Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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Perspective

On Disconnecting and Reconnecting

The seeds of this essay date back to May 13, 2008, when Doug Johnson posted "The beauty of disconnectedness—Ken Rodoff" at *Blue Skunk Blog*. But they really date back a lot further than that—at least to the 2002 Charleston Conference, during which I challenged a speaker who said none of us has time for contemplation any more.

The Beauty of Disconnecting

The Johnson post is a comment on a comment. On May 1, 2008, Johnson wrote a post about Twitter—"Twitiquette is not enough." (Johnson, a school librarian, was in student information system training and used Twitter as part of that. "I really, really, really was hoping to get hooked and discover what all the educational excitement is about this tool." Instead, he found himself asking questions about being "Minnesota nice" in Twitter—and why anyone would use it. The questions are interesting, but *this isn't about Twitter*—at least not directly.)

One comment was from Ken Rodoff—and, as Johnson did, I'm going to quote it verbatim:

> Twitter is a thing. Just another thing.
>
> Twitter use may represent a less-than-dedicated employee, but at home isn't it less of a time-suck than, oh, say, SL?
>
> What I find most confusing is how people can dedicate so much time AFTER work hours,AT HOME! to SL, UStream, WeStream?
>
> Am I the only one with kids? Am I the only one trying to have a F2F with my spouse (I mean, a lot of people sure do love the F2Fs, you'd think they practice them in their homes)? Am I the only one watching Lost? Hell's Kitchen? The Office? Please don't answer those last three…I'm well aware I live, at times, a less than esoteric existence…but I'm watching them with my wife, and we're even talking about them.
>
> And what about reading? When's anyone getting that done?
>
> All I know is that this soporific soul of mine needs / craves / begs for sleep. Begs for balance. Begs for an all-inclusive life, but every time I add one thing, I've jettisoned another.
>
> Take the origin of this comment:
>
> 1. Log on to Twitter
>
> 2. Click on Darren Draper
>
> 3. Click on the link to his blog
>
> 4. Click on his 'hey, read this' little blue widget
>
> 5. Read your post
>
> 6. Think about your point
>
> 7. Read the comments (okay, only two…wanna guess?)
>
> 8. Type my comment
>
> Total time so far (Verizon Fios Internet…just thought you should know): 12 minutes.

Inside This Issue

> So, what did I lose over these past 12 minutes:
>
> 1. The washer to dryer exchange that my load of darks so desperately craves.
>
> 2. Making lunch for work tomorrow.
>
> 3. Cleaning something in this house…anything in this house (myself included).
>
> 4. A chance to talk with my wife as all 4 of my children sleep.
>
> 5. A peregrination
>
> 6. The top of the 9th inning of the Red Sox - Twins game.
>
> 7. The beauty of disconnectedness
>
> And it's #7 here that irks me most of all because it's the constant addition of things that makes me realize how much I had in the first place.
>
> When I think about Twitter I'm ashamed of myself. When I check Feedburner I'm mortified at

> who I've become. When I think about what I should blog about I near tears.
>
> All of the aforementioned make me realize I've neglected my children, my wife, and in its purest form, my life.
>
> Maybe I'll blog about it.
>
> Advertise it on Twitter.
>
> And see if my Technorati rank goes up.
>
> Really now, just as Twitter asks: what are we doing?

Before you start saying "That's just Walt putting down Twitter again" or anything of the sort: This isn't about Twitter. I spend zero time on Twitter directly (and the same time on SL!)—but if you substitute "FriendFeed," I understand the problem and the temptation. I particularly appreciate #7.

I'll skip Johnson's admiring quotation of a Clay Shirky passage that I find elitist and go on to the rest of Johnson's response:

> Like Ken, I wonder if I spend too much time online at the expense of other activities. A friend observed that replying to each comment left on my blog:
>
> > ... a personal comment just to say "thanks" [for leaving a comment] makes me wonder if the blogger actually has a life!
>
> Well, I think I have a life. It doesn't include watching much TV, playing golf, or doing as much volunteer work as I should. While Ken and I both have four kids, the LWW and I are empty nesters. (Whew!) So can we gauge by the amount of time we spend on line if we need to "get a life?"
>
> Subjectively, we could place all our leisure time activities on scale. The low end might be watching Gilligan's Island re-runs (preferably while drinking a beer, wearing sweats, and in a prone position) and on the high end might be tutoring disadvantaged children, comforting lepers, or coaching one's daughter's hockey team. (I believe the last two also qualify one for canonization.)
>
> Blog writing, commenting, responding to comments is, I suppose, akin to pretending to be an elf. But if feels productive rather than consumptive and is one hell of a lot more entertaining than 95% of television programming.
>
> I guess I would even Twitter before I would watch Desperate Housewives.
>
> Are some uses of leisure time better than others?

The odd thing here is that the title of the post has been lost somewhere along the way. Rodoff clearly sees some virtue in being disconnected. So do I. I'll suggest Johnson may be drawing the wrong comparison when comparing Twittering to watching TV—since, realistically, being *truly* disconnected means being off the tube as well.

I watch *Desperate Housewives*. I don't Twitter. I guess I've made my judgment. In fact, while we watch roughly an hour of TV a night (some old, some new), I rarely do *anything* on the computer after dinner, and almost never after 8 p.m. Would I be better off on FriendFeed than watching TV?

Not the right question. I think the right question here is: Am I spending enough time connected to the physical world and disconnected from various virtual worlds (which include reading)? Contemplation is part of that time. Peregrinations—great word, and my wife and I do them almost daily—are another. Meditation might be another. Sitting and staring at the window (or lying on the September grass) might be one, although that slides into contemplation pretty easily.

Johnson got 16 comments—and, as is typical for most blogs, all came within a week of the post. The very first one was on the money. In part:

> Oh, free time. It's YOUR time. It's FREE. Deciding between Twittering (Tweeting?) or watching a ball game sounds equally silly and boring to me. I'm sure you would think what I do in my free time is boring and silly. Who cares?

That may be all there is to say (but don't get your hopes up). I'm not about to suggest to Johnson that he reduce his online time; that's none of my business. The second, from Jane L. Hyde, was equally to the point (excerpted):

> Well, we all make our own decisions. I don't watch TV, but I watch movies sometimes. And I read a lot. And I like to garden and feed the birds. And take pictures of stuff. And listen to music... Oh, and I hang out with my grandchildren and their parents and listen to their dad play piano and talk about his art projects, and I go to the little guys' and girl's ball games, because the kids grow up so fast... I don't do SL and can't imagine getting involved in Twitter, and I don't keep up my work blogs very well...and I love my personal blogging... That's my rant. If we all rant then we'll get one thing we very much need from the Wonderful Web—the assurance that our struggles with time are not our individual burden but something we all have.... There's no One Right Way, is there? Just the daily muddle of life and trying to hold on to some kind of vision.

This one's interesting because Hyde is disconnected from the computer (and from media) and connected with life a *lot*. Johnson responded to both, beginning: "You both sound like decidedly sane and healthy persons with good values. Good to have at least a few of your type commenting on the Blue Skunk ;-)"

What I missed in most comments was any sense that being disconnected was viewed as a desirable thing some of the time. People focused on how they use their time, whether it's the right use, whether they're doing enough or too much new technology, etc.

Should Tech get a Turnoff?

Fast-forward to January 7, 2010, when Julie O'Dell posted "Open thread: Should tech get a turn-off?" at *ReadWriteWeb*. Excerpts:

> Being a technology blogger is like having a license for an around-the-clock gadget and Web addiction.
>
> No one expects you to leave your house during the day. You're allowed to spend the majority of your life in front of a glowing screen, and flipping out over WiFi issues is par for the course. And you're never far from the Web, since your mobile is always in hand when you have to leave your laptop behind for some incomprehensible reason.
>
> But even with such a license in hand, I have to make a case for periodically disconnecting. **What do you think?**
>
> More and more, I am trying to set aside unplugged hours and even days for Internet-free, mobile-free, "Luddite time." Time for asking a stranger for directions, time for talking to the people you're with rather than the people you "follow," time for interacting with the world around you in ways that don't include clicking, scrolling or downloading. Time that's increasingly being destroyed by smart phones, "super" phones and whatever "super duper" devices are in the pipeline....

After suggesting that sitting in front of those glowing screens so much "can't be good for us as living, breathing organismsm" O'Dell notes:

> Another detriment to a constantly wired life is that you're not truly present with the folks around you every day, and you begin to forget how polite, normal people communicate. You become too easily distracted by notifications from your mobile, glazing over and tuning out to parse your RSS feeds while real conversations are going on without you…
>
> And very often, a preoccupation with the Web leads to a total loss of perspective… Not typically the most empathetic people, we begin to give more attention and emotion to minor tech events (Google Wave, anyone?) than to major world events. If it didn't trend on Twitter and hit Digg's front page, we tend to not notice or care…

She also notes that being constantly online is "probably fairly bad for your health" and, after saying she plans to spend more time offline, asks for reader opinions. The 33 comments offer an interesting range, beginning with one I find sad: A man and his wife went to Monterey for a long weekend, left their laptops and iPhones behind…and "came back a day a half early." Another turns off the internet every Saturday. Some only seem to go offline to watch TV. Then there are the devoted disconnectors, like Maria Lantin:

> I go offline for 2-3 weeks in the summer and periodically for a day or so. The single days feel good but the 2-3 weeks are amazing. After about 5 days I start feeling like there's so much room in my mind, like I could do anything, start anything, read a book, dance, go for looooog walks. It's pretty damn mind blowing.

Until our last major vacation we were *always* offline when cruising. Fortunately, most cruise ships now have wifi and relatively inexpensive internet access. Unfortunately, most cruise ships now have wifi and relatively inexpensive internet access. I *love* the idea of going offline entirely for two weeks—and, someday soon, I will. (Another commenter, who says he should disconnect more often, *does* take at least a week's vacation every summer with no phone, laptop, iPod, TV, etc. "It takes me about 72 hours to fully feel unplugged, but the rest of the week is greatness.")

Some people can't imagine turning off their smartphones—but others see the point:

> It's pretty much essential. I spend far too much time checking Twitter, and have recently had to enforce a time-out rule, to take a walk or read in silence or something. Yesterday I was netless most of the day and it was great! Ended up playing the bass and violin for a while and went for a long walk [albeit in bloody freezing snow] with my daughter.

Carri Bugbee may "crave some time off in a country without broadband," but might also be a poster child for the problem:

> In this time of rapid change, it's actually a little scary to go offline for a bit. You could come back and find out Twitter changed its essential functionality or Apple released the most amazing device the world has ever seen.

To which I would probably say "So? You'll find out about it—and even if you don't, *you'll live*."

Some techies recognize the problem—but go with it anyway. Take this one:

> It got worse with the iPhone, I have to say. There's always something to check or look up or play with, usually much more interesting than reality, and it's right there, all the time. Relationships can and do suffer. But then again, you can take my iPhone when you pry it from my cold dead hands, as the saying goes. So I strive for balance, and pieces like this post really help.
>
> So, thanks for writing this and reminding us all, once again, of the need to disengage from the online world at times. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I have a bunch of unread email…

Sigh. "Usually much more interesting than reality."

Jack Abbott brought it back to what I find most interesting:

> …The problem I have is that we seem to think it's all about connectedness, primarily digital and being able to remove ourselves from that if just for a few moments. It's my thinking that it's a whole lot more than that and that it's really nothing new in the GRAND scheme of things. Yogis have been telling us for generations, indeed centuries that to achieve enlightenment we need to quiet our minds. To truly see we need to close our eyes, to live rather than exist we need to leap ahead of our physical existence and peek into the metaphysical. I'm now thinking that what we've been calling a need to disconnect is really a need to reconnect, but at an entirely different level. Reengage with nature, with God, with love with ourselves…

Getting Less Done

Leo Babauta posted "Get Less Done: Stop Being Productive and Enjoy Yourself" sometime in August 2009 at *zenhabits*. While I could argue that being *truly* productive—getting your *best* work done, not just your most—requires disconnecting at times or at least getting away from multitasking, Babauta makes good points. Since his blog is, according to his own statement, uncopyrighted, I'm quoting the whole thing.

> There's too much emphasis these days on productivity, on hyperefficiency, on squeezing the most production out of every last minute.
>
> People have forgotten how to relax. How to be lazy. How to enjoy life.
>
> Try this: read some of the best books, magazines and blogs on productivity, and see how many will tell you how to get the most out of the time you spend waiting, how to maximize your energy, how to make use of your commute time, how to make every meeting more effective, how to get more out of your workday, how to crank out more widgets.
>
> People are working longer hours, constantly checking their inboxes, constantly focused on Getting More Done.
>
> But to what end?
>
> Are we producing more in order to make more money for corporations? Or to make more money for ourselves? Or just to hold on to our jobs—jobs we might not like anyway?
>
> It's possible we're trying to get more done because we love doing it—and if that's the case, that's wonderful. But even then, working long hours and neglecting the rest of life isn't always the best idea. Sometimes it's good to Get Less Done, to relax, to breathe.
>
> Let's take a brief look at how to do that.
>
> **The Beauty of Getting Less Done**
>
> While working long hours and cranking out a lot of widgets is one way to go, another is to work on important things, to create amazing things, and then to relax.
>
> I'm not saying you should surf the web all day, or take naps all afternoon … but why not? Why not enjoy a lovely nap? Why not take a long lunch and then a siesta? Why not enjoy a good book?
>
> I get people who ask me all the time, "What should I do on those days when I can't seem to be productive?"
>
> My answer: "Enjoy it!"
>
> Sure, we need to produce sometimes, especially if we have to pay the bills, but an obsession with productivity is unhealthy. When you can't get yourself to be productive, relax. Let go of the need to be hyperefficient. Stop feeling guilty about enjoying yourself.
>
> But what if you can't motivate yourself … ever? Sure, that can be a problem. But if you relax, and enjoy yourself, you'll be happier. And if you work when you get excited, on things you're excited about, and create amazing things, that's motivation. Not forcing yourself to work when you don't want to, on things you don't want to work on — motivation is doing things you love, when you get excited.
>
> It's how I work every day. I work on lots of projects, on things I really care about, with people I enjoy working with. (See my guide to becoming self-employed if you'd like to do the same.)
>
> **How to Relax**
>
> It's funny that I'd even need a section on this topic—how to relax. It seems like it should be something we all know how to do. After all, aren't we constantly searching for ways to be less lazy? And

doesn't it logically follow that we already know how to be lazy?

It's possible you already have mastered the art of relaxing. And if so, congratulations. You are a Get Less Done master. All you need now, perhaps, is to let go of the guilt you might feel, and enjoy this relaxation.

But for those of you who have forgotten how to relax, you're going to have a tougher time. Here's a hint: don't stress out about it. If you don't know how to relax, it's OK. Breathe. Take it slowly. One step at a time.

Some steps:

- Take 5 minutes to go outside for a walk. Breathe the fresh air.
- Give yourself more time to do things. More time means less rush.
- After work, get outside, take in nature, run around if you can.
- Play. Play like a child. Play with a child. Play when you work.
- Give yourself a day off. Sleep. Watch TV. Eat bon bons.
- At work, give yourself an hour off. Don't try to be productive. Just have fun.
- Work with someone who is exciting. Get excited about a project.
- Take evenings off. Seriously, no working in the evenings.
- Get a massage.
- Breathe.

Step by step, learn to relax. Learn that productivity isn't everything. Creating is great, but you don't need to fill every second with work. When you do work, get excited, pour yourself into it, work on important, high-impact tasks…and then relax.

I had that flagged for use in a future MAKING IT WORK "Balance" piece—but it fits better here, particularly since it's not about librarianship or libraries. It's about life, and not only disconnecting from online at times but disconnecting from "productivity" at times.

If I was going to nitpick, I'd suggest that relaxing and being lazy aren't at all the same thing. People who are good at relaxing aren't necessarily lazy; they may also be balanced. I don't claim to be balanced and I'm not as good at relaxing as I should be—but disconnecting (or reconnecting) frequently helps. (As for laziness, I'm as lazy as the best of them.) Incidentally, the original article is littered with links, mostly to other *zenhabits* posts. You might want to check them out, if "Zen" doesn't offend your productive mainstream sensibilities.

Being Offline: The Swartz Transformation

Aaron Swartz was offline for a full month. He wrote about it in a July 24, 2009 post at *Raw Thought* (www.aaronsw.com/weblog/). How was being offline for a month?

> It was a huge, incredible, transformative experience. Those 30 days felt like six months. My habits changed, my relationships changed, my identity changed, my personality changed—hell, the physical shape of my body changed dramatically. I went through four legal pads trying to describe what it was like. I'm still not sure I really know.
>
> One thing is clear, though: my normal life style isn't healthy. This doesn't seem like the kind of thing that requires a break to learn. I imagine people with unhealthy lifestyles know they're unhealthy. They come home after work and say "I can't go on like this," they cry randomly in elevators. But I didn't know. Life online is practically the only life I know… For most of my life, this has been it: a jumble of interruptions and requests and jobs and people, largely carried out alone. It never let up, so I never saw anything different. How was I to know there was anything wrong?
>
> I used to think of myself as just an unhappy person… But that's not how I was offline. I loved people—everyone from the counter clerk to the old friends I bumped into on the street. And I loved to go for walks and exercise in the gym…
>
> But most of all, I felt not just happy, but firmly happy—solid, is the best way I can put it. I felt like I was in control of my life instead of the other way around, like its challenges just bounced off me as I kept doing what I wanted. Normally I feel buffeted by events, a thousand tiny distractions nagging at the back of my head at all times. Offline, I felt in control of my own destiny. I felt, yes, serene…
>
> I don't know how I'm going to carve a life away from the world's constant demands and distractions. I don't know how I'm going to balance all the things I want to do with the pressures and responsibilities they bring. But after my month off, I do know one thing: I can't go on like this. So I'm damn well going to try.

The rest of the post is worth reading. I'd like to hope most of us don't need to take a full month offline—but extended periods of disconnectedness, of connecting *with ourselves* and with those around us in the non-online world, might be essential and are certainly worthwhile. (Most comments were supportive. One was so astonishingly *not* that—well, you'll have to read it yourself. Among other things, this person seems to think that if we spend time offline, we're saying people on the nets aren't worth our time. Balance, people, *balance!*)

Slow Down People!

That's what Andrew "Andy" Burkhardt suggests in a November 17, 2009 post at *Information Tyrannosaur* (andyburkhardt.com). He was thinking about his own "information consumption"—a dozen Firefox tabs, Tweetdeck running in the background, Outlook notifying him of email every few minutes, the Blackberry asking for attention.

> I do find about all sorts of interesting things…but what is getting one bit of information after another really doing for me?…
>
> It seems to me that there is much to be gained from slowing down in our information consumption. When we just skip from blog post to blog post, tweet to tweet, we get information, but it never becomes knowledge and we don't use that information. That's one reason why I blog, so I can synthesize different thoughts and make a personal connection. Thinking about something and then writing about it makes it more concrete. That's also why I find it necessary to take time out when I'm feeling overwhelmed and simply drink some tea, or write ideas down in a notebook, or watch a meteor shower.
>
> Slowing down allows you to make connections between those eight articles you just read in your feed reader. It allows you to internalize pieces of information that you otherwise might simply forget or not really understand. That's why in our information literacy program at Champlain we devote part of one session to talking about slowing down and reflecting. We ask students how or if they slow down to make connections. I feel it is something that is extremely important to discuss when talking about information.

One way to slow down—one that's pretty explicit in the second quoted paragraph—is to disconnect from time to time. If you do it often enough and effectively enough (which probably means not *trying* to do it effectively!), you may avoid becoming overwhelmed. I should note that Burkhardt's question in the first paragraph may offend some neophiles, those who believe they're "on top of things" because they're always online, always multitasking, always finding out the latest whatever. But most of those neophiles in the library field gave up on me—and on a medium as antique as a journal/magazine, even if it *is* distributed online—a long time ago. If you're somewhere in the middle, well, think about it. Preferably when you're not online.

Notes on Work and Play

It's quite possible that I learned about *zenhabits* from Leigh Anne Vraibel, who blogs at *Library Alchemy*. Since she uses LAV in her blogs, I'll use that here—and LAV posted "Library Workaholics Anonymous: Notes on Work and Play" on November 17, 2009. (Yes, that's the same day as Burkhardt's post. No, I don't perceive a direct connection, but Gaia works in mysterious ways.)

LAV calls herself a "library workaholic"—she has a hard time saying no, she gets to work early, she stays late, she struggles to make time for breaks and lunch. "Every day I get at least twenty brilliant ideas that are going to inevitably result in more work for myself, so of course I try to do them all at once. Finally, whenever I try to set boundaries, say no to assignments, and delegate tasks to other people, I end up caving faster than a master spelunker the first time I meet any resistance."

But she also *plays* hard—and tries to incorporate play into her work. She also deliberately tries to avoid taking things too seriously.

> It sounds…sacrilegious, almost, the idea that we could take anything we do too seriously. And yet, there it is in a squirmy nutshell, the need to be devoted and passionate without becoming a monomaniac, the kind of person people avoid at parties because they can't stop talking about library service for five seconds.

She hadn't been posting much—partly because there's lot of work, but also because she "sacrificed library blogging in favor of play." This play was in the form of NaNoWriMo (oh, go look it up—I'm not going to get into that one again), and that's a form of online play—but it's *still* a form of disconnecting. The same post points to several *zenhabits* posts and says of that blog:

> The overriding theme of the blog is achieving more by letting go, which sounds counter-intuitive. I suggest, though, that you approach this notion the same way you approached the last Library 2.0 innovation you tried–test it out for a month, see how it works, discard if necessary.
>
> How do you know if you've got the work-play fulcrum set right for you? You'll know. You'll know

> because, in spite of everything, you will feel joyful, even when you are not always happy. If library work doesn't make you feel joyful at the core, well…that's a blog post for another day.

Powering Down for Reflection

Steven Bell seems to be one of those hyperproductive librarians—a weekly column, several blogs, conferences, more. He wrote this post on January 12, 2010 at *ACRLog*, at the end of "the break" for most academic librarians—and noted that people didn't seem to take breaks from electronic communication. Neither did he. But he recognizes the need: He goes camping once a year with no connectivity and no computer.

That may not be enough—and some people don't even manage that level of disconnecting/reconnecting. In fact, Bell *does* disconnect much more frequently:

> I do get the value of unplugging–if not for days on end–at least for specific periods of time during the day. I set aside several periods where I unplug. Any time I go to the gym, usually two or three times during the work week, I leave my cell phone behind so I'm not checking email or keeping up with social networks. I do listen to music which helps me contemplate. During this time I often find myself coming up with solutions to work challenges or ideas for new blog posts or essays… Studies have found that when we free our minds from any complex thought activity, some of our best ideas will emerge from the ether. I also unplug at breakfast and dinner and just take time to read the daily paper. But I know I should probably be setting aside additional hours for powering down.

He cites the *ReadWriteWeb* post discussed earlier in this rambling essay and notes Kenley Neufeld's practice of going offline for several days at a time, "which I always find interesting since he is one of the most socially-connected academic librarians I know."

> So we certainly have good reasons to unplug and power down—for all-important contemplation, to improve our health and mental sharpness, and to provide times during the day when we can concentrate on sustained reading and writing without the constant interruption of email, status updates and tweets.

Neufeld found the post intriguing, since he really doesn't have daily tech-free times. Another commenter found an unplanned disconnect "very rejuvenating" and that she came back "sharper and more alert than I've been in a while." "ssmith," who works a 4/10 week, stays offline in the evenings and on weekends and thinks that's great. And "Sarah" took a disconnected week-long trip to Paris and found it energizing.

Then there's Ying:

> It's getting hard for me to imagine that I could live without internet for a single day—not only for work, but for life, and entertainment. For instance, how to even pick up a movie that you want to watch in the theater if you don't check the trailer online?

Marilyn Pukkila had an answer for the latter: she listens to NPR or asks her friends. We read the San Francisco *Chronicle* with its large and excellent staff of movie and culture critics—but of course, that's old hat.

The Disconnect

Finally, jump back to February 12, 2010, when Andy wrote "The Disconnect" at *Agnostic, Maybe*. (Which is, by the way, a *great* name for a blog!) In Andy's case, he got a disconnect without planning one: The power went out. After sending out a couple of text messages and contacting the power company, the family "hunkered down in front of the fireplace." His wife spent most of the night reading.

> I had a book as well that I could have gotten, but I was in no mood for reading. I wasn't really in any mood for *doing* anything, really; I was just listening to the wind outside. Laying on the couch, with the crackle of the fire, eyes looking out the back window area watching the tree sway in the wind.

He went out to shovel some snow—partly to *do something*—and found himself in nature.

> Once outside, it was bright in only the way that a winter landscape can be. The dark trees against the cloudy sky made everything stand out as I shoveled my back to the driveway. It was apparent very early on that this was going to be a short trip outside if I wanted to continue to shovel; the heavy wet snow was enough to make any snow removal arduous. I didn't want to take out the snowblower since there is a lot of driveway under trees and I wasn't feeling that adventurous. So, in standing under the eaves of the garage, shoveling every now and again, I would listen for the wind to kick up. You could hear it coming through the trees from far away, so I'd stop, watch, and listen.
>
> Near and far, you could hear the sounds of branches snapping, their popping and crunching coming through the winter air. Some were so close I'd peer through the darkness to see if I locate the

> source; others were like distant gunshots, their noise taken away by the wind…

Then he went back inside and got ready for bed (on the couch, near the fireplace).

> There, lying on the couch, listening once again to the fire next to me and the storm above me, my situation dawned upon me.
>
> I had not been so utterly disconnected in a long while. No computer, no text (saving phone charge, just in case), no games, no television, no technology whatsoever. I had no idea what time it was; I couldn't even remember the date. As I lay there, my mind was still churning but without the usual external stimuli. It was like a party where the noise level suddenly dies down and all but one person shuts up so their voice carries throughout the room. In this case, my mind was the only voice left.
>
> And so, as I lay under many layers of blankets, I just let my mind roam.
>
> I can't really say that I thought of anything deep and profound, but that I didn't realize how much of my day had some form of technological input. Even when I'm out and about away from the computer screen, I text on a fairly regular basis with a number of different people. It didn't matter where I was, there was always a level of connectedness that was present. With the power loss and a driveway full of snow, it was gone. It was a disconnect that I hadn't experienced in years…
>
> As much as I would think to avoid putting a moral or conclusion on this experience, it feels right to say that I need more kind of this time. While it could be at home, the temptations of the household technology make it a harder sell. I should think that, in conjunction with my new year's resolution to get out of the house and be more social, I should be looking for more opportunities to find places that make such temptations hard if not impossible…
>
> It's always interesting to me how the perception of things can change with just a little shift. I guess this was one of those times. And from the looks of it, it was a tiny bit overdue.

I'm guessing many of my readers were snowed in at some point in February 2009, and a fair number probably lost power. Did you take advantage of that forced disconnectedness—and did you find some virtue in it?

Admission: When I say I don't multitask well, it's true—but it's also a good excuse for my deliberate habit (when not at work). If I'm writing, I'm *only* writing: If there's a browser session at all, it's only to call up source material. If I'm *reading* (print material), the computer's not on…at all. Now, if you don't mind, it's time to finish this section, turn off the computer, and go take a walk—wholly disconnected with technology, wholly connected with the rest of the world. Try it some time. Try it frequently.

It's Not Really about Disconnecting

It's about *reconnecting*—getting back in touch with ourselves and those around us in the physical world. If you want to get more Californian, it's also about *centering*—finding our own places and recognizing our cores. If that seems too Zen for you, so be it—I'm no Buddhist, but I don't deny the power of (what I understand of) the philosophy.

I'm going to finish this essay by reprinting a section from "Finding a Balance: The Balanced Librarian" in the February 2007 *Cites & Insights*, that section being a brief introduction and a reprint of an even older piece—my "Crawford Files" column from the March 2003 *American Libraries* (as submitted, not as it actually appeared). Heck, I may run that column again in 2013…

The Virtues of Contemplation

I believe in quiet time. I call it contemplation, although that doesn't necessarily mean directly contemplating something (it can). You might call it Zen. You might call it prayer. I'll use "contemplation" here if only because I'm quoting previous pieces that used that word. I've also become aware that different people contemplate in different ways—that for some extroverts, contemplation nearly requires conversation. It's still a separate activity from constant turmoil, it still requires focus—and it's worthwhile in either form.

The following originally appeared in the March 2003 *American Libraries* (with editorial changes) as my "Crawford Files" column. **Bold** paragraphs were subheadings in that column.

Finding This Century's Most Important Technological Device

> David Levy's concerned about information and the quality of life. His inspiration was a discussion led by David Levy on "information and the quality of life." As part of a speech at the 2002 Charleston Conference, Levy asked a question that he clearly regarded as rhetorical. That question inspired this column:
>
> **Who Has Time to Contemplate?**
>
> The presumed answer was "Nobody here, that's for sure." That wasn't my response—and I don't

think it should be yours. Mine was, "Everybody here, if it matters to them." Followed by, "And it should matter to you if you want to maintain your humanity."

When Levy asked the question, I didn't see lots of puzzled expressions from people who knew they had time to contemplate. So I chose not to challenge him. Instead, later that afternoon, I retired to a quiet spot to think about what he'd said and how people reacted. In other words, I contemplated his question and the discussion surrounding it. As long as you're not overscheduled, a conference can be a great time for contemplation, given that a hotel room has fewer distractions than your house or apartment.

After contemplating the situation, I still believe we all have time to contemplate, but I also understand how technology can lead us to believe otherwise.

The Most Important Technological Device

What does this have to do with the column title? More than you might expect. I won't discuss libraries as places for contemplation (which they should be), since Janes covered that so well in December. Instead, I'd like to consider some of the reasons that people avoid contemplation or fail to contemplate.

The usual excuse is busyness, being too busy to spend fifteen minutes in quiet thought. I don't buy that. If you're so busy that you can't create a spare quarter-hour or half hour once or twice a week, something's desperately wrong. You exercise three or four times a week, don't you? Shouldn't you exercise your deeper brain muscles once in a while as well?

For most of us, I suspect, "busyness" is another word for distractions—the media, technology, and other things that entice us to do something, anything, rather than sit and think. Distractions also interfere with contemplation. It's hard to think deeply with a sitcom laugh track in the background. I find the combination of deep thought and staring at a Web page (or any other computer screen) almost entirely incompatible. Music helps some people contemplate, but unwanted music destroys concentration. And, of course, a ringing phone or beeping pager breaks any contemplative mood.

Thus my nomination for the most important technological device of this year, last year, or almost any year in the past century. Not transistors, not nanotechnology devices, not PCs, not PDAs, not self-circulation laser scanners.

I vote for the Off switch—the device that lets you remove distractions and prevent interruptions.

In the habit of jogging with earbuds in place connected to your Discman or iPod? Once or twice a week, turn off the player and use the time to think about things—to contemplate the world around you and yourself. (If the earbuds reduce distracting noise, leave them in. Otherwise, the sounds of nature even in an urban environment can be nice once in a while.)

Next time your favorite TV show is preempted or showing a rerun, try using the Off switch on your TV instead of channel surfing (or cueing up your next TiVo segment). You might even use the Off switch on your floor lamp if it helps.

Your phone's ringer and your pager both have Off switches, and your mobile phone can be turned off entirely. You do have voice mail, don't you? Fifteen minutes or half an hour's delay in responding shouldn't matter in most cases. If it always does, without exception, how do you ever take showers, make love, or sleep?

Thinking as if Thinking Matters

Contemplation—deep thinking—keeps us human. If deep thinking means temporarily reducing your level of technology, maybe that's a sign. People should control technology as a set of tools. If technology controls people, we cease to be human. Find your Off switches. Use them. We all have time to contemplate. We should make that time.

If you saw me staring off into space at Midwinter, now you know why. Try it yourself some time.

Try it yourself some time. Disconnect and reconnect. Make room for the real world, and make room to stay in touch with yourself. (Oh, and plan a *real* vacation—advice that I should take!)

Trends & Quick Takes

Time it Was…

T. Scott Plutchak's June 10, 2008 post "The Instability of Information" (at *T. Scott*) points to Robert Darnton's *New York Review of Books* essay "The Library in the New Age." Plutchak focuses on Darnton's believe that Google Book Search will *not* make academic research libraries obsolete—rather, it will make them more important than ever. This isn't a piece about Google Book Search (I have more than 165 items on that topic tagged, and wonder whether I'll ever use them!); nor, for that matter, is it about Darnton's belief in the future of big research libraries (a belief I share).

Rather, it's about the first half of Darnton's essay, as noted by Plutchak:

> Darnton argues that, contrary to the "common view that we have just entered a new era, the informa-

tion age," which he sees as rooted in the long-term view of technological transformations, "every age was an age of information, each in its own way, and that information has always been unstable."

As a cultural historian with an outstanding reputation, he is well suited to making this claim. Years ago I was fascinated by his book, The *Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, in which he shows how our understanding of history is shaped and molded by the ways in which unstable information is passed on and examined. In the NYRB essay, he has a couple of excellent examples to make the case that "news has always been an artifact and that it never corresponded exactly to what actually happened.... News is not what happened, but a story about what happened."

The common wisdom here in the internet age is that things are radically different from the way they've been before. This is the point of view that I criticized in my comments on *Everything is Miscellaneous* in response to Rothman's question about what I didn't like about the book. This predilection to see the present as radically discontinuous from the past isn't new, of course, and it isn't restricted to views about information. My peers and I in the late 60s believed that our generation represented a radical break, not just with our parents', but with every generation that had gone before. We were foolish in this belief because we were ignorant of history.

The point is not that things aren't changing, or that the world isn't different today from what it was a couple of decades ago. The point is that this has always been the case, and our tendency to think that the world of our predecessors had a kind of stability that is lacking in the present world is an illusion. Change is continuous and incremental and multivariate and beautifully complex. When we look at the past, or try to understand the present, we break things up into epochs and ages for convenience sake. We label the decades and try to pin them like butterflies to a display board. We categorize and classify time just as we do everything else. But that's just a way for us to abstract things so that we can find ways to understand and talk about them. Realities are far more complex.

Read those last two paragraphs again, particularly in light of generational generalizations and punditry about the digital future. That golden age of long-term stability is as nonsensical as the concept that suddenly change is massive, overwhelming, predictable and inevitable. We've been dealing with change for as long as we've been human beings. It's never been orderly, it's rarely been inevitable, and there's a natural tendency to think of that time when we weren't coping with so much change.

I was reading a column in one of the "big three" science fiction magazines about the increasing difficulties with one particular theme of science fiction and fantasy: The one in which an advanced artifact from the future (or a more advanced civilization) falls into the hands of people from an earlier time, who reverse-engineer it and make incredible progress as a result.

The problem with that is that, *within our own history over the past century*, it so frequently glosses over gulfs so large that reverse engineering wouldn't help—and some of the biggest gulfs are pre-internet. For example, what would the best scientific minds of (say) 1929 make of a contemporary GPS, or of a notebook computer using an Intel Core i7 CPU? (GPS doesn't rely on the internet, and you don't *need* the internet to use a Core i7-based notebook.)

In both cases, the most fundamental disconnect would probably be the little rectangular boxes on the circuit boards, each box containing from a few hundred thousand to many million solid-state circuits. (I'm guessing the 1929 scientists *would* figure out what the circuit board was and the driving voltages and principles—that's measurement and extrapolation.) What would a scientist from 1929 *do* with those boxes, though? Reverse-engineer them? Using what for discovery? The circuits are far too small for any optical microscope, even if you could figure out how to disassemble a chip package without destroying the circuits. OK, so wait until the late 1930s, when scanning electron microscopes *might* be able to trace the circuits. But what *are* those circuits, in a world where (except for crystal radios) all electronics are based on vacuum tubes? That tiny little intersection is the equivalent of a tube? Sez who? (While the first transistor patents date back to the 1920s, the first *manufactured* transistors are from the end of the 1940s.)

For the GPS unit, of course, there's another fundamental disconnect: It only works thanks to a network of satellites. Before the 1970s, a GPS receiver would fall into Arthur C. Clarke's field of sufficiently advanced technology: It would be magic. (Well, it would be a useless hunk of plastic and metal without those satellites, but still…)

Why did I mention the Intel Core i7? Because I still find it pretty damn close to magic: A chip with eight processing threads (12 in an "extreme" model) running at 2.5GHz to 3.2GHz that uses as little as 45 watts of power.

Tell me you could reverse engineer a notebook running one of those, in a world with the technology and science of 1929. Let's make it easier: Try to reverse-engineer a 386-based notebook: after all, that takes you back a quarter-century, when times were simpler. Right?

Blame the User

That's Doug Johnson's title for a July 24, 2008 post at *Blue Skunk Blog*—and while his example is specific to his state, it's not a unique local problem. Here's the whole thing—it's short and makes Johnson's case better than excerpts would:

> Our state's Library Services Department wanted to collect data on school library programs using an online survey tool. Great!
>
> We need a good set of data. We don't know for certain how many libraries, librarians, resources or computers we have in our fair state's schools - and whether those numbers are increasing or decreasing. It was embarrassing during legislative testimony to be asked for school library data and to not have such numbers available. The lack did not help our case.
>
> So the intent itself was outstanding.
>
> But the execution was terrible. Irrelevant questions, confusing questions, unreadable formatting, unreasonable tech requirements, malfunctioning website, and just an incredibly daunting length were all "features" of this survey. But school librarians in 42% of schools bravely made the attempt—including our district. Many of us tried working the department to make the survey more useful and meaningful—work which seemed to have been simply ignored.
>
> But this is what put me over: a scolding letter from the department saying…
>
>> Please note that of the 383 respondents, only 80 reports were correctly answered. Every library has a dictionary because of the importance of understating the meaning of a word. It's equally important to understand the intent of the question to obtain comparable data.
>
> So let me understand this… Of the 42% of surveys completed, only 21% of those were completed "correctly?" That is a rate of less than 9% of possible survey returns that the state deems as "correct."
>
> Uh, might the problem be with the survey and not with the 91% of us who either didn't complete the survey or got it wrong?
>
> Creating a good survey is a task best left to professionals, not well-meaning amateurs. The validity of the data requires it.
>
> There is a larger issue here as well: When any of us don't get the response we were anticipating (amount of use of a new resource, attendance at an in-service, number of readers or responses to our blog, etc.), it's very easy to "blame the user." Maybe we should be looking at what we are offering instead.
>
> Good intentions do not make up for incompetence.

In the context of surveys, this comes up once in a while within ALA—which used to (and I believe still does) require that any official surveys within the organization go past a unit that checks them for survey design. It slows things down a little, but it also avoids manifestly incompetent surveys. And boy, are there are a lot of manifestly incompetent surveys—not only ones that fail along the lines Johnson notes, but surveys with leading questions and other design flaws that make them fundamentally useless.

Johnson's broader point is also worth noting: If you're not getting the results you expect, it may not be the patron's fault. (No, I do *not* believe that the patron is always right—but it's a good starting point.)

In another conversation I chose not to get into, it became clear that enthusiasm does not make up for incompetence. I'm not sure the lesson here is much different. I am sure that, like it or not, competence must be judged (at least partially) by results.

Speaking of which…

What Web 2.0 Teaches Us…

Andy Powell, August 15, 2008, *eFoundations*. It's a post that clearly gave Powell trouble, as he prefaces it with a suggestion that "it's intended to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek and humorous but like most such things, from my perspective at least, I think it contains at least a grain or two of truth." The post, slightly excerpted…

> The advent of desktop publishing software, way back when, showed us that although pretty much anyone could use clip-art and fonts, most people weren't (and indeed still aren't) graphic designers. Over the years we've mostly got used to calling in

the professionals whenever necessary, though there is always a place for do-it-yourselfness.

So, what does Web 2.0 tell us?

- That anyone can blog but not everyone can write (or even spell-check!)?
- That anyone can podcast but not everyone is a radio chat-show host?
- That anyone can make a video but not everyone is a TV presenter?

In short... Web 2.0 technology democratises production but creative talent and presentation skills remain rare commodities...

Seesmic is a good case in point. Seesmic is a kind of video Twitter. It's a brilliant idea and has been well executed technically. The trouble is, like the video phone, one is left asking, "Do I actually need this?" (by which I mean, "Does video really add anything to what I'm trying to do here?")...

Take 140 characters from Twitter, turn it into anywhere between 30 seconds and 5 minutes of variable quality audio and video, where the video carries no additional information over the audio and where the audio carries little additional information over the original 140 characters. That's Seesmic in a nutshell.

Now... maybe I fall into the category of "people who haven't tried it and therefore don't get it"? Maybe I'm just plain wrong and within a month I'll be Seesmic'ing with the best (and worst) of them! Anything is possible - stay tuned to find out...

With apologies to everyone and no-one.

I appreciate that I'm sounding a bit like Andrew Keen. But that's not my intention. My point is not that amateurs don't have anything interesting to say—I think they do—and indeed, for the most part I include myself as one. My point is that our desktop use of audio and video in particular tends to highlight an amateurish approach to production...

Reflecting on this for a while, I think the problem is two-fold. Firstly the linear nature of audio and video tends to defy attempts at scanning the content. Fast-forwarding and reversing are difficult at best, as is getting a feel for whether the next 3-5 minutes of audio/video is worth sticking around for (though Slideshare slidecasts offer an interesting counter-example, since the slide transitions do give a nice way of quickly navigating the content). These tasks are much easier with text and most of us have well-honed skills at scanning and appraising textual material pretty quickly (even where that material is just a 140-character tweet). Secondly, the problem is not so much with the video quality (shaky camera work and the like—I'm quite happy with that within reason)—it's with the audio. Some people's voices simply become wooden when faced with a microphone and the 'record' light, to the point that listening to them is painful...

Powell isn't writing off the technologies any more than he's writing off blogging or desktop publishing. And he's not saying anything I haven't said before in different ways. Quickest summation: The medium is *not* the message, and making the medium easier doesn't improve the content. Or, to put it another way, channels are easy, content is hard—and multimedia content is *harder*. (See my April 2006 *EContent* column, "Rich Media is Hard.")

Doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. **Does** mean you shouldn't assume you'll be great at it, and maybe shouldn't denigrate boring old easy-to-skim text. Which, of course, isn't all that easy to write.

Checklists for Writing and Publishing

Why is this in TRENDS & QUICK TAKES? I haven't been writing about writing *as such* lately, and certainly not about creative writing. And I have a general dislike of lists. But there are always exceptions.

David Booker quoted a list of eight "basics" of what Kurt Vonnegut calls Creative Writing 101, in a March 11, 2009 post at *The Centered Librarian*:

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.

2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.

3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.

4. Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.

5. Start as close to the end as possible.

6. Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of.

7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.

8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

The greatest American short story writer of my generation was Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964). She broke practically every one of my rules but the first. Great writers tend to do that.

I'm very much *not* a creative writer (that is, the writing I do doesn't fall into the "creative writing" category), but I do read a fair amount of fiction and watch TV and movies, which should follow many of the same rules (setting aside #4).

My take? #2 is *critical*, and is one of the things that causes me to stop watching some movies early (and give up on some TV shows altogether). I suppose that makes me intellectually lazy, but—at least at my age and knowing how many books (etc.) are out there that I *want* to read—life really is too damn short to spend on wholly-depressing fiction.

Similarly #3: Characters with no motivation make cardboard look lively by comparison. As to others…I'm not sure #6 is always necessary, but I'm sure some conflict is part of any good story. And, of course, you shouldn't read the eight "rules" without reading that last paragraph.

The other checklist is by Allan Mott, offering "50 reasons no one wants to publish your first book." David Booker quoted the first five in a March 31, 2009 post at *The Centered Librarian*, linking to the remainder at *bookgasm*. I'll quote a few of the cleaner ones.

> 2. There's this thing called punctuation. You might want to look into it.
>
> 9. Submitting a manuscript handwritten in your own blood does indicate your passion for the material, but not quite in the way you might have hoped.
>
> 11. Iambic pentameter? Really?
>
> 14. William Burroughs was a broken-down beatnik junkie genius; you're a wannabe-hipster asshole imitating a broken-down beatnik junkie genius.
>
> 29. Everyone who attempts to load a copy of the manuscript onto their Kindle is found dead three hours later.
>
> 33. Writing a book about vegetarian zombies kinda indicates you don't exactly know why people like zombies in the first place.
>
> 38. For the first 20 pages, everyone who reads it is certain it's the funniest book they've ever read. Unfortunately by the 21st, they finally realize you're actually being serious.
>
> 45. A general rule to follow when writing for kids: If you could go to jail for saying it to them in person, you're better off not putting it into print.

Tempted as I am to quote #39, you'll have to go read it yourself, particularly since it would seem that there are exceptions… (Coming next issue: MAKING IT WORK *AND VAMPIRES!*)

Quicker Takes

Reality check 1: From the October 26, 2009 *Fortune* comes a little chart titled "Still a Juggernaut." Time Inc. publications tend to fact-check pretty well, so I'd assume this is right. To wit: Market share (installed base) for operating systems as of May 2009: Microsoft Windows, 93%; Mac OS, 3%; Linux, 2%. Market share (sales) for Office-type suites in 2008: Microsoft, 94%; Adobe, 4%; Apple, 1%; Other, 1%.

- **When the mourning's over**: The November 2009 *Sound & Vision* notes that Toshiba has introduced the BDX2000—a $250 Blu-ray Disc player. After Toshiba gave up on HD DVD (being, notoriously, the only player in the DVD Consortium that actually put any money into the format), it brought out an upscaling DVD player with an ad campaign suggesting that it yielded results just about as good as Blu-ray Disc. That was nonsense, of course…and now Toshiba's joined the crowd.
- **Speaking of Blu-Ray Disc**: I put up a blog post noting the availability of two BD players for under $80 on Black Friday. Those were one-day or one-weekend specials and were minor brands. But *since* then, you can buy a name-brand BD player for $150—from almost any major brand.
- **Slowly catching up**, I was going to say something about Leslie Johnston's take on a ReadWriteWeb August 2008 column on everything moving into the web—a column rife with RWW's assured, deterministic, "everything will be" attitude (not "most people will do most of their computing in the cloud," but "the browser is going to swallow up the desktop" very quickly and, presumably, for *everybody*). Johnston was commenting on a comment about us (*explicitly* "we all") shifting from "being librarians" to "being daytraders"—both because the RWW writer has no idea what librarians actually do, but also because the assumption that we'd stop managing information is absurd. But, as I read the RWW column I just have this dreamy feeling, that I'm in some Victorian novel—or maybe in a lazy summer afternoon in Dayton, Ohio, in 1903. It's so predictable, so inevitable, so universal,

so…drearily simplistic and, effectively, old-fashioned in its monolithic future. (**Not** Johnston's post, August 19, 2008 at *Digital Eccentric*: that's actually quite good.)

- **Ars Technica had a snarky item** in September 2008 noting SanDisk's "slotMusic" format and how it was doomed to failure—*because* it was (and is) a physical medium for music and, you know, *nobody buys music in physical form*. (In 2008, that "nobody" was still around 80% of all music sales; in 2010, it's still a majority, although probably not for long.) The slotMusic thingies were going to be 1GB microSD flashcards with an album on them in 320K MP3 format; you could load more stuff onto the rest of the chip if you chose. It's snarky—and assumes nobody has phones or MP3 players that *have* microSD cards. Wrong even in 2008, wronger in 2010. The slotMusic format was never going to be a universal medium—but it didn't have to be. Despite pretty much universal derision from techies, the initial release didn't do badly—and all SanDisk Sansa MP3 players have included microSD slots for years now. There still are some slotMusic releases, but those microSD slots (apart from making a great cheap way to turn a 2GB MP3 player into a 4 GB player, as I did last year) are also useful for something else: slotRadio. Same form factor—but with *1000* songs on a 4GB card for $40 (frequently discounted to $30). They're "radio" format (you can skip songs as often as you want or switch playlists, but you can't select individual songs), but that's still three or four cents a song, enough of a bargain for the ten (as of this writing) slotRadio cards to make a certain amount of sense. (Each card features a genre—country, 80s & 90s, rock, oldies, hip-hop, or 60 hours of classical.) A niche product, but niche products can be profitable.
- **Remember Jones Day v. BlockShopper?** Probably not. It was an odd lawsuit in 2008 in which a law firm sued a little website, BlockShopper, that shows *who* purchases properties in specific city neighborhoods—public information, that is. Two lawyers from the firm purchased properties in one of the covered neighborhoods—and the law firm claimed that *inclusion of its trademarked name* and linking to the lawyers' bios on the firm's website was trademark infringement. Sadly, the case wasn't thrown out of court; it was settled, in a manner that makes the BlockShopper information less readable. The significant result: It's easier for other companies to try to interfere with fully legitimate web stories, at least those stories that include links.
- **I'm no fan of Jeff Jarvis,** but give the man credit for honesty, as quoted in a February 16, 2009 post on *Reflections of a Newsosaur*. The blogger (Alan D. Mutter) is asking "What would Jeff Jarvis do"—or, rather, given Jarvis' "deeply held belief" that content should be free, why did it cost $15 to $27 for his new (then) book *What Would Google Do?*—and almost $10 for a "video infomercial" on the book? Jarvis' answer: "I'm a hypocrite. I didn't put this book up as a purely digital, searchable, linkable entity—I didn't eat my own dog food—because I got an advance from the publisher, and other services. Dog's gotta eat. I couldn't pass it up." But, you know, the *rest of us* are supposed to suck it up and put on shows, since content has to be free. Right? (At least one commenter wasn't buying the "Dog's gotta eat" argument for someone like Jarvis. "No, he just needs the money because he likes money." A bunch of commenters unloaded on Mutter for what I took as a humorous post—and one or two, familiar with Jarvis' record, unloaded on him.)
- **Recognizing your real audience:** As I've noted elsewhere, I only read *Fortune* because, for reasons I don't comprehend, Time Inc. *threw in* a three-year subscription (for this roughly-fortnightly magazine) along with a cheap ($30) three-year subscription to *Money*. (Not quite as bad as the time I got a letter inviting me to subscribe to *Time* for a year at a special professional rate of…whatever I wanted to pay. I was tempted to send a check for $0.01, and have no doubt they would have accepted it, but I don't take magazines I don't have time to read…) Anyway, there's a full-page ad in the Marketplace section of the December 7, 2009 issue; I can't

imagine the advertiser would buy a full page of a large-circ magazine unless they thought there were lots of potential buyers among subscribers. The product advertised? Verari Systems servers and "containers" (big boxes'o'servers). The smaller product insert, the Bladerack 2 XL, *starts* at $124.999 (hey! it's under $125K!), with up to 72 Intel Xeon-based servers and up to 1.3PB (that's petabytes) of capacity. The larger insert is for the Forest Container—up to 2,880 processors and up to 26PB storage capacity. Starting at a mere $749,999—*under $750 thousand!* (The big type: "So energy efficient you may wonder if it's plugged in"—and yes, the Forest Container is painted to look like a forest.) Maybe I'll add it to my Amazon wish list…I bet the Forest Container would run Word2007 *really fast*. And I could save all my drafts in 26PB…several million times over.

- Tim Spalding of LibraryThing posted "Review integrity, reviewer freedom and pay-for-review marketing" on March 25, 2009 at *LibraryThing Blog*. He cites "bottom feeders" in the area of book-based social networking: "Top of my list are companies that charge hopeful authors for positive reviews, which are then owned by the company, edited by them and posted mechanically on multiple social networks and commercial sites over the web, on Twitter and so forth." He's encountered an outfit that charges $425 for reviews—which are then posted to LibraryThing, Google Books, Fetchbook and Worldcat.org. "This organization has posted 94 reviews—$39,950 in theory—and wouldn't you know, all of them were five-star reviews!*" The asterisk points to a footnote that he's avoiding publicity for the reviews and that he's removed them all. On the other hand, it's only reasonable for publishers to *give away* books in hopes of getting reviews (that's nearly universal: Very few book reviewers pay for the books they review!) and isn't even against saying "If you take the book, you need to review it"—as long as the requirement isn't for a *positive* review. He's added a careful clause to LibraryThing's terms of use—forbidding reviews that come from "positive-review-only" giveaway programs and *all* paid book reviews. One commenter objects to the second half, but—I believe—based on a misconception: When you're paid *by a journal* to review a book, that's *very* different ethically from being paid *by a publisher or author* to review a book. Where does that leave *Kirkus Discoveries*, which very pointedly carries the "Kirkus" name and charges $400, which *guarantees* a review? Well, Kirkus doesn't guarantee a *positive* review and they're targeting self-published and independent authors, but it's at best a gray area…the more so because the $400 gets the author *the review*, and the author *then* decides whether the review should appear on the Kirkus Discoveries website. (The *Kirkus Discoveries* newsletter "highlights the best submissions," so it's fair to assume there are very few damning reviews.) There are other open paid-review services—for example "An Honest Read" (yes, authors can kill negative reviews) and *ForeWord* sells reviews for $99 or, under the Clarion name, for $305. As you might guess, much as I'd love to have *any* reviews of some of my self-published books, I'm with Spalding on this one, and I'll certainly never pay for such a review.
- Peter Bromberg (I think) at *Library Garden* and David Booker at *The Centered Librarian* both had a little fun (on April 3, 2009) with a study from the University of Melbourne showing that, as Bromberg put it, "not working makes you a better worker." Or, more specifically, that "WILB"—researcher Brent Cocker's acronym for "workplace Internet leisure browsing"—helps to sharpen workers' concentration. The study, of 300 people, purports to show that "people who use the Internet for personal reasons at work are about 9 percent more productive that those who do not." (That might be true: The others are too busy playing Solitaire.) Bromberg's take: "If your boss still has a problem with your wilbful behavior, you can claim, 'I just have a bursty style, not a busy style, which means that although it might appear to the untrained eye that I'm never actually working, you'll notice that all my work actually gets done.' If this line is deli-

vered correctly, it will create a moment of confusion as your boss ponders the busy/bursty conundrum, giving you a small window of opportunity to slip away for a donut break." Booker treated it more seriously, noting that the study deals with workers spending less than 20% of their time on "short and unobtrusive" web breaks—and notes that, at a former place of work, the policy manual *required* spending at least an hour a day "browsing the web" to keep pace with innovation.

- I don't think this will fit neatly anywhere else, and it's too lovely not to point out: Patrick H. Alexander's "What Just Ain't So"—published April 6, 2009 in the "Views" department of *Inside Higher Ed*. (www.insidehighered.com/views/2009/04/06/Alexander). Alexander, editor-in-chief of the Pennsylvania State University Press, deals with manuscript reviewing for scholarly monographs and cites some problematic forms of peer review. His examples are "the *New York Times* book review"—where the reviewer does a "book review" instead of a peer manuscript review; the "why-didn't-you-write-a-different-book?" review (which, post-publication, may be the most offensive form of book review); the slashing review; and, "perhaps the most frustrating review and most impervious to fixing": the "intellectual comb over," the peer review that clearly *fails* to actually review the manuscript. It's a 2,100-word piece (as compared to the 126 words in this bullet prior to "It's a") and a delightful read. The comments are also interesting and challenging.

Making it Work

Thinking about Blogging 5: Closing the Loop

Roughly a year ago—in the April 2009 *Cites & Insights*—I wrote what began as one medium-length essay and turned into a series. This is the last article in that series—not because I won't keep writing about blogging, but because I'm finally completing the sequence of topics. Incidentally, for those of you keeping track, there apparently was no THINKING ABOUT BLOGGING 3. So it goes.

The discussions this time fall into three areas: *how* we blog, a semi-random set of notes that does *not* include posts focusing on the ethics of blogging (that's another topic for another article, somewhere down the line); brief notes on Lilia Efimova's work on blogger networking practices; and a tiny set of miscellaneous issues. There's a fourth area I'm going to note in almost no detail because, I think, it's past its due date.

How We [Should?] Blog

There must be thousands of blog posts about the right way to blog, particularly posts at marketing blogs and other places that presume the real purpose of every blog is marketing. Most of what's here comes from the library field, although I couldn't resist going a little astray. I think it's fair to say you shouldn't take *any* of this advice too seriously—although you may find suggestions that trigger your own ideas.

How to keep a Good Blog

Rochelle Mazar posted this in what was then called *Random Access Mazar* but is now *Thursday Evening Post* (same url: www.mazar.ca). Mazar plays off advice that *another* blogger got (the link is to an invitation-only blog): "pick a topic that's unique and that she's passionate about; that thing that everyone tells you to shut up about should be the topic of your blog." Maraz doesn't buy this.

> I think this is a very male geek perspective. Perhaps male nerd perspective. That's about branding yourself with your own singular idiosyncrasies; you always post about the intersection between WoW and Freud? Sure, you can be the WoW Freud guy to your tiny wedge audience, but I'm not sure that gives you an awesome blog.
>
> I don't think you need to have one topic to have a good blog. In fact, I think I'd get bored of your blog if you only have one topic… The only advice she got that I think is any good is this: find *your own voice*. Any blog, and any topic, can be interesting if it's really coming from you, if the ideas and feelings and observations are genuine. I don't even think your voice, your perspective, has to be radically unique, either, and I don't think you have to go out of your way to make yourself unique. I think you just have to be passionate. There's no point writing about something you're not passionate about, and I'd hope that you're passionate about a lot of things…

I think the point is to talk back to popular culture, to hegemony, to media, to teachers or authority or peers. Make yourself an active participant rather than a passive absorber of information, regardless of your situation. It's more of a way to reorient your vision of yourself and your importance in your own grand scheme. To remind you that you have a voice in your world, and your blog can be your platform. I don't think the point of that is to get more readers, or to have a more entertaining blog, so perhaps I'm a bad adviser on that front. I think the idea is to train yourself to speak out, no matter what the topic is. To think critically about what's going on, read/listen/think carefully and add your opinion. Not just absorbing what you're hearing, what you're experiencing, but responding to it. To be political, I think that activity can make you a better citizen and a better person.

> As a side effect, I think it gives you a better blog, too. Because your passion is obvious. You are a speaker in the world rather than a listener. You have something to add. That makes you interesting.

Different bloggers have different purposes, to be sure, but I'm more sympathetic to Mazar's perspective than I would have been to the "pick one unique topic and drill it home" concept—although I suspect the latter is a better way to become The Go-to Person/Guru for a topic. I'm less certain of the section beginning "I think the point…"—that may be the point of Mazar's blog and the person's blog she's commenting on, and that's fine, but it's not my point here and I suspect that's true of a few million other bloggers. Adding another voice to the set of conversations isn't inherently "talking back." Yes, you're being more of an active participant; yes, you gain a voice (of sorts, even if nobody hears you); I'm not sure those are the same things.

Still…this is better advice than most of the canned How To Get More and More Readers and Big Bucks from Adsense articles and posts.

So You Wanna Be A Librarian Blogger Star

Steven Bell wrote this on October 13, 2008 at *ACRLog*, and starts out by namechecking yours truly:

> There must be at least 500 librarian blogs. Probably closer to 600. I imagine Walt Crawford has probably given some more accurate librarian blogger data in one of his blog studies, but I think I'm in the ballpark. So let's say you are a librarian and decide you want to have a well known blog. With the field as crowded as it is how do you get noticed? What do you need to do to make it to the A—or even the B or C—list? Maybe you just want a blog that uniquely covers some new, unknown territory. I got to thinking about these things because a newer-to-the-profession academic librarian recently posed these questions to me.

At the time, I commented on the first three sentences ("Almost certainly more than 1,000…")—but I'm beginning to think the ongoing community of English-language liblogs may indeed be somewhere in the 500 to 600 range, omitting "friends & family" blogs and short-lived blogs. That's not the point, though; the point is the rest of the post.

I'd immediately push back on the desire to have a *well known* blog… perhaps the motive should be to have a *communicative* blog that reaches its appropriate audience, no matter the size of that audience. Still, "how do you get noticed?" is a relevant question, one where I suspect the answer's changed significantly since 2008.

> Succeeding as a blogger in a crowded field, to my way of thinking, comes down to three things. All are probably easier said than done. First, find the right niche because that will establish your identity as a blogger. I come across lots of blogs and many of them are missing character. If your tag line is "thoughts about librarianship and working in libraries" or something like that it allows you to write about everything but in the end you may stand for nothing. I think the best librarian blogs are the ones where you know what the blogger stands for, and you can be reasonably sure you going to get some consistency over time. Here at ACRLog you know we're going to be focusing on academic librarianship (maybe not right now). If that's what you like to read about—and to get some attitude on the side—then this is the blog for you. If we suddenly started covering totally different topics everyday I imagine we'd lose the bulk of our readership pretty quickly. Finding the right niche is probably the hardest thing to do. It requires you to figure out what no one else is writing about and to capture the market on that topic—or you could just write about things with an incredibly unique point of view—the way no one else is seeing them. You've got to be different. Originality is the key.

Steven Bell, meet Rochelle Mazar. I think there's a disconnect here: Being original and distinctive does not necessarily mean finding a particular *topical* niche. It does require speaking in your own voice (and having a voice others want to hear); it does require *caring* about what you write. But you could be the seventh blogger focusing on (for example) open access or a blogger who writes about open access as one of *many* topics and still gain the right audience. "Figure out what no one else is writing about" strikes me as *precisely* the wrong advice because it doesn't come from your heart. What do I know? I know *Walt at Random* has a pretty substantial readership even though it's about nothing or many things and even though it's certainly not "what no one else is writing about." For that matter, I'm getting the sense that the most-valued and most-read essays in *Cites & Insights* are ones where I'm specifically writing about what *many others* are writing about—where I'm channeling the zeitgeist.

> Now finding a good niche will only take you so far if you lack good content to keep your audience coming back. So the second thing is to identify a niche that is likely to have a steady source of content. It doesn't mean you have to blog everyday, unless you are filtering a steady stream of news on a specific subject. But without good material to keep the ideas flowing, so you can post at least once a week, the blog will probably fail to be sustainable. Witness the many librarian blogs that have bitten the dust. Again, a bit easier said than done, but not impossible. One way to do this is to look for a niche that librarians would find of value and would draw upon sources of information external to this profession…

Here again, I think there's way too much emphasis on finding a niche and, frankly, on producing a steady stream of material.

> Having a blog with a good niche and steady content won't help if no one knows about it. So number three is promoting your new blog. We saw a good example of that last week when the blog *In the Library with the Leadpipe* made its debut. Several of the bloggers posted announcements to their friends on Facebook (where they also started a group), and asked a few established bloggers to take a look and spread the news. I think I saw it in at least five places, including LISNews and Walt Crawford's blog. So just as it begins the blog is getting buzz. I've come across a fair number of interesting librarian blogs but they just seem buried in the blur of too many blogs called "The Something Librarian". Though it may sound contrived, it can help to occasionally offer opinions, challenge traditions, take a position or anything that might get other bloggers to link to or comment on your posts…

Did one of the folks at Lead Pipe ask me to take a look at it? I honestly don't remember. I *do* believe that, in 2010 at least, "hey look at us" announcements and attempts to get other people to link will do less good—and be less successful—than "viral marketing," the kind of thing that happens when a couple of people note your posts on FriendFeed (or Twitter, or for that matter Facebook) with a note making the post look interesting. That's how I find new blogs these days…and some of those blogs are indeed named "The [something] Librarian."

> I don't know if my new colleague will achieve his goal of establishing a more widely read blog – I hope he will. Personally I think it's getting hard to stand out in the crowd and attract the attention of the bread and butter of librarian blog readers—the younger generation of librarians who are accustomed to blog reading. Now I imagine they are spending more time sending and receiving tweets for their awareness and entertainment, and that reading blogs is, or will soon be, somewhat tired. I sometimes question how sustainable all of this librarian blogging is, and whether we'll still be doing this five years from now. Perhaps it will last as long as we have a good topic, something to say about it and a need for conversation with our colleagues. But until then I wish my colleague good luck in his journey to librarian blogger recognition—or at least in bringing life to a blog that creates some value for those who read it. I admire his ambition but hope that, as always, he is motivated by a desire to provide meaning for others and a passion to help them learn. With these simple outcomes as your intrinsic motivation you will always be successful no matter how many librarians read your blog.

You know I'm going to push back on "the younger generation of librarians"; I don't think blog readership breaks down that way. I think writing and reading blogs has *changed* partly because of Twitter and its ilk—but I don't think that makes blogging "tired" or unsustainable. What it does now and will, I believe, do three years from now is change the medium, possibly in a healthy way. There's one sentence here I wholeheartedly agree with: "Perhaps it will last as long as we have a good topic, something to say about it and a need for conversation with our colleagues." Since almost *anything* can be a good topic (ask me about some of my more widely-read posts and articles!), the limiting factors are something to say and the desire for conversation. On the other hand, I demur on "provide meaning for others and a passion to help them learn"—if I thought *Walt at Random* was about "helping them learn," I'd do it very differently and probably have given up long before now. As for meaning…that's in the mind of the reader.

I Also Restore Blog Posts: The Web is Not Print II

Blogs aren't all one thing, maybe not even all instances of one medium, and John Miedema makes that abundantly clear in his own blog(s), found at johnmiedema.ca. Thus this post on December 6, 2008—a followup to "I Delete Blog Posts: The Web is Not Print" on November 29, 2008.

Most bloggers, I suspect, follow a "printlike" rule—I know I do. Once I hit the Publish button, the post is published. If I find I need to make changes to the post (changes which, I've found, won't make it through to most readers in this day of aggregators), I'll either add an update at the bottom of the post or, in some cases, use ~~strikeout~~ strikethrough type to indicate what I've changed. Notably, Wordpress' WYSIWYG toolbar includes an icon for strikethrough—it's a normal convention of blogging. Deleting posts? Somehow, that feels wrong…to me and, I'm guessing, many other bloggers.

Miedema isn't buying it. Quoting from the November 29 post:

> Deleting a post might be censorship if the web was print, but the web is not print. Change is the essence of the web. The ability to rapidly modify data is one of the key reasons the web exists. We like the web because we can publish easily. Consequently, I have posted as much junk as good stuff. Why shouldn't we also use the changeability of the web to improve our publications. I think of my blog as a wiki, continually edited toward a better overall product. More of what works, and less of what doesn't. I keep a back up of all posts if I need to resurrect one. We never had this flexibility before the digital age, and that clarifies one of the persistent virtues of print. It is dangerous to assume that web publications have the fixity of print. We need both digital and print technologies in a modern information ecology.
>
> The right to delete data should be respected. Many people do not ever delete anything because they are unsure when it may be of value…
>
> The practice of deleting data should be encouraged. Web 2.0 makes it easy to contribute to the web; this is a good thing. It also makes for an ocean of data, much of it with fleeting relevance, making it harder with time to find relevant information. Google is not as effective today as it was five years ago, and the primary reason is the explosion of content. Don't get me wrong—everyone should feel entitled to contribute whatever they want to the web. They should also be encouraged to delete what is no longer relevant…

That post received 15 comments (roughly half of them from Miedema). Looking at it now, I would comment that "censorship" is *never* the right word when somebody withdraws their own work, and Miedema's deletions never struck me as censorial.

The December post is interesting and says a lot about "deletion" in the proper contexts—noting that Miedema explicitly saves his WordPress database and will email "deleted" posts to people on request. Excerpts:

> I may have been a bit a little too enthusiastic in my weeding. There are some posts that I have deleted over time that later recur in my thinking, and suggest themes I should pursue further. To that end, and thanks to the easy backup and restore functions of WordPress, I have restored a number of posts in their original form, with the same URL and comments and all. It is the web after all, and I take advantage of both easy deletion and easy restoration.
>
> One such theme is this very issue of deleting posts. I see I have had [seven] posts related to information overload and the value of turning it off. I have said that the new front of intellectual freedom is not access to information but access to relevant information. But I think it is more aptly called psychological freedom since it entails more than just an academic concept, but the need of every person for a psychological space free of information pollution. Psychological freedom is a theme I will explore further.
>
> Other themes that have been emerging are now organized into categories. See the "themes" in the new categories drop-down to the right. If you were looking for something that was deleted, it may now be back. Not everything though. This blog still works more like a wiki, deleting old material in favour of better material…

Maybe the takeaway here for "how we should blog" is this:

It's *your* blog. There may be blogging norms—but if you have good reasons to violate those norms, *do so*. If people complain—well, there's a great topic for some worthwhile posts.

Speaking of norms, here's a quickie:

Don't you get it yet? Partial feeds kill readership

The direct post is from *Library Stuff* on December 10, 2008—and I have to say that, *for my taste,* Cohen's blog has become too much of a link blog with too little commentary. But, you know, it's not my blog; it's Cohen's blog (and he gets paid for it, so why should I complain?).

Cohen's apparently citing a December 10, 2008 post on *WinExtra* that includes this sentence: "For the past week or so there has been a slow building steam over this ridiculous habit that some bloggers have of only sending out a partial RSS feed."

I figured I'd go to the *WinExtra* post when I was ready to write this article and extract pithy comments. I certainly agree that partial feeds are a damn nuisance. Yes, they'll increase direct page-hits if the excerpts are sufficiently enticing, and if you're actually getting paid based on ad exposures (as opposed to clickthroughs), that might give you a mercenary reason to do partial feeds. But I'm certainly not the only one who will be equally inclined to unsubscribe unless your posts are *uniquely* wonderful—it's just extra hassle.

Here's the thing: I can't go to the original post because *it's no longer there*. There's not even a 404, just a screen with the frame, absurdly oversized icons for Twitter and RSS, a bunch of ads (including one for *Circuit City*? Really?), even more ads, sidebar stuff, still more ads…and a big blank spot in the middle. Call this "link fail" if you like.

The message is one I agree with: Partial RSS feeds are annoying. But, hey, *it's your blog*.

Defining the Journalism vs. Blogging Debate

That's only part of the long title on a March 30, 2009 post at *A Blog Around the Clock*, Bora Zivkovic's prolific blog at scienceblogs.com/clock/. It ends: "with a Science Reporting angle." There is no way I can summarize or even reasonably excerpt this post—it's more than ten thousand words long (Zivkovic calls it an "epic post"), not including two shorter followup posts. It's also about a broader topic than "how to blog," as stated in the title. Zivkovic looks at several different kinds of journalism—breaking news, reporting news, news analysis, investigative reporting, "opinion, entertainment, storytelling, etc." and two sets of media: newspapers and blogs.

Here's part of what he says about blogs:

> As I have said many times before:
>
> *Blog is software.*
>
> Bloggers are people who use blogging software. Blogging is using the blogging software. Period.
>
> Bloggers are not alien invaders from outer space. Bloggers are humans, citizens, silent majority that never had a voice until now. Bloggers are former and usually current consumers of the media. And re-producers of the media (yup, those guys that drive the traffic to your sites). And commenters on the media (guys who keep you honest and make you better if you are open-minded enough to listen). As well as producers of the media…
>
> It is not what you use, but how you use it. 90% of everything on blogs is crap. 90% of everything in newspapers is also crap. So goes for the radio and TV. If you complain that we should not point out the worst of the newspapers and focus on the best instead, then please reciprocate: point to the best of blogs, not the worst. Then perhaps we can have a discussion…

I might get into a heated argument with Zivkovic over some of the rest of the post (he's written off newspapers where the internet is available), but not this section. Here, I have no argument. How you should blog is what works for you—a freedom you don't have in traditional media (unless you own a printing press), and a freedom that in no way invalidates your choices or your results.

It's probably worth noting an April 2, 2009 post on *ABSW* (Association of British Science Writers), then at absw.blogspot.com: "Do bloggers need editors?" Noting the length of the Zivkovic post, the blogger opines:

> Which publication would allow a writer to rabbit on at that length? Even in its most ponderous days Scientific American would have seen that as at the upper limit of readability. And on New Scientist, another place where they cover science at greater length than most newspapers, it would have been a crime against humanity.
>
> It is just too easy to write too much when you don't have an editor shouting at you. That is one reason why it is harder to write science for tabloid newspapers than for broadsheets. The editors are less tolerant on the tabloids.

There's more—and I'm only partly sympathetic. I'm even less so after this snarky little paragraph:

> Unlike bloggers, professional writers see little point in writing for their own consumption. Ideally, they want to reach people who would normally avoid the subject. You don't do that by writing too much.

Yes, and science writers have done such a *fine* job of communicating so the public understands how science works and doesn't get caught up with pseudoscientific nonsense. Those editors really earn their keep. (See? I can be equally snarky and unjust.)

One I couldn't digest

I chose not to comment on the entire 10,000-word post above, for a variety of reasons. There's another 7,000-word piece that would appear central to a discussion of "how we blog"—a scholarly article on a "genre-based typology of weblogs" appearing in a supposedly peer-reviewed open access journal. I just can't make my way through the damned thing. It includes a 770-word "working definition" of personal weblogs, and rereading that section at this remove only serves to remind me that I'm not a Proper Scholar and how delighted I am by that failure.

The 7 Deadly Sins of Blogging

It's a list! It's not from a liblog! (It's a post by Sonia Simone on c*opyblogger* from some time in October 2009. The blog has 106,123 subscribers! The post got 1056 tweets! It has 54 trackbacks! It has 165 comments! It's *very easy* to see all those impressive numbers.) And it's really hard to get past the opening commentary on the very first deadly sin, Selfishness. To wit:

> Here's how making money with social media works:

What? Wait a minute. I thought this was about *blogging*—but the *very first discussion* talks about "making money with social media." It becomes clear that the theme here is *not* blogging as a form of personal expression, blogging for communication, blogging because it's important to you. It's about *making money with social media*.

If you're interested, the big seven are selfishness, sloth, impatience, lameness, identicality, irrelevance and boorishness. Greed, obviously, is not on the list.

Here's some advice: If you want lots of advice for *how to attract huge audiences to something you call a blog*, there's a whole industry out there eager to provide that advice. I'm not part of that industry. Neither, I believe, do most libloggers have "making money with social media" as a primary or secondary motive.

I had another *copyblogger* post tagged here—and one by a pseudonymous non-librarian with a "librarian" blog. But never mind. To my mind "how you should blog" means, for one thing, ignoring most hotshot advice on marketing-oriented blogging. Unless, of course, that's what you want to do.

Celebrity, blogging and the role of the academic

Instead, let's finish this section with a post by Martin Weller (a professor at the UK's Open University) on September 21, 2009 at *The Ed Techie* (nogoodreason.typepad.co.uk). Weller notes an article suggesting that UK academics "should attempt to become 'celebrity academics' via blogs" and asserting that North America has "always" had a "culture of the celebrity academic," further noting that blogs are excellent vehicles for shameless self-promotion.

> This isn't the first time I've heard the celebrity argument, but I think it misunderstands the aim, or benefits of blogging. It assumes that becoming a celebrity is the only goal for an academic blogger. This seems to me to exhibit a lack of imagination and makes a straightforward analogy of print journalism to blogging. Sure, there are some good academic bloggers who perform the role of interpreting events for the general public, but there are many more who write about their subject in detail, where the intended audience is that of their peers or community. If have a very specialised area of expertise, medieval dance (say), then it's not about becoming a celebrity by blogging about this, but rather having influence and being recognised within your (probably quite small) community.

Substitute "librarian" for "academic" and this strikes me as directly relevant and appropriate—and a reasonably good way to say it. Even within the library community, small as it is, achieving celebrity is not the only goal for a blogger and, I believe, shouldn't be the primary one.

There's more to the post (having to do with ways academic blogging can be superior to journalism), but this is a key point, as in the conclusion (edited to remove one example that most of us wouldn't recognize):

> In conclusion then I'd say we need to move away from the idea that celebrity is some kind of desirable goal. …the mix of academic, celebrity and traditional media nearly always produces an unholy mess. Blogging (and other similar types of activities) are not a means to realising this, but a thankful alternative.

Lilia Elfimova's Blog Research

Lilia Efimova is a Russian researcher at Novay, a "networked innovation" center in the Netherlands. According to her blog *Mathemagenic*, she's "studying social media, changing workplace, knowledge and learning." She's published quite a bit on her research on blogs—or, rather, "blogger networking practices." Much of this appears connected to her PhD research. (It's an interesting blog template—the first one I've encountered that shows on the sidebar not only the number of posts but the *words* in those posts—just over 590,000 in 1,598 posts as of late February 2010.)

What's interesting about her research is that it's not about blogging as such; it's about networking between (or among) bloggers and their readers. There's a fair amount of self-study involved (she started the blog in June 2002). I can't begin to summarize her research and findings and I might not be enough of an amateur social scientist to frame the discussion properly. It's certainly the case that liblogging, as one subset of personal/professional blogging, involves an odd and sometimes uneasy mix of talking to friends & acquaintances—but also publishing to strangers who might *become* acquaintances. Beyond that, I'm reluctant to go. Her site is blog.mathemagenic.com; you'll find a lot of the research-related posts in late 2008 and early 2009. The categories may not be much help: "Meta-blogging" has 383 posts, "PhD" has 744 and "Weblog research" 191.

Elfimova had four posts in February 2009, including one brief note that she was typing away on her actual dissertation while her "two favorite men" (her son and, presumably, her partner) were sleeping. The other three might be worth noting since they appear after most of her research notes had already appeared.

A February 2, 2009 post offers "PhD conclusions in a thousand words: blogging practices of knowledge workers." It links to a longer summary (3,200 words—not *terribly* long) and, via an update, to the full dissertation, which is available free for downloading (or 25 Euros for the printed book): *Passion at work: blogging practices of knowledge workers*. (It's got a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license, but I'm quoting selectively because "SA" is such a murky clause.) Portions of her short list of conclusions:

- **Ideas:** Weblogs are used to maintain awareness of ideas and for sense making supported by writing; the "person-centric and open-ended nature of blogging" can bring unexpected insights that cross topical boundaries and over time, ideas in weblogs "provide a fertile ground for reflection and reuse."
- **Conversations:** Blog conversations are fragmented and distributed and "may be supplemented by interacting via other media" (FriendFeed, anyone?); participation in blog-based conversations "requires extra effort" and works best for "occasional interaction rather than…constant conversations." (There's more there.)
- **Relations:** Blogs are often treated as "online representations of their authors"; can establish and maintain personal and informational relationships—but connecting through content; can support networking both through publishing and through interaction; and over time other channels enter into such relationships.
- **Tasks:** Blogs may be best for "enabling work, rather than doing it"—except when tasks match the medium.
- **Context**: Blogging on professional topics can result in some integration with work (even unintentionally); blotters need to deal with the effects of visibility; bloggers have to make choices and draw boundaries, deal with fragmentation and abundance, and choose, manage and "work around" tools.

That's a 188-word summary of Elfimova's 1,043-word set of bullet points; I hope it's not too unfair. Where liblogs are concerned (and librarians are certainly "knowledge workers" if the term means anything at all!), I find almost nothing here I can disagree with, and much that seems worth thinking about. Hmm. Ideas in weblogs providing a fertile ground for reflection and reuse? Can you say "probably four-fifths of what's now in *Cites & Insights*" as based on such ideas?

Two days later, Elfimova wrote "Am I killing publication opportunities with blogging PhD results?" She clearly decided that the answer was either "No" or, as the post says to me, "If so, I don't care." Here's the key paragraph:

> I know that sharing openly brings all kinds of good things back, but next to it there is a feeling that a successful professional career requires more than coming up with good ideas and sharing them. I also believe that performance is counter-productive, that doing things in the way that reflects personal values brings people and projects that reflect those values. So, I will probably end up blogging all those things I'm not sure about, but I would also love to hear what do you think about it.

The phrase "performance is counter-productive" links to another post that seems to say that good personal blogs are "backstage"—where you can be yourself—rather than "performances"—where you must manage your persona "to impress the audience in a particular way." That's *really* interesting, and may mark a key difference between the kinds of blogs I treasure (which includes most liblogs) and the kinds of blogs that Blogging Gurus always tell us how to produce: That is, blogs that reflect their writers, as opposed to blogs carefully designed to maximize audiences and present a favorable impression.

Finally—and understanding that I'm mostly pointing you to Elfimova's site, where you'll find lots more detail along the way plus the final dissertation—there's "What pragmatists might want to know about blogging," posted February 11, 2009. She introduces it as a *possible* article to hand to "a colleague thinking about starting blogging" and wonders whether it makes sense for a pragmatic knowledge worker. At just under 1,300 words, the article's certainly short enough to hand somebody (figure two printed pages, or a bit over 1.5 pages of *C&I*) and I'm sorely tempted to quote the whole thing—I think you'll find it worth reading. She suggests three modes for blogs: publishing, conversations with self, and interaction with others (the three overlapping). She notes reasons why blogs might not be good tools to do your job *directly* but might support your job (she calls posts "microcontent," which isn't always the right term—e.g., I wouldn't call a 1,300 word post "microcontent.") She sees blog audiences growing through "enticing" writing and through comments and recommendations—not through various direct marketing efforts. And she suggests some "cultural shifts to be addressed and lessons to be learnt" along the learning curve. Here I will include the sentence that begins each of the six bullets but not the few sentences that follow:

- Personal passions have a legitimate place at work.
- Transparency is here to stay.
- Visibility can turn into information overload.
- Everyday routines matter.
- Authority becomes fluid.
- Organisations might set the rules and create conditions, but at the end it's up to an individual.

Seriously good stuff, well worth exploring.

Miscellaneous Issues

The overriding theme for this installment is "closing the loop"—closing out one cycle of discussions about blogs and blogging, particularly as they relate to libraries and librarians. Those discussions will begin again in the future: of that there's little doubt. Right now, I'm leaving out a small group of items tagged "blogging and ethics," because it's not quite ripe yet and may actually fit into an entirely different discussion. (How's your Australasian journal collection doing these days?)

That leaves three items from 2009 that I want to note and comment on, posts that can best be summarized as—well, see the subheading.

Researchers working on blog credibility ranking systems

That's the title of an *Ars Technica* article on April 21, 2009 written by Jacqui Cheng.

> Researchers at the Austria-based Know-Center are working on a program that analyzes the language used on blogs in order to rank them as highly credible, having average credibility, or "little credible." The code looks at the distribution of words over time, and compares blog topics against articles from mainstream news, which are apparently weighted as being more credible.

The *distribution of words over time*? Really? How well your blog's topics compare to *mainstream news*? Truly? To me, this smacks of a peculiar definition of "credibility"—one that can almost certainly be gamed easily to establish "highly credible" blogs that are nothing of the sort, and even more easily to build spamblogs with no original content but *great* "credibility." I'm guessing Cheng doesn't swallow it entirely, based on this paragraph:

> Of course, comparing the facts and opinions posted on blogs to the mainstream media may not be the best way to determine credibility. The beauty of the Internet is that people can write openly on almost any topic, and they may disagree heavily with the angle presented by certain news sources. Those people will undoubtedly be miffed at automatically being categorized as "little credible" just because their opinions may differ.

Ya think? Comments included the usual "blogs are all crap anyway," a couple of useful criticisms, and a rather nice one:

> Someone needs to start working on a researcher credibility system. There has been plenty of crap research quoted by members of Congress and media outlets that would make a credibility system almost mandatory.

The Mythology of Blogs

That's the pre-colon part of this Proper Article Title, by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom in the May 2009 issue of *Perspectives on History*. The post-colon portion: "A Top Ten List for the Uninitiated Historian." You'll find the whole 2,700-word piece at www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2009/0905/0905for10.cfm. I'll just quote the ten misconceptions, not the expansions (which can run to several hundred words each):

> Misconception 1: All bloggers prattle on about themselves, make confessions, and rant about pet peeves.
>
> Misconception 2: All blogs have cutesy tag lines.
>
> Misconception 3: Blogging is a fad that is bound to go away soon, so we can just ignore the phenomenon and wait the trend out.
>
> Misconception 4: "[A blog post is] there for anyone with an internet connection to see." [Discusses national censorship and filtering.]
>
> Misconception 5: Books and blogs are so different that the publication of Boxer's anthology (*Ultimate Blogs*) was a "man bites dog" novelty.
>
> Misconception 6: Blogging is for the young.
>
> Misconception 7: Blogging is the latest thing in online writing.
>
> Misconception 8: The academics and other intellectuals who turn to blogging are attention-seeking people who have trouble getting published in more traditional venues.
>
> Misconception 9: Academic blogging is an indulgence best reserved for the tenured.
>
> Misconception 10: Bloggers think that everything can be boiled down to a top ten list.

There's humor and useful discussion within the ten paragraphs, particularly for those who really don't get blogging. #7, as you might expect, discusses *newer* trends in online writing—and #10…well, consider the form of the particular post.

My comment predictor doesn't work

Maybe I should just note the title (from a July 25, 2009 post by Doug Johnson at *Blue Skunk Blog*), say "Amen," and let it be. But what fun would that be?

Johnson appreciates and encourages comments, and gets a fair number.

> But even after nearly four years of writing on a pretty regular basis, I'll be damned if I can predict which entries will result in an outpouring of reactions and which will create a resounding silence—or just a couple whimpers.

He did a major series of posts—about a hypothetical future school library—where he "guessed there were enough things in the posts that would confuse or anger readers and that the reactions would be hot and heavy. Didn't happen." He got one really good comment (which he reprints in this post), but the first four posts had a total of *three* comments (plus his responses)—and the fifth had four (including the one he cites).

> On the opposite end of the spectrum, my post "the short rant about how men can improve their dress" was written in about 15 minutes, has so far elicited 22 comments, some sort of hostile…

I should probably note that this relatively brief metapost about commenting got five comments (plus responses) plus one spamment. It also elicited the potential Blue Skunk Rule of Comments: "The more trivial the post, the larger the response."

I *didn't* comment on the post, but I certainly agree with the sentiment. I've stopped attempting to guess which posts will draw loads'o'comments (directly and indirectly) and maybe even be mentioned elsewhere and which, no matter how hard I work on them, will be met with complete silence.

A Brief Threnody on a Dead Blog

My stack of old lead sheets on liblog issues includes seven items by one of the most thoughtful writers in the field—and I'd grouped them all under her name, or rather the name of her blog.

But that blog is dead. Or, rather, it's still there, but the blogger has stopped posting to it for reasons that make me feel she'd just as soon not have lots of new publicity for the old blog. She has a new public blog (a very good one) on the ScienceBlogs platform, but it's a different creature. The blogger is Dorothea Salo; the dead blog is *Caveat Lector*; the new blog is *The Book of Trogool*. I would lament the old blog more—but the new blog is excellent and seems to be the fresh start Salo needed.

So instead of giving these seven items the time and attention they deserve (which would probably take at least 3,500 words, given my typical practices), I'm just going to note them without providing much of the commentary I'd like to provide:

- "Why I'm not a researcher," August 25, 2008, explains why some of Salo's most important professional writing is explicitly *not* Proper Research. Wild applause, high fives, *sometimes* "me too" here—even though some of my work does fall perilously near the proper-research category.
- "Public service announcement," September 8, 2008, tells people to stop emailing Salo

"stuff to tout on CavLec" and explains why—and the purpose of CavLec itself ("where I think out loud"). Also good stuff; either I'm lower-profile (probably true) or I just delete most such nonsense and assume it was intended for my old *EContent* column (and there's a *ton* of that), but it's annoying and useless in any case.

- "The care and feeding of a bully pulpit," January 28, 2009, discusses some of the odd things that happened when *CavLec* became well known and respected ("a demi-deity in the library firmament")—also well worth reading. Fortunately, my blog is of no import whatsoever, but I recognize some of the issues raised here.
- "Blogging, power, and risk" on January 30, 2009, continues pretty much the same discussion, and I see in these the backstory to her discontinuation of the blog.
- "A postscript"—same day—talks about comments and *CavLec*'s lack of them, which of course was never accidental. Also good stuff.
- "Writing and blogging" on February 1, 2009—Salo was on a metablogging roll here—is about writing and blogging. What more can I say?
- "Blog preservation" on March 31, 2009, is about the preservation of blogs, specifically scholarly blogs.

That's 259 words total, just enough to entice some of you to **go read the posts**.

My Back Pages

Getting It Wrong

I put up an offhand post at *Walt at Random* on February 11, 2010 about the extent to which mainstream journalism will "get things wrong" (or insufficiently right)—and, more specifically, the extent to which you should assume that the accuracy and completeness of stories in areas you know *nothing* about shouldn't be assumed to be better than the accuracy and completeness of stories in areas you're deeply familiar with.

In other words: If you *know* they get it partly wrong when you're aware, why should you assume they don't otherwise?

Here's a tiny little poster child for that notion: a January 2010 *Home Theater Magazine* rave review for the Sonos ZonePlayer/Controller wireless sound distribution system. Here's the sentence:

> Pandora, which used to be available only by subscription, is now free to Sonos system owners, as is Last.fm and 25,000 radio stations via Sonos Radio.

Never mind the "as is" for what's clearly a plural situation. Since when has Pandora available only by (paid) subscription, as opposed to free? Since never, of course, but the writer just isn't an expert on internet streaming music: He gets it wrong. (Or *partially* wrong. What might be accurate: *ad-free* Pandora with unlimited song skips—that is, Pandora One—normally requires a paid subscription. But that's not Pandora, and there are so few ads that they're not a real obstacle.)

Einstein Was Wrong—and I Have Proof!

Pascal Boyer wrote "How I found glaring errors in Einstein's calculations" in early April 2009 at *cognition and culture* (cognitionandculture.net/). It's a great 2,200-word post, and I encourage you to read it. I'd quote the whole thing, but while it carries a CC license, it's secondary to my so-called audience, so I'll excerpt.

> Call me radical, call me a maverick. Rather than slavishly swallowing the scientific orthodoxy from establishment textbooks, I decided to go back to the original papers. I have identified several embarrassing errors of mathematics and physical reasoning in Einstein's original 1905 paper on the "Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," the alleged beginning of "special relativity," one of the main tenets of standard modern physics (despite its manifest absurdity). Once Einstein's errors are corrected, we can establish a new foundation for physics that is consistent with commonsense experience, and does not require fancy mathematical tricks. Not surprisingly, I have been thwarted in all my attempts to publish these findings in scientific journals, which is why I have decided to post them on the Internet.

Boyer didn't find such errors—but he's aware of lots of people who have, or at least claimed to. That first paragraph is Boyer speaking in the persona of one of many "crackpot physicists, those marginal self-styled scientists whose foundational, generally revolutionary work is sadly ignored by most established scientists. These are the great heroes, at least in their own eyes, of alternative science."

Boyer collects webpages by crackpot physicists, much as Mark Chu-Carroll of *Good Math, Bad Math* collects mathematical crackpottery. Boyer, noting the "practically infinite amount of drivel on the net," is selective: he's only interested in

> …the ones trying to really, seriously do science, because their productions and their failures tells us important things about science itself. Most of my "informants" are committed to the standard scientific way of doing things. They accept that their theories should be coherent, clearly expressed, grounded in explicit mathematics, consistent with the evidence, compatible with other established (and empirically grounded) frameworks, etc. They accept that theories should be discussed, tested, and discarded if they are redundant or trivial.

But, as Boyer notes, that acceptance of scientific procedures doesn't work out: "The grandiose claims invariably accompany theories that most physics undergraduates can puncture in a few minutes. The new particles proposed are of no explanatory value. The new forces postulated are generally irrelevant to experimental phenomena."

Here's one of four typical self-assessments by such alternative scientists:

> The ideas in these pages are extremely revolutionary. I am asking the world to throw out long established beliefs. Men have been born, become professors of physics and died within the time span that these errors that have been perpetuated. A large number of Nobel prizes of have been awarded for work which history may one day come to regard as the twentieth century's great blind alley of science.

Good science *should not* be limited to institutional science—and some of today's accepted scientific theories were regarded as close to crackpottery not all that long ago (plate tectonics, anyone?).

Boyer offers some common aspects of crackpot physics:

- **All crackpottery is foundational**. (Crackpots don't spend time on small problems; they go for unified theories and the like.)
- **Most physics crackpots are engineers**. (He says more than 95% of his sample boast engineering degrees.)
- **All crackpots are male**. (As Boyer says, see the previous point.) There was one exception, but she died.
- **Crackpots ignore other crackpots**. (This should not be surprising.)
- **The crackpot theory is invariably more intuitive than the standard one**. (And, you know, maybe π really *is* just three, which after all is a magic number.)
- **The crackpot alternative is, almost universally, less mathematically challenging than the standard account**. (Hmm. I like my simplified circle-circumference calculation more and more!)
- **The crackpot theory is based on textbooks**. (Most cranks don't cite recent publications, relying on textbook physics.)

Boyer's a cognitive anthropologist, and he concludes, among other things, that *there is no room for the solitary scientist*:

> You cannot do science by just studying the right books, having the right mathematics and being committed to (some form of) "scientific method". What you need, over and above all that, is constant social interaction with other practicing scientists. Oral tradition and daily exposure to other scientists' everyday decisions are indispensable, and only a very small fragment of that makes it way to the scientific journals.

Is that true? Possibly—which leads to another conclusion: "there is something crackpottish in any attempt to push the envelope of not-so-successful science." (It makes one wonder about Einstein himself, although I now see people claiming that he was not actually a solitary scientist.)

Boyer points to John Baez' Crackpot Index (at math.ucr.edu/home/baez/crackpot.html) and its simple scoring method for "rating potentially revolutionary contributions for physics." He also suggests the Open Directory category Physics:Alternative (www.dmoz.org/Science/Physics/Alternative/) as a starting point to explore crackpottery.

You Can Sponsor C&I for 10000

This one's from *The Consumerist*, posted June 10, 2009 (some things improve with age). The title "Take currency symbols off the menu, restaurant patrons spend more."

> Have you ever noticed that the menus in nice restaurants leave the currency signs off prices, or spell them out in words rather than Arabic numerals? The intended effect is pretty much what you would assume—to remove the association between prices on the menu and actual money. Now, there's actual academic research showing that half of this theory is true.

The study was conducted by Cornell's Center for Hospitality Research at a restaurant of the Culinary Institute of America. The results weren't quite as expected: Numeric prices with no currency sign (or period, of course) seemed to encourage patrons to spend *more* than spelled-out prices: Thus, "twenty dollars" didn't do as well as "20."

The study tested three possibilities (on variations of the lunch menu): Full information ($20.00), just numbers (20) and spelled-out (twenty dollars). From the report summary:

> While the numerical manipulation did not significantly affect total spending when compared to such non-menu factors as party size or length of time at the table, the price formats did show noticeable differences. Contrary to expectations, guests given the numeral-only menu spent significantly more than those who received a menu with prices showing a dollar sign or those whose menus had prices written out in words…Although these findings may apply only to lunch at this particular restaurant, they indicate that menu-price formats do influence customers' spending, both in terms of total check and spending per cover.

I'll admit to a bias: When I see a restaurant menu on the web (or if I walk into a restaurant) and see simple numbers (no $ or decimal point), spelled-out numbers or, worst of all, no numbers at all (which used to happen on the menus presented to the female half of couples)—I tend to assume the restaurant's going to be overpriced. I'm rarely mistaken.

Comments on the article began with one from a graphic designer for restaurants who says "for any higher end location, we always do this. It really does bring in more money." (I loved another comment, suggesting spelling out the price in Arabic *letters* instead of Arabic numerals. Thus, twenty dollars = دولار الـ عـ شريـ ن.)

The title's not quite right. You can sponsor *both C&I* and Walt at Random for 10000. *C&I* alone could be cheaper.

Obsolete!

Tech and home entertainment writers seem to love "obsolete" almost as much as gurus love "death of" and simplistic answers—and love to project wondrous new ideas without thinking through the details. Here are two great examples on a single page of the January 2010 *Sound & Vision*.

One item: HDTV, which of course *must* be obsolete because it's become mainstream and relatively inexpensive. Wait for *UHD*—instead of 1920x1080-pixel resolution (the best HDTV), you'll get 7,680x4,320 pixel resolution. "Some market researchers are predicting that UHD consumer content will become available within 7 years and then move into the mainstream." Could happen—but, even seven years out, you have to consider that:

- Most experts don't believe people can *see* the difference between 720p and 1080p pictures unless they're watching a big TV at a fairly close range (1.5 times the width of the screen, or about six feet away from a 50" screen). If that's true—it has to do with visual acuity—then wouldn't you need to be, oh, *three* feet away to tell the difference between 1080p and 4320p?
- Digital projection *in theaters* isn't 7680x4320; it's only half that (3840x2160).
- Using the best current compression techniques, a double-layer Blu-ray disc would be able to store about *eight minutes* of UHD content. To store two hours plus extras, figure 800GB.
- What level of cable TV or streaming support would you need for true UHD? Well, figure 16x whatever it is now—assuming you get truly clean HDTV signals now.

None of which means it couldn't happen…but it's hardly a sure thing.

The other one is just plain silly: A breathless blurb for the Onkyo TX-NR5007 A/V receiver, which says that 5.1-channel surround sound "was crushed" by 7.1-channel sound (which adds two "vertical" speakers), and *that*'s now "made obsolete" by 9.2-channel sound. "Obsolete," in this case, means…nothing. How many home theater owners do you know who have 7.1 channel sound or are itching to get it? How many believe their 7.1-channel sound system is *already obsolete* or nearing obsolescence?

USB-Powered Microwaves

Seth Finkelstein's "Read me first" column in the June 17, 2009 *Guardian* (www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/jun/17/seth-finkelstein-read-me-first) took on "popularity without accuracy," using an example you may have heard about then but not since:

> Many media organisations, ranging from blogs to newspapers, recently reported a story about a small microwave oven that could allegedly be powered as

> a laptop computer attachment. The physical implausibility of the tale—as told—went widely unremarked, which is a revealing lesson in incentives.

Why implausible? It's rocket science for some people: It involves simple mathematics and an understanding of physical laws. The "Beanzawave" was what you'd expect a plugin peripheral to be: It used a USB port, which can provide power as well as two-way data communication.

> But anyone who had even a passing technical familiarity with the systems involved should know it couldn't be true. And that doesn't require being a professor, merely some basic critical thinking. Ordinary microwave ovens can consume 1,100W. USB might supply up to 2.5W. Even without knowing the latter number specifically, it's easy to realise a USB port supplies a comparatively tiny amount of power, given the typical limitations of what peripherals can run just from USB power. The scales simply don't match, by two orders of magnitude.

You *could* chain a whole bunch of USB ports—except that you couldn't really. If you could, the battery in your notebook computer would be exhausted within a few minutes. 1,100 Watts is a power consumption rate. A typical notebook battery provides 40 to 60 Wh, watt-hours—so if your notebook runs out of battery power after two hours, it's probably using 20-30 Watts. Realistically, the battery wouldn't be able to discharge at 35 to 50 times that rate without frying itself and, probably, the notebook.

If writers checked the story, they'd find that the USB port is only to control the oven. It uses lithium-ion batteries to heat "small type hand-snack food products." But what got reported was *USB microwaves!*

> In tracing the epidemiology of the story (patient zero being the press release), I was struck by how, time after time in sites that had comments, someone would point out the problems with energy requirements. But, contrary to evangelists who might claim those comments as proof of the superiority of their hobbyhorse (whether blogs, crowds, commenting, or the internet in general), the corrections were essentially ineffectual. Relatively few people plough through such discussions, as it's tedious and time-consuming to separate any wisdom from ranting. And while the website owners had the ability to update what they had posted, there was no incentive to do so.

As Finkelstein notes, this isn't about bloggers vs. journalists, since an "early vector of inaccuracy" was a newspaper story. It's more an indication that "the supposed new ecosystem of journalism isn't developing the better correction mechanisms that are often predicted (if not outright assumed despite all the evidence to the contrary)."

The first result for "Beanzawave" in a Bing search on February 12, 2010 is a June 2009 *Fast Company* story contrasting this tiny microwave with "energy hog" conventional microwaves (which is nonsense, since a good microwave uses less electricity than conventional cooking for the same food). The story says this:

> The Beanzawave, which measures just 7.4 inches tall by 6.2 inches wide and 5.9 inches deep, doesn't even need to be plugged into an electrical outlet. The device contains a USB port, so mid-afternoon snacks can be heated up at the computer without expending excess power. In the future, Heinz might experiment with lithium ion batteries--making the Beanzawave ideal for camping trips. Heinz claims that snacks can be warmed in under a minute thanks to intense heating action from a combination of cell phone and radio frequencies.

I'd expect better from *Fast Company*. What happened to the device? Well, at the time, it cost $160, which the magazine said "isn't much cheaper than a conventional microwave." That's an understatement: Even in mid-2009, I can pretty much guarantee that a typical microwave oven would cost less than $100.

Just how gullible were writers? Cory Doctorow picked it up from *Fast Company* and posted it on Boing Boing with no hint of skepticism (although a few commenters were able to do the math). Doctorow may write science fiction, but that doesn't make him a scientist or necessarily scientifically literate. Some commenters claimed it's not *possible* to have a microwave oven that small (given how microwave ovens work)—and the official site still says "Coming Soon" in February 2010.

As I skimmed through the first 100 of "about 66,600 results" (on Google—only 4,850 on Bing), I saw the *repeated* statement that the thing was powered by USB—so if that wasn't in the PR, it sure did spread awfully fast. Sadly lacking in that first 100: Clear statements that this was *and had to be* nonsense. An awful lot of "tech" blogs appear to be written by people who regard technology as magic, which is truly sad. Even one site devoted entirely to USB apparently didn't have anybody who *understands* them, as it ran the story with this phrase regarding power: "USB ports nowadays are more readily available than electrical outlets." Sigh.

Can't Live Without Them!

Two dozen web applications here. 100 products there. This particular bit of hyperbole seems to be little more than a synonym for "like"—either that, or there must be a *lot* of dead techies and magazine writers these days.

Here's the *PC World* 100, December 2009 issue, and the big type uses that deadly phrase, "100 products that our editors can't live without." What are these wondrous things that, like oxygen and food for ordinary mortals, are all that stands between *PC World*'s editors and early death? The iPhone app store—that's #1. Google Voice. The Nikon D300s digital SLR. Twitter, A $2,000 Dell laptop. Microsoft Bing. The Canon PowerShot SX200 IS superzoom camera (two digital cameras just in the top ten). A 46" Samsung HDTV.

That's the top ten. They also *can't live without* the Palm Pre but also the HTC Hero and Apple iPhone 3GS and RIM BlackBerry Tour 9300—you gotta have four different smartphones to live these days! Whereas, for portable computers, all you need is the Dell Latitude Z600—oh, wait, and also the HP Mini 311 netbook, the Lenovo ThinkPad T400s (another $2,000 notebook), the HP Envy 13 (only $1,700!), Alienware M15x ($1,500) and Asus Eee PC 1101: Six portable computers, the minimum for editors to sustain life. Did I mention two digital cameras? You also *need* three other still cameras (some of which can take video) and three digicams. Chrome but also Firefox. The Intel Core i7 eight-core CPU, but also AMD Phenom II CPUs.

I could go on, but what's the point? That common usage has become so hyperbolic that it loses all impact? I can live with that.

Universalism of the Month

Here's the first line of a February 2010 *PC World* article on "smartphones you can rely on": "We Americans pay a hefty slice of our monthly budget—$80, on average—for the convenience (and fun) of owning a smartphone."

Wow. *We Americans*—not "some of us," not "smartphone owners," but *everybody*. Then comes the *very next sentence*: "In total, U.S. consumers will spend $4.8 billion on smartphones and wireless services (voice and data messaging) in 2010, according to market research firm In-Stat.

Do the calculations. Let's assume that smartphones themselves are free. $80 per month is $960 per year. $4.8 billion divided by $960 is…five million (or 5,000,000 if you prefer).

This means one of three things:

- Unbeknownst to most of us, the population of the United States dropped to five million households from about 130 million while we weren't watching.
- The only *real* Americans are the five million who own smartphones, at least in the eyes of *PC World*.
- The writer and copyeditors are given to absurd overstatements.

Or something different is going on. One comScore report seems to show 36 million American smartphone users in October 2009, still a *long* way from "we Americans" (most cellphones in use and being sold currently are *not* smartphones)—but a whole lot more than five million. But $4.8 billion divided by 36 million comes out to $133/year or about $11/month, which is implausibly low. Gartner claims 26.1 million U.S. smartphone subscribers at the end of 2009Q2. Gartner's figures seem to agree as to average monthly expenditures, more or less, with Blackberry and iPhone owners both up around $88 or so. That *does* yield a contradictory indication: wireless services for smartphone users alone should exceed $26 billion for 2010.

11 Undocumented Features…

I won't quote the whole thing, but Dave Rutledge's "11 Undocumented Features of Google Chrome OS"—on *woot! the blog*, posted July 8, 2009—is even funnier now that Google has buzzed us all. Just a couple of the items:

> 1. Your family photos are accompanied by text ads for skin care and diet plans.
>
> 4. Invests in, develops, acquires, and abandons your best ideas.
>
> 8. Prevents all evil activity unless it is deemed to be for the good of the shareholders.

Rutledge missed anything about privacy—but, you know, Google would *never* endanger that!

Things John Scalzi Doesn't Miss

I've had some fun with "deathwatch" lists, and will probably poke at them even more. John Scalzi's *Whatever* post from January 15, 2010, "Things I Don't Miss," is better than most.

His list, without his commentary (except one quoted passage):

- Stupidly expensive long-distance charges.
- Crappy old cars. "Pre-catalytic converter cars were shoddily-constructed, lead-spewing deathtraps, the first generation of cars running on unleaded were even more shoddily-constructed 70s defeat-mobiles, the 80s were the golden age of Detroit Doesn't Give a Shit, and so on." He puts 1997 as his cutoff for oldest possibly-worthwhile cars.
- Physical media for music. (OK, so I'm not with him on this one, at least not entirely.)
- Smoking allowed everywhere.
- Pull tabs on drink cans. (As opposed to today's "stay tabs.")

Comments? *Of course*—156 of 'em. Turns out Scalzi *does* still buy some CDs. He got pushback on vinyl, some on CD, some on 1997 as a decent-car date (people saying early-90s *Japanese* cars were OK)—and not much on anything else (very few pulltab lovers out there). He got some absolutists ("*Nobody* uses a landline anymore").

More Fun with Audio Prices

Know anybody who has a set of Wilson Audio speakers—probably costing more than a luxury sedan? Want to make them feel inferior (if they're so inclined)? Mention the Magico Ultimate II. As previewed in the December 2009 *The Absolute Sound*, these may be seriously good speakers. The writer calls them "completely and utterly exceptional. If you prefer, they are revolutionary, stunning, and amazing. They blew me away."

These are *seriously* large speakers—the preview doesn't provide much in the way of specifications, but based on the photos they appear to be at least nine feet tall and two feet wide. The three-page piece does include one significant specification (in addition to some specs about the powered woofer): The price. $395,000. As the writer says, "that's not a typo."

This is a note, not a complaint. I don't think anybody's suggesting all serious audiophiles need to own Magico Ultimate IIs. I doubt the company plans to make more than a handful (well, a roomful!), and may only build to order. For those with the bucks and the desire, *it's their money*. Speaking as one whose ears and wallet couldn't possibly justify these, I suspect spending $395,000 on a pair of speakers makes more sense than spending, say, $100,000 on a CD player.

Art Dudley expounds on consumer insanity in the January 2010 *Stereophile*. Dudley thinks *lots* of consumer purchases are insanely overpriced or represent consumer idiocy—Jimmy Choo sandals, Judith Leiber handbags, gourmet jelly beans, cookbooks in specialized areas.

But not audio equipment. Not having two pairs of high-end full-range loudspeakers, multiple turntables, several amplifiers (including a "mildly exotic" $21,000 unit). Oh, no, that's sensible. Because that's *Dudley*'s obsession, you see. He knows that, come 2039, you'll see that the Choo sandals fell apart after a year, the gourmet jelly beans "could be traced to over 100,000 deaths attributable to diabetic shock" (Dudley is not known for understating cases), the $8,000 Leiber handbag got left in the back of a taxi. "But you listened to that Wadia CD player every day until you died, and it never failed to make you happy."

Sure you did—you're a wealthy audio freak and kept using one expensive CD player for 30 years! I believe that—*sure* I do. Just like I believe Art Dudley isn't a mean-spirited snob who despises people with less-refined *or different* tastes and preferences. Clearly, *Stereophile* must think Dudley's an off-the-wall case: That's why they hid this opinion piece…on the very first page of the issue. (In the next issue, in his regular column, Dudley made it clear that very expensive clothes are perfectly appropriate, as long as they're ones *he approves of*.)

Masthead

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