the why of blogging may include pertinent notes about comments.

Bloggng as a median medium

Does blogging deserve as much space and thought as it gets in *Cites & Insights*? I believe so. Liblogs are at a

three-way intersection of libraries, media and technology—and policy issues play out in blogs in ways rarely seen in more traditional media. I think blogs are in an interesting sweet spot in a casual media hierarchy of length, thought and formality:

- **Ultra-short and ultra-immediate items:** Twitter and its ilk, whether one-to-many or one-to-one, with a typical limit of one relatively short sentence per post. I believe these media serve primarily the "what's up?" and "where are you?" functions—as well as "go look at this." I don't like the term "microblogging" but that's what some people call these.

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- **Brief, fast and aimed at quick response:** FriendFeed messages and Facebook notes may be the prime examples of this (although FriendFeed is also a portal for other areas and Facebook has many other aspects), with a typical limit of one brief paragraph, messages reaching out to a small (or not-so-small) circle of friends and colleagues and easy ways to respond, building conversational threads. I won't suggest "miniblogging"—but these and similar media can reward terse ideas and issues with extended multipart conversations.
- **Frequently deeper, usually longer, sometimes more thoughtful:** Blogs are in the middle. It's rare to find one-sentence posts these days (except in special cases and linkblogs). It's not uncommon to find posts that run to a thousand or more words (sometimes several thousand), some of those posts clearly reflecting deep thought and probably extended editing. A blog can be anything from a set of tiny links to a series of refereed articles, but most

blogs are in the middle—longer and deeper than the first two categories, more personal, less formal, more conversational and more rapid than the next two.

- **Typically longer, more formal, less immediate and conversational:** Journal papers, magazine articles and columns and electronic equivalents—“traditional media” even if in a new guise. Some of these are peculiar hybrids (what you’re reading now, for example), and such hybrids are likely to grow over time. It’s a wild oversimplification, but this fourth level tends to involve more thought, more editing, frequently more length, almost always a longer gap between writing and public appearance—and typically less feedback and conversation.
- **Longest, most formal, least immediate and conversational:** Books and monographs, which *should* reflect the most thought, highest degree of editorial checking and revision and most attention to the longer term.

For some people, one medium does it all, at least as far as “publishing” goes. They’re tweeting, or writing items on Facebook—or blogging. Or they disdain less formal media and write proper articles and books.

Increasingly, though, we make choices—some of us more than others. I’ve backed away from the shortest form but I’m active in the others. That makes for interesting choices. Should I discuss Topic X in a post or should I note it on FriendFeed and see what happens? Is a post on Topic Y enough—or does it deserve a *C&I* article? Is a *C&I* article the best approach—or would this fit neatly into a print-magazine column? (One column is *deliberately* designed to take previous *C&I* items and bring them up to date: There are no firm barriers in this hierarchy!) And that nasty decision: Should Big Topic Z be a long *C&I* article, maybe even a special issue—or should it become a book?

Posts become columns and articles. Posts *expand* on columns and articles—and expand on bits of raw thinking tossed out on FriendFeed and elsewhere. But I think the hierarchy remains—and I think blogs *are* in a sweet spot, the place with the most room for experimentation. It’s also the sweet spot in terms of likely readership and persistence. A blog post *should* stay around semi-permanently (as is true with “lower” levels) and *can* achieve readership in the thousands or tens of thousands (also true of lower levels)—but can also be as immediate and conversational as the upper levels. (I know a few edge cases have thousands of Twitter followers or FriendFeed subscribers—but there will always be edge cases.)

A day after writing that section, I realized you can use the same hierarchy for conversational intensity—the extent to which readers are likely to respond to the writer (and the writer’s likely to see those responses). But it’s reversed: The most conversational intensity—and the extent to which the medium *depends* on conversations—is at the top, with blogs once again in a middle position.

That’s more random thinking on the topic than I’d intended to do. On to some interesting posts and my thoughts on them.

Comments and Conversations

Robert J. Lackie posted “Blogs that attract comments: Are you in the active ‘1%’? Do you want to be?” on September 16, 2008 at *Library garden* (librarygarden.blogspot.com). He cites Nielsen’s 1:9:90 “rule” for interactive online communities—that is, 90% of users never contribute, 9% rarely contribute and 1% actively contribute. (That’s best case: As *Wikipedia* and other sites show, it can also be 990:9:1 or worse.)

Lackie quotes from “Why doesn’t anyone comment on your blog?” by Lindy Dreyer and Maddie Grant, which appeared in the September 2008 *associations now*. That article is mostly a set of tips on how to make an “association blog” effective. Here’s the paragraph following the Nielsen ratio:

What does this mean for you? It means that most of your audience is reading, not commenting—and that’s normal. Many of those readers think about commenting, but something stops them. Help them conquer that fear. Strive to write content that is more than just relevant. Dare to be unique, to stir the pot sometimes, to write in a way that resonates.

Lackie urges people to read the article and use the tips—so as to increase the extent of commenting on their blogs. But there’s more to the post’s title than the story covers, namely “Do you want to be?” (The title’s a little misleading. It’s not that 1% of *blogs* attract comments; it’s that most blogs are lucky to attract comments from more than 1% of *readers*.)

I commented that one of the biggest *barriers* to commenting is a sign-in procedure—the need to be registered with a blog (or its software) before you can comment. I’m more likely to comment on Blogger blogs (because I already have a Google account) than on others that require sign-in, but I’d rather avoid them altogether. Then there are all the flavors of Capcha, which are secondary nuisances.

But... “Do you want to be?” is a key question, and should be followed by “Is it *vital* for your blog to draw comments?” Sometimes it is. More often, it’s al-

most irrelevant. The worst case is when the blogger uses techniques designed to draw comments—and gets few or none of them. Asking direct questions, for example, is great when you get answers but makes your blog look unread when you don't.

My takeaway: If you regard comments as vital for your blog, go read the Dreyer/Grant article and as many other articles as you can find offering tips for increasing your conversational intensity. But as you're doing that, think carefully about the downside. A blog that works well *without* comments looks even better when it draws them; a blog that *requires* comments can only go downhill.

Why no comments article via ttw

This post appeared on *librarytwopointzero* on September 28, 2008 (librarytwopointzero.blogspot.com), beginning with a double link—which leads to the same *association now* article. *Tame the web* quoted ten types of “posts that can rock”—but this blogger chooses to quote the section on keeping comments open and easy. It's good advice—and “no moderation” is part of that good advice. Again, as with signins and captchas, it's advice you can only safely take if you have first-rate spam filters in your software. Otherwise, if your blog ever becomes popular (I'd say 50-100 subscribers or a Google Page Rank of 3 is enough), you can *guarantee* that your comments and trackback will be full of spam, all of it annoying and some of it nasty.

In one of those ironic cases—or two of them—neither the “Why no comments?” post on *Tame the web* nor this post (which ends “Please feel free to comment ;)”)...has any comments.

Is there any value in blogging when you get no comments?

Christina Pikas asks this question in a November 1, 2008 post at *Christina's LIS rant* (christinalibraryrant.blogspot.com). This post *did* draw comments—seven of them. Pikas rarely gets comments.

Yet from the earliest days of blogs there have been pronouncements that you need to post so many times per time period (once a day? three times a week? no less than 4 times per month?) and do all other sorts of things to build and grow readership. Some people do all sorts of stunts to get readers. Likewise, there are all sorts of pronouncements (and in another place this week) that you have to have comments and trackbacks to have community and without communities blogs are pointless.

Pikas has decent readership stats but isn't relying on either readers or comments. Her own reasons for blogging are worth quoting:

1. to park ideas for later or so that I can think of something else
2. for personal information management
3. to try out new ideas

So it's all about me :) I go through long stretches when I don't post anything... I think people find me via searches and subscribe to my feed...so I'm not really worried that people forget about my blog and I'm not going to write posts in some—what I think is vain—attempt to get people to actually visit the site.

This is a healthy attitude. Actually, many of us believe that the easiest way to *lose* readership is to post out of obligation rather than need: People unsubscribe.

Commenters noted that in a Nature Network comment stream on blog comments, some people emphasized that comments are *not* the main signifier of quality blogging. One commenter raised an interesting question: Is there value in blogging when no one *reads* your blog? (The commenter answers the question as I would: “I think there is.”)

a blink, a metric and some thinking out loud

Kate Davis had an extended “life trumps blogging” period on *virtually a librarian* in 2008, with no posts from April through October. She returned with this post on November 9, 2008 (virtuallyalibrarian.com). She's thinking about how to evaluate a recently founded blog at her library and asks, “What, in general terms, makes a blog successful?” Which leads her to conversational intensity.

This is something I think a lot of bloggers get hung up on, so it gets its own sub heading. To what extent is success in blogging about “conversational intensity”?

We're not getting a great deal of comments...and I'm not particularly fazed by that at this point. I had a chat with a colleague about the appropriateness of using blogs without being too concerned about generating conversation. She indicated she thought that a blog without multi-way conversation (ie with little commenting) misses the point of blogging. Her feeling is that conversation is a fundamental element of blogging.

I think I agree, to a certain extent, but I'm not convinced that blogs that exist without active commenting don't have their own role to play. After all, we know that there are lots of different types of participants in this participatory web: consumers of information; occasional content producers (commenters); active content producers; and so on... Does it really matter if you don't get a whole host of comments? Is there a ratio of comments to page views* that indicates a blog is successful in facilitating conversation?

In my opinion, level of conversation is a measure you should get hung up on only if it's a primary aim for your blogging project.

There's more to this post regarding plausible measures for an effective blog, but I'll stop with this section. (If you're thinking about how to measure the effectiveness of a blog, *go read this post*. Davis may not have the answers but she has worthwhile questions.)

I'm not surprised that some people still feel that blogs without comments, or without lots of comments, "miss the point of blogging"—but that attitude is unfortunate and, I think, just plain wrong. It's a definitional attitude: This is blogging, this other thing *isn't*—even though it looks and reads like a blog. I don't buy that at all.

A sidebar about "conversational intensity"

Based on the searches I've done, it appears I was the first to use that term in the sense of "ratio of comments to posts in blogs" (as opposed to, for example, the loudness of conversation in a party). I'm certainly happy to claim the term. Mitch Ratcliffe used "Conversational intensity" as the title of a February 5, 2006 post on *Rational rants*, his ZDNet blog, which I'm sure has many times the readers that I do—and I'm equally certain he didn't pick the term up from me. (He actually refers to a measure that's the inverse of conversational intensity, with the number being *lower* if there are more comments.) As with Michael Casey and "Library 2.0," I disclaim any trademark or proprietary interest in the term "conversational intensity" or the metric itself. I don't own it; I just used it first in this context.

Whatever happened to library blogs?

Iris Jastram asked this question on November 17, 2008 at *Pegasus librarian* (pegasuslibrarian.blogspot.com). She thinks "the landscape and function of librarians' blogs is in the process of a transformation."

Two years ago, I mentioned that participating in the biblioblogosphere was like attending a conference every day. A year ago, a good portion of my evenings were spent reading, thinking about, and responding to other librarians' blogs. This was what kept me feeling connected to the larger world of librarianship. This was what made me feel useful beyond my own patron community. And this was a major source of contact with librarians whom I had come to regard as friends.

But lately, I wake up to find that my RSS aggregator has very few new posts from this once-prolific core of librarian bloggers, and I certainly haven't been contributing to anyone's aggregator overload recently. Not by a long stretch.

My first reaction at that point would be to test the hypothesis (has the "once-prolific core of librarian bloggers" become far less prolific?), but to some extent I've already done that on a more general basis, and it raises a tricky question: What's that core?

On a general basis, the answer is **yes**—most libloggers post less often in 2008 than they did in 2007, with roughly 60% showing significant decreases. Trying to define a "core," taking 82 liblogs that have posts in both March-May 2007 and March-May 2008 *and* that have Google Page Ranks higher than 5 (a good crude indicator of wide visibility), here's what I get for March-May 2008 posts compared to March-May 2007 posts: 21 blogs had significantly *more* posts in 2008, 19 had roughly the same number, and 42 had significantly fewer.

If you reduce that group of 82 by eliminating blogs with fewer than two posts per week in 2007, and further remove seven very prolific but also fairly specialized blogs, you get a group of 52 blogs that might be one definition of a "core group" of prolific libloggers. Among those 52, only nine had significantly more posts; 13 were at roughly the same level (81% to 120%); and 30—considerably more than half—had significantly fewer posts in 2008.)

That ignores the next paragraph, where Jastram starts by worrying whether we're a little bit burned up or have given up on blogging and continues:

While there may be some of this at work, I think it has more to do with a shift in communication patterns. Two years ago, blogs provided a venue for people's carefully thought-out ideas as well as for their off-the-cuff thoughts, gut reactions and general banter. In this way, they were like the sessions and the between- and after-session banter at a conference. Today I think that blogs have begun to take on the more focused character of the actual sessions at a conference while places like Twitter and FriendFeed have become the venue for the between-and after-session banter. We pass each other in the micro-blogging hallway, have conversations...shout hello to other passers-by, and show each other our pictures or the latest new gadget we're playing with. Then, when we have something more formal to say, we take the time to sit down and compose a blog post to present to our peers.

I believe Jastram gets it exactly right here. With more tools in the top two rungs of the "immediate and casual" hierarchy, liblogs have shifted toward "slower and more thoughtful"—and less frequent.

The first comment agrees and says "This medium doesn't seem to meet the attention span of some of us anymore." I'm not sure that's a good thing: Should we *celebrate* short attention spans?

Random thoughts on the attenuation of conversation

Rachel Singer Gordon writes in a related vein in this essay, posted January 10, 2009 on *The luminal librarian* (www.lisjobs.com/blog/). She'd been using Friend-

Feed for a month or so and enjoys it, but notes a small potential problem:

One thing that nags at me, though, is the way in which using multiple sites fragments conversation. Someone might comment on my Facebook status on FriendFeed, for instance, but my Facebook friends won't see that comment or be able to join in the conversation. Someone might comment on a blog post on Facebook, but readers over here will miss that discussion entirely. (Let alone, I haven't even made it to twitter yet—and probably won't, since I can't afford another time suck!)

Over at Walt at Random, Steve Lawson comments on the usefulness of FriendFeed, saying in part:

You will see that some blog posts that got very few comment have actually sparked a discussion on FF. Also helpful for blogs like Caveat Lector that don't have comments enabled.

I pull blog posts into both FriendFeed and Facebook, and notice that posts (and Flickr photos, for that matter) that garner no comments at “home” may get comments elsewhere. This is neat, but again leaves no record here and doesn't inspire blog readers to join in the conversation.

I offered the only comment on this post:

I'm finding that, not only do blog conversations seem somewhat attenuated these days, but—so far—I have mixed feelings about FB and FF as substitutes. The noise-to-signal ratios seem so much higher than in blogs (even as I keep hiding more and more categories in FriendFeed—so far I don't have any useful conversations in Facebook) that I'm already wondering whether it will prove worthwhile. Once in a while, it's great—but there's just so much!...

It's not just fragmentation. It's also attenuation. To use an in-person analogy, I try to avoid dinners with more than half a dozen people and prefer small social gatherings to very large ones; otherwise, the noise-to-signal ratio is just too high.

On one hand, many briefer, more spur-of-the-moment posts have moved to other platforms, which is where they probably belong. On the other, conversations related to blog posts may take place elsewhere, becoming more fragmented and attenuated. There may be tools to help, and it's not an entirely new problem, but it is a little frustrating.

Preserving the zeitgeist

Just as I was preparing this section, Iris Jastram chimed in with “Preserving the zeitgeist” on February 15, 2009 (again on *Pegasus librarian*)—a post that goes off in another related direction and is so cogent I'm quoting the whole thing:

The internet is a weird place. It seems like nothing that you'd prefer to forget ever dies while whole chunks of your life can disappear into the cloud with very little warning. People worry about preserving all the digital ephemera that we produce, or about deciding which categories of ephemera are worthy of these efforts. And while actually losing content is the stuff of librarianish nightmares, it seems to me that there's another aspect of internet life that we are continually losing without even realizing that we had it, and that's the thread of public conversation that holds all the individual streams of blog posts and news feeds together.

In other words, even though my blog and my friends' blogs haven't disappeared off the face of the internet, it would take a lot of work to recreate the moment in time in which any given post was written and see the broader environment of posts and discussions that make up any given posts' context. Even this post is part of a conversational environment that includes the post I linked to above (and the posts to which it links), one other blog post that I can't find any more, a couple of conversations on FriendFeed, the simple fact that an issue of Walt Crawford's *Cites & Insights* came out recently, Greg Schwartz's weekly requests for “newsworthy” content to talk about on *Uncontrolled Vocabulary*, and an IM conversation with Steve Lawson. That's a lot of conversational context, each piece of which will be preserved in its own space (each blog's archives, the *Cites & Insights* archives, the *Uncontrolled Vocabulary* audio, blog and wiki archives, FriendFeed and chat logs). But the moment that brought them all together, that asynchronous conversation, that zeitgeist will probably melt into the cloud and render each piece of the conversation less rich for those coming back to them later. In fact, this context is already melting since there's one piece of it that I can no longer remember well enough to find.

There are a few vehicles that I know of that preserve these conversational contexts to varying degrees. *Cites & Insights* is one of them (and the one that I think defines the genre I'm imagining), *Uncontrolled Vocabulary* is sometimes another, *This Week In LibraryBlogLand* will be a third if it ever resurrects, and the now-defunct *Carnival of the InfoSciences* was often a fourth. Each of these gathers together the posts of others and strings them into some sort of narrative about contemporary issues in librarianship. But each also has its weakness as a Preserver of Zeitgeist. *Cites & Insights* preserves the issues that interested Walt, for example, and *Uncontrolled Vocabulary* preserves issues that Greg deems newsworthy. These foci are necessary and by no means a fault, but it leaves me wishing that more people had the time, energy, inclination, and ability to take on the task of this kind of preservation so that more pieces of the internet conversation would get named, recorded and preserved.

Of course I added a comment! I'd never thought of "preserving the zeitgeist" as a principal function of C&I, and that certainly isn't its sole or primary function—but I think Jastram is right: It has become a significant function (see this article—and also see the most widely-read C&I ever). Here's what I also found necessary to say, after noting that two of the four zeitgeist-preserver mentioned are either moribund or defunct (and a third has since gone dark): "Weaving these things together is actual work, and unless you're a little strange (like the proprietor of *Cites & Insights*), it may not be particularly rewarding work. The group of half a dozen library ezine/newsletter publishers that was briefly COWLZ is now down to...well, one." If I was sensible, either financially or in a desire to build the kind of reputation that leads to fame etc. (e.g., narrowly defined expertise), C&I would not exist. Weaving together informal zeitgeist preservation is not only hard work, it's unusually thankless: the standard response is that you're just copying what other people said.

So, no, I don't really expect to see other similar e-journals popping up all over the place. And I'm going to try to ignore any "responsibility" for preserving the zeitgeist.

Why doesn't anyone comment on your blog?

Getting back to the comment theme, Nina Simon asked this on December 2, 2008 at *Museum 2.0* (museumtwo.blogspot.com). She begins: "When people ask about blogging, the question of comments comes up more frequently than any other. It's a bit strange. Why not ask more typical website questions, 'why don't more people visit my blog?' or 'why don't more people link to my blog?'" To Simon—unlike some other bloggers—"somewhere inside ourselves, we feel that comments are the thing that validate a blog's existence."

But here's the problem: the vast majority of people who read your blog aren't reading it because they want or plan to comment on it. They are reading it to read it—to learn, absorb, and gain awareness of new things.

Simon notes that she rarely comments on other blogs (and notes why) and says:

95% of the blog posts I read are exciting to me because they provide me with useful, interesting windows into new information. They're like magazine articles. I may talk about them with friends or pass them on, but only once in a blue moon will I write a letter "to the editor" to share my thoughts back to the author.

Simon thinks her blog has a lousy comment rate, averaging seven comments per post. By my standards, a conversational intensity of seven is *terrific* (only 14 liblogs did that well in *The Liblog Landscape*, and *Mu-*

seum 2.0 wasn't one of them, as its conversational intensity was 4.83 for March-May 2008), but she's looking at her 10,000 unique readers per month as a basis for comparison. She also thinks that's not crucial—that it doesn't devalue the posts.

The other reason not to let comments drive your efforts is that the posts which elicit the most comments are not necessarily the ones that readers value most. It's easy as the blogger to feel this way—after all, I get the most value as a content recipient when you comment back to me, so I (probably incorrectly) inflate the value of those posts.

Simon notes her most commented-on posts—all of which are "personal and provocative," but "certainly less informative" than many other posts.

Of course, if you are writing your blog for marketing purposes, you should care about the number of readers. If you are writing to have industry impact, you should care about the number of people who link to you. And if you are writing your blog for conversational purposes, you should care about the quantity and quality of comments. So think about why you are writing before you worry about how to get more comments.

Simon knows why bloggers care about comments: "They are the most obvious way that you can see that all of your hard work has had impact on someone. Someone cares! Blogging means giving a lot to a faceless community, and every comment fills in a face."

Still, as Simon says, for *most* expository blogs—blogs that are more about topics than about friends & family—comments shouldn't be the primary measure of success. That said, I'm sure Simon was happy with the results of this exposition: 23 comments (including only one response by Simon herself).

What does it all mean?

Comments are nice. Conversations are even better. Neither is essential to the nature of the Platonic blog, although either or both may be essential to specific blogs.

Many of us, particularly in the library field, are blogging less and meaning it more. The general level of conversational intensity has gone up a little, I believe (although, unlike number of posts, that one's harder to prove)—but that's only as measured within blogs themselves. FriendFeed offers a rich new arena to comment on posts in a highly conversational mode, although it's still a niche product (about one million repeat users at the end of 2008). There are other arenas and have been for some time. Posts draw comments on lists, on Facebook, on Twitter and in chat rooms. Posts draw other posts—and just as some of us don't allow comments for very good reasons, some of us don't show trackbacks for very good reasons.

If your only or primary reason for blogging is feedback, you're as unlikely to succeed as if your primary reason is fame or advertising revenue. But sure, those of us who allow comments always appreciate them: That, after all, is human nature.

Staying Power

Kay Johnson asks "Are blogs here to stay?" in the September 2008 *Serials Review*. The rest of the article title: "An examination of the longevity and currency of a static list of library and information science weblogs." I saw the article as a preprint; I see no way to obtain it on the open web, so won't provide a URL.

It's an odd article in some ways. Johnson uses Susan Herzog's *BlogBib* (blog-bib.blogspot.com) as a reference point and states flatly, "It is a tribute to her selection criteria that "BlogBib" continues to be of use as a library blog bibliography" 21 months after it was last updated. I won't argue the point, although substantial portions of the eight-part bibliography deal with blogging in general and the whole was seriously out of date by mid-2008 (Herzog explicitly stopped maintaining the site). I find it interesting that the "Studies on blogging" section mentions neither the 2005 nor 2006 *Cites & Insights* studies—but that may be indicative of the literature gulf, the extent to which gray literature simply does not exist from certain perspectives. (Herzog comments on a 2004 study of 55 library-related blogs in three countries in late 2003; that study appeared in a print journal. There's *nothing* newer related to studies of liblogs and library blogs.)

Johnson's mostly using Part 7, a list of 82 "select librarian/library blogs." The new research project consisted of clicking on the URL for each blog (or searching for it if the URL didn't work) and noting the latest update date. She calls blogs "very active" if they were updated any time in April 2008 (she did the observations on April 25) and hadn't changed URLs; 49 of the 82 fit these criteria. Using an *extremely* generous definition of "active"—updated any time in 2008—Johnson adds another nine "active" blogs. Ten more were active but had changed URLs. In all, that's 68 blogs out of 82 (83%) that remained at least marginally active and findable after a 16-month gap, which I'd regard as excellent longevity.

The rest? Most were moribund (nine most recently updated in 2007, two most recently updated in 2006 and two most recently updated in 2005).

Johnson feels the 80% activity rate (she includes three sites in her calculations that aren't blogs at all) is low, partly because she asserts these blogs "are of

higher quality and interest than many on the Web." Why so? Apparently because they're in Herzog's list, since I see no other basis for such an assertion.

It's an interesting study with loads of footnotes, but it raises a number of flags even apart from editorial oddities such as consistently adding a "c" to Richard Akerman's last name. (I wouldn't notice that in a blog post, but this is an article in a professional journal, she repeats the error twice—and Akerman's name is spelled properly at *BlogBib* and, of course, on Akerman's blog itself.)

- She did not do the small amount of extra work to *measure* longevity—that is, how long active blogs have been around. (It's rarely difficult to find the start date of a blog.) In practice, this is a report on **currency**, not longevity.
- "Very active" seems an excessively generous term for blogs updated within a 25-day period.
- Here's the biggie: She finishes by thanking Susan Herzog for creating *BlogBib* and saying "Perhaps I or someone else will examine the longevity and other aspects of these blogs in a few years." *Why?* Someone else *has* examined survival and currency, and other aspects, of much larger populations of library and librarian blogs, although it appears that those examinations aren't on Johnson's radar screen. (Not in the formal literature, and not by an appropriate expert, equals **does not exist**.) Of course, my examinations took more than a day to complete, but I'll warrant that those examinations, and the readily available lists of blogs involved, are far more suitable for future studies than Herzog's set of 82.

What's really odd here is that Johnson *did* go to the web for further research and she's researching a web-based phenomenon—but seems to credit only the formal literature as being worth review. Maybe if I charged \$30 per issue for *Cites & Insights* (roughly the personal rate for *Serials Review*; the institutional rate is \$91.50 per issue)? An earlier part of the article asks "Are blogs strictly ephemera, or are they culturally and historically important?" after asking "Does it matter if blogs disappear?" I would respond that, if the *formal* gray literature (of which this journal is definitely part) is disregarded, then there may be a presumption about the significance of blogs—a presumption I regard as incorrect but common.

The news on a broader range of liblogs is pretty good. As noted in the preface to the bound Volume 6 of *Cites & Insights*, 90% of the blogs discussed in "Investigating the biblioblogosphere" (which appeared in 2005)

were still active 27 months later; 79% of the much larger group in “Looking at liblogs: The great middle” (August 2006) were active 17 months later. Those are all liblogs, not library blogs. Of the latter, 92% of academic library blogs that were active in March-May 2007 were still active in late December 2008 (using a 120-day limit for activity), as were 89% of public library blogs. Of 475 liblogs with posts in March-May 2007 that were still visible on the web in December 2008, 87% qualify as active. These are all better figures than the 83%, and reflect a much larger and, I would argue, more meaningful universe. (The latter figures appeared in the February 2009 *Cites & Insights*.)

Is it worth looking at those blogs in a year, in two years, in three years to consider longevity? Maybe—but I have this sinking feeling that such studies, no matter how large, well constructed and carefully carried out, will be invisible within the halls of Proper Librarianship.

Rant off. Let’s look at comments *within* liblogs *about* the staying power of blogs and liblogs.

Blogs aren’t hip anymore, but I’m hooked

That’s how Marcus Banks puts it in this November 2, 2008 post at *Marcus’ world* (mbanks.typepad.com/my_weblog/). He’s one of several to note the absurd *Wired* piece saying you should “pull the plug” on your blog and use Twitter instead—a piece that, since it appears in the national chronicle of **Ooh! Shiny!**, strongly suggests that blogs will do just fine as useful tools. His response:

When I started this blog almost four years ago, blogging was hot. The 2004 election had just concluded, and during that campaign there was breathless talk about how the blogosphere would take down the “mainstream media.” I didn’t have such ambitions, but did want to jump into the fray.

Back then I often had short posts, sometimes annotated with pictures taken by Helen. I also had longer posts, but the joy of the blog was that it could have anything--silly, serious, short, long, in between.

These days blogging has become more of a chore. If I want to be flippant I’ll just craft a snarky Facebook status. And if I want to post pictures I can do that in Facebook too... So what’s left for the blog? Those long, thoughtful passages that are hard to craft....

...Back in 2005 blogs were hip because they offered a low-bandwidth way to get words online. In 2008 many people have stronger Internet connections, and words and links alone are boring.

So why do I still blog? Precisely because it still offers an outlet for that more “serious” writing. You won’t see the short, silly posts these days; for that you have to follow my Facebook status feed...But hopefully

this blog still offers a good place for reasonable and insightful commentary on a variety of topics.

For as much as I love them, it’s hard to fit nuances and complexity into a Facebook status.

Maybe my comment on his post said it better than my sentence above:

You mean people still read *Wired*? It’s only sensible that, as library-related blogs transition from Shiny New Toy to established useful tool, blogs in general become irrelevant to *Wired*: They’ve entered the real world and aren’t that shiny any more.

blogging matures

Harking back to my rant above, this one’s by Richard Akerman, posted November 7, 2008 on *Science Library Pad* (scilib.typepad.com/science_library_pad/), although if you go there now the title’s “blogging (becomes ordinary).” Excerpts, from a post that mentions *Wired*’s “typically hyperbolic” piece and a more reasonable *Economist* piece, “Blogging grows up”:

Once you strip the hype away, [both pieces] basically say that blogging is a part of the commodity infrastructure of the Internet now, it’s just one communication option. This is not too surprising, considering that blogging will reach its 10th anniversary next year (by my estimation anyway)... 10 years, that’s what, 70 years in Internet time?

Blogging: not dead, just resting. Just an experienced old man, actually.

I’ve found that as I’m using Twitter and FriendFeed more, I’m doing more content consumption and less content generation, which is unfortunate... I have recognized a need to blog more...

I must admit, I prefer “matures” to “(becomes ordinary).” If anything, I think the proliferation of shorter-faster media has made blogs more interesting and *less* ordinary—but also less shiny. Otherwise, I’d note that I’ve seen that happen elsewhere—people who used to be active bloggers shifting more to faster media and, after a while, showing up again but with longer, more thoughtful posts. Which is all to the good.

Who killed the blogosphere?

Moving away from liblogs for the moment, we come to this post on November 7, 2008, by Nicholas Carr at *Rough type* (www.routhtype.com). Excerpts with commentary:

Blogging seems to have entered its midlife crisis, with much existential gnashing-of-teeth about the state and fate of a literary form that once seemed new and fresh and now seems familiar and tired. And there’s good reason for the teeth-gnashing. While there continue to be many blogs, including a lot of very good ones, it seems to me that one would be hard pressed

to make the case that there's still a "blogosphere." That vast, free-wheeling, and surprisingly intimate forum where individual writers shared their observations, thoughts, and arguments outside the bounds of the traditional media is gone. Almost all of the popular blogs today are commercial ventures with teams of writers, aggressive ad-sales operations, bloated sites, and strategies of self-linking. Some are good, some are boring, but to argue that they're part of a "blogosphere" that is distinguishable from the "mainstream media" seems more and more like an act of nostalgia, if not self-delusion.

I agree that "blogosphere" is a meaningless term today—but it always *was* a meaningless term, or at least it was once there were more than, say, 50 blogs. There's no more a blogosphere than there is a meaningful "bookosphere" linking all currently published books or a "magasphere" that finds all magazines related to one another. Blogs are several media with millions of distinctive examples. On the other, for Carr to focus on the "popular blogs" is nonsensical: If there's a heart to blogging, it's not in the monster blogs but in the hundreds of thousands of midrange blogs, those read by a few dozen to a few tens of thousands of people.

And that's why there's so much angst today among the blogging set....

"Blogging" has always had two very different definitions, of course. One is technical: a simple system for managing and publishing content online... The other involves a distinctive style of writing: a personal diary, or "log," of observations and links, unspooling in a near-real-time chronology. When we used to talk about blogging, the stress was on the style. Today, what blogs have in common is mainly just the underlying technology...

Always? Bull. For many of us (possibly most of us), blogging *never* implied one distinctive style of writing, at least not in the areas I've followed.

Stylewise, little distinguishes today's popular blogs from ordinary news sites. One good indicator is page bloat... Among the top 100 blogs, as listed by the blog search engine Technorati, the average "front page" (note, by the way, how the mainstream-media term is pushing aside the more personal "home page") is nearly a megabyte, and three-quarters of the blogs have front pages larger than a half megabyte...

Once again, by focusing on the most popular blogs (almost all multi-author, commercial magazines-in-blog-form), Carr's abandoning serious discussion of blogs as a medium.

I was a latecomer to blogging, launching *Rough Type* in the spring of 2005. But even then, the feel of blogging was completely different than it is today. The top

blogs were still largely written by individuals. They were quirky and informal. Such blogs still exist (and long may they thrive!), but...they've been pushed to the periphery.

They haven't been "pushed" *anywhere*. Most individually written blogs probably have more readers now than they did in 2005, at least if the bloggers have something interesting or worthwhile to say. The fact that mediablogs have *more* readers is meaningless—unless, I suppose, only primacy matters to you as a blogger (or you're depending on ad sales).

It's no surprise, then, that the vast majority of blogs have been abandoned. Technorati has identified 133 million blogs since it started indexing them in 2002. But at least 94 percent of them have gone dormant, the company reports in its most recent "state of the blogosphere" study. Only 7.4 million blogs had any postings in the last 120 days, and only 1.5 million had any postings in the last seven days. Now, as long-time blogger Tim Bray notes, 7.4 million and 1.5 million are still sizable numbers, but they're a whole lot lower than we've been led to believe. "I find those numbers shockingly low," writes Bray; "clearly, blogging isn't as widespread as we thought." Call it the Long Curtail: For the lion's share of bloggers, the rewards just aren't worth the effort.

But it's been true for years now that most blogs are abandoned shortly after birth. If Carr is suggesting there actually *were* 133 million active blogs (or even 74 million active blogs) at some point, there would be a historical case here—but that's not what the Technorati reports show. (In fact, you can't determine the number of active blogs from pre-2008 Technorati reports.)

[Carr then suggests a relationship between amateur radio and blogging.]

Who killed the blogosphere? No one did. Its death was natural, and foretold.

Nobody killed the blogosphere; a silly term just ceased to have any meaning at all. As for blogs, they're alive and doing fine—but they're not shiny (and, despite Carr's closing line that "blogging is new and sexy," they're neither new nor sexy).

Tim Bray offers a telling comment, even if he understates the number of active bloggers by a few million:

So, we now have a couple of million voices, with mid-level individual presences such as my own having a few tens of thousands of readers, and with regular outbursts of blog-to-blog conversation. I'm not sure what the right word for this landscape is, but I'm pretty sure that "dead" isn't it.

There it is. Blogging is doing just fine. The blogosphere may be dead, but it was an artificial construct in any case. (Indeed, Carr responds to Bray in a way

that suggests his post really *was* about the term, which really does make it much ado about very little.)

This post had lots of comments including a couple from Seth Finkelstein—and this is an area in which he and I simply disagree. He sees little or no value in blogs that reach a few hundred or a few thousand of one's peers; I see considerable value in such blogs, which is one reason I read them and write one of them. (One other commenter feels much as I did when reading this post: the term “blogosphere” never existed “as anything more than a shared hallucination.”

Rumors of my blogging end are exaggerated (but not by much)

We'll close this section with Angel Rivera offering another exemplar of how other media (and life!) change blogging—posted December 3, 2008 at *The gypsy librarian* (gypsylibrarian.blogspot.com). Rivera begins with the same *Wired* nonsense:

The argument is that you can express yourself faster with tools like Flickr, Facebook, or Twitter. I will admit there may be a point to that. I have been blogging less. Part of it for me is the lack of time, but it also the feeling that I actually need to have something of substance to post. Writing does take some time and effort; this post was written a few days ago, and I let it simmer before posting here. The obstacle for me when it comes to blogging is time, or the lack of it.

In addition, I have discovered that I can use Facebook, post a link, and make a brief comment about the item I linked. It is much less effort than opening Blogger... [Notes uses of various “microblogging” tools as an alternative.]

Not that I am giving up blogging. When I started this blog, I did not start with any great aspirations. Over time, it has become a tool for reflection along with a way to make notes on things of interest or that I thought are useful. That has worked for me...

I guess the bottom line for now is that my blogging habits are changing somewhat, or at least evolving... I like that idea, the idea of one's writing evolving. We'll see how it goes.

Blogging isn't dying—but the uses of blogs are evolving. I like that idea too, just as I like the idea that your own writing could keep evolving (and hope mine does, at least some of the time).

Closing Part 1

The so-called outline for this article includes four more sections (plus conclusions), based on groups of posts I thought worth noting and commenting on.

But I can see by that word count at the bottom of the screen that I'm already over 8,000 words, which is

one-third of a thick issue—and that means I need to postpone the rest to another time.

Perspective

Writing about Reading 2

This time around, let's set aside the Death of Serious Reading and look at some other reading-related topics. This edition may be more suitable to folks with short attention spans than *WRITING ABOUT READING* in the December 2008 *Cites & Insights*: It's much shorter.

Different people approach reading and literacy in different ways—and few of us maintain one approach to reading everything. We're reading in new ways, a trend that's likely to continue—but there's less evidence that we're *dropping* the old ways. Whether it's ebooks versus print books, online reading versus offline reading or new media versus old media, “versus” is a trap. As elsewhere, the new generally complements the old, supplanting it for those people and those circumstances where the new is clearly better. And *your* “better” may not be *my* “better.” For most developments, for most media, there's room for both of us.

Aliteracy: Writing about *Not* Reading

Doug Johnson writes about “Libraries for a post-literate society” in a pair of posts at *The blue skunk blog* (doug-johnson.squarespace.com/blue-skunk-blog/) on August 13 and 14, 2008. Since I'm going to argue with Johnson, you should know that I admire Johnson's writing and thinking, on a blog I discovered when I was doing *The Liblog Landscape 2007-2008*. It was my loss. But admiration doesn't always mean agreement. Johnson begins with Steve Jobs' fatuous remark, “the fact is that people don't read anymore,” and goes from there to make his case that “libraries, if they are to remain vital, need to recognize and support a ‘post-literate’ society.” Excerpts with comments:

Next time you are returning to your seat from an airplane's bathroom, do a quick scan over the shoulders of seated passengers. What are they doing?

If your observations are similar to mine, well over 50% of air travelers are listening to portable music devices, playing games on handhelds, working on presentation or spreadsheet files on laptops, or watching video on small players. Book readers today are the minority.

Honestly? Comparing my recent flights with those of a couple years ago, I *don't* see a decline in reading. I rarely read *books* in flight; I read science fiction magazines. I see *loads* of magazine and newspaper readers, and

plenty of book readers. Are they in the minority? Yes, and I don't remember a time when that wasn't true—even before laptops and multichannel entertainment systems provided more competition. (Admission: On Air Canada to and from Toronto, I spent as much time watching flicks on TV as I did reading magazines. That doesn't make me postliterate or aliterate.)

Any number of recent studies are concluding that reading is declining. Not just any reading, but reading of novels and longer works of nonfiction. A range of pundits is remarking that online reading is changing their personal reading behaviors. As the Jobs quote above suggests, we are rapidly becoming a postliterate society.

We discussed some of those pundits and studies last time around. And yet...the numbers, the *facts* don't support the doom crying, making "rapidly" a particularly questionable term. (If we're really becoming postliterate, how come so many books on the topic get published?)

...I would...define the postliterate as those who can read, but chose to meet their primary information and recreational needs through audio, video, graphics and gaming. Print for the postliterate is relegated to brief personal messages, short informational needs and other functional, highly pragmatic uses such as instructions, signage and organizational device entries or is highly supplemented by graphics. Their needs for extended works of information are met through visual and/or auditory formats.

I omitted the utopian *Wikipedia* definition; that's another, probably very silly, discussion. (Hey, let's make a movie defining your mortgage details fully...)

...While many adults exhibit postliterate behaviors, the "Net Generation" is its poster child...

The term "postliterate library" may at first look seem like an oxymoron. But it is not. Our best libraries are already postliterate, increasingly serving sets of users who communicate, recreate and learn using media other than print. And the attitude we as professional librarians adopt toward the postliterate may well determine whether our libraries continue to exist.

Two issues here. One, there's a whole lot of text that isn't print, including long form text. More importantly, I would argue that the "Net Generation" and others *do* continue to read, including books—they just have access to a richer array of media (text and otherwise) than some of us older types did.

Education and librarianship have a bias toward print. This communication/information format that has served society well and in which most professionals now demonstrate high levels of proficiency is expected to be vociferously defended...

But I would argue that postliterate may be a return to more natural forms of communication—speaking, storytelling, dialogue, debate and dramatization. It is just now that these modes can be captured and stored digitally as (or more) easily as writing. And information, emotion and persuasion may be even more powerfully conveyed in multi-media formats.

I agree: *For many purposes*, multimedia beats straight text. But that doesn't lead to "postliterate"—to a wholesale *abandonment* of print—any more than providing two dozen varieties of heirloom tomatoes in the grocery store means nobody buys beefsteak tomatoes.

What do you see as critical attributes of a library that serves a postliterate clientele?

It's always tricky to *ask* for comments, but Johnson has an active readership (averaging 5.4 comments per post in March-May 2008, a *very* high figure for liblogs) and got them, 12 to date. "Beth" offers an excellent response (in part):

I wouldn't say "postliterate" so much as multiliterate. Print literacy is simply one among many ways of being literate. Libraries are great in that we can offer access to all kinds of literacies—we act as a literacy gateway... Print isn't dead, and I don't think it will be going away any time in the future. But I do think you are right about library bias toward print and that focusing on print to the exclusion of other formats does not serve students well...

"To the exclusion of"? I'd agree. That's a mistake, for school libraries (Johnson's field) or public libraries. As one principal focus? That's different.

"Jane in NYC," in a fairly long comment, makes a point we too often forget when people are lamenting the loss of the Good Old Days when Everybody Read Serious Literature:

Part of me wants to say that without [slow silent reading] we can't or won't take the time to get deeply into a subject or into reflection on life. Another part—the modern librarian part—recognizes that this kind of reading is, to use a phrase from C. S. Lewis, a "minority enthusiasm," and that lots of people just do not relate to the world through in-depth reading. These people can be brilliant and competent and very successful and whatever else you want.

There are a range of comments discussing audio-books, various forms of literacy and more. Amy Thornton notes, among other things:

I don't think the idea of curling up with books is completely lost on the NetGeneration...I'm not officially part of that generation, but I'm not too far off (will be 30 in a couple of weeks) and I have always enjoyed reading (print) books. I still prefer it over watching or listening to something on my iPod, DVD

player, computer, etc. I do think that libraries have to keep up with the technology as well, but I hope that we are a long way from giving up the printed word.

Johnson believes that the percentage of people who *do* still like to read “seems to be declining.” I question that—but not his conclusion: “We need to provide services and resources for [those for] whom print is **not** a first choice. And not feel we are doing a disservice to education or society by doing so.” *Absolutely*.

In the second post, Johnson offers ten possible hallmarks of a “postliterate library”:

1. PL libraries budget, select, acquire, catalog and circulate as many or more materials in nonprint formats as they do traditional print materials. The circulation policy for all materials is similar.
2. PL libraries stock without prejudice age-appropriate graphic and audiobook novels and non-fiction for both informational and recreational use.
3. PL libraries support gaming for both instruction and recreation.
4. PL libraries purchase high-value electronic information resources.
5. PL libraries provide resources for patrons to create visual and auditory materials and promote the demonstration of learning and research through original video, audio and graphics production—and physical spaces for the presentation of these creations.
6. PL libraries allow the use of personal communication devices (mp3 players, handhelds, laptops, etc.) and provide wireless network access for these devices.
7. PL library programs teach the critical evaluation of non-print information.
8. PL library programs teach the skills necessary to produce effective communication in all formats.
9. PL library programs accept and promote the use of non-print resources as sources for research and problem-based assignments.
10. PL librarians recognize the legitimacy of non-print resources, and promote their use without bias.

As an unregenerate book reader (but not book lover: I don't collect them), there are five words in that decade that I find questionable: “as many or more materials” in #1. I would respond—at least for public libraries and probably for school libraries as well—in two ways: First, that really should depend in part on *your* patrons. Second, there are so *many* sources of nontext material (including nonprint) that I think a case can be made that libraries should, to some extent, favor the proven carrier of culture through the generations.

Otherwise, I'm on board—but I don't believe it has much to do with postliteracy. As Johnson says, “We cannot ignore the society of which we are a

part—and are charged with supporting. I believe culture determines library programs, not that libraries create the culture.” (I'm not sure why this followup post, which also ended with some questions, failed to draw *any* substantive comments.)

To read or not to read

That's the title Wayne Bivens-Tatum used for an August 13, 2008 post on *Academic librarian* (blogs.princeton.edu/librarian/). (Hmm. Note the same date. Synchronicity? Coincidence? Intergalactic conspiracy? It was, after all, a Wednesday the 13th.) Some of what he has to say:

I seem to be reading a lot lately about how people don't read anymore, especially these young people. On my recent flights, there sure seemed to be a lot of people reading books, but maybe airline travel is restricted to the especially literate...

It's a good thing I'm not worried about the kids not reading today, because I'm putting together my syllabus for my writing seminar, which begins all too soon. The reading list isn't especially heavy in terms of page count. I always considered such courses torture because I'm such a slow reader. In a Victorian novel course I took in graduate school, I'm not sure I finished any of the novels except *The Mill on the Floss*, and that's because I had to present on it. It seemed I'd get a third of the way through one of Dickens' interminable tomes and we'd start on yet another one. Even *The Mill on the Floss* I had to read so quickly I remember almost nothing about it. I think someone dies.

...If the prevailing views of students are correct, whatever are we to do with them? Just now I was trying to decide between a Philip Pettit or a Quentin Skinner essay to represent the republican position. I decided on both, but if these kids today don't read, perhaps I should just teach neither. Perhaps we should abandon research and writing altogether. Why bother if the kids are so incorrigibly dumb?...

The touchstone of the new aliteracy for some seems to be that the kids today aren't reading literature anymore. Capital L Literature apparently used to be important to the culture, and everyone who was anyone ran around discussing T.S. Eliot or Allen Ginsberg while drinking cocktails or smoking pot (respectively), or ruminating on the supposed complexities of Beckett or Sartre. The kids just don't do this anymore, and it bothers some people.

Let's hope the students get a smattering of great literature during their college years, but otherwise, is it so bad if they don't read novels for fun? Some of them no doubt will go on to be the educated intellectual types who will lament for the future because the next generation will be so ill read. But if most of them grow up reading nothing more substantial than news

or blogs or the occasional magazine, will they be that much different from how most people have always been? Did we ever really live through some literary golden age when masses of people read more not because it was what they wanted to do but because there wasn't much else to do?

The nineteenth century in England and America seemed to be a relatively literate time, but was there not perhaps a large difference between those who for enjoyment read the John Stuart Mill or Matthew Arnold and those who read the serial installments of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and flocked to Dickens' celebrity tours of America? When literature was entertainment, were we any better off as a society? Now that literature is less popular, doesn't there still seem to be a lot of reading going on? And is the person who daily consumes another genre novel somehow more critical and analytical than the rest of us, more fit to be a citizen than those who skim headlines on Google News or read political blogs?...

I wonder about that last paragraph. Did we actually have a higher percentage of literature readers—or is it just that only the upper class (and emerging class), the literate minority, are remembered? I strongly suspect that the latter is true; after all, near-universal *ability* to read books is pretty much a 20th century phenomenon.

Sidebar: Good writing encourages serious reading

T. Scott Plutchak discusses “saying what you mean” in a June 19, 2008 post at *T. Scott* (tscott.typepad.com/tsp/). It's not directly about aliteracy or book reading, but he does decry cases where people discuss a term and don't seem to care whether the term has a commonly-agreed meaning, and also the attitudes of bloggers (like me, I guess) who post very rough drafts.

...I first began to appreciate the beauty and critical importance of sentences from reading the great short story artist Harold Brodkey, who was absolutely manic and obsessive in his devotion to getting each sentence right—the right words, the right tone, the right balance, the right music. All of those carry meaning, and if one element is off, the writing fails.

As an editor, one of my roles was to pay a lot of attention to sentences. I recall many instances where I would spend a considerable amount of time on a single paragraph, going over it again and again, trying to sort out exactly what the author was really trying to say. The challenge...was to come up with alternatives that maintained the tone and voice of the author, while clarifying and conveying the actual meaning. It would be easy enough to rewrite it to sound like me—but I always wanted it to sound like the original writer. That's what makes an editor.

Those who see “publishing” as simply a matter of doing some kind of peer review, clarifying some of the facts & conclusions, and then putting things up on a website, miss the importance of that kind of editing. A well edited article carries the reader along—it feels effortless. Without it, reading becomes a chore. How many ideas never get the distribution that they deserve because the prose they're encased in makes reading just too damn much work?...

As I grow older, the notion of “story” becomes increasingly important to me. I was talking to someone about the presentation that I was working on for Scotland. “I've got the arc of the story figured out, now it's just a matter of pulling together the images that I want to illustrate it, and making sure the transitions work the way that I want them to.” I always think of a presentation as telling a story, as having a plot, as requiring a certain flow to take the listener from beginning to end. The *Post* writer makes the point, “The sentence itself is a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Something happens in a sentence.”

Irrelevant to this discussion? Maybe, maybe not. I wrote the first comment:

An eloquent post. I should read it once a week and try to improve my own sentences. Thanks.

As readers can no doubt guess, I've failed in that resolution—and, frankly, I'm probably better at editing other people (on PLN) than at editing my own work (here and on my blog).

Setting aside comments on a different issue (not mentioned here), it's interesting to see an exchange about blog writing. First, Marcus Banks (whose posts are frequently quite well written):

For my own blog posts, I have a different standard. I strive not to spout off gibberish, but more casualness feels OK. If somebody uses their blog to “think out loud” and states as much, what's wrong with that? As long as you know their intent, you know how to read it.

And Plutchak's response:

“Casualness” is great. I'm all for it. And certainly one of the great things about blogs is that you can use them in whatever way you want—including “thinking out loud.” But then people should not be surprised if they're misunderstood or if someone challenges them on the grounds of what they actually said, as opposed to what they think they thought they were trying to say.

That last sentence is critical—and I can tell you people will not only be surprised but in some cases deeply offended if you read what they say, as opposed to what they later claim they intended. The term “charitable reading” gets tossed around at times, and it's a dangerous term.

How closely is this related to supposed aliteracy? There is a relationship. Close reading and careful writing involve a precision that's frequently harder to obtain (and a lot easier to obscure) in nontext environments. On the other hand, it's a lot harder to make a polished, well-edited, communicative movie than it is to write a polished, well-edited article (or book).

Online and Print Reading

You could make a good case that this topic—online reading compared to offline/print reading—belongs with comments on slow reading, which should appear in a future edition. That may be true, in which case you can think of these comments as a warmup for that edition—and, in some cases, as followup to the first WRITING ABOUT READING.

Online and print reading

Marcus Banks discusses this in a July 27, 2008 post at *Marcus' world* (mbanks.typepad.com/my_weblog/). He begins by discussing “Literacy debate: Online, R U really reading?” from the July 27, 2008 *New York Times*. It's a long, complicated piece, complete with remarkably vapid and predictable doomsday quotes from then-NEA chair Dana Gioia and a whole lot more. You can still find the article online; I won't go through it separately. Some of what Banks has to say about the article and his thoughts on the matter—beginning with the beginning, because it's too good to pass up:

I started the day by reading the Times article...online. It's pretty long, and soon I became distracted. Later, at lunch, I picked right up where I had left off with the print version of the paper. With the glorious boundaries of print at my disposal, I was able to finish. Given the context, this sequence of events was amusing, and it just goes to prove that I'm not so young anymore.

It may also suggest that it's easier to focus on lengthy text in print form than online—regardless of age.

I grew up reading lots of books, and am still predisposed to think that “serious” reading is done in print. But that's not as true as it once was, and will be ever less the case as time goes by. The article documents a debate between traditionalists who think that reading comprehension should only be measured on the basis of print texts, and reformers who want to start measuring online reading comprehension. I hope the reformers prevail...

So do I—and so, I believe, should anyone who cares about literacy. Comprehension is *comprehension*, whether it comes from a 4x6 text block on a 6x9 printed page or the text on a screen—or, for that matter, an audiobook. While I don't believe print is going

away, I certainly don't believe online reading is going away. To ignore it or treat it as useless is absurd.

Nobody is defending the glory of printouts, but there's some evidence that online reading works better for some readers than reading print... [Cites a dyslexic reader who appears to learn better online.]

Wouldn't it be odd if it *wasn't* true that online reading worked better *for some readers*? Much as I detest universalisms about everything going digital or the death of traditional media, reverse universalisms—“you really only learn from great books”—are just as detestable and counterproductive.

Another benefit of online reading, for all readers, is the immediate exposure it provides to multiple viewpoints. With a book, at the moment you are reading it, you can only engage with one text at a time. Online the world of information is literally at your disposal. This doesn't mean that people always seek out multiple viewpoints, and of course it's possible to simply fritter away time online. But engaged online reading, which is something that teachers could model and promote, could have many benefits.

The flip side is that, *by and large*, that engagement may be shallower than when focusing on a single text—and that's as much a multitasking/task-switching issue as it is a question of medium. That really does get into slow reading.

Print still works well... But holding the line for the virtues of print to the exclusion of online virtues is folly...

Agreed. Here Banks introduces a different topic (one I've avoided in *C&I* to date), making a valuable point:

Librarians have a role here; the article reinforces the well-known fact that people are generally not good at evaluating the trustworthiness of online information. This is what all those librarian information literacy campaigns seek to combat, so we need to keep at it...

[R]ather than offering up a checklist of web site attributes, we should promote beneficial online behaviors: linking to sources whenever possible, demonstrating an attempt to seek out multiple viewpoints, etc. Sometimes the best source will be a blog...and that's just fine. My guess is that the number of times in which a blog will prove most beneficial in understanding a problem will only increase. The goals of critical thinking and close reading are what will always be important, however people choose to read.

Is close reading (similar to slow reading) harder to do online? Maybe, for most people; I'd say probably, for many people. Is it impossible or unimportant? No.

reading offline, reading online

Laura Crossett posted this on November 23, 2008 at *lis.dom* (www.newrambler.net/lisdom/). It is, to some

extent, a followup on the previous WRITING ABOUT READING:

...The most recent *C&I* contains an essay...called "Writing about Reading" and it takes a good long look at the National Endowment for the Arts studies of recent years that claim to show there is a Drastic and Dire Crisis in this country because Nobody Reads Anymore.

The omitted part is partly about the difficulties of reading *C&I* online, difficulties that are partly specific to *C&I* and my own laziness.

As you may gather by my use of sarcastic capitalization, I am unimpressed with the arguments the NEA makes on this count. If you're in any sort of business that deals with books and learning and reading, you've probably heard a good deal of talk about how the web has decimated people's ability to do sustained reading of complex texts. Nicholas Carr—or his headline writers—have gone so far as to wonder if the internet is making us stupid.

I spend a lot of time on the internet, and I don't think I'm any stupider than I was before.

Actually, in some ways, I think I'm smarter.

I'm almost certain I'm smarter now than I was before I started using the internet. Am I as steeped in deep textual understanding? A tougher question.

...When I first started moseying around the web, I was baffled. I'd get to a page of text, and I'd start reading the text, and then there'd be a hyperlink — usually in the middle of a sentence!—and I had to figure out what to do. Should I continue reading the rest of the sentence and then go back to the hyperlink? Should I click the hyperlink in the middle of reading the sentence? And then when I got to the page that the link led to, what was I supposed to do?... It was confusing and made for an unsettled and unsatisfying reading experience. I met a guy at the college radio station that year who said he was working on the Great American Hypertext, and I thought, Dear God, please tell me I will never have to read such a thing.

Flash forward about a decade, and I'm sitting at my old job reading my feeds and I come across [a] post by Steve Lawson, in which he talks about how he expects to be able to link to things when he's writing.:

On the other hand, I'd still have the same reaction to someone who says they're working on the Great American Hypertext—and my experience with articles and fiction *designed as hypertext* (as opposed to those that use hyperlinks as, in effect, expandable footnotes) is almost wholly negative and befuddling.

...In the last few papers I wrote for library school, I constantly found myself wishing I could just link

some text instead of inserting a footnote. The link would take people directly to the thing I was talking about. The footnote could help them get there, but it wasn't immediate, and how often do you go track down the source mentioned in a footnote? I've done it, but it is increasingly a hassle.

When did I go from "OMG how can I possibly take in all the information in this document and all its links?" to "that is totally the way to read—and write—everything?"

I'm not sure. But it is clear to me that when we talk about the web taking away the ability to do sustained reading of complex texts (and I think the jury's still out on that one), we neglect to consider the skills that the web has led us to develop. It is useful—and becoming essential—to be able to read a hyperlinked text, to be able to bounce around from screen to screen, to skim a document and find out if it's something you need to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest or something you just need to get the gist of.

Here I will *partially* take issue with Crossett. Not with the last sentence but with the middle paragraph (where I suspect Crossett's overstating for effect). I don't believe online documents with hyperlinks *are* "totally the way to read—and write—everything," not by a long shot. (If I did, I'd obviously give up on *C&I* and my magazine columns, not to mention books.) I *do* believe that hyperlinks get in the way of narrative, at least to some extent, and that narrative is important for sustained argumentation as well as long-form entertainment.

...I don't mean to dismiss close reading or slow reading: I still think both are still important and have a place. But we live in a world in which so much text is produced on an hourly basis that you simply could not take it all in... You have to figure out how to filter it—how to get what you need, how to find the bits you want to go back to. If bouncing from document to document is a sign of stupidity, then yes, the web has made me stupid. But I wish that the doomsayers would, rather than simply lamenting the skills they believe we have lost, look at the skills we have gained.

It's been a *long* time since anybody could take in all the text that was produced, even in their own area—and I think we need filtering methods above and beyond bouncing from document to document. So, I think, does Crossett. I may disagree with some particulars, but not with the heart of this essay.

Unlike Banks' post, this one drew comments. (You really can't predict when posts will and won't draw comments, with certain exceptions.) Mark Lindner noted that he *does* follow some footnotes—and that footnotes and hyperlinks are related but serve different purposes. I thanked Lindner for calling

my 12,000-word essay “a lot of fun” and noted the attempts at hypertext essays and fiction I’d read: “not pretty’ is a kind way of putting it.” Crossett clarified that she was offering “and not or”—“What I wanted to say, really, is that online reading and the kind of skipping around it involves is not necessarily bad, just different.”

The now-liminal status of the printed word

While that’s the title of Rachel Singer Gordon’s January 19, 2009 post at *The liminal librarian*, www.lisjobs.com/blog/, she’s quoting another doom-and-gloom article, this one from *The New Atlantis*. That article—5,600 words of sans serif in its online form, although there’s a nicely-done serif PDF version—treats the NEA reports as gospel and closes with this threnody (which Gordon quotes):

Such is the end of the tragedy we are now witness to: Literacy, the most empowering achievement of our civilization, is to be replaced by a vague and ill-defined screen savvy. The paper book, the tool that built modernity, is to be phased out in favor of fractured, unfixed information. All in the name of progress.

Again, I won’t go through the whole article—Gordon’s done that, and as I skim the original I’m not encouraged to study it deeply. Gordon says “There’s so much to take issue with in this mish-mosh of an article that one hardly knows where to begin.” I’m inclined to believe her.

There’s enough good stuff in this post for me to suggest that you go **read the whole thing** (good advice for every post I cite, to be sure). Gordon cites Poynter Institute studies suggesting that, for those articles people actually choose to read online, they may read them *more* thoroughly than they read print newspapers (which, admittedly, are a peculiar category of print reading). She notes the wildly different lessons people have drawn from the various NEA reports. She concludes (after one of those quotes about Socrates’ worry that writing lessened memory):

Yes, gloom and doom scenarios are nothing particularly new. Just as writing enabled the creation of that larger pool of knowledge, though, the content creation tools of the read/write Web (and the interactivity it invites) similarly enable the creation of a new pool of knowledge, a new collective wisdom to draw upon. We may not know exactly where this all leads us, but we can explore the possibilities — speaking of being in a liminal state.

I would add that the new content creation tools *do not* replace the old tools; they complement them. We’re not “replacing” print literacy with either “a vague and ill-defined screen savvy” or, well, literacy; we’re add-

ing new tools, new media, new ways of understanding and communicating. They’re not the same, and all have their advantages. Since we don’t have to abandon one for the other (and, by all real-world measures, aren’t doing so in general), it’s all good.

My new perspective on reading

This take is by Michelle McLean, posted January 14, 2009 at *Connecting librarian* (connectinglibrarian.com/). She found the subject of reading coming to the fore, thanks to a post by Kathryn Greenhill (which should appear in a future essay), my essay—and an Australian story claiming that “news consumers” are moving away from newspapers and TV to the internet. (McLean’s Australian; the spelling in what follows is correct in that version of “English.”)

So it seems that reading is changing. I have no problem with that. My public library has increasing statistics and not just for the always-popular CD and DVD collections. Magazines and graphic novels are high turnover items and fiction and non-fiction items continue to be well used. Our library now has four blogs and we are building a good following on each of those as well.

But do we still define reading as reading of print exclusively? I am a long-time librarian and have only just realised that to a certain extent I still did. I have been reading blogs for quite some time, but usually printed out the articles I wanted and read them away from the computer, which only reinforced that assumption, incorrect as it is.

Even with the introduction of e-books in various forms, with a wide range of content and available through a growing number of digital devices, I did not really think about reading any great amount of content online as either possible, or even reading.

Until now. Towards the end of last year, I discovered fan fiction. I know it’s been around for decades, almost as long as the internet, but it was only then that I found something of interest to me....

Fan fiction has been around *much* longer than the internet, actually, but McLean’s young. Fan fiction’s been around longer than I have: It’s *older* than the hills. McLean goes on to say how much she’s finding it acceptable to read fanfic online, and more:

...I have been hearing and reading stories from people who are quite happy and comfortable reading quite lengthy tomes on their iPhones, Blackberrys, mobile phones, computers and more.

So my perspective on reading has changed from just reading printed text on paper (in some form). Reading for me, now that I have finally realised it, is carrier neutral and I will read what I choose to, because I choose to, regardless of the format.,,

Libraries in the last decade, but definitely in recent years, have been placing more of an emphasis on reader development... I am all for it.

[But] should reader development only be about encouraging readership using the items we already have? Or can libraries expand reader development to things like fan fiction, which is only generally available online? Should the focus be on the content, or more on the reader, more of whom are becoming more comfortable reading online and are finding what they want to read there? And if it is the latter, how do we help our readers to find what they will enjoy reading online? That is my big question and the breadth of it and all its implications is only just starting to hit me...

While part of me says reading may *not* be entirely format-neutral, a bigger part believes “reader development”—encouraging literacy and thoughtful reading—should *absolutely* encompass more than print.

Closing this edition

Books aren't disappearing any time soon. Neither is the concept and practice of slow, focused reading. It may be true that focused reading of long texts works best with printed texts; that might be an astonishingly difficult thesis to test, one way or another.

What is *certainly* true, I believe, is that most of us read in many different ways for many different purposes. And that most of us gain information, knowledge and wisdom from material read on the screen, not only from print stuff.

It's silly to say online reading isn't really reading. It's equally silly to say that print, books, magazines, whatever is *or should be* obsolete. It's absurd to suggest that people have, in general, lost their ability to focus or pay attention to long narratives or deep arguments.

I don't believe we're becoming aliterate in any sense—whether print or online. I strongly suspect that most educated adults read more now than they did a decade ago, with a hefty portion of that reading being online. But reading and media aren't politics: Being a minority doesn't mean you're irrelevant.

Library Access to Scholarship **The Death of Journals (Film at 11)**

No, I don't believe journals are dying. I needed a snappy title for a set of topics related to access. Since these topics *do* relate to journals, in one case suggesting that they be replaced with a very different me-

dium, and since “death of X” predictions seem to be all the rage...well, there it is.

Leading off with some semi-informed notions

I was thinking about the requisites for 100% success of either color of open access, setting aside for now the gratis/libre distinction. Here's how it seems to me, noting that this may be a terribly naïve view.

- **Gold open access** (where readers can access refereed article portions of journals, from the publishers in final published form, at no cost) seems, in the long run, to require one success and one transformation: The near-universal success of gold OA journals and transforming author attitudes. As part of that success, by the way, I'm assuming some revolution in understanding actual publishing costs and reforming them. I'm assuming that charging author-side fees equivalent to the *asserted* “costs” of traditional journal publishing (which somehow seem to equal the total income of the journals) is **not** going to hack it in the long run. Transforming author attitudes? Because the biggest traditional publishers have managed to corral too many of the highest-“impact” journals, scholars need to look beyond the traditional impact factor when deciding on submissions.
- **Green open access** (where readers can access *some version* of articles from repositories at no cost) seems to require a different success and transformation: The universal success of institutional and topical repositories—and a *different* (and equally difficult) transformation in author attitudes. In this case, scholars need to believe that it's worth their time to (a) make sure they have the rights to deposit papers in repositories and (b) take steps to do so.

Gratuitous statements by OA advocates to undermine topical-repository mandates and suggest that institutional repositories don't cost anything to establish and operate don't get us there—but help assure that we never will get there. There doesn't seem much question that IRs are in trouble; that doesn't bode well for green OA as the only or even the primary answer. And nonsense like the reintroduced Conyers bill threatens to undermine what progress has been made on what *should* be the low-hanging fruit for repositories: research funded by the Federal government, which—if it was carried out in Federal labs—would automatically be in the public domain.

Lately, I've been trying out FriendFeed—and some of my subscriptions are librarians who subscribe

to scientists. That means that, one way or another, I wind up seeing more commentary from scientists (on FriendFeed and in linked blogged posts) than I'm used to. Once in a while, it's truly discouraging—for example, a presumably informed scientist using “open access” (in scare quotes) to mean Wikipedia-style crowdsourcing as opposed to peer review. What does that tell me? That the continuing campaign to sell the *absolutely false* notion that OA journals aren't peer reviewed is working where it matters most: Among the scientists. (In an earlier FF discussion, a scholar *directly* said OA journals wouldn't count *until* they were peer-reviewed...and wasn't immediately corrected.)

About the Conyers bill

I'm not going to attempt general coverage of the Fair Copyright in Research Works Act, which has *nothing* to do with “fair copyright” and *everything* to do with undermining NIH on behalf of the big international publishers and their society-publishing allies.

What's the point? Patrick Ross of the Copyright Alliance issued a thoroughly misleading statement speaking of commandeering, treating copyright works as public domain and violating publisher rights. After the hearings on the bill last year—hearings that raised important issues—Conyers reintroduced an unchanged bill, essentially ignoring all input and criticism. James Boyle wrote a charming imaginary dialogue as to how Congresscritters could ignore the combined views of Nobel laureates, most legal scholars, empirical evidence and everything else to favor the special interests of publishers.

There are side discussions that might be fascinating to discuss—but are, in the end, distractions. As usual, Peter Suber links to most important sources of commentary *on both sides* (or all sides) of the issue in *Open access news* (www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/); searching for “Conyers” or “NIH” should yield most of the posts.

Are Print Journals Obsolete?

The first post noted here goes back a *long* way—to March 28, 2007, on *T. Scott* (tscott.typepad.com/tsp/). T. Scott Plutchak used the title “No more print?” and notes that the American Society for Cell Biology was considering discontinuing the print version of its journal and asking for feedback (in a post by Mark Leader).

Some of what ASCB said:

We welcome comments from the library community about the value of print journals and the adequacy of LOCKSS, Portico, and PubMed Central as archives of electronic journals. We are also curious about wheth-

er librarians would be interested in a print-on-demand option for obtaining archival print copies if regular print subscriptions were discontinued.

The impetus for discontinuing the print edition is a desire to reduce author charges, especially for color figures. The cost of producing the print edition greatly exceeds revenue from print subscriptions. Author charges (page charges and color charges) are the largest source of revenue for the journal. In effect, authors are subsidizing the print subscriptions.

Portions of Plutchak's commentary:

At my institution, we're canceling as much print as we can anyway. One of our criteria is the adequacy of the preservation/archiving plan, and I'm glad that Leader mentions several. I'll confess to a fondness for LOCKSS, largely because of the philosophy behind it. The National Library of Medicine has a statutory responsibility to preserve the biomedical literature, and I have a great deal of confidence in PubMed as a perpetual archive. I'm not as familiar with Portico, but it seems to be pretty promising. My advice to ASCB would be to participate in all of them. We're still early enough into all of this that we don't know what the best long-term solution will be.

We're also concerned with perpetual rights to material should we ever end our subscription/license altogether. The notion of offering a print-on-demand option for archival copies is an intriguing one, although not one that I think we'd avail ourselves of here. As Leader points out further on in his message, ASCB considers the online journal to be the journal of record anyway and “[m]ore than 60% of the articles include supplemental data or videos online.” I'm not sure why someone would want to keep archival copies of the print issue under those circumstances...

We certainly don't need to keep the print to satisfy our user base. Two years ago we stopped getting any print for our ScienceDirect titles. I did not get a single question, comment, or expression of concern from faculty or students. We've reached the point where librarians tend to worry a lot more about the print than the people who use our libraries do...

The rest of the post has to do with the low institutional prices for the journal (at the time, \$578 per year for online access to about 5,400 pages per year) and why open access advocates lump publications such as this into an “all-or-nothing approach to open access.” I won't get into that discussion here—and, in fact, I agree that any move to 100% gold OA should *end* with low-cost society journals, not begin with them.

I'm including this here because it's clear that, for this class of journal in Plutchak's library (and doubtless many others like it), print *has* become an anachronism—but there do need to be reliable preservation

mechanisms, including LOCKSS. (Based on the rest of the post from Leader, the print version of the online journal was substantially incomplete in any case.)

ASCB made the decision: In 2008, the print version disappeared—and in 2009, the journal went from monthly to twice-a-month publication, entirely online. The price? Still reasonable for its size: \$514 to \$714 per year, depending on category of institution.

FO: Open access journals

Jumping forward a year, we get this July 9, 2008 by Vernon R. Totanes (“Vonjobi”) at *Filipino librarian* (filipinibrarian.blogspot.com/). The post is about several aspects of OA, but I’m excerpting portions relevant to this particular discussion.

In “Open Access in the Third World,” I predicted that “the traditional journal will eventually have to be abandoned” and that “in a Third World country like the Philippines, it is, in my opinion, the only way to go.”

That’s followed by comments on *two* sites listing online journals (he finds it unfortunate that there are two rather than one combined site) and a set of links from both sites with flags for those journals that make *some* or *all* articles freely available.

The message here is that, for some nations at least, online journals may be the *only* realistic way to publish peer-reviewed articles. For other nations and fields, print may already be a less-satisfactory alternative.

Paul Courant on informal peer review

Two important aspects of journals are the assertion of peer review for articles—and, for leading journals, a brand of apparent quality and importance. Take away the journal entirely and you may take away the second—but what about the first?

Paul Courant offers some clues in “On the meaning and importance of peer review,” posted sometime around October 12, 2008 on *Au Courant* (paulcourant.net/). (I’m not including all of his primary argument, which is that the academy, not publishers, pays nearly all the costs of peer review.) Excerpts:

Broadly, peer review is the set of mechanisms that enable scholars to have reliable access to the informed opinions of other scholars, in a way that allows that those informed opinions themselves to be subject to similar vetting.

Scholarship requires reliable and robust peer review, and the academy engages in peer review in a variety of ways, both direct and indirect. Peer reviewed publication is one method, and a fairly powerful one at that. If you read a paper in (for my field) *Econometrica* or the *Journal of Political Economy*, you are reasonably confident that accomplished scholars in the field have made a judgment that the paper is of high

technical quality and worth reading, and that experienced scholars have made a judgment that the paper is of interest beyond its narrow subfield...

Similarly, the appearance of an article in a leading specialized journal, or of a monograph in a prestigious series published by a scholarly press, conveys valuable information (at least to the cognoscenti in the field) about the quality of the book or paper.

The peers who undertake the reviews are genuine peers. They are scholars whose judgment is trusted by experienced members of editorial boards, who are themselves generally senior scholars in the relevant field(s). Such people engage in peer review pretty much all the time... They could no more *not* provide “peer review” then they could give up reading and writing. Peer review is part and parcel of what serious scholars do.

I’d guess (and I would love to see a serious study) that the fraction of time that scholars spend engaged in formal peer review of publications – journal articles and monographs – is less than half of the time they spend on peer review in total. Moreover, the work that has traditionally been done under the aegis of publishers is increasingly being done in other settings. In fields where it is customary to post working papers on the web, interesting papers generate a good deal of peer review in the form of commentary from peers... Given that publication in the literal sense (making public) is now easy and cheap in the technical sense, it seems almost certain that informal review will grow relative to formal review...

A record of publication in strong peer-reviewed settings conveys valuable information to tenure and search committees, chairs, deans, and provosts. But the fact of the matter is that we pay equal attention to other reviews, including (for some fields) those required to obtain research grants, and (for some fields) post-publication reviews that appear in journals and other venues. We also take very seriously the opinions of ad hoc reviewers, inside and outside of our institutions, who prepare and evaluate the case for promotion and hiring. Take away the information conveyed by publication venue, and these tasks become more difficult, to be sure, but by no means impossible. And the essential part—close reading of the work by peer reviewers—remains intact.

That commentary may lead directly to the second subfocus of this section: **Should professional journals evolve into blogs?**

Why professional librarian journals should evolve into blogs

Marcus Banks argues this proposition in a February 10, 2008 post at *Marcus’ world*, focusing on a field that may be scholarly but usually isn’t all that scientific.

In the last few months I've attempted to lead the transition of the journal *Biomedical Digital Libraries* (BDL) from publication on BioMed Central to publication via the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform...

[S]omething funny happened on the way to OJS: I became firmly convinced that the traditional journal model is antiquated for sharing research and knowledge among librarians. A better course is to develop and nurture excellent blogs, with multimedia capabilities and guaranteed preservation of the postings. This could be an entirely new blog that starts from scratch, or an established journal that evolves into a blog...

My arguments:

1. As...Walt Crawford notes, blogs are among the most vibrant library literature today. I agree...and believe there is no reason why all of the rigor traditionally associated with journals could not be maintained on a blog contributed to by multiple authors.

2. Peer review should be a post-publication process, rather than a pre-publication process that sometimes drags out for many months...

The argument for pre-publication peer review is that it filters out poor research. This is a legitimate concern when the research in question is about a new and potentially deadly medical intervention. Library research is not like this; peer review can occur via community conversation.

Counter-arguments:

1. *Most people will prefer to publish in established journals rather than an unestablished blog.* Of course this is true, which is why the evolution to a blog paradigm would take a long time.

2. *All of the supporting structures—from PubMed citations to tenure requirements—favor the traditional journal...* This is certainly true now, but—ultimately—what is a scholarly journal but a means of communication among people of similar interests and backgrounds? Why can't blogs achieve the same goals?

3. *Blogs are ephemeral...* The proof of the viability of a scholarly blog will be in how long it lasts. But even if the blog failed, that would be a function of a lack of commitment among the people involved...

One commenter, Jane Blumenthal, wonders whether blog authors—who might generally agree—are the same people as article writers, but supported the change: “One of my big frustrations is the gap between research or project and publication or presentation. What we read in our journals and hear at our meetings is usually at least a year old. Can we continue to afford that much time lag?”

Another, James Jacobs, sees a possible hybrid model, notes that blogs *could* include prepublication peer review and offers several additional arguments:

Blogs cut down the costs of publication/distribution (and can, if one chooses, be a revenue stream with google ads, sections for highlighted vendors etc.)

Blogs are more easily found and searchable in popular search engines

Blogs speed up community input, which makes articles all the more interesting, lively, and contextual.

Blogs are closer to the ideal of “scholarly communication” than paper journals with necessarily long publication cycles...

Is it really the case that open access journals aren't readily searchable as part of Google and friends? Banks responded to prepublication review by noting that this still slows down access:

I can see no harm in getting those papers out earlier—philosophically, at least. Practically speaking, people don't want to injure their reputations by offering up less than polished work. Who can blame them?

I'm calling for a professional shift that values speed of new ideas over polished presentation (while recognizing that the polish has a place too). This will be a long time coming, but I think it's worth it.

Reactions

David “Medical” Rothman gathered some reactions to Banks' post in February 12, 2008 and February 25, 2008 posts at davidrothman.net.

➤ Dean Giustini liked the idea but noted: “My only reservation is when research methods are used such as randomization and the articles would need to go through peer-review.”

➤ T. Scott Plutchak, a longtime journal editor, had reservations: “Although there is something appealing about this idea, when I think about the actual articles that I was involved in editing, I'm not at all sure that this would be a good thing... I'm not at all sure that it would be a service to the library community if all of those articles that I read through in their first iterations had simply been posted to a blog and opened up for comment. The few experiments that have been done in the last couple of years with post-publication review have not been overwhelmingly successful... Rather than providing vibrant post-publication review, I'm afraid that posting unedited articles for comment would result in much good work being buried and ignored. But the terrain continues to evolve rapidly, and the opposition of blogs to traditional journals is probably a false distinction. The traditional journal is rapidly morphing into something else, while adopting features that we associate with blogs (the ability to provide rapid responses be-

ing the most obvious)... Marcus is pushing the right questions, and everyone involved in scholarly publishing, at whatever level, should be thinking creatively about how to make the communication and discussion of projects and ideas more effective.”

- Banks responded to Plutchak’s post, in part: “I’m not wedded to the idea of a ‘journal as blog’ as we understand blogs now. My real hope is for much faster communication, and a recognition that some level of review can be post-publication.. ‘Peer review’ in this sense would be about improving the kernel of the original idea...The big difference is that comments would be public; to me that’s OK.” The conversation went back and forth in one of those comment streams that’s highly thoughtful—and might undermine Plutchak’s continuing assertion that open comments “will always draw a high proportion of junk.” With one remarkably juvenile (but brief) exception, that wasn’t the case here.
- The longest response came from Rachel Walden, who is a blogger, a medical librarian and an editor at *JMLA* (which Plutchak formerly edited). Some of her notes (excerpted from excerpts in Rothman’s January 25, 2008 post):

I don’t see any reason why librarianship journals...should be singled out as a specialty...so I’ll talk about this more generally.

1) I believe there is value in having a final version of a manuscript on the record. Getting things out quickly isn’t the only goal in publishing a paper, or shouldn’t be. A larger goal is to contribute to the body of knowledge on a topic, in a way that can be cited and referred to and built upon in the future...

2) “The argument for pre-publication peer review is that it filters out poor research.” Marcus seems to believe that this isn’t an issue for library research, or at least that the stakes aren’t high enough to matter. I would ask whether librarians seeking tenure and professional respect are really willing to hang themselves out there like this, simply assuming that what they’ve done is good enough for public consumption. Like Scott, I believe this simply isn’t true...

3) Peer review takes work. When a committed board of peer reviewers exists with a demonstrated interest in the process and a deadline for providing feedback, and an editor does the work Scott mentions prior to publication, it is a certainty that an author will receive feedback. Blog comments are an unreliable thing...

4) Related to #3, it would be important to determine whether a manuscript was just open to whoever felt

like commenting (or not), or if peer reviewers would be assigned drop by and comment. Would they be allowed to do so anonymously? Could an editor comment anonymously?...

I’m not saying it couldn’t be done. These are just a handful of issues I see as barriers that would have to be considered. Ultimately, I think part of the question is whether we’re so determined as authors to put our unfiltered thoughts out there as fast as possible, or whether we’re really interested in being accountable and on the record and contributing to the professional knowledge base in a substantial way, even if it takes a little longer...

Rothman commented on this, noting an issue with wiki pages (but versioning means you *can* cite a sort-of-fixed version) and continuing:

When it comes to technology topics, I think that getting the information out quickly is especially important because the technology changes so dang quickly...

I think that library technologists would probably be mostly comfortable throwing their work onto the Web for immediate criticism and would, in fact, rely on their peers to examine their work critically...

So if Marcus moves forward...I’d suggest making technology its focus...

(Rothman cited one blog as a possible example, but that hasn’t worked out very well...)

Why blogs aren’t journals

Dorothea Salo posted this on May 26, 2008 at *Caveat lector* (cavlec.yarinareth.net/), after seeing a post elsewhere that harked back to Banks’ posts. Noting Banks comment, “[W]hat is a scholarly journal but a means of communication among people of similar interests and backgrounds?” Salo responded (in part):

Aha. That’s what a journal was, way back in the day. It’s not what a journal is...

Journals started because the round-robin letter-sending arrangements by which research results were communicated among gentleman scientists got to be too unwieldy to manage. They started out as pure communication vehicles. No peer review... This meant that quite a few of the articles were pure snake oil. No credentialing; gentleman scholars didn’t need credentials. No discipline boundaries, really; that had yet to shake out. Just pure, untrammled 200-proof communication.

If this sounds like the blogosphere, especially the biblioblogosphere...well, it should. I would argue that librarianship has glommed onto the blogosphere far faster than other nominally or genuinely academic disciplines precisely because a lot of us are a lot closer to “gentleman scholars” than we are to today’s notion of an academic...

So what does that mean? Well, the gentleman-scholar eventually gave way to the professional academician, who suddenly had to defend his value in a marketplace if he wanted to get paid. So he had to mark his territory..., prove he could produce (publish-or-perish) and prove that what he produced was any damn good (peer review). All of this is fine and dandy, but it reduces the communications efficiency of the journal medium by quite a lot. It's hard to yell out "Eureka!" in a modern journal. *By design.*

Enter the conference, the listserv, the preprint server, and yes, the blog. Just because the academy needs to puff up its CVs doesn't mean it *doesn't* need to communicate efficiently. Other means of communication came in to fill the void...

But there is a line, still, between the blog and the journal... Journals have beta-readers, people who read your stuff in order to help you improve it before it hits the newsstands. Blogs don't.

I once read a peer-reviewer stating that the publish/don't-publish decision was the *least* of his considerations as he read articles. His chief goal was to *make the article better*: clean up the logic, clean up the language, ask fruitful side questions, et cetera. Even at non-peer-reviewed publications, a good editor can do yeoman's work as a beta-reader...

We haven't figured out how to do beta-reading in the blogosphere yet. Until we do, that's one genuinely important way in which the blog is inferior to the journal.

It's probably not the only way. Y'all can find the arguments about long-form versus short-form blogging on your own. I do tend to think that the blog is hostile to the kind of extended argumentation that the journal article is good at...

There's one other problem with blogs as a scholarly medium that I'm frankly *appalled* that a passel of librarians and library-school professors didn't come up with: the scholarly record. Remember that? That thing that's supposed to outlast ephemeral thoughts and ephemeral media? That thing that allows us to check that when X writes "Y said Z," we can go back and read whether Y actually *did* say Z? That thing that academic libraries are partly in business to protect?

Yeah. That. A blog can disappear in a heartbeat or a DNS blip, irrespective of its quality... If pieces of the record vanishing altogether into the ether isn't bad enough for you, I know bloggers who regularly redact their stuff, for matters far more important than grammatical miscues or adding corrections. Catching them out can be quite a trick.

We haven't solved that problem, either. We've barely even made a stab at it. Until we do, blogs can't do something *genuinely important* that journals (*pace* the problems of e-journals) do: persist.

I haven't seen much more on this theme since May 2008. (It may be out there, but I haven't noticed it—and it's *very* difficult to search for, since the haystack of posts about blogs as *personal* journals hides the needle of blogs substituting for *scholarly* journals.)

You may notice that I didn't interleave these excerpts with a lot of commentary. That's partly because I think the discussion is an interesting sideshow in the larger circus of possible futures for scholarly journals, partly because I don't write in scholarly journals. Nor, for that matter, do I read a lot of them.

Not that I don't have some thoughts:

- Blogs as article carriers would seem to be OA by default.
- Blogs as article carriers don't necessarily *save* that much in time or money as opposed to other e-article publication systems. I don't know anything about Open Journal Systems; I do know there's *no* reason a peer-reviewed ejournal can't post articles the minute peer review, editing and layout are all complete, using the journal "issue" (if there is one) as an overlay set of contents pointing to already-published articles. You could do that on a protected wiki. You could do it on a blog. You could do it on almost any CMS. There is, in short, nothing magical about blog publication.
- You certainly *can* send an article through peer review before posting it on a blog—that's how *In the library with a lead pipe* works. But that means having provisions to do so, and I don't see that the blog medium really aids that process. Blogs *are* pretty good for post-publication review, as discussed by Banks. But I find myself on the side of Plutchak and Salo, both as a sometime peer reviewer and as an editor: Good peer review *should* improve the quality (editorial, logical and sometimes scholarly) of articles *before* they're public. (*Cites & Insights* would be a better publication if all the copy went through some other editor—but it also wouldn't exist, given the realities of time, energy and cost.)
- On the other hand, there's peer review and there's peer review. I didn't quote one particularly telling comment in Salo's post about the editorial quality of one supposedly peer-reviewed ejournal—but it's an opinion with which I heartily agree. Peer review can and should improve manuscript quality; that doesn't always mean it does.

- The persistence issue is a real one—but here I'm *not* on Salo's side. There's nothing about blogs that makes them *inherently* more ephemeral than ejournals. I've seen peer-reviewed ejournals disappear without a trace because they lacked sound long-term archival solutions and ceased to be of interest. (I've written about such disappearances in the context of very early ejournals.) There's no reason that blog-journal hybrids (journals? blournals?) can't be archived. (Actually, to assure that a given version can always be retrieved, a wiki with automatic versioning might be a better medium.)

In the end, there are four related discussions going on here, I think:

1. Does prepublication peer review offer enough advantages to prefer it to the immediacy of publishing on submission?
2. Will postpublication review, through open comments or other means, offer the same assurance of quality that peer review *should* offer?
3. Is a blog an inherently good or poor medium for article-length scholarship?
4. Are blogs inherently more ephemeral than ejournals?

I don't know the answers to any of those. I do know that blogs don't *inherently* support some of the extra stuff that scholarly articles use heavily (endnotes, references, bibliography); there again, a wiki with appropriate extensions may actually be a better medium. (Yes, footnote plugins are available for WordPress—and MediaWiki also requires an extension to do references properly.)

There's also a semantic issue. Could you publish a solid journal using WordPress with a few extensions? Almost certainly. Would the result be a blog? Well, it would use blogging software...

Net Media

Beyond Wikipedia

This article is not about *Wikipedia*—at least not directly. It's about would-be competitors or alternatives and Wikia, the very much for-profit corporation that trades on the good name of, and is owned by the co-founder of, *Wikipedia*.

But saying "it isn't about *Wikipedia*" is misleading. In some ways, it's *all* about *Wikipedia*. That's true even though I'm not discussing the extent to which *Wikipedia* is now controlled by a few hundred cyberbureaucrats with their endless list of SAARs (Sometimes-

Applied Acronymic Rules) or the oddity that, to me at least, the talk pages of *Wikipedia* entries are frequently more interesting than the entries themselves—and, frankly, almost mandatory viewing if you want to judge a *Wikipedia* entry coherently. (I must say, after the experiences I and many others have had, the next time someone says "If you find something wrong in *Wikipedia*, it's up to you to fix it" I'll have to rely on my essentially pacifist nature to avoid slugging them or at least cursing a bit.)

Why do we love monopolies so?

That's a question that comes to mind when discussing *Wikipedia* alternatives and in quite a few other areas. I've sometimes asked why *librarians* seem to love monopolies so much, but it's not just librarians.

So, for example, when *Citizendium* started up, it faced a huge amount of fairly vicious commentary, and you could trace much of the viciousness to it *not being Wikipedia*. Didn't matter whether it might offer an interesting alternative: it could potentially threaten The Great Source of All Wisdom.

How many of you vary your default search engine so you look somewhere other than Google? How many of you would seriously *consider* an alternative general-purpose web search engine?

Maybe it's not surprising it was so easy for the government to effectively dismantle its antitrust operations. Weren't we more comfortable back when AT&T owned the landlines, even if it did mean much higher long distance rates? (As opposed to now, when AT&T only controls *most* landlines—and, for a while, we have competition among cellular networks. Unless you own an iPhone, of course, in which case you're happily back in the arms of AT&T.)

I don't get it. Does choice make us that uncomfortable? Is the need to *think* so disturbing?

OK, I use Word2007 running under Vista on a PC with an Intel CPU. I'm pretty sure I'd like Vista and Word2007 a lot less if Apple and (to a lesser extent) Linux weren't providing some competition. I'm guessing, however, that a lot of Apple users would be pleased as punch if *everybody* used OS X...and wouldn't mention the desirability of competition. (I was reading a set of hints for great presentations and stopped cold when the author said Presentations Must Be Done Using Keynote and you should go out and buy a Macbook *just to use for presentations*. That writer wasn't concerned with monopolies—only with the *wrong* monopoly.)

Two sections of this article concern *Wikipedia* alternatives. I won't call them competitors, exactly, be-

cause I don't regard them as such. Is either one ready to take over from *Wikipedia*? Nope, and not likely to. Should they be dismissed and opposed simply because they aren't *Wikipedia*, which has become an effective monopoly for online "encyclopedic" stuff (if only because of Google's algorithms)? I don't believe so. I'm probably in the minority.

Knol Knotes

Sorry; couldn't resist.

The basics

Knol (knol.google.com/k/) became public on July 23, 2008, after some invitation-only testing. (I discussed it briefly in May 2008.) Google defines "knol" as "A unit of knowledge," but also as "an authoritative article about a specific topic." *Authoritative*—a striking assertion.

Do you need advance vetting and proof of authority before writing an article in knol? No: Anybody can write them. As the site says, you can write on "(Almost) anything you like"; your writing isn't edited and there's no attempt to enforce a viewpoint (or "neutral" viewpoint). The "almost" refers to content guidelines—you can't include pornography, pedophilia and the like, hateful content, violent content or content you don't have rights to use. You can't impersonate others "in a manner that is intended to or does mislead or confuse others" and, while you can promote your business, there are limits on that as well. (Pages can't primarily exist to redirect visitors to other sites or just display ads—but "advertorials" appear to be legitimate.)

One particularly interesting aspect to Knol is that you *can* write about something when there's already an article on it—it's encouraged. "[T]he Knol project is a forum for encouraging individual voices and perspectives on topics." Which brings us to a key aspect of Knol, one that makes it wildly different from both *Wikipedia* and *Citizendium*: Articles are typically *signed*...and you're expected to use your real name and display your credentials and references. "Use your bio to tell readers why they should trust your opinion on a given topic, and reference other works that informed your thinking."

You can collaborate with other authors, but only if you choose to do so. You can allow changes by readers—but the default is moderated collaboration (the author must approve changes). Readers can comment on articles; authors are encouraged to check those comments and update articles as needed. Since readers also *rate* articles, that's probably significant.

The Knol guidelines indicate that articles are *introductory* essays, but also says they should generally be longer than a web page. Looking at the featured articles on February 18, 2009, I saw lots of illustrations and text varying from 1,900 to 4,500 words, with some articles going fairly deep into a topic.

I'd say the essential characteristics of Knol, other than being a Google project, are these:

- Knol consists of *signed* articles, encouraging real names (although pseudonyms are clearly allowed—e.g., "Murphy beds in the movies" is by "Bobbie7" and "Running for an improved life" is by "Anonymous") with posted credentials, and even optional name verification (by phone number or credit card). As the Google announcement put it, "The key principle behind Knol is authorship."
- Knol encourages authorities to write by protecting their articles from vandalism—although the same mechanism also protects crackpots. Given that there can be many articles on the same subject (and articles can have fairly odd names), that may not be an issue.
- Knol really doesn't *have* quality control except via community feedback. The site makes it clear that nobody will edit your articles (unless you grant permission) and that, unless you're violating fundamental content policy in such an egregious way that it becomes obvious, you can write pretty much anything. (If your topic is sufficiently obscure, that's also true for *Wikipedia*—except that these days the article would probably get deleted *because* it's obscure.)
- Rather than encouraging direct participation in improving articles, Knol encourages commenting, rating and *reviewing* articles as means of feedback.
- Knol articles have oddly varied typography and tend toward loose layouts. Some articles have fully justified serif text (probably imported documents); others have left aligned sans text or a mix; most articles seem to have large gaps between paragraphs.
- It's not clear how many articles there are or how often they're viewed. The site reached 100,000 articles on January 20, 2009, which is a good start—but given the difficulties of browsing or searching articles, it's hard to guess how many of those articles are worthwhile.
- The list of articles with the "most viewed" seal runs to 1,147 on February 18, 2009, but only the first 800 are visible. The two articles tied

for 799th place have been viewed 2,275 times each, which is neither trivial nor all that great. They're an odd pair, one a German article on Web 2.0, the other "10 practical ways to teach your children right values" by "United Church of God"—a *verified* author name! But some articles *have* been viewed quite often: The most frequently viewed article that isn't part of Knol overhead is "The self" by Kevin Spaulding, and that shows 168,415 views—which ain't bad at all. As for current activity, it varies. When I checked the ten most recent articles 15 minutes ago, it went back 33 minutes, but now it only goes back nine minutes, which is healthy activity.

- Knol is even more of a hodgepodge than *Wikipedia*, combining what appear to be doctor-supplied medical topics with advertorials and religious screeds. Maybe that's OK.

A few early comments

Tom Wilson of *Information Research* noted the public announcement in a July 23, 2008 post on *Information Research—ideas and debate* (info-research.blogspot.com). He notes that, even then, featured items "seem to show a bias towards medical issues" and comes to this preliminary conclusion, one I find hard to argue with:

The obvious comparison is with Wikipedia and Citizendium--Knol appears to be more like the latter than the former and I imagine we may see the same persons contributing to all three. Of the three, however, Citizendium seems to have the better editorial control--which is why my own developing article on Information Management is there.

Larry Sanger of *Citizendium* (and cofounder of *Wikipedia*) chimed in on July 24, 2008 on the *Citizendium blog*, noting not only Knol but also *Britannica Online* and *Medpedia*, grouping them all as "new, non-collaborative encyclopedia projects."

These are competitors to CZ, or to subjects within CZ, for eyeballs or traffic, and we certainly will not be complacent.

Some people have billed these as "Citizendium-killers," but they consistently fail to appreciate is that all three of these projects are not primarily collaborative community projects, as CZ is. Both *Britannica* and *Knol* say that authors can determine the extent to which other people can collaborate on one's article. On CZ, all articles are owned and controlled in common, and are unsigned. The designers of those projects seem not to realize just how crucially important that is to building an online community that takes on a life of its own.

In the end, as I have argued on multiple occasions...the advantages of radical collaboration could, I think, outweigh even the natural advantages of Google, *Britannica*, and *Medpedia's* distinguished partners....

All this said, may the best encyclopedia win. The world needs a better encyclopedia than the 800-pound gorilla, *Wikipedia*.

I just think that, in the fullness of time, that will be the *Citizendium*!

As you've probably guessed, I'm less impressed with "unsigned" as an inherently positive point in building a quality resource—but then, I *don't* see a race to establish *The One Best Encyclopedia*.

Richard Akerman thought about Knol quite a bit during July 2008 (after noting it briefly in January 2008), posting at *Science library pad* (scilib.typepad.com/science_library_pad) on July 23, July 26, and July 28, 2008. Excerpts from July 23, omitting a number of other notes:

So you can contribute to Wikipedia, a vast and inter-linked set of pages with high traffic.

Or toss your Knol out into the wind and hope it is gently lofted to the top of search results...

...They make a big deal about a Knol being attached to an author. Well for one, my Wikipedia edits are already attached to my user name, and for two, what's more personal than publishing something under my own name in my own web domain instead?

It seems to me this is mostly about ads, and secondarily about drawing you even further into the web tracking dream: you're always logged into Google, they know every search you make, every email and document, and now they will know your particular areas of expertise, and topics of interest. Seems like lots of benefits for Google...

I would only murmur that your contributions to Wikipedia are visible *only* if someone tracks through the history, which is a far cry from signed articles. I *do* see value in signed contributions—but, of course, most of mine show up on one of my own websites or in published magazines, so I certainly don't argue with "for two" above, unless Knol *does* become a highly-regarded compendium.

The July 26 post is entitled "Knol—thinking about authority," not unreasonably given Knol's own (questionable) assertion. Akerman notes problems with attaching authority to authorship:

So if you want to organise knowledge this way, it's quite easy, you get Learned Persons to write articles in their areas of expertise. There are, however, multiple problems with this approach:

1. You actually have to get them to write.
2. You get a tremendous management problem as you try to scale out from a handful of articles to millions.
3. Just because someone is very learned in one area (e.g. Ph.D. in Physics with accompanying publications) doesn't necessarily mean that he or she has any expertise whatsoever in another area (e.g. climate change).
4. We only have "authority structures" for a small number of areas (related to issue #2 above). You can probably find an authority in Evidence-Based Medicine (and indeed the Knol on that topic is quite learned). But who is the authority on say...Gnolls, obscure mythical creatures?...

The actual problem they appear to be trying to address is not one of authority, but of certification. They're focusing on credentials, when the focus should be on proof. As best I can deduce the argument, it goes something like "on Wikipedia anyone can author, anyone can make changes, and anyone can challenge anything..."

Akerman cites *Wikipedia's* {fact} template, which inserts "citation needed" into an article.

This little piece takes Wikipedia from an open brawl to one of the most powerful engines promoting scientific thinking in our time. It says simply: "I don't care who you are, demonstrate with evidence that your statement is true."

To retreat from this is to retreat from reasoned discourse.

Why? Well, I have to turn to Wikipedia

When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong. (Clarke's First Law, from Wikipedia: Clarke's three laws)...

To put it another way: authority is a weak predictor of truth. Only evidence is a strong indication of truth.

That's a valid objection—although in the world of Wikipedia, "citation" really means "verifiability" according to Wikipedia's sometimes-applied ruleset.

Akerman also objects to Knol's marketplace of competing viewpoints rather than the consensus view of Wikipedia:

Great, so all the people with over a century of evidence supporting the benefits of immunization can balkanize off in their own Knol, while the nutjobs who think immunization is some government conspiracy can have their Knol, and each community can rate their respective Knol highly. How does that help anything?

The problem is that Knol has focused on authorship, and not certification. What demonstrates the law of gravity is true is a preponderance of evidence, not some sort of individual gravitas.

Now there certainly is something in ranking and commenting that helps us to get at certification, but the mechanism provided is simply too weak. Certification is some combination of general review, authoritative review, ranking, and ranking of the rankers. Certification must work on a consensus item...

Akerman provides an example, the long-time debate over the value of the Hubble Constant. (How long would it have taken before an earlier *Wikipedia*, using its standards of verifiability, would have accepted the Continental Plates theory?) He also cites a number of problems with Knol and a whole bunch of reasons why *Wikipedia's* better—and Akerman clearly supports the Wisdom of the Crowd over the authority of the individual. Of course, Akerman's Canadian, and evolution may still be the consensus up there. Here in the lower 48, if consensus is the rule for truth, the world was created in six days...

Do I think Akerman's wrong? Not exactly. Do I buy into consensus—the wisdom of the crowd—as the basis of truth? Not really. Can both models work together? I'd like to think so.

On the other hand, I think Akerman strikes a fairly telling blow in "Knol—Google losing view of web?" on July 28, 2008. He cites one of the stupider paragraphs in Google's publicity for Knol:

Blogs are great for quickly and easily getting your latest writing out to your readers, **while knols are better for when you want to write an authoritative article on a single topic.** The tone is more formal, and, while it's easy to update the content and keep it fresh, knols aren't designed for continuously posting new content or threading. [Emphasis added, by Akerman and by me.]

That's just *wrong*. The tone of a blog is whatever the blogger chooses it to be—and very few blog posts are continually edited. (Threading? Blogs? Huh?) Since Akerman's one of those who's demonstrating that you *can* present "serious science and ideas" in blogs, he's right to be offended by this dismissal.

He also notes the oddity that Knol uses nofollow, so search crawlers (including Google's) don't follow links—and the search engine is pretty poor. (Oh well, what would Google know about search engines?)

There are a bunch of other objections in the article, and they're all sound. He sums it up:

I'm sorry Google, but that's not only not true, the entire Knol system and "introducing Knol" tone show a total lack of understanding of the current state of scholarly blogging, a total absence of support for scholarly citation and linking, and a surprising disregard for critical existing aspects of the web architecture.

What I particularly like about this is that Akerman isn't putting Knol down for not being *Wikipedia* (although I'm less enamored of the *Wikipedia* model than Akerman is). He's putting it down for being badly designed and implemented.

Seth Finkelstein and others have discussed whether Google is likely to favor Knol pages in its search results. It's a complex discussion, and the general answer is "apparently not, at least not directly." On the other hand, when Google blogs and Google itself write warmly of Knol, that tends to drive traffic to Knol, which in turn tends to improve Knol's ranking, which...

Eric Schnell wrote "Will librarians embrace Knol? Chances are..." on August 4 at *The medium is the message* (ericschnell.blogspot.com). He follows that title with "...we will not. At least initially." But Schnell's not ready to dismiss Knol out of hand—and, indeed, he combined his blog posts on service-oriented architecture and libraries into a single Knol article. He likes the result—at 1,600 words, it's not that long and works well as a single article. He comments on Akerman's criticism and goes on to discuss "the value of blogging as scholarly communication," an area where Schnell and I are of similar minds:

When talking with our faculty about "scholarly blogging" it still amazes me how many librarians simply do not see how blogging is shaping our professional communications. I'll speculate that a majority of topics presented at conferences [and that] eventually land up in print literature started with a half-baked idea on a blog...

Librarians think of themselves as being on top of emerging technologies and using them to provide our customers with the best services possible. Yet, the communications methods that we use to share our ideas, our knowledge, are still grounded in the middle ages. A growing amount of content making its way into our traditional literature is so 'old' that it is no longer interesting. This may be the single reason why our traditional published literature has become so dreary.

I am sure many of our professors could wax poetically about why Knol and blogging do not merit consideration as scholarly communications. They will talk about the lack of pre-publication peer-review and authority. Chances are they would be evaluating Knol without ever using it...

So, while Knol has issues, it is the potential of this type of publishing I feel can help to revitalize the state of our professional communication. Tools such as blogs and Knol can let us toss out those half-baked ideas. The reviews and comments enable the author to build out newer/better/more thought out versions

of the content. This is in contrast to a blog post which is generally stuck in time--much like the majority of our professional communications.

Those last two sentences could favor Knol over blogs—if, in fact, Knol turns out to work that way. As of late February 2009, Schnell's article has been viewed just over 330 times. Here's the sum total of the comments: "good article! professional." Which is to say: Knol will only work as a post-publication review medium if it is *used* heavily—and that isn't always (or usually) the case.

I haven't seen many commentaries on Knol since August-September 2008. Clearly, a lot of people have added a lot of content—some of it good, some of it pretty awful. Will it become a major force (not a "Wikipedia-killer" but an alternative source people will commonly check)? That's hard to say.

My closing note here is one of those I find most frustrating: "Chuck Knol," by Farhad Manjoo, published September 22, 2008 on *Slate*. The subtitle is "Why Google's online encyclopedia will never be as good as Wikipedia," but Manjoo goes for the throat immediately. After noting a pair of very dissimilar articles on Sarah Palin, and that one of the two appears to have been copied from *Wikipedia*, Manjoo offers this:

Knol is a wasteland of such articles: text copied from elsewhere, outdated entries abandoned by their creators, self-promotion, spam, and a great many old college papers that people have dug up from their files. Part of Knol's problem is its novelty. Google opened the system for public contribution just a couple months ago, so it's unreasonable to expect too much of it at the moment; Wikipedia took years to attract the sort of contributors and editors who've made it the amazing resource it is now.

There's more—and much of it's conditioned on Manjoo's belief that *Wikipedia* is all we need, that its mechanisms work, that "We don't need the next Wikipedia. Today's version works amazingly well." Once you've crowned The King, you need only spit on Pretenders. Manjoo regards authorship as a critical flaw, as he does Google's sharing of ad revenue with authors. He says "Wikipedia is functionally anonymous"—and views that as a strength.

And yet, and yet. As Manjoo admits, "we read books and magazines not for their neutrality but for an author's clear point of view." Some of us find *Wikipedia's* flat, this-then-this-then-that, intentionally uninflected style to get in the way of understanding. "So what's wrong with encouraging...a reference guide that's both informative and stylishly written?" Here's Manjoo's answer, and the first sentence troubles me:

What's wrong is that perspective and style don't scale. Writing is hard even for the world's greatest wordsmiths; it requires time, thought, and care. Good writing also usually requires good editing. Because Wikipedia's NPOV guidelines set clear rules for what's allowed on the site, Wikipedia is easy to edit—anyone can look up the tenets of NPOV and then set about cleaning up contributions that stray from the preferred style.

Unfortunately, editing may be even harder than good writing—and *Wikipedia* “editing” tends not toward good style but towards an utter lack of style. The example of Knol's editing “problem” is an odd one: He notes a critical commentary on Tori Amos that he finds “vague and mushy”—but the *Wikipedia* solution would be to eliminate the commentary entirely. How, exactly, is that better? It does serve as a fine example of editing-toward-blandness, which *Wikipedia* does magnificently.

Conclusion? Knol won't displace *Wikipedia*—but it seems to have a plausible place, one where individual style and commentary are still welcome. I'm not thrilled with Manjoo's implication that perspective, style and good writing are to be avoided; utilitarianism can go too far. As a loyal reader of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, I can tell you that I find the strongly styled pieces with perspective and thoughtful writing prepared by David Perlman (the science editor, who has been writing forever) and some of the bylined local writers to be *much* more effective, as sources of understanding rather than just facts, than the “neutral” stuff from the wire services. Good writing, style and perspective improve understanding; surely there's a place for them on the web?

Catching Up with Citizendium

How's *Citizendium* doing these days? That depends on who you ask and your criteria. If you're looking for sheer number of articles, “badly” might be the right word. There are just over 10,000 “live articles” (those being worked on and those approved), but only 94 of those are approved as fully developed—“so well developed that it gives the *Citizendium* reader a good introduction and overview to its topic.” (All figures as of February 19, 2009.) There are more than 900 “developed” articles that aren't quite ready for approval.

That compares poorly to the 100,000+ things in Knol, but such a comparison is entirely pointless. It also compares poorly to the zillions and zillions of articles (given all the deletions and new items, I wouldn't attempt to suggest a current count) in *Wikipedia*—and given Larry Sanger's goals, that *might* be a meaningful comparison.

So how's it doing?

Looking at the statistics page, the growth in articles (of all statuses) is roughly linear over time. Indeed, the *rate* of article creation has been roughly flat (about 13-14 articles per day) for some time, when smoothed out to monthly figures.

For that matter, the edit rate (smoothed by month) is a little disturbing if you're touting *Citizendium*'s growth: it was leaping to nearly 900 edits a day in mid-2007, then dropped, then came back up to roughly 800 per day in the spring of 2008. The text on the graphics page attributes the “recent drop in daily edits to summer vacation; we'll be roaring back in September.” Unfortunately, that's not quite true—since the graph, unlike the text, is refreshed every month. After dropping to around 400 edits per day in early summer, the rate *did* rise in the fall—but only into the 400-450 range, lower than the summer dip in 2007. That's discouraging.

The number of authors active each month seems to have dropped off to a level around 125, with perhaps 50 of those doing more than 20 edits per month, perhaps 25 doing more than 100.

Total words in all articles has more than doubled in 19 months—from 4.1 million words in July 2007 to just under 9.8 million in January 2009. But the median length of articles has dropped a lot—from 562 words to 284 words.

Comparing April 2008 to February 2009, articles have increased from 6,100 to 9,900; developed articles from 778 to 900+; and *approved* articles from 56 to 94. I would compare total pageviews, but the automatically-generated Statistics page appears to be useless (and is labeled as “probably unreliable”), as it shows essentially *the same* number as last April—that is, 1.135 million, although that's now over 19,732 probable content pages instead of roughly 11,000. Since it's not plausible that there have been fewer than 1,000 page views in 10 months (or in 10 *days*, if the wiki's being used at all!), I'll say there have been millions of page views—but the site no longer says how many millions (that's not one of the human-generated items).

I've written about *Citizendium* several times (November 2006, March and September 2007, May 2008 and briefly in January 2009). The May 2008 essay, while generally supportive of the effort, questions the adherence to an unsigned consensus approach (even as contributors are expected to use real names, so it's easier to determine who contributed to an article).

Now that I look at my small set of lead sheets for *Citizendium* items, I notice something else that's a bit disturbing: All of them are from the *Citizendium* blog.

Which mostly means that the site hasn't been mentioned much among libbloggers or the couple dozen others I normally follow. Doing a Google blogs search of recent postings elsewhere, I found pretty much what I expected: Dismissals of *Citizendium* either as a good idea that doesn't work or as a bad idea from the start. Some dismissals are way over the top ("Citizendium is a miserable failure"—one reason given is that it doesn't have an article on *Lost*). You get the monopoly lovers ("there's only room for one wiki-based encyclopedia"). You get the special interests—people who were ousted from *Citizendium* for bad behavior, where it turns out they'd previously been banned from *Wikipedia*. You don't get all that much: Google showed me 49 items from June 17, 2008 to February 19, 2009.

Quick conclusions?

- These are still early days—and, unquestionably, articles developed the *Citizendium* way will take longer to emerge than those tossed into *Wikipedia*.
- We seem to be in an extended lull, with linear growth in articles and text, a dropoff in editing and, apparently, no particular growth in usage. That's more than a little ominous—and maybe it reflects the relative paucity of effective publicity for *Citizendium*.
- While outright attacks on the very *idea* of a better *Wikipedia* have declined somewhat, the knives still come out fairly often. I continue to be surprised at the number of supposedly intelligent commentators who not only don't believe *Citizendium* will work (that's an opinion), but don't seem to believe it should be given a chance to do so.
- The issue of who contributed to an article continues to be interesting and, I believe, significant—and I'm finding that it's not always clear, at least once an article has been approved.
- "Authoritative" is a tricky word. There's a long draft article on "memory of water" that (as the son of an engineer and brother of a chemist) I find deeply disturbing, and an *approved* article on homeopathy that, while including a few disclaimers, is slanted very much in favor of homeopathic claims. (For example, it considers the similarity of homeopathic remedies and vaccinations both using "low doses of active ingredients," and says "the doses in homeopathic remedies are always *very* much lower"—but you have to go a lot further down in the article to learn the simple fact that most homeopathic remedies "are virtually certain to contain not even

a single molecule of the initial substance." (That's why "memory of water" is important.)

- Indeed, the "healing arts workgroup," dealing with "all articles that have a primary focus on topics that provide care to health problems," shows a partial list of articles—*almost all* "alternative" forms (chiropractic and massage therapy probably being the most mainstream. There's also a "health sciences workgroup," which appears to deal with mainstream medicine—and that creates an odd disjunction. One would think that the healing arts would include and, indeed, be primarily based on health science. One would, apparently, be misinformed.

A few items from the Citizendium blog

You'll find the blog at blog.citizendium.org. Most posts are by Larry Sanger. It's not a prolific blog; as of February 19, 2009, I see 14 posts in the last seven months. These notes are from a few of those posts and the attached comments. (I didn't realize how *young* Larry Sanger is: He turned 40 on July 16, 2008.)

On June 17, he posted a copy of the *Citizendium* "CZ:Myths and Facts" page, "devoted to correcting many errors about us." A few of those supposed myths and excerpts from the responses, with my comments (if any) in [brackets]:

- **Myth: we're experts-only.** Fact: we love experts—we admit it. And we want more of them. But this is still a remarkably open project. You can be an author with no degrees and only a basic facility with English... [M]ost reasonably well educated people have something to contribute to a project like this. Our youngest registered members are 13, and we have some active high school students who have done good work.
- **Myth: we're a top-down project, with expert editors giving orders to underlings.** Fact: no, we're very bottom-up. We're a *wiki*—really... You work on the articles you want to work on, when you want to work on them... [Referring to Eric Raymond's *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*]: We, too, are a bazaar. We have merely added "village elders" wandering the bazaar. Their welcome, moderating presence does not convert the project into a cathedral; it only helps make the bazaar a little less anarchical and unreliable.
- **Myth: we're Serious. We accept only your most careful, painstaking work.** Fact:... This is a work in progress, and we have fun! Yes, we

have a lot of overeducated people here, who are regularly writing really wonderful prose as if it costs them no effort. But we also have no problem whatsoever with you making a rough start on any topic, as long as somebody else will be able to pick up where you left off... [I'll admit that I've assumed *Citizendium* preferred careful, painstaking work—and maybe that's what I'd *like* to see, rather than the reality.]

- **Myth: since real names are required, nobody will participate. Maybe nobody should—participant privacy will be violated, as our bios will be accessible from Google!** Fact: the fact that we have 200+ participants every month makes it obviously false that nobody will participate in a project in which real names are required.... As to privacy, biographies are not indexed by Google (or any other search engine that respects the “noindex” tag)... We feel that the advantages of real names outweigh the small sacrifice of allowing our work-in-progress to be viewed publicly. On the one hand, using real names makes people behave themselves more civilly; on the other hand, it makes our articles more credible, since readers know that there are people willing to put their names behind them. [I think the requirement for real names is a key *advantage* of *Citizendium*—but, as I look at approved articles, it's not clear to me whether I'm seeing all the contributors; frankly, I'd rather see them listed as bylines, right on the article page. And unfortunately, if I'm reading the graphs right, “200+ participants” hasn't been true since June 2008, with the current number somewhere closer to 125. That's *not* the right trendline!]
- **Myth: since this is an academic project, we are not open to articles about pop culture.** [I never thought of *Citizendium* as an academic project, and there clearly are *some* articles about pop culture, though scarcely the sheer profusion of *Wikipedia*.]
- **Myth: there is no point to the *Citizendium*, because *Wikipedia* exists.** Fact: *Wikipedia* has uneven quality, and is extremely off-putting to most experts—indeed, to most people, period—who might otherwise contribute to it. We believe that, in the end, a lot more people will be comfortable with and attracted to the open, yet sensible CZ model. Some of us expect a tipping point to come in the next year or two, in which CZ will be flooded with more

and more people who are now firmly persuaded that we are a force to contend with. There is no danger whatsoever of our giving up. Your work here will be well used as part of a resource with tens of thousands, and then probably hundreds of thousands, of articles. Besides, we're sure you'll agree that the world can use more than one “go to” source for free reference information. We are the best hope for a real alternative! [“The next year or two” may be some time away, given current trends. Otherwise, the most interesting part here is the penultimate sentence: Far too many people *do not* agree that the world can use more than one wiki-based encyclopedia, apparently.]

- **Myth: most *Citizendium* articles are just copied from *Wikipedia*.** Fact: wrong. While we do allow people to copy *Wikipedia* articles here, we keep careful track of them, and by far most of our articles are completely original. Besides, many if not most of the articles that are sourced from *Wikipedia* are not counted in our CZ Live article count... [It seems clear that *Citizendium* really doesn't want warmed-over *Wikipedia* articles.]

The post has some interesting claims—for example, that there's no vandalism and little trolling on *Citizendium*, a striking statement damaged by the following “What other wiki can say that?” Well, the PALINET Leadership Network, for one, and almost any other wiki with double-verification editing requirements. A more important statement: “CZ articles are intended to be coherent narratives, not random grab-bags of facts.”

Interjection: At this point in writing this semi-narrative, I was going to look up “Kingston Trio” in *Wikipedia*, having read a quite good single-author draft article in *Citizendium*. I used the Firefox search-box pull-down to select *Wikipedia* (I also have Worldcat.org, IMDB, and the primary search engines on the menu)—and, since I was on a *Citizendium* page at that point, was offered the opportunity to add *Citizendium* to the menu. Which I did. Very snazzy way of insinuating yourself as a lookup source, if that was CZ's doing! In comparing the two—one almost entirely by a fully-named author, the other mostly by a series of pseudonyms—it's clear that the CZ article has better narrative flow and is more coherent, although the *Wikipedia* “grab-bag of facts” (which also includes commentary) includes more information.

Jumping ahead several months, Sanger tried to capitalize on a kerfuffle in which *Wikipedia* editing was blocked in part of the UK for several days because of an

uncensored reproduction of an album cover with a naked “pre-pubescent girl in a sexually suggestive pose.” Frankly, some of this strikes me as low blows:

Does it bother you that Wikipedia reproduces an image that is, arguably, child pornography? It does me. Now, I think the Internet ought to be safe for porn, but not child porn... I don't think that a general encyclopedia, used by millions of school kids...should host sexually suggestive pictures of naked pre-pubescent girls. That ought to be obvious to Wikipedians, and the fact that it's not is yet more evidence that not all is well in Wikipedia-land.

Perhaps it's time to remind the world that there is a wonderful new, and growing, alternative: *Citizenium* (CZ)...

Let me sum up the case for CZ. We are still around, we're still growing, and we're steadily becoming a viable alternative to Wikipedia. We are small, but vigorous. We have no vandalism. We have grown steadily over the one-and-a-half years since our public launch...I won't bore you (again) with the reasons, but I think that there will come a tipping point for us, after which a lot more people will know about us and swell our ranks. And they should! We aren't going away, and even at the current rate, we're going to have hundreds of thousands of articles in the long run...

And, of course, the cover of *Virgin Killer* will never appear on the pages of CZ.

Now, if you are harrumphing (rather ridiculously, I might add, but that's just me I suppose) that of course the cover of *Virgin Killer* should not be “censored,” and that Wikipedia is better than CZ insofar as it doesn't feature such “censorship,” then let me point something out. Let me point out the wonderful, delicious fact that you can stick with Wikipedia. The two projects naturally attract delightfully complementary groups of people. The people who want to hide behind pseudonyms, who want to play governance games in order to push their biases, and who want to prove their maturity and enlightenment by putting up pictures of naked little girls, can stick with Wikipedia. I'll be delighted if they do. But I think that in the long run, you'll see that a lot more people will want to contribute under the more sensible CZ system...

Perhaps not surprisingly, since this was in December 2008, the first comment noted that the number of active authors seems to be shrinking, not growing—and that CZ might have started a little too late. The second, by Steven Walling, is stronger: “This post is an immature and reprehensible attempt to poach readers and contributors by licking the boots of moral tyrants.” Walling, who finds the album cover in question “detestable” and tried to get it deleted, notes that it's not child pornography in the eyes of the law, since it's legal-

ly distributable. Walling labels Sanger a censor. (He also calls Sanger “God-King of Citizenium”; it's fair to assume Walling is no great friend of the effort.) In response to another question, Sanger cites the policy that would prevent display of the album cover: there's a “family-friendliness policy.” (Walling shows up again, defending inclusion of explicit material even while saying “a lot of it isn't appropriate for children”—so should filter software lock out *Wikipedia*?) Another CZ supporter felt, as I do, that the post is a low blow.

A January 23, 2009 post is interesting: “Why wiki knowledge projects are so fascinating to so many.” He lists quite a range of disciplines (with notes on why each one is interested), and considers the more general question. His answer, in part:

There's a good reason. It's because of what wiki knowledge projects *are*.

They are a new thing under the sun: international communities of volunteers that collaboratively produce free knowledge, information of use to everyone, distributed online; and, in the form of *Wikipedia* and soon the *Citizenium* too, they are remarkably huge and well-used. The mere description is enough to get a whole bunch of people excited about these communities, even if they don't understand them very well.

But there is an even more essential explanation: **wiki knowledge projects are an enormous coming-together of people to understand the world**. Long ago in the 1990s and in the dark ages before that, learning and imparting knowledge socially was as it were fractured... But the Internet provides a way that everyone, globally, of all ages, of all professions, of various educational attainments, can participate together in the same (virtual) place and at the same time, in both the creation and consumption of a new sort of knowledge project.

I think most people have vaguely, but not quite, realized that we are coming to grips with a new kind of **knowledge institution**—one that has the potential to be as powerful as any that has come before it, or more so...

There are more posts, but that may be enough. (Did I mention that Sanger is a philosopher by education?) In some cases, the comments are as interesting as the posts. In early February 2009, for example, Eugene van der Pjill noted that Sanger's one-year report (in October 2007) had some ambitious projections for growth, but doesn't see them happening and refers to “its present decline.” Sanger is having none of that: He stands by his projection of explosive growth and thinks van der Pjill is painting “an unduly pessimistic and puzzlingly unfair picture.” I'll admit that it's the picture I saw from the same page; frankly, at this stage

of the game, *linear* growth in the number of articles is surprising, as you'd still expect geometric growth.

Maybe I'm also being too negative, possibly because I'd love to be a lot more positive. Then again, I haven't contributed to *Citizenium*; there's only so much writing one semi-employed person can do, and I haven't found that either it or *Wikipedia* fits within my limits and preferences. I continue to wish CZ well and hope it becomes at least a plausible complement, if perhaps not full competitor, to *Wikipedia*.

Wikia is not Wikipedia

Nor does Wikia—Jimbo Wales' for-profit company.—own Wikipedia. It's owned by the Wikimedia Foundation, a nonprofit. But Wikia does trade on the good name of Wikipedia, at least indirectly (where you see Wales mentioned, you'll see “founder of Wikipedia” or “cofounder of Wikipedia” not far behind).

Right now, Wikia is mostly lots of specific wikis in the areas of gaming, entertainment, sports, toys, humor, etc. The Wikia site lists the 16 biggest wikis (in terms of content), with 17,000 to more than 70,000 articles each—and while they do include a recipes wiki, a psychology wiki, a genealogy wiki (“Familypedia”) and the sometimes-humorous *Uncyclopedia*, most of them are on role-playing games, the Star Wars and Star Trek universes (two wikis each) and the like. “Over 29,000 articles on the popular *Yu-Gi-Oh!* franchise.” The mind reels. From what I can see, article counts include huge numbers of extreme stubs (“articles” with a title, a category and nothing else). I have no idea how many Wikia wikis there are in all, but there are “thousands” of Wikia wikis just in the entertainment category. Most of these are “fan-created”—you write the content and do the work. The difference between Wikia wikis and *Wikipedia*: There's advertising—lots of advertising—and Wikia takes the proceeds.

I've seen the term “digital sharecropping” used for this sort of for-profit “crowdsourced” enterprise. It's the wrong term. Sharecroppers got a pretty substantial portion of the crops they labored to produce (sometimes half). I don't see any suggestion at Wikia that those ad revenues are shared with contributors. That ain't sharecropping, digital or otherwise; it's unpaid labor. (Nothing wrong with unpaid labor, although I'd rather volunteer for a charitable agency or at least a nonprofit.)

I have nine printouts and lead sheets, mostly related to Wikia Search, Wikia's odd effort to take on Google by crowdsourcing search ranking itself. But I notice an oddity similar to the CZ cluster, and maybe it shouldn't be surprising: All the items are from a single blog, in this

case Seth Finkelstein's *InfoThought* (sethf.com/infthought/blog/). Searching that blog for “Wikia search” yields a lot of results; he's covered it in depth.

Why is all my Wikia Search stuff from one source? Maybe because, despite lots of praise when Wales started talking up the idea in 2007, the reality has been...tepid. When the public availability began in January 2008, SearchEngineLand called it “really just yet another crappy search service.” The more you read of the whole basic idea, the less it seems to make much sense in the real world.

How bad is the situation with Wikia Search? As of February 2009—13 months after the public launch—Wales has admitted that Wikia Search *doesn't use its own search engine*. It's using Yahoo! BOSS (Build your Own Search Service) to support its “user-editing, community-control” front end. Why? Because, after considerably more than a year (including pre-launch time), the backend wasn't good enough.

Just for fun, I did an ego search on “Walt Crawford”—with the quotes. In addition to five Google-supplied ads (two above the results, three on the side), I get these as the top results: Walt Kelly (yes, his middle name was Crawford), the Watley Review (?), the Wikipedia article on *The Public-Access Computer Systems Review*—and, in fourth place, my own site and other results that seem sensible enough. Watley Review? In second place? I'm bemused that the site shows a *count* of all searches done to date—fewer than 9.9 million when I did the test, with about one new search every two or three seconds. Somehow, I don't believe Google is worried.

Masthead

Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large, Volume 9, Number 5, Whole Issue 115, ISSN 1534-0937, a journal of libraries, policy, technology and media, is written and produced by Walt Crawford, Director and Managing Editor of the PALINET Leadership Network.



Cites & Insights is sponsored by YBP Library Services, <http://www.ybp.com>.

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